

From Monologue to Dialogue

Incorporating Social Media into Consumer Communications

The rise of social media is turning the interruption model of marketing upside down. Today, brands are not only speaking to consumers, but many of these engaged consumers also are talking back to the brand.

BY JOHN TAPPER, PHD

New influences and new media are creating a new world of healthcare communications. In particular, the rapid growth of social media is transforming how pharmaceutical marketers communicate with their customers.

Until recently, DTC marketers depended on the age-old “interruption model” to promote their brands. In this approach, the consumer is watching TV, listening to the radio or reading a magazine, and the experience is “interrupted” by an ad attempting to convince the consumer to buy the brand (or, in the case of DTC, contact a physician). In essence, brands were talking *at*, not *with*, consumers.

The rise of social media is turning that model on its ear. Now, brands not only speak to consumers. Consumers speak back to brands. The monologue has transformed into a dialogue, with millions of people listening and engaging in the conversation. Marketers no longer just “interrupt” experiences. They create their own experiences – engaging *with*, rather than just talking *at*, their target consumers.

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For those who think this new world doesn’t apply to pharmaceutical brands – which often target older consumers – it’s time to think again. Women over age 55 were the fastest-growing demographic on Facebook in the 120 days prior to February 2009, growing by an astounding 175.3 percent. A study by AdSam and TNS Healthcare (now KantarHealth) shows that influencers in both male and female sufferers’ lives are most often women. Therefore, Facebook can reach a key demographic group for influencing healthcare decisions.

Even more importantly, consumers today not only turn to the Web and social networks for information, they believe what they find. In fact, 70 percent of consumers trust their peers for

pharmaceutical information... one-half of the U.S. population seeks health information online each month... and 86 percent say online health information is reliable. The Web actually has edged out physicians as the source consumers turn to most often for health-related information.

Growing interest in social media

Pharma marketers are beginning to take notice of the impact social media can have. In a recent KantarHealth survey, while just one in five companies said they have programs in place today to listen in to what’s being said online about their brands, four in five say their companies are interested in developing these kinds of programs.

For DTC marketers, the rise of social media can be worrying. Consumers now have the power to generate their own messages, taking control out of the brand manager’s hands. Rather than rail against this loss of control, however, marketers need to embrace the change and find creative ways to influence consumers through a number of different routes – both new and traditional.

It is important to remember that consumers today have a huge number and variety of contacts with a brand – some through brand-generated messages that marketers can control, such as TV or print, and some through consumer-generated media that they can’t, such as blogs. None of these contacts exists in a vacuum, and none is neutral. They each impact and interact with each other – and they each either enhance or detract from a brand’s image. Savvy DTC marketers need to look at the full range of media holistically and understand how to create the best mix for their brands.

A new model, a new environment

A new communications model – Influence 3.0 – provides the complete view of communications necessary in today’s multi-channel, multi-influence world. It captures the two types of communication used today to influence brand decisions:

1. The left-hand side represents the traditional model of brands talking to consumers (brand generated).
2. The right-hand side represents the new model of consumers talking with each other – and back to brands (consumer generated).

Most importantly, the model shows the interactions among all brand experiences. New media are not isolated. They operate within the full communications context. They influence – and are influenced by – other channels. Consider that the second-most common action after seeing a DTC ad through traditional media is to go online. In addition, consumers often incorporate ads and brand images from traditional channels into their social media sites. In turn, brands can “listen in” to social media to shape their messages for traditional advertising programs.

Today’s communications landscape is highly complex, interactive and dynamic. Using Influence 3.0 as a framework helps marketers understand the full range of communications alternatives – and make the best investment decisions across the marketing and sales mix.

Alternatives for DTC creative

Social media provide a powerful new guide to effective messaging for companies willing to “eavesdrop” on the conversation. They offer a firsthand look at the topics that interest audiences and the language they use to express themselves. Social media reveal not only what consumers want to know, but also how they want to talk about it. They can lead marketers both to the right subjects to impact consumers and the right words to unleash the message’s full power.

Increasingly, patients, caregivers and even providers interact on blogs, discussion boards and chat rooms. As a result, social media offer a new window into the attitudes and perceptions sufferers and those who care for them have about a disease, its treatments and its impact on quality of life. These insights can be a critical new source of information to support effective message and graphic development.

Traditionally, when seeking to understand what audiences think, marketers have turned to a combination of three information sources:

- Focus groups or surveys to understand what people say when asked
- Secondary data on purchasing or prescribing to understand what people do
- Approaches, such as ethnography, to understand how people behave



Social media offer a new option – the added perspective gained by listening to online conversations. With social media, you have a more complete picture of what consumers want to talk about and how they want to talk about it. As a result, marketers can create DTC messages that drive action.

Building a competitive advantage

With the advent of social media, the old interruption model is losing ground to new approaches that give consumers a voice in the brand-building process. Successful DTC marketers must take a holistic view of communications – putting together plans that incorporate consumer-generated messages with brand-generated messages and optimize the interactions between them.

Transitioning to this new world requires mastering the art of listening, so companies know how to make their end of the conversation relevant and compelling to their audiences. Companies that learn to engage with – rather than just speak to – consumers will have a major competitive advantage in today’s complex communications environment. **DTC**

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