

Highlight Reprint # 410-03

GSK Strikes Back with a Grassroots Campaign

By John Mack

Mike Pucci, Vice President of External Affairs at GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), is a man with a mission, which is to get the word out about the good that the pharmaceutical industry is doing (or, as Pucci expressed his goal: to "Restore the reputation of the industry by communicating the value of our products, our research and our hope for the future"). He spoke recently at an industry Forum on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) held in Princeton, New Jersey.

Pucci began his presentation by pointing out that the pharmaceutical industry's reputation has declined dramatically over the years (see chart on left showing Harris Interactive survey of 1,000 registered voters).

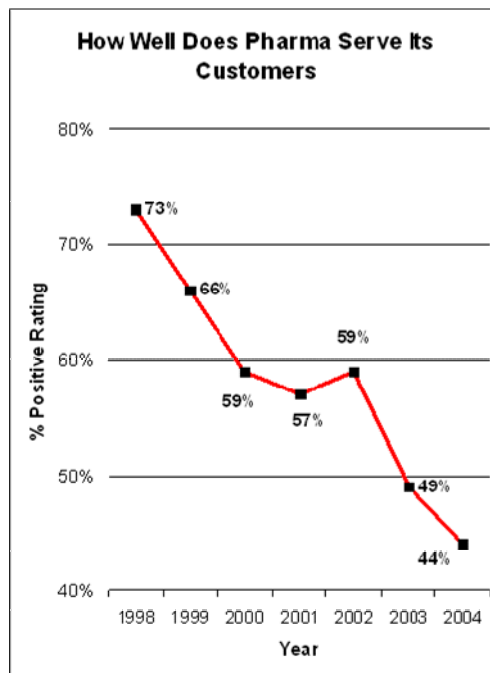
Pucci believes the pharma industry has just sat back and "taken it" and like the frog sitting in a tepid pot of water slowly being heated, it has acclimated itself to the increasing heat of negative publicity.

The pharma industry, says Pucci, needs to recognize that the climate around it is changing and it better get out of the pot!

"The consequences of having a reputation nearly as bad as the tobacco industry," said Pucci, are threefold:

1. **Litigation**
2. **Legislation**
3. **Regulation**

"These three things don't exactly add value to our ability to research and development medicines," said Pucci. GSK, for example, is managing thousands of lawsuits per year and has not even had a product withdrawn from the market. Even Republications these days, noted Pucci, are proposing price control and importation legislation.



Bill Frisk, Republican majority leader in the Senate, called for a 2-year DTC moratorium on newly-approved drugs (see "[To Ban or Not to Ban DTC, That is the Question](#)"). In addition to all that, the FDA is said to be considering new DTC regulations and held a two-day public hearing on this issue in November, 2005 (see article in this issue and "[FDA May Follow PhRMA's Lead on DTC](#)"). Pucci also pointed to FDA's new emphasis on safety and the ramifications this would have on the approval of new medicines.

Ordinarily, many industry observers would consider Pucci's mission a lost cause, akin to spitting into the wind, considering all the forces arrayed against it. In this case, however,

the main tenet of Mr. Pucci's (and GSK's) strategy—engage employees to spread the word by talking positively, sharing what they are doing, and explaining the value of their work—is a unique and effective grassroots tactic.

Grassroots Campaign is a Key Tactic

GlaxoSmithKline, under Pucci's leadership and with the direct support from GSK's president, chairman and board of directors, has been doing a good job marshalling its employees as spokespeople. TV ads feature GSK scientists, for example. Scientists are good pharma spokespeople. They are usually dedicated to doing good, which comes across as a genuine characteristic in the ads, and they represent the image that big pharma wants to promote—i.e., that they are research based.

This national media campaign, however, is just one leg of Mr. Pucci's and GSK's strategy for the company's "Value of Medicine Campaign." The other legs are:

- A grassroots campaign using the sales force and medical & executive speakers
- WebMD Collaboration

You might want to compare this strategy with the action plan developed by attendees of a recent conference and summarized in the *Pharma Marketing News* article "[Marketing the Pharma Industry: The Empire Strikes Back.](#)"

Key Messages

The key messages of the campaign are the familiar ones heard from other pharma executives:

- Today's miracle drugs finance tomorrow's breakthroughs.
- Prescription drugs help us all live longer, better and more productive lives.
- Pharmaceutical therapy in chronic disease treatment is the best value in healthcare delivery.
- The pharmaceutical industry cares about people who can't afford their medicine.

It should be noted that not every pharma executive agrees with all these tenets. Hank McKinnell, CEO of Pfizer, for example, took exception with the first one. He said in his book *A Call to Action*: it is a "fallacy to suggest that our industry prices a product to recapture the R&D budget spent in development." He suggests instead that it is "investors' confidence in the risk and rewards" that drives prices. (See "[A Call to Action: A Mea Non Culpa by Big Pharma](#)".) Nevertheless, these are the messages that GSK wishes to get across to the public.

Genesis and Structure of the Grassroots Campaign

The real story is not the messages, but the grassroots tactics GSK is employing to get the messages across. The framework for the grassroots campaign had its roots back in 1993 and

GSK's "Civic Action Network," which is a loose network of GSK volunteers who are interested in the political side of the business. Pucci recruited one volunteer in each region to "champion" the initiative and, using his sales training background and skills, he trained these individuals on the key messages.

"These people are responsible for presenting at regional meetings out in the field," said Pucci. "They also keep their antennae up to find opportunities for presenting GSK's messages whenever health care is being discussed."

- Regional Medical Scientists target medical and pharmacy schools
- Sales force targets friends, family, neighbors, community organizations, local politicians and HCPs
- Value of Medicine champions target state conventions and health care symposiums and train local sales representatives on messaging
- Trade organization targets distribution channel
- Employer group targets local and national business groups on health and employee benefit managers of major companies
- Reputation committee formed to coordinate and purchase national media spots in all US markets
- Executive VP available to speak nationwide
- WebMD contracted to create Value of Medicine website with links to patient assistance and disease management programs

Role of PhRMA

A couple of members of the PHARMA-MKTING Online Discussion Group suggested that PhRMA

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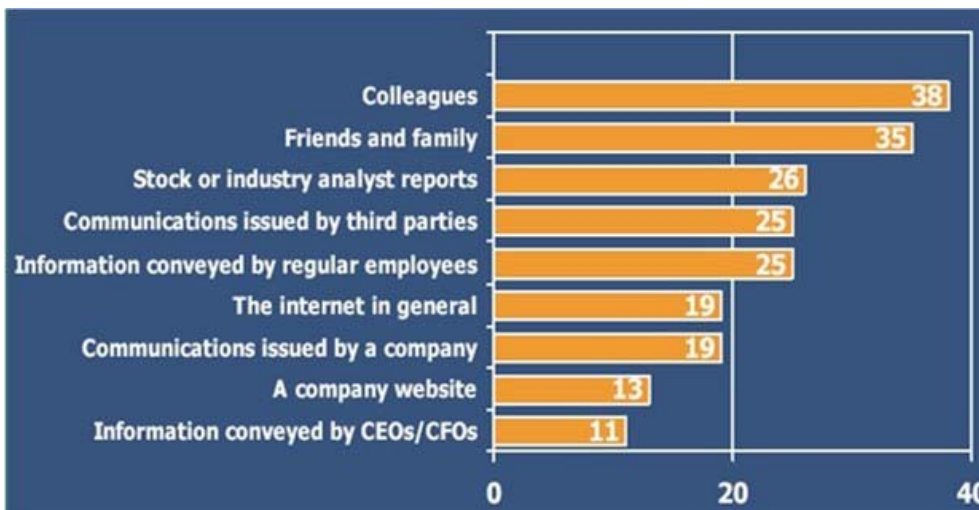


Chart: The credibility of colleagues and friends trumps that of corporate communications departments and company web sites.

[Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers Association' the industry's trade group] should get involved. Terry Nugent, Director of Marketing, Medical Marketing Service, Inc., for example, stated "I commend GSK, but where is PhRMA? Each company continues to do its own thing. The divided are conquered."

Ann Poorboy, Senior Program Manager at S&R Communications Group, had this to say: "Individual pharma companies have long touted their 'citizenship' efforts and their helpful attitudes towards ensuring all patients receive quality care. But the industry must come together. If PhRMA isn't working to improve the condition of industry, have they met their objective?"

"Although there will be a lot more activity from PhRMA going forward,' said Pucci, "this is not something we can easily delegate to our trade association in Washington. It's incumbent upon

each individual pharmaceutical company to take on the responsibility for the pharma industry's bad reputation and address it. We each have to own it."

An important advantage of GSK's strategy—the use of credible employees to get the messages across in a grassroots campaign—cannot easily be exploited by PhRMA.

Pucci included a slide (see Chart on previous page) that showed that the credibility of corporate communications (communications issued by companies, company Web sites, or CEOs and CFOs) was very low among US consumers (only 11% of consumers cited CEOs as credible sources of information) compared to colleagues, friends and family, and regular employees (25% cited regular employees as credible sources). [Source: Pharmaceutical Executive Magazine, April 2003.]

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Program Available from GSK

GSK makes available materials to other pharmaceutical companies called *The Value of Medicines: Beyond the Basics*. This is a non-branded learning system covering issues of R&D costs, DTC, value, importation and access. A video is also offered with unbranded patient testimonials that tell the value of medicine story and describe access programs for the uninsured. GSK will also provide detail aids for the sales force and a pharmacy fact sheet for pharmacists.

Expert Consulted

The following expert was consulted in the preparation of this article.

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