

What is the Role OF Unbranded Websites IN Pharmaceutical Digital Marketing?

Pharma marketers are aggressively exploring how to leverage unbranded initiatives online, in part because of uncertainty around DTC online marketing and concern that branded online initiatives will be more heavily regulated by the FDA. An important first step for marketers is to better understand how consumers are adopting and using these unbranded condition Web sites.

BY MAUREEN MALLOY

In the current DTC marketing landscape, branded initiatives are the predominant form of promotion. According to data from SDI & Kantar Media, unbranded advertising only accounted for about 4 percent of total DTC spend in 2009. Though the product Web site will likely remain the online hub for most brand campaigns in the midterm, evolving consumer health information-seeking and pharmaceutical marketing trends have prompted companies to reevaluate the role of unbranded initiatives in their promotional and customer service plans.

Whether or not unbranded initiatives are an effective option for a brand depend on a variety of factors, including disease category, brand goals, product situation and the regulatory environment. It has been argued that for many brands, competing with major digital health publishers in providing comprehensive online symptom and disease information for the sole purpose of boosting patient education and awareness is a difficult and ineffective investment. But in the right situation, unbranded Web sites and condition-focused tools and content can support a variety of brand goals, such as lead generation and relationship management initiatives. The following trends indicate that unbranded initiatives can be viable pharmaceutical marketing strategies:

Condition-focused content extends reach throughout treatment continuum

Among other factors, increased broadband penetration and mobile access have made the Internet a central information resource to U.S. adults in recent years. This shift in access, coupled with macro changes in healthcare, has also driven more consumers to go online for health and pharmaceutical information more often and also during more situations along the treatment continuum. In the early days of the health Web, consumers primarily went online to check new symptoms. Now, consumers go online before and after doctor's visits and at multiple points during the maintenance phase of treatment.

Unbranded Web sites and other types of condition-focused initiatives can help pharma marketers extend their reach and relevancy throughout the patient life cycle. For example, consumers visit product Web sites when researching prescription drug information, but are unlikely to use them as a resource when they have symptoms for a condition or are looking for disease management information. Unbranded Web sites can complement product Web sites by opening up more opportunities to engage and connect with patients throughout their journey, and potentially drive them into the marketing funnel or to complete other actions that support brand goals.

Consumers online for pharmaceutical information are interested in unbranded Web sites

Research indicates that there is considerable demand for unbranded Web sites among consumers using the Internet to look up prescription drug information. Over half of this key segment either uses or is interested in using unbranded Web sites from pharmaceutical companies. Only a small share of these consumers does not want to use this kind of resource at all (see Figure 1).

Driving this demand for unbranded Web sites is greater trust of manufacturer online resources than commonly believed. While only about one-quarter of consumers seeking prescription drug information say they trust manufacturer Web sites, about 50 percent indicate they are cautiously open to using these Web sites as part of their overall research.

One of the major challenges with unbranded investments, and branded ones for that matter, is that consumers visit these pharmaceutical properties much less frequently than major general health and medical Web sites. This trend, along with the regulatory challenges of deploying unbranded Web sites, is often cited by marketers as major barriers to the growth of unbranded online initiatives. Integrating campaigns both within and across

channels can help leverage investments in unbranded Web sites more fully.

Industry's involvement in social media leans toward an unbranded approach

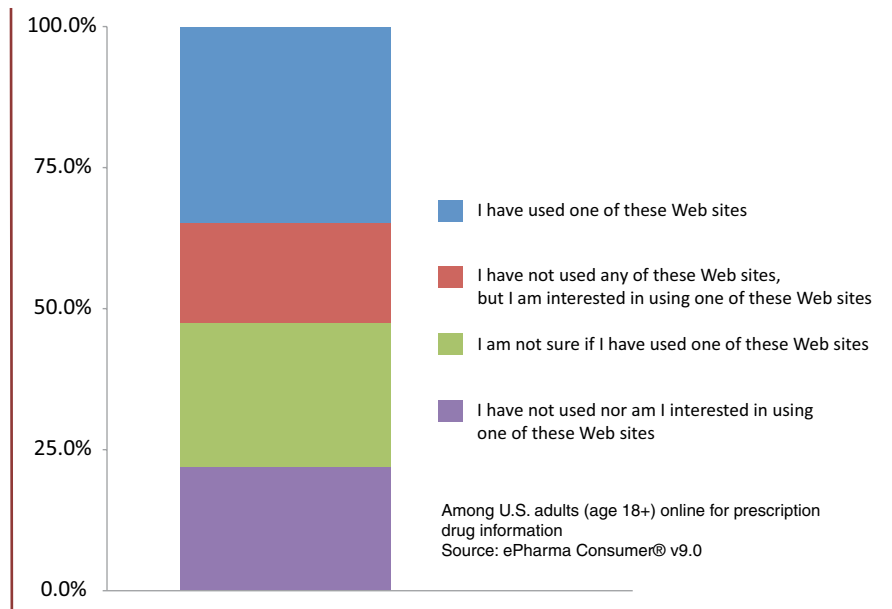
Unbranded online campaigns have also risen higher in the brand planning agenda because of their potential to offer a viable way for brands to participate in social media. With ambiguous FDA regulations, most pharmaceutical social media initiatives at this point are either corporate or condition-focused. Beyond regulatory limitations, social media lends itself more to socially-relevant content such as causes, events, support, and service. An unbranded approach can offer a more human and personal way for pharmaceutical companies to participate in social media.

Jonathan Richman, director of Social Media at Bridge Worldwide and author of the Dose of Digital blog, predicts that pharmaceutical brand Facebook Pages will become extinct over the course of the next two to three years, alluding to the fact that consumers may be less than inclined to become a Fan of a pharmaceutical drug than they would of a more relatable brand or cause. By contrast, cause-related initiatives appear to be doing well. Merck's *Take a Step Against Cervical Cancer* Page is one of the most notable industry examples on Facebook. Though the Gardasil brand is mentioned, the focus is on empowering women to take steps to protect themselves from HPV and cervical cancer, which is a cause to which females are more likely to feel connected and support rather than the drug itself. Additionally, many brands that have launched their own communities, such as PKU.com, I Walk Because, and CF Voice, have also gravitated toward more of a condition-focused approach.

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Another industry trend that used to be a mark in favor of unbranded Web sites was that they generally faced less regulatory scrutiny than product Web sites and other branded promotions. This past spring, though, the FDA posted a warning letter that called out a variety of offenses committed by two of Novartis' unbranded oncology Web sites, GIST and CML Alliance. This situation called into question many of the assumptions that

Fig 1: Among Consumers Searching Online For Rx Info, Most Currently Use or Are Interested in Using Unbranded Web Sites



marketers previously held regarding the regulatory aspects of unbranded initiatives. Though the Web sites' content did not seem to blatantly advertise the cancer drug Gleevec, the FDA nonetheless found them to be "false and misleading because they promote the drug for an unapproved use, fail to disclose the risks associated with the use of Gleevec and make unsubstantiated dosing claims." The FDA determined that a variety of Web site elements promoted the drug, including links to product information and similarities between the look and feel of the unbranded Web sites and Gleevec.com.

Due to the present uncertainty around the regulatory aspects of unbranded Web sites and pharmaceutical digital marketing in general, companies are increasingly concerned with how they will manage the line between unbranded and branded content. Nonetheless, the merit of unbranded content remains. Despite the fact that marketers will likely take a more conservative approach toward these types of initiatives in the meantime, the above consumer digital health trends indicate that unbranded and condition-focused content are highly relevant in the current pharmaceutical marketing landscape and can be a viable option for certain brands under the right circumstances. **DTC**

Source: Manhattan Research, Cybercitizen Health® v9.0, ePharma Consumer® v9.0

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