

Tapping Into Digital Patient Education

Digital patient education has evolved through the years, but not very dramatically. According to three industry thought leaders, there is still a long way to go, making this an exciting time for digital marketers.

BY JENNIFER HAUG

DTC Perspectives magazine recently interviewed three patient education marketing veterans – Mike Cunnion of MediZine, Eric Jensen of Health Monitor Network and Elizabeth Apelles of GreaterThanOne – to discuss some of the current and possible future trends surrounding patient education.

Research shows that an increasing number of consumers are turning to the Internet when they are looking for health information, yet pharmaceutical-run Web sites fall low on the list of most-visited resources (see figure on next page). To keep up with the rise in demand for disease awareness Web sites hosted by third parties, MediZine, a leader in consumer health education, acquired HealthCommunities.com, a physician developed and monitored medical resource for consumers covering 30 medical information channels, in June 2009. MediZine president Mike Cunnion said that the acquisition allowed the company to “dramatically increase reach among consumers who are interested in learning about diseases and conditions.”

Such acquisitions occurring in the industry show that “it is no longer sufficient to be focused in only one medium,” Cunnion noted. “This allows [marketers] to create more holistic or integrated communications opportunities.” It also offers another avenue to reach patients with trusted information.

Elizabeth Apelles, a co-founder and chief executive of GreaterThanOne, a top digital marketing agency, also noted that “there is a focus on narrower therapy areas, driving a response for marketers to reach consumers.” According to research conducted by Health Monitor Network, a leading provider in patient education, company founder and president Eric Jensen explained that physicians say “the best and smartest



Mike Cunnion



Eric Jensen



Elizabeth Apelles

opportunity to fill that need digitally [for consumers] has not yet been met.”

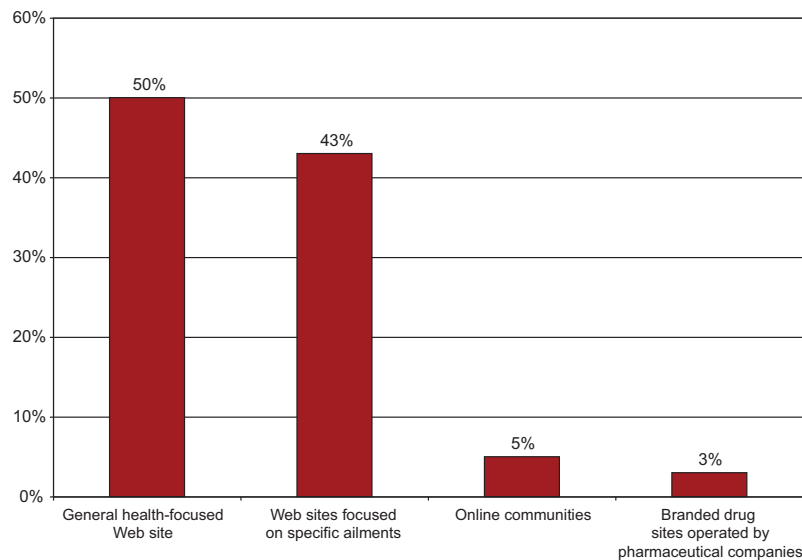
Trusted and relevant

While, as noted by Apelles, “the population is becoming more and more comfortable with digital channels,” Jensen pointed out that patients can become overwhelmed with the amount of information available. “We are seeing more and more of a need for a trusted and better-informed conversation, or dialogue, between patient and physician,” he stated. To bridge that gap, Cunnion advised marketers to “be committed to delivering trusted information in whatever channel consumers choose to participate in. It’s really about adapting to consumer behavior.”

Being viewed as a trusted resource does more than just educate consumers. Jensen noted that if consumers “trust the source, they are much more likely to take action.” Apelles added that “smart companies empower consumers through education to take action.”

Consumers also want information that is timely and relevant to their searches. “Patients want their ‘education’ to be targeted

Online sources used by US internet users to research an ailment or get drug treatment information, 2008 (% of respondents)



Note: n=1,319 who have ever used the Internet to research an ailment or get drug treatment information

Source: Prospectiv, "2008 Pharmaceutical Online Resources Poll," provided to eMarketer, October 28, 2008

to their specific condition and in the form of compelling content that they can apply to their daily lives," Jensen explained. Additionally, consumers want to receive it in a timely fashion. Cunnion noted that the Internet offers great platforms to provide immediate answers and engagement, such as social media and peer communities.

Apelles identified the changing role marketers play in educating consumers through digital channels. They are no longer just providing information about a specific product to consumers; they are now "advocates in healthcare management." This is a prime opportunity for marketers to be a key part of a patient's journey by providing them with trusted information through every step of the process. Jensen and his team have found that consumers "respond best to education that is engaging, supportive, [and] medically sound."

Trends shaping patient education

While pharma hasn't utilized digital channels to its fullest, all three thought-leaders agree that the best opportunities lie ahead. Cunnion stated that there has been "an amassing of a substantial audience" on the Internet, adding that today's consumer is more proactive and educated, requiring more than just an overview of a disease. These two factors, combined with the "massive influx of reference content in the market" have caused the baseline to sustain consumers' engagement to grow rapidly.

Apelles observed that marketers are moving away from broader-based tactics in favor of more targeted campaigns to meet that shift in behavior. She is also seeing a shift from blockbuster drugs to more orphan diseases among marketers. Cunnion also anticipates a stronger focus on vertical marketing. Innovation will be fundamental in continuing to reach and engage with consumers.

Jensen recommends integrating more interactive tools to help further the doctor-patient conversation and then adding "compelling offers of value on which the patient can act, such as co-pay offers and prescription savings." He also has noticed that the more successful campaigns for "engaging and motivating consumers are those supported or endorsed by the patient's physician. The next phase, which is already in its early stages, may be to adopt these trends to handheld devices." Cunnion said he also strongly believes in the power of mobile technology, which will provide "a whole host of new opportunities to consume content and to make better decisions using mobile devices."

As consumers are becoming more proactive and doctors are increasingly pressed for time, patient education that "enhances the physician-patient dialogue will lead to positive outcomes for DTC and DTP campaigns," conveyed Jensen. Cunnion stated that strategically, marketers will have "a whole new mindset to engage with, but tactically, it's not going to be tremendously different" because there will still be a driving need for patient education at the appropriate times.

Believing that a lot of innovation will be reached through "testing and learning," Apelles does not foresee "much in the form of FDA guidelines." She said she expects that regulations will occur more "in response to approaches taken by marketers," as it did back in April when DDMAC issued violation letters to 14 companies for 48 brands as a result of their usage of sponsored links on search engines. Cunnion recommended that pharma marketers "partner with companies that have acquired expertise" in various areas to ensure they are remaining within regulations, but are also reaching the right people.

The Internet is a vital source for consumers, and marketers need to learn how to leverage technology more. Marketers should also take more integrated approaches to keep up with the ever-fragmenting consumption of media by consumers. Successful use of digital channels – much like any other medium – will happen through proper testing, some trial and error, and of course, compliance of government regulations. **DTC**