Article

Real Patient Testimonials
An Effective Social Media Marketing Strategy

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Drug companies have long used celebrities to endorse their products. Sally Field and Brookes Shield are just two celebrities that come to mind. However, there are several disadvantages of using celebrities to endorse products. Aside from the expense, celebrity endorsements can backfire.

A classic case involved Andy Behrman, author of the book "electro boy" about his bipolar adventures, who was hired by Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS) to help promote its drug Abilify. Unfortunately, Behrman had a falling out with BMS and started an anti-Abilify campaign (see "Andy Behrman, Now an Anti-BMS Spokesperson, Says ‘Ask Your Doctor If Abilify is Wrong for You’"; bit.ly/JgBRO). It’s not hard to imagine other celebrity endorse fiascos such as Sally Field breaking a leg (see bit.ly/9aHDh5) or Brooke Shields’ blue eyes turning brown (see bit.ly/de6xM5).

**Peer-Influenced Marketing**

Visit Pfizer’s Lipitor Web site and you’ll be greeted by “John E.” who “worked to manage his cholesterol. Then he had a heart attack. Find out more about John’s wake-up call,” says the caption to the video clip of John E. telling his story. Pfizer also uses John E. and other real patients to tell their cholesterol-lowering and smoking-cessation stories on broadcast TV and print ads.

John E., whose real name is John Erlendson, first came upon the scene in September 2008 after Pfizer canceled Dr. Robert Jarvik as a Lipitor celebrity spokesperson. Pfizer saved a bundle of money. John E. is said to work for scale vs. over $1.3 million Pfizer paid Jarvik (bit.ly/22xL6V). But more importantly, a “testimonial” from a real heart-attack survivor trumps the advice of a fake MD even if he did invent an artificial heart!

John E. may be an example of “peer-influenced” marketing described in a recent Wall Street Journal article (see “Trusting Other Patients’ Drug Advice”; tinyurl.com/2ffora3).

“Wecking research shows that the sick are relying more on the recommendations of fellow patients, and less on the reputations of companies and endorsers, in deciding whether to seek treatment and what drugs to ask for, say pharmaceutical companies and their consultants,” said the WSJ. “Several drug makers are seeking to tap into the growing importance of so-called peer-influence marketing. They are making use of more patient testimonials and savvier use of the Internet, including sponsoring information about diseases on medical Web sites.”

**Soliciting Patient Stories**

It’s much better to recruit real “non-celebrity” patients, especially considering the influence these people can have in online social networks. Pharmaceutical companies are already soliciting patient stories via unbranded social media sites such as J&J Lifescan’s Diabetes Handprint, a web site that encourages each visitor to write a word on his or her hand expressing their feelings about diabetes, and sharing the story behind it. You can click on the “Sharing” button to see “Real Stories” of people with diabetes (see Figure 1, pg 2). Although these “Real Stories” may be authentic, they are not user-generated content, which is the hallmark of social media.

Imagine the day when John E. starts his own Twitter account or blog or participates in a PatientsLikeMe forum. This would be the ultimate in online-offline integration of peer-influenced marketing! Of course, John E. already has earned a kind of “celebrity” status due to his appearance in Lipitor TV ads and on the branded website.

Until recently, PhRMA’s “Guiding Principles for Direct to Consumer Advertisements About Prescription Medicines” did not address the use of paid endorsements. In the December 2008 revision, this principle was added:

“Where a DTC television or print advertisement features a celebrity endorser, the endorsements should accurately reflect the opinions, findings, beliefs or experience of the endorser. Companies should maintain verification of the basis of any actual or implied endorsements made by the celebrity endorser in the DTC advertisement, including whether the endorser is or has been a user of the product if applicable.”

This and the other principles, however, do NOT address the use of celebrities at live events or on the Internet. Nor does the “celebrity” principle apply to the use of ordinary citizens/patients who are not "celebrities."

**Consumer Opinion Leaders**

Pharmaceutical companies are free to pay well-respected patient members of social networks to...
Figure 1. Bill, “One Happy Diabetic,” tells his story on Diabetes Handprint.


COLs may be pharma’s "secret sauce" for social media marketing. COLs have the benefit of already being part of the "conversation," which neatly solves the marketer’s problem of how to "join the conversation."

There may be hundreds of patients out there on social networks who currently earn thousands of dollars from pharmaceutical companies to be spokespeople as part of online branded drug or disease awareness campaigns.

FTC is well aware of the trend and potential abuse of using COLs as paid spokespeople. On April 13, 2009, Advertising Age reported: “As part of its review of its advertising guidelines, the FTC is proposing that word-of-mouth marketers and bloggers, as well as people on social-media sites such as Facebook, be held liable for any false statements they make about a product they’re promoting, along with the product’s marketer” (see box, pg 4).

To help answer the many questions that are raised by using real patient testimonials, Pharma Marketing News hosted an online survey that asked respondents’ opinions of the use of patient testimonials in DTC and social media advertising, including what the benefits may be, the regulatory issues, and how it may evolve, especially with regard to use of social media. A total of 55 people responded to the survey.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

There are several “pitfalls” that must be overcome when a pharmaceutical company decides to use patient testimonials. Leaving aside the legal issues regarding content ownership, some of the more interesting hurdles to overcome for marketers are:

- Assuring authenticity/believability
- Complying with FDA regulations
- Complying with New FTC guidelines (re: "typical results")
- Controlling the conversation in live/social media venues
- Finding the right patient
- Transparency (eg, revealing payment)

Survey respondents felt that complying with FDA regulations, controlling the conversation, and assuring authenticity and believability were the main hurdles to overcome (see Figure 2, pg 5).

Respondents who submitted comments, made the following points:

- Credibility and transparency are key

Comments included:

“Keep it open and transparent, otherwise it's not a real patient...most ‘testimonials’ as they appear to date are trite, dishonest and lacking authenticity,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

“Credibility is the key word here,” said Brenda Snow, Founder and CEO, Snow Companies, a boutique agency that develops patient communications (http://snow-companies.com/). “By ensuring that patient testimonials deliver a balanced story, drug companies can avoid potential pitfalls. It’s also vital to ensure that patients speaking on behalf of the company’s product are representative of the average patient and not a miracle patient and that there is complete transparency and disclosure that the patient is speaking on the company’s behalf. This not only ensures compliance with FDA regulations, it’s the only way to assure authenticity and engage the target audience. Agencies working in the pharmaceutical field must have the experience and confidence to impress this upon their clients. Failure to do so risks a double dose of failure, namely, a lack of audience connection and unwanted interest from the FDA.”

“If you approach your marketing program grounded in truth & ethics, I think this could be a very effective

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FTC Publishes Final Guides Governing Endorsements, Testimonials

Under the revised Guides, advertisements that feature a consumer and convey his or her experience with a product or service as typical when that is not the case will be required to clearly disclose the results that consumers can generally expect. In contrast to the 1980 version of the Guides – which allowed advertisers to describe unusual results in a testimonial as long as they included a disclaimer such as “results not typical” – the revised Guides no longer contain this safe harbor.

The revised Guides also add new examples to illustrate the long standing principle that “material connections” (sometimes payments or free products) between advertisers and endorsers – connections that consumers would not expect – must be disclosed. These examples address what constitutes an endorsement when the message is conveyed by bloggers or other “word-of-mouth” marketers. The revised Guides specify that while decisions will be reached on a case-by-case basis, the post of a blogger who receives cash or in-kind payment to review a product is considered an endorsement. Thus, bloggers who make an endorsement must disclose the material connections they share with the seller of the product or service. Likewise, if a company refers in an advertisement to the findings of a research organization that conducted research sponsored by the company, the advertisement must disclose the connection between the advertiser and the research organization.

And a paid endorsement – like any other advertisement – is deceptive if it makes false or misleading claims.

Celebrity endorsers also are addressed in the revised Guides. While the 1980 Guides did not explicitly state that endorsers as well as advertisers could be liable under the FTC Act for statements they make in an endorsement, the revised Guides reflect Commission case law and clearly state that both advertisers and endorsers may be liable for false or unsubstantiated claims made in an endorsement – or for failure to disclose material connections between the advertiser and endorsers.

The revised Guides also make it clear that celebrities have a duty to disclose their relationships with advertisers when making endorsements outside the context of traditional ads, such as on talk shows or in social media.

The Guides are administrative interpretations of the law intended to help advertisers comply with the Federal Trade Commission Act; they are not binding law themselves. In any law enforcement action challenging the allegedly deceptive use of testimonials or endorsements, the Commission would have the burden of proving that the challenged conduct violates the FTC Act.

FDA Blasts Lilly’s PAH eCommunity Videos


The patient videos present statements made by Adcirca users, "Traci" and "Carolyn" who make the following claims among others:

"I can walk, and stairs don’t bother me [after Adcirca treatment] . . . . Bending over used to make me breathless, picking up my cat used to make me breathless and it doesn't affect me anymore.”

"Exercising and stairs and heat used to bother me and it didn’t bother me anymore [after Adcirca treatment]."

"Promotional materials are misleading if they represent or suggest that a drug is more effective than has been demonstrated by substantial evidence or substantial clinical experience,” said the FDA letter. "‘Traci’s’ and ‘Carolyn’s’ statements misleadingly imply that patients treated with Adcirca will greatly increase their walking time and distance (e.g., ‘from . . . five minutes . . . to one hour,’ ‘spending all night at the mall’, ‘now I am walking on the treadmill,’ and “walking along the beach”). These statements significantly exaggerate what was demonstrated in the clinical trials for Adcirca,” said the FDA letter.
marketing approach where your product can deliver true quality of life improvements - I'm thinking of some examples I've seen with RA biologics,” said Bruce Lehr, Director of Development, SAFC Biosciences and author of The Big Red Biotech Blog (http://bit.ly/a3CRgp).

“I'm concerned that if Pharmaceutical companies ‘get away’ with using real patient testimonials in social media, then what will tool will they use next, REALITY SHOWS?,” said Janel McGill-Mbagu, MS candidate in Bioscience Regulatory Affairs at Johns Hopkins University.

“If I come across a patient advocating a brand on the social web, I typically find them credible,” said Erika von Hoyer, a consultant at 360 Reputation, Inc. (www.360reputation.com). “When I see someone in a paid venue, I typically do not find them to be credible. If a Pharma used the ad to promote a fan page so that consumers could hear from other patients, I think I would be interested (would find it to be credible).”

“Because pharma historically is translucent, consumers always wonder what they're not hearing, what's not being told to them. None of those ads are unedited so people know there were coaching involved,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

Are Patient Testimonial Ads More Persuasive?
Survey respondents were asked to evaluate the following claims regarding patient testimonial ads:

- Depending on the condition, these ads are more likely to motivate viewers to visit a doctor
- Patient-endorsed brands are seen as having less dangerous side effects than similar drugs
- Patient-endorsed brands are seen as more effective than similar drugs
- These ads are more believable
- These ads are more likely to gain attention and cut through the “clutter”
- These ads are more memorable

The survey results are shown in Figure 3 (pg 6). Respondents who submitted comments, made the following points:

- Patient endorsements alone do not make ads more effective

Comments included:

“The use of non-celebrity patients alone doesn’t make communications more effective” said Brenda Snow. “It is
authenticity and balance that are key. However, people struggling with a chronic illness are much more likely to engage with messaging that they feel is both authentic and realistic. Patient testimonials can be incredibly powerful, but again it is imperative that the patient presents a balanced story. Authentic patient marketing isn’t achieved by pulling an actor off a website and replacing them with a real patient. Testimonials that say ‘before I took drug x I was miserable, now that I have taken drug x I am better’ achieve very little. Patients should not be utilized to overtly sell a product. They should be utilized to build a mental model of success with a product for potential users to interact with. The challenge is to present a fair, balanced story from a patient.”

“If you do a good job selecting an articulate patient with a good clinical outcome for a serious condition this can be very powerful,” said Bruce Lehr. “But, the result has to be representative of likely results & if you could give accurate stats around actual outcomes all the better.”

“I suggest marketers evaluate and test perceptions of such ads!,” said Rob Halkes, senior consultant at Van Spaendonck management consultants (www.medicalandpharmamarketing.com).

“Broadcast DTC is a waste of resources and hugely annoying to the inevitable majority of viewers who are not affected by the subject in the ad,” warned an anonymous employee of a pharmaceutical company.

“I often wonder are celebrities REALLY taking the drug or are they getting paid to say so,” said Janel McGill-Mbagu. “Who checks the validity of these statements?”

“For a paid commercial, I’d rather hear the facts & claims of the pharma -- then I could do my own investigation on the social web to see if consumers back the claims,” said Erika von Hoyer.

“Not that I think ads w/out real-person endorsements are the bee’s knees, but real-person experiences belong with editorial/broadcast coverage ... in an environment with some time to develop a relationship with them; could really work for social media,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

**Brand and Disease Category Ambassadors**

Survey respondents were asked to consider the use of real patients as paid social media "ambassadors." These may be patient bloggers or Facebook

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members who post to discussion boards. The question is: Will the use of such "ambassadors" increase in the future? An overwhelming majority (66%) of respondents answered "Yes," 9% said "No" and 13% said "Maybe" and 13% did not know.

Respondents who submitted comments, made the following points:

- Patient ambassadors are going to play a huge role in the social media plans of the future
- Use of patient ambassadors is a viable marketing strategy
- Use of patient ambassadors is economical

Comments included:

“Because of FDA guidelines, I don't foresee many companies utilizing them. Also I would be worried about adverse effects,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

“Very important to reach the patient where the patient is... that is increasingly becoming social networks. Brands need to be part of that conversation to make sure the brand is being represented correctly,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

“The fact is that patients are currently using, and will continue to use social media to talk about brands,” said Brenda Snow. “These conversations are going to happen regardless of whether the industry participates or not. These conversations are already impacting the patient decision making process. There is a great deal of data that suggests traditional PR messaging isn’t working in social media. It lacks the interactive properties that drive these conversations. Patients are, on the other hand, demonstrating much more willingness to interact with other patients. For this reason, I feel that patient ambassadors are going to play a huge role in the social media plans of the future. Patient ambassadors can bring realistic hope, empowerment and a renewed sense of confidence to people living with a chronic illness. Meanwhile, the model allows pharmaceutical companies to communicate regulatory-compliant key messages.”

“They will bring some genuine positive support for a brand and provide a more ‘honest’ approach than paying a celebrity to endorse a brand,” said an anonymous consultant.

“If it works from marketers viewpoint, it will be exploited,” said Bruce Lehr. “We marketers generally have very little imagination & follow a herd mentality. Flavor of the month type phenomenon.”

“I think that so many drugs use ‘talking heads’ that people tune out the KOL’s in ads,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency. “Using real patients feels more like hearing another soccer mom's about a condition and treatment. I believe it adds a level of comfort about a drug.”

“With more open access, patients will be easier to find and engage,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency. “I think it will be fairly easy to see whom the ideal ambassadors might be,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

“Ambassadors increase the coverage of marketing, with the added benefits mentioned in Figure 2 (pg X), at a very low cost,” said Francisco A., MS candidate in Bioscience Regulatory Affairs at Johns Hopkins University. “In consequence, their inclusion is a viable and effective marketing strategy as long as it complies with regulatory considerations.”

“The American public is skeptical of paid advertising, but personal testimonials have a certain ‘reality’ to them,” said an anonymous employee of a pharmaceutical company.

“A trend in advertising seems to be to integrate the ad into real-life (compare product placement in a show versus a 30 second commercial spot). It would seem logical that pharmaceutical marketing would follow this trend.”

“It levels the playing field if pharmaceutical companies have real patients,” said Janel McGill. “People will empathize with a ‘real’ person who is going through similar circumstances.”

“For conditions that can be seen as embarrassing or as particularly serious, celebrity endorsement (paid or otherwise) adds value and credibility,” said Erika von Hoyer. “It also helps to make it ‘okay’ to admit to or discuss the condition. Paid endorsements from Joe the Plumber don't add credibility what-so-ever and can actually come across as being a joke.”

“Cheaper than mainstream media ads, faster to ‘produce’ and adapt to counter anything negative about a drug that might be in the news, audience tricked into thinking they aren't seeing/hearing a real commercial,” said an anonymous consumer.

“I believe the use of 'ambassadors' will definitely increase because technology is everywhere and has become such an important source of information for the world,” said Ruth Ramirez, MS candidate in Bioscience Regulatory Affairs at Johns Hopkins University. “The pharmaceutical companies know that this is the most vital tool for reaching the consumers.”

“Use of social media ambassadors will probably increase, but will never achieve the same levels as social media ambassadors for general consumer products,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

“There is going to be a massive difference in the number and intensity of social media ambassadors for supplements and RX products - supplement industry is going to go crazy with ambassadors.”

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Integrating Broadcast DTC and Social Media

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, integration of patient testimonials in broadcast DTC advertising (or live events) with social media (e.g. “You can follow Bob's success with quitting smoking using Chantix on his Facebook page or receive tweets from him.”) is possible. This would emulate TV shows whose fans can go on the Web to learn more about the characters and even interact with them.

Survey respondents were asked if they thought such integration in drug marketing will emerge and if so, what would be the implications. A majority (58%) said “Yes, if regulations allow it.” Only 6% said “No way,” 20% said “Maybe,” and 16% said “Impossible to say at this time.”

Respondents who submitted comments, made the following points:

- You must be confident that the patient will have continued success with the drug
- Patient celebrities have a short, finite lifespan as far as their use in marketing is concerned
- First efforts might fall short

Comments included:

“Absolutely...the age of the branded destination site is slipping...we live now in an age where authenticity rules and social media, or our peers, someone who has ‘walked in my shoes’ hold great weight and resonance,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

“Great way for patients to follow and interact. I think it will work better for certain drugs that are more mainstream,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency.

“A very telling indication of how broadcast and social media advertising are merging can be found by looking closely at the traditional media industry itself,” said Brenda Snow. “TV, radio and print have long battled each other for ad dollars. Now they also have to compete with online digital media outlets as well. The result is that they have to re-invent themselves and re-examine what they are offering their clients. Traditional media sales reps are no longer able to offer one dimensional ad solutions. They are now tasked with creating more customized solutions that depend not only on their own internal resources, but also interactive and social media tactics. The result will be more wide-reaching added value opportunities that go well beyond what we are used to getting currently from broadcast DTC advertising.”

“The only way something like this is going to work is with a moderator,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency. “I don't know that there will ever be a true ‘real’ relationship with social media, but I do think that with a moderator these kinds of events can be mostly real.”

“Specific to smoking, I think it depends on the confidence that the company has in the success of this particular patient,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency. “Might be skittish about putting out an ambassador who might fail treatment later, even if it starts off strong.”

“I would see companies backing off bc of future risk...drug stops working, conditions worsens,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency. “Testimonials as currently executed have a finite end. You use it bc its a good/compelling story. Following someone's path doesn't guarantee the desired results and therefore some may back away.”

“More people may join the site; however, the pharmaceutical company will have to hire social media PRs to respond to negative comments to prevent as much damage to the companies reputation as possible,” said Janel McGill-Mbagu.

“It would allow for the patients to easily interact with a real person in their same situation,” said Ruth Ramirez. “The pharma companies want to gain the consumers trust and doing so with social media will make this easier.”

“It is going to emerge, but may be pretty lame at first,” said an anonymous respondent who works for a pharma agency. “I think Rx brands are not going to be very successful in creating regular, timely social media content due to internal review processes. The topics and language will be bland, sanitized, so not sure it will have the viral value of the best real social media content.”

Thanks to everyone who responded to the survey!