



Patient-Centric Relationship Marketing: A Best Practice Review

A study of effective relationship marketing programs uncovered five building blocks that are critical to current best practices. They are: customer engagement (emotional and rational involvement), segmentation, program customization, community-building and incentives. The author explains how they fit together.

By Alfred O'Neill

Relationship Marketing (RM) is becoming an increasingly vital and strategic part of the pharma/biotech marketing mix. While DTC is like casting a wide net in hopes of reaching a significant school of patients, RM dangles its irresistible lure – an actual connection with the patient with ongoing support and help. RM affords DTC just the patient-centric hook it needs to go beyond mere awareness building to strengthen the engagement, brand loyalty and compliance and deliver targeted results.

As a marketing discipline based upon patient insight and need, RM offers more actionable and personalized health information than DTC. It is perhaps the most measurable form of marketing that exists, as well as the one discipline that works from the proven premise that the more relevant and ongoing the communications, the more apt the patient is to stay a customer.

Consumer marketers' extensive experience with RM provides the perfect foil for pharma marketers' how-to questions: How is RM currently being used for consumers (remember, patients ARE consumers) and what are the best practices that give each brand the greatest opportunity to succeed? What strategies are working for connecting with consumers today?

Our analytical team set out on an expedition to explore the best practices of a formal case study of outstanding

relationship marketing programs. We wanted to identify which companies had the most effective and innovative brand-building programs and, more importantly, to discover the essential strategies – the building blocks – of the programs that made them so effective.

Ultimately, we conducted a comparative study of 95 relationship marketing programs targeting consumers and patients. Fifty-five were mass-market brands from Ford to Oprah, and 40 were pharmaceutical brand programs. Once the top brands were identified, our team literally deconstructed and re-constructed the steps consumers would need to take to become engaged in each program.

A look at the project methodology

Among our selection of brands were Dove, American Express, alli, WebMD, Gardasil and Revolution Health. We identified the frontrunners from among more than 90 others, large and small, based on the following measurable achievements: a demonstration of deep engagement, enduring brand loyalty and measurable increases in customer satisfaction.

After identifying our best RM practice list, we scrutinized the strategic, creative and tactical elements of their

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marketing programs. For example, we set up temporary patient addresses to receive e-mail and direct mail communications from the selected companies and used Email Analyst longitudinal tracking tools to analyze their long-term customer relationship marketing campaigns. We also conducted research at the Direct Marketing Association library. We reviewed Web sites (online marketing), registered for interactive programs, analyzed ads and direct mail (print) campaigns, and utilized WhosMailingWhat.com and Emailanalyst.com.

Findings reveal five key building blocks

From the 95 brands, our researchers were thus able to pinpoint the most successful RM programs, and isolate five common building blocks essential to their success. The five are:

1. Customer Engagement: Harnessing the Power of Emotion

Customer engagement creates satisfied consumers because it goes beyond providing information. It takes patient education to a personal and more relevant level by providing content based on where the person is in his or her disease progression, and in some cases, what attitudes individuals have towards their condition. For example, Topamax's CAN program leverages telephone support to connect healthcare professionals with patients to answer their most pressing questions. The program makes extensive use of a patient video in My Way with Migraines patient support program.

Another program exemplifying customer engagement is GlaxoSmithKline's alli. Aside from branding a pill, GSK delivers a program that speaks to the patient's emotional/rational stage or condition. This element primarily happens online and integrates call center, grassroots programs, text messages and direct mail to provide from every angle the patient's need for supportive and motivating information.

2. Segmentation: Identifying MVPs

The most successful brands begin with a segmentation strategy that identifies their most valuable customers. Every business has its Most Valuable Customers – the difference

is in how companies identify, find and measure them. For example, Vyvanse for ADHD collects demographic and attitudinal segmentation data among parents, including diagnosis status, ADHD Rx history, degree of parent involvement with other ADHD families, reasons for stopping past medications, attitudes about using Rx on the weekend, and perceived effect of ADHD on social performance. Once the segmentation data is analyzed, relationship marketing efforts must focus on prospects/customers with the greatest potential ROI.

3. Customization/Relevance: Keeping the Customer Engaged

RM winners use simple customization to maximize relevance to every customer in order to keep them engaged over time. For example, Raptiva's Clearly You program offers personalized online support based on date of the patient's first injection. Once the patient accepts support, he or she receives a customized weekly e-mail and an offer of two gifts, mailed a few weeks apart. Raptiva's success, clearly demonstrates that setting and managing expectations based on the patient lifecycle is key. The Raptiva program includes carefully timed messaging that keeps its product relevant without creating patient push-back from over marketing (And if patients or care partners raise their hand, make sure your team responds quickly).

4. Community-Building: Establishing Brand Differentiation and Leadership

Our analysis showed that community-building is the single most underleveraged opportunity for pharmaceutical brand differentiation. People like being part of something. People like to know others with shared interests – and frankly, the loneliness of a condition makes having a community of sufferers a very real need. By giving patients a sense of belonging to a group that shares a deeply personal experience, and provides critical emotional support, brands can establish a leadership position and gain a profoundly loyal base of consumers.

For example, Vyvanse's SHINE support program for ADHD provides a wealth of resources designed to help parents build a multi-faceted support community (for example, school teachers, family members, healthcare professionals and professional ADHD coaches). And alli created a community for pre-launch to start the discussion about dieting that segued naturally to alli's own message board. It is inevitable that healthcare companies are going to end up with online or grassroots community efforts – in some ways, we see it with hospitals community outreach or in-hospital education clinics.

5. Incentives: Building Loyalty

Incentive programs can be financial, informational, or both. While incentive programs alone are not efficient in brand building, they are essential in building a loyal base of customers. From our analysis, Effexor XR's Dialogues

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program represents a fully realized incentive program through its branded Dialogues card. This reimbursement card combats formulary issues, is good for discounts on prescription refills, and is a catalyst to future patient communications (I'm not alone) that helps build brand differentiation and leadership. Importantly, all of the brands we identified as winners harnessed the power of emotion to support their incentives.

The implications for marketers

In studying patient-centric relationship marketing, we have learned that these five building blocks – customer engagement (emotional and rational involvement), segmentation, program customization, community-building and incentives – represent current best practices for relationship marketing in pharmaceuticals. These represent the leading approaches for marketers who have experienced the value of building a database, integrating their marketing channels and a gaining competitive advantage. Their efforts go beyond simply building brand awareness to building genuine, long-term relationships with patients, creating compliance, loyalty and trust.

In today's pharmaceutical marketing world, ignoring the RM possibilities could mean brand extinction. RM helps create more informed patients – encouraged and empowered to take responsibility for their health.

Contemporary pharmaceutical marketing is still an evolving process. It requires 360-degree insight into the motivations and needs of the patient, a methodology that focuses on measurable results, and importantly, an understanding of human emotion, to engage consumers. Carefully planned and properly executed programs, like the ones described here, deliver relationship marketing magic – and impressive results. ■

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