



Healthcare Marketing

Healthcare: Making it Personal

Complex healthcare issues flood the general consumer media. Consumers are bombarded with information about Medicare prescription benefits, patient privacy issues, co-pays, generic drugs and new treatment developments. While everyday citizens read about these issues in the newspapers and hear about them on the nightly news, they often have trouble making sense of how these complex issues affect them personally. As healthcare professionals in the public relations field, it is often our job to present complex healthcare issues in a way that is understandable, and most importantly salient, to consumers.

According to a recent survey conducted by Cigna, 92 percent of respondents said they believe that it is important to be more informed healthcare consumers, yet only 50 percent of respondents claimed they had knowledge of the latest healthcare services and options available to them. Healthcare organizations are challenged to respond to consumers' strong demand for information in an effective manner. Unless the information is presented to them in a useful format, consumers will not necessarily be able to understand what the information means to them. The following are useful techniques to consider when trying to reach out to the consumer in a meaningful way.

All Healthcare Issues are Personal

Healthcare issues evoke emotions because they are personal - we all go to the doctor, navigate through healthcare provider networks, take prescriptions from time to time and unfortunately deal with illness. Presenting an issue by incorporating real-life examples helps to paint a picture for the consumer and gives them something to which they can relate.

Let's use the example of a case in which you are charged with the challenge of marketing a new online doctor-patient communication tool to consumers. Just the name of the service itself may invoke intimidation or confusion on behalf of a consumer. The following real-life example helps to bring the concept to life:

Rhonda, a working mother of three, benefited from the online doctor-patient communication tool offered through her health plan recently. Her son was experiencing a stomachache at school while taking antibiotics. During her busy workday, between meetings, Rhonda emailed her son's pediatrician about his complaint. Within two hours, she received helpful feedback from the pediatrician. Had there not been this online option, Rhonda would have had to wait for the pediatrician to reach her by phone. Considering her busy meeting schedule that day, reaching her may have been difficult. The online option saved time for her and her pediatrician that would have otherwise been spent trying to reach one another on the phone.

Value, Benefit and Value Again

Consumers are primarily interested in how a service or product benefits them. Focusing on the specific benefits a consumer would directly experience with a healthcare product or service should be a key objective in any communications plan.

For instance, in marketing the opening of a new state-of-the-art medical imaging center, describing the high-tech equipment and sophisticated infrastructure of the center will not necessarily be meaningful to a consumer. However, communicating how the center will be able to serve more patients in less time or how the center's new technology will provide new services not previously available will be much more salient to consumers. Going back to my first point, by giving a real-life example of how one of the new pieces of diagnostic equipment will be able to detect a specific condition, a clearer picture will be painted for the consumer and they will be better able to relate to what you are trying to communicate to them.

Don't Wait for Them to Come to You

Getting the message out through traditional consumer media outlets is often not enough. Going out into the community of your target audience and communicating to them at a grass-roots level can be extremely effective. Organizations such as church-based support groups, local charity organizations and community health fairs are outlets that often welcome opportunities for consumer education through speeches and presentations. When a healthcare organization reaches out to consumers within its own community, they are often more receptive to the information and often become empowered to ask questions and request additional pieces of information for which they never may have felt comfortable asking before.

A few years ago I worked with a pharmaceutical company to promote their new breast cancer chemotherapy agent. The most effective campaign involved traveling to local church-based breast cancer support groups throughout the country to present the latest developments in therapy. We brought in a local oncologist, who presented the information on a level understandable to consumers. The members of the support groups were able to absorb the information, primarily because it was presented in a familiar environment and it was tailored to their organization and membership's information needs. In fact, many participants claimed they felt less intimidated about asking questions of the presenting oncologist than their own oncologist.

Today consumers demand more and more healthcare information. Healthcare companies - along with public relations and marketing professionals - try to keep up with this demand. While consumers are becoming exposed to vast amounts of information, it may not necessarily be helpful or even understandable to them. In communicating complex healthcare issues to consumers, an explicit effort needs to be made to package the information in ways that will ultimately be meaningful to them.

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