

# Watching THE WEB

Effectively monitoring online media is crucial to a successful marketing strategy

The Internet changed everything. Consumer behavior, thoughts, philosophies and activities have become more transparent than ever as millions of people entered cyberspace. Marketers had to approach this medium differently from any other they had encountered in the past. They had to study the audience's movements and engage their target markets in a new way, perhaps even directly. The Internet has changed marketing, and the often-controversial world of healthcare marketing is no exception.

How can a public relations practitioner begin to adapt more traditional PR practices to the online environment? Looking at two recent examples of online strategies for pharmaceutical products may give us insight into the matter. The first is an example of effective online PR, where one group was able to unlock the potential of the Internet to significantly affect a core regulatory body. The second example illustrates what happened when a major subset of the drug industry stood by while allowing bad press to accumulate in online channels, affecting traditional mainstream coverage and general perception. What needs to change in PR practices in order to find or create opportunities for online public relations and marketing activities? Let's find out.

## Effective online strategy

In a recent landmark decision, the Food and Drug Administration's Peripheral and Central Nervous System Drugs advisory committee recommended the clinical use

of Tysabri. The drug, which patients say is effective at treating multiple sclerosis symptoms, was marketed for nearly three months before being pulled off the shelves by manufacturers Elan and Biogen Idec after three patients developed a brain infection. Physicians remained divided on the treatment because of its risk. However, in testimony presented to the FDA's advisory committee, patients, who had learned about the hearing online, were able to effectively communicate as a group and explain their willingness to bear the burden of risks and side effects of Tysabri if the drug were made available to them. After their testimony, the FDA panel unanimously recommended that Tysabri be re-approved for use by patients.

These patients had organized themselves with the help of the MS Patients for Choice Web site. The site is a striking example of how powerful the Internet is in finding, reaching, motivating and organizing target audiences. It is amazing to consider what might have happened if the patients had remained silent about their wishes. While hearings for re-approval are posted directly on the Food and Drug Administration Advisory committee site calendars, most people must be hyper-attuned to what is happening in the regulatory sphere in order to be aware of opportunities to advocate for themselves. In this example, those who had used the drug or were interested in trying the drug were able to find each other and effectively organize themselves online in order to deliver their appeals. The MS Patients for Choice website alerted visitors to the hearing, provided

timely information to empower MS victims, and contributed to building support for the drug, ultimately enabling patients to organize and lobby on behalf of Tysabri.

## Untapped opportunity – psychotropic medications

Consider, now, the case of methylphenidate and various psychotropic medications in the public's perception. Many drugs classified as psychotropic medications have built notorious reputations among worried parents, physicians suspicious of school-based evaluations, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) sufferers and skeptics. Web sites such as Death from Ritalin – the ADHD Truth serve as an information resource for parents. The site's mission is to warn parents about the risks and side effects of methylphenidate. Lawrence Smith created the site after the death of his five-year-old son, who had been diagnosed with ADHD and subsequently prescribed a popular brand of methylphenidate, and whose official cause of death was the long-term use of the drug. Smith's story is real, credible and heartbreaking. His mission is clear – because he was an uninformed parent, he is willing to go to great lengths to ensure that other parents are informed about the possible risks of a popular drug.

Web sites such as these are not uncommon. Many advocacy groups are composed of individuals who have either had negative experiences with a drug or product or are simply skeptical of the pharmaceutical

industry. These groups are actively using the Web to organize, mobilize and get their message out online. While increasing their own visibility and agenda, they are also influencing mainstream media coverage because of their stories' human-interest appeal. Psychotropic medications such as methylphenidate, have received a great amount of negative press in recent years, while people who have had positive experiences with the drug tend to stay silent, content with its result.

Consumers who research drugs online will inevitably stumble across a great deal of negative information about available treatment options. These consumers will likely become frightened or consider alternative treatments, regardless of whether the information is verified or credible. It is important for pharmaceutical companies to inform their consumers by mobilizing those who have benefited from treatment to tell their side of the story or share their perspectives with information seekers. However, this cannot happen if the market chooses to ignore the product's existing reputation in the online sphere – and the only way to ascertain the existing reputation is to begin online tracking with a formalized media and influence monitoring process.

### Media and influence monitoring

Most public relations agencies do not have the means for a more sophisticated approach to media and influence monitoring. Smaller agencies typically utilize an informal approach where an intern or account coordinator will spend two or three hours every morning conducting Internet searches for pre-identified key terms. Others receive outsourced monitoring and weekly or bi-monthly news clip reports. Some have signed up for a Factiva or BurrellesLuce account, which allows them to pull articles off a database and pass them along to colleagues in a daily or weekly e-mail. Though it is crucial to the creation of an effective marketing strategy, media research is often gathered haphazardly. By the time the report arrives or the daily emails have been sent out, the opportunities to engage with the target market are likely to have passed, replaced by new issues and discussion.

A second problem is the negative bias many public relations agencies have towards online media, though they cannot ignore how the media landscape is changing due to the popularity and large-scale adoption of social media.

The traditional approach to media monitoring does

### The top seven online media monitoring practices

1. **Get involved online sooner rather than later**
2. **Implement a platform that will track online media for you**
3. **Categorize online activities of target markets/information seekers – blogging, message board posting, etc**
4. **Make a list of top sites to monitor per public/target audience**
5. **Track site statistics (eg, how often the site is visited)**
6. **Track bias of various sites with regard to your product**
7. **Decide how you will respond to the circulation of negative information about your product.**

not work with interactive media, because the older approach relies on relatively invariable content. The old approach does not inform anyone on how to track a dynamic exchange or an evolving discussion that takes place on message boards, discussion forums or blogs, because content in newspapers and on television did not change after it was printed or aired. Traditional PR practice tends to rely on preparation, rehearsal and gatekeeping information. That is no longer sufficient with the emergence of social media and

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its corresponding principles, which consider interaction and participation necessary survival skills. However, there are ways to manage this new media environment. It is a matter of researching, studying and fighting the onslaught of information by using content tracking platforms.

### Technology support

A number of companies have developed software specifically to manage online media content, allowing PR staff to spend more time on analysis and strategic planning. In this age of information overload, companies such as The Bivings Group, Cymfony, biz360 and BuzzMetrics have released platforms that allow for a more sophisticated approach to online media and influence monitoring. This type of software is very useful in grabbing and tracking evolving content on a daily basis, thereby unifying new consumer-generated media from Web sites and blogs into a singular platform. With one place to go

to for all pre-filtered content, these platforms enable PR staff to monitor, act and analyze new opportunities, developments and/or crisis, in a timely manner without wasting manpower. By formalizing their approach to online media research, PR specialists are able to spend more time on proactive strategy and less time filtering and managing irrelevant information.

The change in marketing has only begun. The Internet has transformed the traditional top-down model of communications into a two-way model, with the consumer actively engaging with the brand/product and a community. This change has rewritten the rules of engagement, now requiring timely interaction and participation. Had methylphenidate manufacturers monitored their brand online, along with similar psychotropic drugs, they could have developed a timely communications strategy that addressed the concerns users had or inspired people who had benefited from treatment to share their own experiences.

Marketers and public relations specialists must learn how to seize opportunities as they arise and create authentic connections with end users. Learning to effectively survey what is happening online will enable PR staff to effectively document the user's product experience and create new and innovative ways of creating brand resonance and increasing brand loyalty among target markets. If equipped with the proper tools and insight into consumer needs, public relations practitioners will be able to unlock the potential of an issue or product in both the online and offline environments.



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