

THE SHIFTING BALANCE OF POWER

Consumers have never been more involved in their health management. As marketers, we need to wake up to this fact or risk being left behind in this consumer health revolution



We see evidence of patient power all around us. Some of it is very public; for example, NICE's remarkable U-turn on Lucentis, and Stoke PCT's decision reversal on Herceptin. But this very public face of patient power hides a much bigger movement - a sort of mass consumer health engagement.

As consumers, we aren't any more passionate about our health than we were 20 years ago. But we do have more access to health information than ever before - and this is changing our health expectations.

Broadband penetration is the big enabler of this change. It makes the internet a truly accessible and powerful tool. In 2007, 43 per cent of Europeans had a broadband connection, and increasingly more people are using their super-quick broadband connection to gain access to information about health.

In 2007, 143 million adults across Europe searched online for health information. Twenty years ago, people saw their doctor as the only credible source of health advice. Now, their first port of call isn't their local doctor but Dr Google.

Informed patients are more influential than you might think. A recent Datamonitor survey found that a patient request for a specific medicine was as likely to influence physician prescribing decisions as much as a visit from a rep. The NHS understands this shift in power towards the consumer: patient choice has become a key factor in the provision of healthcare in the UK.

Why is this change in consumer behaviour so important to us? Because it is not traditional marketing efforts that are directing the behaviour of our 'customers' but the decrease in rep access to physicians, the reduction in individual clinician influence over prescribing decisions, and increasingly strict protocols and guidance.

Stricter guidelines mean we must work even harder, and smarter, to maximise the smaller opportunities we now have. Traditional marketing tools are less effective but individual clinicians are still responsible to the patient. And it is to patient engagement that we must now turn.

We already know that ill-informed patients are bad for our business. A poorly educated patient ultimately leads to a bad brand experience because adherence is poor. This is fed back to the physician as "brand X isn't working". Poor adherence not only negatively reinforces the brand for the doctor but means billions of lost revenue.

Most pharma marketers believe that talking direct to consumers is problematic at best, illegal at worst. But we know from experience that you can talk direct to consumers and provide support for them to have informed discussions with their doctor, increasing the chance of matching the right patient to the right brand - your brand.

It is possible to help patients become 'better' patients - patients on your brand, engaged with their condition and adhering to your medication. It is also possible to get patients to feed back their treatment successes to their physician - improving the doctor's brand perception.

I'm not advocating that we stop marketing to prescribers completely - they still have a crucial role at the point of prescription. But we do need to wake up to the fact that patients are important stakeholders and their influence is increasing.

The balance of power is shifting to the consumer. Don't get left behind.

“We need to wake up to the fact that patients are important stakeholders with increasing influence”

John Perkins is managing partner at Rapp Collins Consumer Health. He can be contacted at john.perkins@wwavrc.co.uk or on 020 8735 8846