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Pharma’s Confidence Crisis: A Call for a New Marketing Paradigm?
By Lisa Roner
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It is said by many that pharma is an industry in crisis. It faces weakening pipelines, spiraling costs and political adversity. It is plagued by pricing pressures on every front, increasingly competitive markets, patent challenges and public distrust. Yet, its medicines better and save lives. The industry’s healthcare mission is arguably noble; it is its business model that draws fire.

It could be argued that the root cause of its many other challenges lies in public distrust. Dan Mendelson, President and Founder of the health strategies consultancy in Washington, D.C. and former Associate Director of Health at the White House Office of Management and Budget, called the industry’s predicament a “paradox of perception” in a recent editorial in Pharmaceutical Executive. “A skeptical public thinks drug makers care more about the bottom line than helping the sick,” Mendelson said.

The public’s negative perception of the industry has taken years to form and is deeply seated. And while public distrust runs high for most big business, a recent Wall Street Journal survey revealed pharma ranks among the least trusted industries. One recommendation Mendelson offers for improving public opinion is for pharma marketers to acknowledge that prescription drugs are both medical and consumer products.

“Companies need to clearly communicate the benefits of increasing consumer empowerment through advertising and ensure that ads contain broader public health and medical messages, such as how the medication improves patient compliance and overall health,” he said.

This view is supported by a recent Forrester Research report examining the value consumers place on information offered in the pharma industry’s online messages. “Consumers Don’t Swallow Pharma Site Messages” reveals that although the numbers of online health information seekers continues to climb, consumers turn to third-party health and wellness sites for credible information more readily than branded sites.

The report contends that although many consumers (58%) believe pharmaceutical sites are a good source of information for drug facts, only 37% believe the sites accurately present the a product’s benefits and risks and 20% think disease information is more reliable elsewhere. In fact, 59% of visitors find branded drug sites “too promotional, making content less trustworthy than at other sites.”

Similarly, a recent Manhattan Research study commissioned by Novartis found that more than half of online consumers felt the accuracy and quality of pharmaceutical information online needs to increase. In addition, 51% reported having difficulty separating credible online health content from untrustworthy information.

Drivers of trust in online health information cited by participants in this survey included review of content by medical professionals (81%) and clear distinction of health and medical content from sponsor advertising (80%).

Differentiating educational material from promotional content is being done well by some pharmaceutical companies. In a recent Pharmaceutical Executive article, Kathy Kastner, CEO of the Health Television system, noted Glaxo-SmithKline’s underwriting of an educational segment on its AIDS treatment Combivir.

“It’s purely educational content fosters Combivir’s image as a brand and GSK’s image as a company whose primary focus is patient care,” Kastner said.
“That, in turn, promotes trust among patients and healthcare providers who see the program.”

Likewise, Novartis’ SimplyStated.com initiative strives to address consumers’ desires for simple, accurate and credible health information online. The portal, which provides information on 14 disease categories, also offers tips on evaluating the reliability of online health information and user privacy policies.

In addition, the content on SimplyStated is written and reviewed by an independent board of health professionals and features only limited commercial material promoting Novartis’ products. For its efforts, Novartis has been awarded Good Housekeeping’s Web site certification, endorsing the company’s sites standards for privacy, security and content.

Forrester recommends to distinguish educational and promotional content online, drug makers should incorporate educational content on third-party and non-branded sites and include links to the product Web site’s promotional content.

“Education can be a key factor in repositioning pharma’s image: from an emphasis on profits to a commitment to partnership in patient care,” Kastner concludes in her article.

Altering the “paradox of perception,” according to these industry experts, begins with altering the industry’s public credibility, at least in part through a new marketing approach that embraces and emphasizes educational value and content quality and accuracy.
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