



THINKSTOCK

# CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

To date, pharma marketers have viewed interactive video as more or less a curio—a tactic best assigned to next year's to-do list. But in doing so, they're missing a huge opportunity to connect in ways that more linear forms of advertising can't match. By way of IKEA and Coldplay, **Mitch Apley** explains

**R**emember the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series of children's books? The ones where the reader became the protagonist and got to decide whether to go through the trapdoor or fly into the black hole or battle the dragon? You could read those books over and over and still find your way to a different ending every time. For me they were an endless source of early teenage entertainment.

Pharma marketers would be well advised to dig out and reread their old copies, because we as an industry have fallen into the bad habit of limiting ourselves to linear narratives. Back when the magazine page and the TV spot were the only tools we had, this sort of thinking was excusable. But the toolbox is bigger now. We now have the power to create our messaging in the image of how people actually live their lives—zigging and zagging, choosing to pause and find out more about this, to skip over that, deciding and changing one's mind over and over again.

Many tools exist to create nonlinear messaging today, but the most powerful, the most potentially impactful—and the one in which pharma is most conspicuous by its absence—is interactive video.

For a demonstration of the marketing potential that interactive video offers, go ask Mr. Google about IKEA's "Where Good Days Start" campaign. Its centerpiece video follows an impossibly cute family—parents, a boy and two girls—through their morning activities. The catch? At any time viewers can tap the space bar for more information about the characters, the story or (most important) the IKEA furniture in the family apartment. This little slice of brilliance was nominated for a 2015 Webby Award for Best Use of Interactive Video. Try it—even if you don't know Swedish you'll get the idea.

This is the way real people will interact with media in the future. In fact, it's the way many people interact with media *now*. Users don't need their content to be curated anymore; they are going to curate content for themselves, in real time, as it flies past their eyes at 29.97 frames per second.

And this development could not be more perfectly suited for the marketing of pharma brands. We're always trying to jam absurdly large amounts of information into small amounts of real estate, actual or virtual, while knowing that much of our audience has little to no interest in the vast majority of that information, much of which may not even apply to their individual circumstances. But in an interactive video we could include every bit of content our little hearts desire but place the great majority of it under the surface, waiting for the viewer to click on a word or object or symptom or MOA illustration.

## FAIR BALANCE? FAIR QUESTION

For those of you asking, "What about fair balance?"—and I imagine that's just about everyone—well, interactive video offers a solution to that, too, but one that may be even better than what's available for more traditional linear videos. In an interactive video environment, fair balance can be scrolling in an adjacent window while the video is running. Also, that fair balance can be specific to the individual piece of content with which the viewer is interacting rather than just a giant wedding cake of fair balance for every imaginable circumstance and indication. Additionally, fair balance could be added as an overlay in specific places and be required reading in

**You could create a patient story narrative that, at its start, applies to all the disorders but allows the viewer to branch off in any direction based on indication and life situation.**

order to move forward, backward, wherever—you can dictate the information flow from start to finish.

Think about it. Imagine you are marketing a drug with indications across multiple autoimmune disorders. You could create a patient story narrative that, at its start, applies to all the disorders but allows the viewer to branch off in any direction based on indication and life situation. This would allow older folks with rheumatoid arthritis to follow one path and younger folks with psoriatic arthritis to follow another. Individualized fair balance would follow.

This sort of thing is already being done out in the wild, though without the fair balance component. Take a look at Honda's interactive video "The Other Side," another Webby Award nominee. Car advertisers always try to strike a balance between sexiness and utility. This video does so by letting the viewer toggle between two versions of the same Honda story, showing that the car is both safe enough for family and big enough for ego. An approach like this makes me think about potential two-sided patient journey applications, which could be used to highlight different outcomes of varying patient choices.

An even more impressive example outside the world of marketing is "A Short History of the High Rise," created by the *New York Times* last year. This piece is like an inverted matryoshka doll: The further into it you dig, the bigger it gets. Talk about packing in a ton of information and allowing viewers to dig as deep as they like—something like this would be a perfect device for letting physicians digest information at their own pace and according to their own needs.

Or there's Coldplay's video for its song "Ink," which trumped IKEA and Honda for that Best Interactive Webby award. Of all the examples I've mentioned, this one comes the closest to *Choose Your Own Adventure*. It lets viewers pick different paths for the protagonist as he searches for his lost love. A similar approach could be used in circumstances when patients have to choose among treatment options. They could follow the different paths and see what other decisions may come up along the way and how they might turn out.

## THE FUTURE IS NOW

I cannot emphasize enough that *this is how people are going to consume content*. Online versions of TV shows have been doing it for years. Back in 2007 you could watch an episode of *Burn Notice*, click on the blouse a female character was wearing and be directed to a website to buy it. As millennials age and start dealing with health problems, they aren't going to turn on *60 Minutes* and hope there's a spot between segments that'll tell them what to do about their aching joints. They're going to look for interactive ways to learn how to fix their problems, ways that allow them to follow their own paths, find their own answers and choose their own adventures.

Whoever in our industry has the foresight and the courage to start communicating this way is going to come out ahead. Will solving the regulatory and fair balance side of it be a challenge? Yes, without a doubt. New media and communications platforms are always frightening to some folks in our industry. Is that sufficient reason to turn away? That, wise reader, you'll have to choose for yourself.

*Mitch Apley is senior director of broadcast/print production for AbelsonTaylor.*