

The Rx for Medical Marketing

Digital media solutions are helping pharma and biotech companies serve the physician community more effectively and efficiently

Medical marketers are facing some hefty challenges today. With patents on key drugs expiring, legislative scrutiny of medical information increasing and several years of sluggish sales, pharmaceutical and biotechnology manufacturers are looking for ways to cut costs and improve profit margins.

Staff reductions are often a first choice, and more than 20,000 sales rep positions have been eliminated in recent years, with more expected. Those remaining are covering larger territories, giving them less time with each doctor, while many doctors are increasingly limiting the reps' access to them. In addition, physicians are spending less time in peer-to-peer meetings discussing their experiences with a particular drug therapy, further reducing a brand's face time in front of healthcare providers.

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Meanwhile, physicians are concerned that healthcare reform may add 31 million patients to a system already short of 125,000 doctors, leaving existing medical professionals with little time to care for them. As a result, "Physicians want 'found' time," says Donato Tramuto, CEO and vice chairman of Physicians Interactive Holdings. "They want their time back to do the things that are important to them," he says, and they're turning to the online channel as a vehicle to help manage their professional time.

THE BENEFITS OF DIGITAL MEDIA

With more physicians online, drug makers are increasingly leveraging digital media, and agencies and marketing services firms that serve the pharma sector are seeking acquisitions and investments that strengthen their core digital competencies.

Physicians Interactive, for instance, which is owned by private equity firm Perseus, acquired MedManage Systems, a U.S. provider of online, on-demand

prescription drug sampling, and Skyscape Inc., a global leader for medical information delivered via mobile devices and the Internet. With these additions, Physicians Interactive added content and product delivery platforms, doubled its physician network and added more than one million healthcare professionals to its database.

A growing form of digital media used by drug makers today is e-detailing, which takes a traditional, face-to-face presentation delivered by a sales rep and moves it online. These customized presentations allow pharma companies to reach a wider group of healthcare professionals more efficiently.

Leon Behar, CEO of Medical Knowledge Group, a holding company comprised of several specialty medical communications companies, including Synapse, a full-service strategic agency, and 81qd, a data analytics firm, cautions that the ability to impact behavior change is dictated by the strength of the content. "If e-detailing is perceived as nothing more than a commercial, it will achieve nothing. It's all about the credibility of the content, the brand's value proposition and how you communicate that," he says.

Some medical marketers are testing social media communities, but legal restrictions about what they can say is keeping them from diving in with both feet. "Drug companies primarily use social media sites to 'listen' to what physicians are writing about diseases and products and as a channel to conduct online market research," says Jack Davis, co-CEO of group dca, the independent parent of Cue, Graphic Details, iLights, Insight Exchange and Park Street Research, five specialized companies involved in integrated marketing programs. "We believe that current regulatory concerns will block pharmaceutical companies from making significant advertising and sponsorship commitments to these communities."

E-SAMPLING OFFERS VALUABLE DATA

Another growing trend is the movement toward e-sampling, in which physicians order samples from a pharma manufacturer's website. This self-managed model frees drug makers from certain administrative

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duties and helps keep costs down, while also providing valuable physician behavioral data. Theoretically, drug sampling should be similar to CPG sampling, where distribution leads to trial which leads to purchase, but some say that is not the case.

“There has been a lot of debate on the value of sampling and whether or not it can help move the needle with respect to increasing first fills, overall patient compliance and monitoring [drug] effectiveness,” explains Tramuto. “One needs to be mindful that there are multiple variables that serve as drivers ... and physician/patient interaction is critical to any successful outcome.”

He further points out that the acquisition of e-sampling firm MedManage was designed as a component of a complete holistic approach and not intended to stand on its own. “This acquisition was part of an integrated strategy that includes multiple online activities, such as education, medical alerts, peer-to-peer interaction and mobile apps,” Tramuto says.

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Jack Davis, co-CEO, group dca

DATA IS KEY TO THE FUTURE OF MEDICAL MARKETING

The pharmaceutical industry is awash in data, including volume, dose, regimen and patient types. The information collected, however, can only reveal what is happening, not why, and much work still needs to be done to improve data's value. “We believe the single most important difference between the Internet and other media is the opportunity to collect and act on extensive, detailed, individual-level data, ultimately understanding the factors that drive individual physician behavior,” Davis explains.

Adds Behar, “Other industries are way ahead of the game with predictive analytics and closed-loop marketing platforms.” He notes that communication with health care providers often involves multiple touch points, but they remain siloed. “Physician

Pharma companies don't care how many healthcare providers you have in your database, it's whether they are engaged and interacting.

*Donato Tramuto, CEO and vice chairman,
Physicians Interactive Holdings*

sentiment is rarely captured and utilized to effectively close the loop and tailor subsequent communications. Without sentiment, you have no idea if your message is resonating with a specific target. Given that you have a limited amount of time to communicate your message to busy clinicians, doing so without knowing where to focus is a huge waste of time and resources. Marketers that figure out how to do this well will be the ones that win.”

Tramuto views partnering as pivotal to the data integration process. “It's costly to think you can try to get all the data yourself,” he says. “There will have to be integration of many different services, such as education, social media, content, data and communication tools, which will allow information to get into the hands of the providers quickly and in a way that will meet their communication preferences. That's the value proposition.”

TRANSFORMATION AHEAD

The medical marketing industry is grappling with change. To overcome substantial challenges, drug makers are looking for ways to drive a more effective relationship with a wider audience at a lower cost, and digital media has become a key component in helping pharma and biotech companies achieve their goals.

Given the inefficiencies that exist today in the communication, collection and processing of healthcare information, clear opportunities exist around both business models that integrate physician and consumer insights with agency services and tools that provide better content creation and delivery to help physicians maximize their time and improve the doctor-patient relationship, such as tablet PCs, iPads, mobile apps, e-sampling, e-detailing and CRM applications. Business combination activity will increase, as integrated digital service delivery businesses continue to emerge and deliver measurable results for medical marketers. ■