



Quick Response How Pharma Companies Could and Should Use the Web to Respond to PR Crises

There are a few simple steps a pharma company should take when facing an unexpected PR crisis that take advantage of the reach and immediacy of the Internet.

By Robert Kadar

Merck and Schering-Plough had a major PR crisis on their hands when in January they pulled TV ads for two of their cholesterol lowering drugs, Vytorin and Zetia, which generate more than \$5 billion in annual sales. Within days, the companies ran full-page ads in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal.

“You may be worried about recent news stories questioning the benefit of these medicines... on the basis of a single study that has generated a lot of confusion. All of us at Merck and Schering-Plough proudly stand behind the established efficacy and safety profiles of ZETIA and VYTORIN,” the large-type headline stated

This was a good start – perhaps more aimed at Wall Street than Main Street – but what I would like to explore is how companies facing PR challenges like this can use the Web in an effective manner to reach out to consumers, patients, the medical community and all other interested parties.

According to numerous studies, up to 80 percent of online adults routinely use the Web to access health information – and that’s during normal conditions. When a health crisis hits, I wonder how many more go straight to the Web? I know I do.

Here then is a list of the things that any other Pharma company facing a PR crisis can do on the Web to help with damage control.

- Update the corporate Web site, and do it fast. Prominently post your response and use plain English when describing what happened, what you are being accused of and how you plan to respond. Avoid sounding defensive. Adopt a tone of concern and honest appraisal. For example, language such as, “We take these accusations seriously. We’re concerned about the welfare of our customers. We’re establishing an independent review board. We will keep the public updated on our efforts,” will resonate with most consumers.
- Alternatively launch a new site dedicated to communicating to the public about the event. That way, you can communicate in a clean, neutral environment outside of the normal product marketing channel found on your existing Web site.
- Run a banner campaign targeting audiences most likely to be effected by and interested in the products in question. For drugs such as Vytorin and Zetia, targeting cardio health sites and cholesterol sections is the most obvious tactic as is targeting general health



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sites and health ad networks. Being proactive can allow companies to get in front of the message instead of being in a persistently reactive mode.

Don't give bloggers first-mover advantage

Gentlemen start your search engines! If you did a search for “Vytorin Study” shortly after the crisis broke in January, you would have seen results from everyone but the companies who own and market the product. Why cede this incredible information source to every blogger, hacker, rumor-monger, malcontent and pharma hater out there? A well-known health publisher ran a hastily executed (and, in my opinion, poorly thought out) search text ad with the title “Ineffective Drug Found.” That’s harsh.

Figure out how to respond to the Blogosphere. The conversations are taking place whether you participate or not and whether you like it or not. Even if you operate under the constraints of a highly regulated industry like the drug companies, there must be something that you can say that will not get you in trouble with the lawyers or the FDA.

For instance, the Health Blog on The Wall Street Journal site (one of the better health blogs out there) is going crazy with stories, posts and responses about the Vytorin issue – some of them are actually very informative. Even a simple post such as: “We appreciate everyone’s concern about this issue and we invite you to our Web site where you can learn more about how we are responding to the situation” – would at least get you involved in the conversation and keep you on the right side of the lawyers. Again this gives you the opportunity to drive traffic to your site where you control the messaging.

In the current environment where news travels at lightening speed, opinions are shaped in hours and markets respond in minutes, it’s more imperative than ever that companies have a Web-based disaster plan in place. These are a few strategies that can help any company get through the crisis.

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