

Are You Ready for the Next Frontier in Pharma Marketing?



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What if you had a channel to facilitate two-way communication with patients, the actual end-users of your product? Would you provide them with a “product experience” or just the product? For your high-revenue legacy brands, would you consider intelligent financial incentives to overcome formulary generic bias? What about bridging to reimbursement, compliance reminders and information on lifestyle changes that could benefit their condition. How about online access to your compassionate usage programs?

Let’s be clear here, this is not about marketing to acquire patients. The utilization of patient-based marketing techniques is best suited to retaining patients who are currently benefiting from the usage of your product.

What is patient retention marketing?

The very first step in patient retention marketing is assuming that the end-user is enjoying the desired response from the drug. Secondly, patient retention marketing is not suited for all product categories; medications that treat chronic or frequently recurring conditions are ideal.

Given these two preconditions, patient retention marketing is about creating a one-to-one dialogue with the healthcare consumer to engender a “product experience” that will counteract defection forces. A defection force is anything, other than medical reasons, that would cause patients to move away from your brand.

Defection forces can be divided into three categories:

- Non-compliance (due to cost, memory, disability or asymptomatic condition)
- Competitive product pressures (current physician switches to competitive product, patient changes physician)
- Formulary influences (generic entry, reimbursement status)

Takeaway: Patient retention marketing is about doing everything in your power to facilitate an environment where patients exercise their “voice and choice” in drug treatment options.

Why is patient retention a critical imperative?

The sales and marketing investment required to acquire patients has never been higher and continues to escalate. Total pharmaceutical company promotional expenditures in the US rose 82% from \$13.9 billion US in 1999 to \$25.3 billion US in 2003. Ironically, as the cost to reach your MD prescriber customers is rising, their influence in choice of prescription is waning, fodder for a future discussion no doubt.

Takeaway: As patient acquisition costs increase, it is only prudent for the pharma marketer to strive to retain the patient for as long as the drug continues to provide the desired health benefit.

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Patient retention marketing methods

The methods and tactics employed in patient retention marketing fall into the class of “non-manpower marketing” in that they generally do not involve significant sales force time. However, it is vital that the sales force be kept in the loop and, in most cases, it will be advantageous to communicate any patient retention initiatives to your MD customer segment.

Patent retention marketing programs can be designed to:

- build patient level brand loyalty,
- encourage compliance,
- provide information on lifestyle changes and even
- incorporate financial incentives.

Regardless of the program design, the first step is to clearly identify the brand challenges or issues being addressed and outline the program objectives, budget and return on investment metrics that will be used to determine the level of success or failure.

In most instances a third party is engaged to facilitate and manage the collection of patient data (*i.e.*, Internet, toll-free numbers, mail-in, *etc.*) and provide any fulfillment requirements incorporated in the program design. When selecting your vendor partner you will be best served by aligning with a firm that can work with you from program strategy and design through to implementation and metrics reporting.

Takeaway: Clear objectives, proper program strategy and design, establishment of metrics and selecting the right vendor are the key elements for a successful program implementation.

Navigating potential pitfalls

Communication is always the problem and always the solution! As previously mentioned, the sales force must be fully conversant with any patient retention efforts and be able to quickly and clearly communicate the program benefits to your MD customers in order to garner further support for your brand.

In addition to physicians, you’ll want to consider pre-implementation meetings with patient associations and pharmacy, especially if there is a pharmacy payment card incorporated into the program design.

Any associated print material will likely need to go through all internal and possibly external review processes (medical/legal, PAAB). It is also a good idea, especially if you are planning any program public relations, to develop a Q&A document with your communications experts.

“Even the unintentional release of sensitive medical information is a serious

breach of consumer's trust. Companies that obtain sensitive information in exchange for a promise to keep it confidential must take appropriate steps to ensure security of that information." That was a statement from J. Howard Beales, the Director of The Bureau of Consumer Protection in the US in response to a pharma company's e-mail based compliance reminder program. A company employee unfamiliar with privacy policies and procedures unintentionally sent an e-mail to all patients enrolled in the reminder program without blinding the recipient's names.

In Canada, patient information collection and privacy is governed by the Personal Information and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA). The details and implications of PIPEDA are well beyond the scope of this article.

PIPEDA is a consent-based statute, which generally requires consent for the collection, use and disclosure of personal information. The key when collecting patient information is specific, informed and expressed consent.

Takeaway: Be aware of privacy concerns and communicate, communicate, communicate!

Summary

As the cost to acquire patients continues to spiral upwards, it behooves the pharmaceutical marketing professional to consider all available avenues to retain, or at a minimum, slow the defection rate of end-user healthcare consumers. Complete the brand specific business analysis and you will find the return on your time and resources will be well worthwhile. **CPM**

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