

Healthcare Marketing

The Buzz on 'buzz marketing' for healthcare

Fashionably dressed young people arrive at the local mall in a new car - it's not one they've bought, but one the car manufacturer is lending them to show to their friends. Celebrities wear the latest style watch, handbag, or shoes. "Frequent visitors" to the websites of the latest cutting edge movies receive an invitation to participate in a web-based mystery game, which is subtly linked to an upcoming film, in the hopes that they will invite their friends to also participate.

"Buzz" marketing, like its cousin viral marketing (addressed in a previous column), is generating a buzz of its own as a way to reach young, hip consumers and to penetrate the advertising clutter that today's sophisticated American is learning to tune out. And the concept is very much a part of some healthcare marketing efforts.

Buzz marketing involves the identification and then the enlistment of individuals who are trendsetters and who influence the opinions and the buying behaviors of others; these trendsetters may or may not be reached through the Internet. Buzz marketing has been most utilized by companies with products that could not be marketed through traditional means (such as liquor and cigarettes), and by companies with a product with a very short shelf life, such as Hollywood studios opening new films that need to build audiences quickly.

Examples of buzz marketing include:

- Carefully constructed websites that lure in visitors with complex or mysterious story lines or games. The film, "The Blair Witch Project," is a well-known example in which the website presented the story of the fictitious "Blair Witch" and the expedition to find it as a factual chronology of the documentary which was, in turn, the movie.
- Attractive and fashionable people given free merchandise and fees to wear or use the products and services, and to talk about it to their friends and strangers
- Celebrities given free merchandise and/or services in return for the exposure the product will receive through the star's use and implied endorsement
- Grassroots promotions executed by word-of-mouth and/or via the Internet, through peer-to-peer communication

Both viral and buzz marketing share two features in common: communication by non-traditional means and targeting "influencers" who will then tell others. Their success and growing popularity is based on the theory that new ideas and behaviors (wearing a style, seeing a movie, buying a product or service) is initiated by a small group of influential trendsetters - early adopters - and then spreads out to a much larger audience who are originally connected to these initiators.

The growth of these types of marketing campaign is fueled by several factors:

- The use of the Internet makes it possible to identify and profile individual's interests and needs based on the sites they visit, and to quickly and simultaneously communicate with thousands of individuals at little or no cost
- Americans in general are growing increasingly cynical of traditional advertising
- As people get busier and/or rely on the Internet more for information, their exposure to traditional advertising channels - TV, radio, newspaper - decreases
- Reaching and influencing sophisticated Generation X and Y customers requires ingenuity and subtlety

What does it take for a person to be considered an 'influencer?'

First, they must be respected and listened to by others - the high school student whom others follow, the mom whom other women turn to for child-rearing advice, the physician who is consulted by his colleagues, the well-respected executive whose opinions are sought out by peers and subordinates.

Second, they must be linked to others through formal and/or informal communication channels. An articulate, experienced mother might be well linked to her "mommy & me" group whose 10 members view her as a credible source of information; but to be an effective influencer, she must be linked to more networks - her PTA, her business associates, her church, the friends of her older children's playmates, etc.

Third, they must be vocal (without being offensive), articulate, and interesting, with the ability to command or capture the attention of others.

Fourth, their network and influence must match the scope of the marketing campaign. A person enlisted for a local effort must have local credibility. A national campaign would require someone nationally respected and known.

What are the implications of buzz marketing for healthcare?

The basic concept of buzz marketing is one that is familiar to healthcare under the guise of referral marketing. Referral sources play a critical role in how patients are directed to healthcare services, and the art of identifying and influencing key referral sources is a cornerstone of most healthcare marketing plans. Here are some additional healthcare-related applications of buzz marketing in its latest iteration.

1. Word-of-mouth is a strong reference source for healthcare. People are more likely to rely on the reference of a friend or family member about a physician or choice of hospital, for example, than a phone book listing or telephone referral service. As such, the ability of influencers to impact healthcare purchase decisions should be substantial.
2. The more personal the choice, the higher the likelihood of buzz marketing making an impact. Information from a credible source would be more likely to influence the choice of a hospital or physician for a surgical procedure, than it would for the selection of a brand of toothpaste or headache remedy.
3. Buzz marketing could be highly effective in targeting ethnic or cultural groups. In some instances, it may be the only means to effectively communicate with a particular ethnic group that is primarily attuned to members of its own community. Alliances with other groups and individuals

- that already have relationships with these areas - realtors, pharmaceutical firms, cable television companies - could be a means to ally with influencers of these communities.
4. Buzz marketing is a particularly potent means of communicating with teens and young adults, who are especially reliant on peer-to-peer communication for information and for counsel. "Street teams" talking to peers about safe sex is one example of the use of this tactic in healthcare.
 5. Potential "influencers" can come in a variety of guises and be discovered by a number of means. One might be the analysis of patient satisfaction questionnaires to find patients who are thrilled with their healthcare experience. Another might be a contest soliciting anecdotes on ways in which a healthcare product has been successfully used. Others might be the nurse that patients seek out for advice, the physician whose opinion is sought by his peers, the civic or volunteer leaders who have a stake in the health and safety of the community.
 6. Buzz marketing can be an effective way of promoting events, which many healthcare companies utilize in their marketing campaigns. Gaining the participation of high-profile individuals and making the event a "must-see" occasion that people will tell their friends about and encourage them to attend.

Although the strategy and tactics of a buzz marketing campaign must be - like all elements of the marketing plan - carefully researched and planned, the marketer should not lose sight of the hallmark of the successful buzz. Instead of a calculated marketing overture, the connection appears as a serendipitous, almost casual, encounter. Hence, its elusive effectiveness and its aura of exclusivity.

If you have experience or opinions on buzz marketing in healthcare, we would like to hear from you for future columns. Send your thoughts to joy@joyscott.com.

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