

GOT WEB?

The move to e-promotion may be risky, but marketers can ill afford to wait. Omnicom's **Tom Harrison** gives you permission to experiment with new types of messaging

Walk the hallways of any pharmaceutical company today and you're likely to hear executives talking about innovation, usually in the context of R&D. But there is another aspect of innovation that is just as important: innovation in marketing.

Innovation in pharmaceutical marketing is no longer an oxymoron. Yes, the industry is highly regulated, with strict guidelines for virtually every aspect of advertising and promotion. But many of the new technologies and communications channels driving innovation in consumer marketing are starting to have a significant effect in healthcare as well. We need to embrace these channels as innovative and relevant avenues to communicate between brand and patient.

Indeed, opportunities for innovation abound, especially in the shift from print marketing to e-promotion. In 2009, according to one report, spending on print advertising in medical journals was the lowest in a decade, as promotion moved to digital formats, such as banner ads, text messaging, blogs, forums and video.

But the move to digital marketing requires a change of thinking, and that isn't always easy. One of our clients forced the issue by committing to go paperless by a specific date. Being forced into action accelerated the learning curve and compelled both the company and its agency to become experts in digital marketing in short order.

To those companies hesitant about e-promotion, consider that FDA guidelines for digital marketing might be no different than those for DTC advertising. And e-promotion corresponds to a growing focus on e-detailing, as companies seek to engage doctors in ways that are far more compelling than the old eight-page glossy brochure and more cost efficient than the rep in the office.

The industry is forging ahead with other marketing innovations

as well. Mobile marketing holds huge promise in helping patients manage chronic diseases and adhere to medication schedules. From QR (quick response) codes that offer instant access to content or drive consumers to take action, to gaming and entertainment applications, companies are finding that mobile marketing offers endless possibilities.

Many companies are also making the move to social media—although progress there is admittedly slow due to the lack of FDA guidelines. In fact, the FDA recently missed another self-imposed deadline and is now saying it doesn't know when it will provide guidance in this important area. I seem to recall a similar set of circumstances years ago when DTC was emerging as a conduit of consumer education.

In the meantime, a number of companies are taking the plunge and connecting with consumers via social media sites. In some respects, they're playing catch-up. Although 60% of Americans turn first to the internet for health information, the pharmaceutical industry allocates less than 2% of its marketing budgets to social media sites. That compares to 10% today for packaged goods companies.

In another sense, however, they're doing what marketers have always done when faced with a new communications channel: they're experimenting—figuring out what messages can go viral via Twitter, how best to present themselves on YouTube, and how to engage consumers authentically—i.e., in a way that's trustworthy, credible and service-driven.

Indeed, there's growing recognition that marketers can no longer afford to wait for specific guidelines, that companies must interact with consumers where they live and breathe, whether that's on a cell phone, a Facebook page, a blog or an iPad. Companies with a finely tuned social media strategy are adding value to online conversations and, in the process, both advancing public health and achieving their otherwise regulated marketing goals.

The industry should welcome and encourage this experimentation. The path forward will not always be straight. And companies may occasionally get things wrong and have to correct course. But in the end, pharmaceutical companies can't ignore the changes taking place in the marketplace and the way consumers wish to be informed in today's social world. They have to recognize that innovation plays as important a role in the hallways of the marketing department as it does in the company's labs. ■

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