
Editorial

Journal of Medical Marketing (2007) 7, 183–184. doi:10.1057/palgrave.jmm.5050095

Technology management experts constantly remind us that we tend to overestimate the short-term impact, and underestimate the long-term impact of new technologies. It is now almost ten years since the internet began to play a real, but certainly not pervasive, role in medical marketing. In 2003, I reviewed the state of digital technologies in the pharmaceutical industry, cataloguing the practical application of e-health, internet and new communications channels across the life sciences value chain.¹ It was then possible to identify high potential areas where the internet was changing sales and marketing processes, especially when it came to interaction with specific segments of physicians, consumers and payers. Clearly, digital technologies had changed the face of reimbursement and professional communication and the era of health information as a commodity had begun. The bursting of the dotcom 'bubble' signalled the end of the indiscriminate application of inappropriate business models to health and healthcare — the interaction between the stakeholders in health is quite different to that involved in selling books or offering leisure activities online.

The creation of online communities, both physician and consumer or patient, is still today regarded as the pinnacle of success in pharmaceutical internet marketing. To have an essentially captive group, especially if it is large, interacting on a web-based platform provides a pharmaceutical, medical device or health service company with a ready-made source of market insight and also with an

auto-segmented target that can be offered products and services. But today, most online communities sponsored by pharmaceutical companies have not succeeded in attracting large memberships. Yes, some can boast a certain number of committed users, but then again so can the myriad of associations fighting for the rights of people with various diseases and conditions. Yet, large numbers of people throughout the world continue to share health-related information with each other via various chat rooms and forums and the nether world of internet sales of prescription drugs (especially so-called lifestyle drugs) continues to flourish with astonishing impunity. And the community is alive and well in cyberspace, as can easily be confirmed by a brief visit to the Second Life site. While there may be little demand for healthcare in a virtual world where our avatars are slim, fit and good looking, the evolution of the online community may have implications for health marketers.

Another promising area of online activity is broadly described as 'social networking' where people share information about themselves and their business and personal interests as part of a community with a range of value-adding and therefore commercial, options. We have all joined or been tempted to join online professional or special interest networks that provide an automatic address book of our contacts and our contacts' contacts. Increasing levels of automation and integration with daily tasks such as contact list and agenda management will ensure that social

networks become a more pervasive part of our online lives. The implications for medical marketing are still somewhat unclear, but perhaps we can draw some lessons from the marketing case study on the application of mobile telephony in condition management and compliance promotion that appears in the current issue of the journal.

A few years ago, it seemed unlikely that a technology as basic as text messaging would ever become popular in the face of the rise of the mobile internet. In reality, most of us have succumbed to typing with our thumbs, and with the diffusion of mobile email devices such as the Blackberry and Treo, many of us have become quite good at it. On the surface, text messaging is indeed a simple technology, but when combined with a sophisticated 'back end' to manage interaction, the options for applying SMS in health promotion and condition management become almost limitless. The marketing case and commentary authors

eloquently highlight the potential for text messaging in medical marketing. Perhaps this is an example of where ostensibly low-tech has been ignored by marketers seduced by colourful websites and fancy CRM applications?

What is next in digital medical marketing? We need to look backwards first to ensure that we have indeed extracted the maximum value from substantial investment that was made in e-marketing. We need to revisit the online community and corporate website and relentlessly focus on meeting the needs of our stakeholders in this world of networked healthcare.

Reference

- 1 Lerer, L. & Piper, M. (2003). *Digital Strategies in the Pharmaceutical Industry*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK.

LEONARD LERER
Managing Editor

leonard.lerer@journalofmedicalmarketing.com