

Managing Physician Relationships in the Future: New Rules of Engagement in the Digital World

By Dan Goldsmith and Matt Wallach

Physicians, being consumers like everyone else, are affected by the same trends shaping the public's expectations of how and when they can access goods and services.

Pharmaceutical companies must, therefore, prepare to market to physician-consumers in new ways within the next few years...

We foresee that two consumer phenomena in particular will have a profound impact on the relationships between pharmaceutical companies and physicians in the near future: "Nowism" and "butlering." Nowism is the consumer's need for instant gratification, fed by the ever-ready Internet. Butlering, a term coined by Trendwatching.com, addresses the time-starved consumer's desire for care and convenience. It is satisfied by mobile devices that deliver highly relevant services around the world...and around the clock.

As both of these trends are enabled by technology, the set of physician-consumers most impacted will be Gen Y or "millennials." This generation, born after 1980, has grown up with all things "e" and everything mobile. The first wave of Gen Y physicians graduated from medical school with the iPhone® in hand, and many will soon join the ranks of top prescribers and key opinion leaders in their fields.

But that's not to suggest that established physicians are not also early adopters of digital media. Based on a survey of 1,224 physicians conducted in five European countries in 2010, Manhattan Research found that "watching videos, online shopping, and downloading multi-media files are mainstream activities among physicians, and they are significantly more likely than consumers to use smart mobile devices and apps."¹

If pharmaceutical companies are to succeed in reaching both established prescribers and rising young physicians, they have but a narrow window of time to prepare. We share our thoughts below on how pharmaceutical companies must adapt their sales and marketing practices to accommodate the expectations of physicians who embrace digital technology enthusiastically.

Reaching Physician-Consumers

Within the next five years, the most successful pharmaceutical companies will be those that understand the new expectations of physician-consumers and offer them:

The options to call, click, or visit. Physicians will look for pharmacos to be as accessible and as flexible as retail operations and banks, for instance, by providing help that is on hand 24 x 7. Companies will need to maintain multiple communication channels that are available to physicians via multiple devices.

The convenience of here and now. Rather than expecting physicians to seek them out via their own proprietary customer portals, companies must be more accessible to physicians by establishing a digital presence where physicians already go. Many physician destination sites such as DocCheck® can become clearing houses for physician requests for information and samples from multiple pharmacos. Companies should evaluate the leading services that are attracting physicians and find ways to partner with them.

More touch points throughout the continuum of care. The growing interconnectivity of the healthcare system (and physicians' eagerness to use technology at every step of the way) will give pharmaceutical companies new digital avenues for reaching physicians at the point of care. There will be opportunities to "butler" physicians with scientific information, diagnostic tools, and consultative advice.

Disease-Specific information. Physician needs for broad-based information sources and practice communities are already well met by sites such as Sermo™ and Medscape. Where companies may still provide value is in developing resources around specific therapeutic areas that are as yet underserved.

"Butler reps." As channels and devices multiply, and as companies create more resources to support physicians, sales representatives will need to help physicians navigate the options available. Reps themselves will need to be more technologically savvy and better equipped with the latest, "coolest" digital devices. Five years hence, field tools will likely look much like iPads, although they will be somewhat smaller and will be able to project presentations onto the wall.

More relevant content. Given that the Millennial generation is driving the use of social media, we anticipate that Gen Y physicians will be more open to sharing information on their practices and interests than their older counterparts. At the same time, technology will allow companies to capture and mine more insights about physicians.

This will support companies in developing more personalised and dynamic content for individual physicians than quarterly POAs could ever provide. And thanks to mobile devices, physicians will increasingly have the benefit of real-time interactions with other internal resources such as medical affairs and medical science liaisons who can furnish information to physicians on the spot.

The "Right Way" Ahead

To the traditional goal of reaching the right doctor with the right message at the right time, companies must also add using the right information channel. The great challenge, though, will remain developing the right message.

Consequently, companies will need more in-depth physician profiles, greater connectivity between personal and non-personal sales channels, more sophisticated analytics, and—as always—talented marketing professionals who can interpret and predict physician needs.

The responsibility for bringing together these capabilities and applying these tactics lies with brand management. The function must learn quickly how to use technology to satisfy the expectations of nowism and the desire for butler services if it is to keep pace with its audience.

¹Malloy, Maureen and Avallone, James. "Key European Consumer and Physician eHealth Trends for 2011," pharmaphorum, March 22, 2011.

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