

Relationship Marketing

The Rx for DTC



More than a band-aid, relationship marketing – or RM – is a proven antidote for the erosion of trust, which is one of the side effects of DTC. The author outlines a strategy for restoring trust in the doctor-patient-brand relationship.

BY KELLY ANDREWS

The marketing environment for DTC – or direct-to-consumer drug advertising – has grown increasingly complex over the last few years. Media fragmentation, information saturation and heightened regulatory scrutiny have combined to create an obstacle course for the pharmaceutical marketer.

These factors – plus a consumer base that is increasingly skeptical of the healthcare system – can add up to serious questions regarding the viability of DTC.

Yet DTC is here to stay. Many people – including some of its most vocal critics, both within government and the media – credit DTC for its role in increasing patient involvement in their healthcare. In fact, DTC has provided the consumer with a degree of control that would previously have been unthinkable.

Given the fact that patients are empowered, yet rapidly losing trust in the healthcare system, what is the best way to reach them? One solution is the use of relationship marketing. When powered by the insights of behavioral science and tailored to the needs of the patient, this strategy can be the best prescription for making DTC a more effective marketing tool.

Importance of trust in marketing

Nowhere in marketing is trust more important than in healthcare. But DTC ads, with their required litany of possible side effects, can give consumers the idea that taking their medicine can be a “bitter pill” indeed. And despite consumers being

in control more than ever before, a significant power differential still exists between the physician and patient. In addition, the current economic climate – which has consumers trying to cut healthcare costs and delay expensive treatments – can result in consumers wondering if their treatments are really necessary.

A good patient-doctor relationship can mediate some of these factors. When patients believe that their doctors have their best interests at heart, they are more likely to be active participants in their healthcare. They are also likely to adhere to treatment and experience better outcomes (Lee and Lin, 2009). Similarly, the belief that the company behind a pharmaceutical brand is truly interested in the patient’s long term success can also help to alleviate concerns.

How to restore trust?

There are ways to use relationship marketing to restore trust.

Over the last 20 years, there has been a dramatic erosion of trust in the doctor-patient relationship. In her recent article, “Doctor and Patient, Now at Odds,” New York Times reporter Tara Parker-Pope asserts, “The once-revered doctor-patient relationship is on the rocks.” (The New York Times, 2008). She blames the loss of trust on several factors, including news reports about medical errors and DTC. She believes the rise of DTC advertising has taught patients to research their own medical issues and made them more skeptical.

One of the best ways to restore trust is to make it clear that patients, healthcare providers and the brand all share the same goals. It is not enough for DTC marketers to tell consumers that a product is safe, effective and convenient. The brand must demonstrate that it understands and empathizes with the consumer's concerns by providing materials and programs that the patient actually needs.

That's where relationship marketing comes in. Relationship marketing doesn't overlook the product message. Instead, it makes the product more relevant to the target audience – the patient – by opening up channels of communication, clarifying expectations and providing much-needed support. Relationship marketing helps to position the brand as an ally, or trusted partner, in the care of the patient.

What is relationship marketing?

Relationship marketing is, first and foremost, consumer-centric. Its principal hallmarks (see following sidebar for more details) are to focus on the consumer, listen to the consumer and serve the consumer. Its goal, most of all, is to empower the consumer by building trust, eliminating the skepticism that often taints the patient-doctor-brand relationship.

Traditional marketing, too often, tends to be one-sided. Brands talk at, rather than with, consumers. They focus on what they want consumers to hear, with very little thought as to what consumers want. But in today's environment, where consumers want and expect information on their own terms, this kind of monologue can be a turn-off. Like the blind date who talks exclusively about himself, the brand is telling the consumer that it cares more about itself than about those who use the product.

Relationship marketing uses dialogue and an understanding of behavior to rectify this situation. When based on behavioral science, relationship marketing allows the marketer to understand the patient's anxieties and address specific barriers that may stand in the way of treatment. Conversely, it also allows the marketer to identify which positive buttons to push in order to motivate patients to participate in their own care.

For example, according to the theory of attachment style, patients relate to doctors in one of four ways. Communicating according to a patient's attachment style builds trust between patients and doctors, which leads to improved health outcomes (Ciechanowski et al., 2004; Street, et al., 2009). By meeting patients where they are and engaging them in a conversation, relationship marketing helps build trust between patients, physicians and brands.

How does this affect DTC? First of all, one-size-fits-all “Ask your doctor” directives are not compelling to everyone. Behavior change, especially in healthcare, is difficult and comes more slowly, for most people, than following orders. To reach that part of the audience, marketers should follow up their DTC

directives with invitations for dialogue. By engaging consumers in discussions about their specific issues, marketers not only reinforce DTC messaging and build trust, but they also focus spending on their best prospects.

Used correctly, relationship marketing is a strategy, not a tactic. It is a platform on which the wise marketer can build connections between all the stakeholders – the patient, physician, pharmacist, family, caregivers and other providers – so that everyone has an investment in the fight for better health.

While DTC is an excellent way to begin a relationship with patients, relationship marketing is the glue that keeps them engaged. Through information and support, it empowers patients, preparing them for a meaningful conversation with their doctor about their diagnosis or treatment. Once patients are on a medication, relationship marketing helps them to remain compliant and achieve a positive outcome, creating a

Hallmarks of Effective Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing is a strategy that engages and empowers consumers. It requires the seamless integration of product information with lifestyle information, education and support. Moreover, it does all this in a way that is consumer-friendly and relevant. Here are some basic tips:

- Focus on the consumer: use research to understand the consumer's needs, and then create tactics and messages that will build knowledge, confidence and motivation.
- Listen to the consumer: encourage dialogue through surveys, member feedback, market research, patient advisory boards and social media, engaging consumers in the process and gaining deeper insight into their needs.
- Prioritize the plan: identify those consumers who are most likely to take the desired action and target spending, tactics and messages accordingly. This will maximize the effectiveness of the program and increase its ROI.
- Provide multiple ways to engage: give consumers a variety of ways in which to interact with the brand, maximizing the program's reach and value.
- Adopt a customer service approach: make service a part of the product by providing information and support at every point of contact.
- Be nimble: integrate measurement into every step of the program so that tactics can be weighed and then adapted to reflect changing needs.

scenario in which everyone – consumer, pharmaceutical company and physician – is a winner.

The bottom line – better outcomes

In healthcare, achieving a positive outcome is the best way to ensure a return on investment. Helping consumers to recognize that the brand is on their side – and that it has their best interests in mind – can best be achieved by providing targeted information and support. In that way, brands can build trust and increase the overall effectiveness of DTC marketing.

Because of its consumer-centric focus and reliance on listening, relationship marketing is a perfect antidote to the layers of distrust that often accompany DTC. Because it is highly targeted and personal, it is cost-effective. And used correctly, relationship marketing can be used to overcome patient barriers to

treatment, ultimately converting those patients – and their physicians – into advocates for the brands. **DTC**

Kelly Andrews brings more than 12 years experience in advertising and marketing to her role as strategic planner at MicroMass Communications. An accomplished focus group moderator and ethnographic researcher, Andrews applies her anthropologist's eye to understanding what motivates consumers both within and outside of pharma. She also has expertise in brand-building initiatives and has helped clients create award-winning campaigns. Before joining MicroMass, Andrews was an account planner for a major advertising agency, where her account responsibilities included The Ad Council's Breastfeeding Initiative (Department of HHS), among others. She can be reached by e-mail at kelly.andrews@micromass.com, or by telephone at (919) 256-2476.

Two Case Study Examples

FEMARA's "My Next Steps"

Femara is a breast cancer treatment developed by Novartis. Its patient marketing program, called "My Next Steps," was designed to ease the stress of being a cancer survivor and encourage patients to seek social support. Both its tactics and content were based on a deep understanding of breast cancer survivors as a supportive community whose members share information.

Through My Next Steps, Femara is able to support patients all along their journey, surrounding them, through print and e-mail, with highly-personalized information. The program includes in-office education and starter kits, newsletters, tell-a-friend materials, a Mammo Map, and reminder tools that address specific behavioral drivers and barriers.

Behavioral insights helped spark some of the most compelling program tactics. Femara invited members of My Next Steps to share their stories and made them a part of the program content, along with stories from an oncology nurse and a physician. The stories added authenticity while building a sense of connection among members.

My Next Steps also includes a Treatment History kit that supports patients and makes it easier for them to participate in their own care. The kit helps position Femara within the context of ongoing care and communicates product benefits in a relevant, patient-centric way. Not surprisingly, this program has been effective in differentiating Femara among doctors and patients by providing personalized information and support.

The Novartis BP SUCCESS ZONE Program

The BP Success Zone Program supports five separate hypertension brands from Novartis. Participants receive lifestyle information, relevant messages about their medication and helpful tools, including access to a members-only Web site and online BP tracker. The program also provides a healthy lifestyle action plan, refill reminders, a prescription savings card and a free BP monitor to help patients manage their high blood pressure.

Every aspect of the program is customized for the individual patient. Variables depend on the length of therapy, the medication being taken and behavioral constructs that have been proven, through research, to motivate change among people with high blood pressure. Patients can choose to receive their materials by e-mail or direct mail, selecting one of five Healthy Lifestyle Action Plans – salt reduction, weight loss, increased physical activity, smoking cessation and stress management – based on their needs.

Surveys at enrollment and other key points during the program have created an ongoing dialogue that helps to maximize member engagement while allowing further customization in subsequent communications. The BP Success Zone program has differentiated Novartis and positively impacted the behavior of physicians and patients, increasing the length of therapy and generating a positive ROI. Program members are overwhelmingly positive about the program, with more than 75 percent of them stating that it has helped them control their high blood pressure.