

Survey Review

Americans Skeptical of Pharma Cause Marketing

By John Mack

Wikipedia defines cause marketing as a type of marketing involving the cooperative efforts of a "for profit" business and a non-profit organization for mutual benefit. The term is sometimes also used to refer to the marketing efforts of social and other charitable causes generally. Cause marketing differs from corporate giving (philanthropy) as the latter generally involves a specific donation that is tax deductible, while cause marketing is a marketing relationship generally not based on a donation.

Most of the opportunity for pharmaceutical cause marketing is linked to what the industry calls "disease awareness" marketing campaigns done in concert with non-profit patient advocacy groups. An example of this kind of cause marketing is the faith-based disease awareness initiative described in this issue (see "[Targeted Faith-based Disease Awareness Marketing](#)").

DTC Ban Could Mean More Cause Marketing

As Congress considers banning direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising or at least giving the FDA the power to place a 2- or 3-year moratorium on DTC for new drugs (see "[Bill Could Block Some Ads for New Drugs](#)"), the pharmaceutical industry is gravitating towards more unbranded disease awareness marketing programs. Pfizer, for example, is on record saying that it will spend at least as much on such programs in one year as it would on a typical branded DTC campaign.

Pharma disease awareness campaigns can take many forms, one of which is giving "buckets of cash" (aka "educational grants") to patient advocacy groups such as the American Heart Association and other, lesser-known, patient groups. Pharma is also known to create such groups *de novo* (see "[Restless Pharma Marketing](#)").

Not all funds earmarked for disease awareness, however, are donations—educational grants—to non-profit organizations. There's plenty of unbranded TV DTC advertising focused on disease awareness, for example. An example would be GSK's Men's Facts campaign focused on erectile dysfunction. The ads do not mention Levitra, which is the brand that sponsors the ads.

Disease Mongering

Some critics suggest that some pharma-sponsored disease awareness campaigns are forms of disease mongering. (see "[Disease Mongering: When Is the Line Crossed?](#)"). Disease mongering is a term that was coined by the late journalist Lynn Payer to describe what she saw as the confluence of interests by some doctors, drug companies, patient advocacy groups and media in exaggerating the severity of illness and the ability of drugs to "cure" them.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that a new survey by Envision Solutions, LLC, a healthcare marketing communications company, suggests that many Americans are deeply skeptical of pharmaceutical companies' motives for supporting non-profit patient advocacy groups?

According to the survey, 43% of US adults believe that pharmaceutical companies fund groups like the American Heart Association and the National Kidney Foundation in order to get more people to buy their products or medicines, whereas only 21% believe it is to demonstrate that the companies care about a health issue supported by the group.

Don't Blame the Media!

Envision Solutions also analyzed negative media coverage of pharma support for patient groups and other non-profits and found that such coverage has increased. In particular, Envision suggested unease about pharmaceutical industry support of non-profits may be partly fueled by a recent sharp increase in news stories about disease mongering.

Disease mongering, however, is not the only pharma cause marketing practice getting negative press these days. For example, the recent Boston Globe article "Drug firms' funding of advocates often escapes government scrutiny" revealed that "In 221 [FDA] advisory committee meetings scrutinized [by Public Citizen, which doesn't receive money from the pharmaceutical industry], 32 of 44 speakers representing patients said they had received funding from a company that would be affected by the FDA's decision...While the FDA scours its advisers' backgrounds for such information, the agency does not require disclosures when patients testify."

Continues...

You can't blame the media for reporting practices that are clearly suspect. It's time to put the horse before the cart and for the industry to accept some responsibility for the negative press it receives!

Britannia Rules

In Europe and Australia, where DTC brand advertising is prohibited, pharma-non-profit cause alliances are practically the only way pharmaceutical companies can reach out to patients. However, abuses "over there" have led to restrictions.

In the 2005 revised Code of Practice for the Pharmaceutical Industry of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, a new clause was inserted concerning relationships with patient advocacy groups. While companies are permitted to work with such groups, their involvement must be made clear, and rules on arrangements for meetings are the same as those for health professionals. Companies must make public, by means of information on their website or annual report, a list of all patient organizations to which they provide financial support, and a written agreement must be in place with every organization spelling out exactly the terms of the relationship and funding of every significant activity or ongoing co-operation.

Envision Solutions warns that "Americans' deep suspicion of pharmaceutical companies and increasing negative media coverage of their support of non-profits is a recipe for disaster." One such "disaster" would be what happened in the UK and elsewhere: "more aggressive government regulation of drug firm-non-profit partnerships."

Don't Let It Happen Here

There have already been moves in Congress to investigate pharmaceutical support of non-profit groups through educational grants, which are "growing rapidly" according to a New York Times article:

"A Congressional investigation of the money that drug companies give as supposed educational grants has found that the payments are growing rapidly and are sometimes steered by marketing executives to doctors and groups who push unapproved uses of drugs.

"Twenty-three drug makers spent a total of \$1.47 billion in 2004 on educational grants, or an average of \$64 million per company, according to the Senate Finance Committee. That number was a 20 percent increase from the total in 2003, which was \$1.23 billion." [NYT, "Drug Makers Scrutinized Over Grants", January 11, 2006].

To avoid more regulation in the US, Envision Solutions suggests that "drug firms and non-profits must take steps to increase their transparency and communicate more proactively about their alliances."

Listen to the Podcast

Envision Solutions has some recommendations to achieve this goal. You can learn more about these recommendations by listening in to the May 2, 2007 Pharma Marketing Talk podcast on Pharma Cause Marketing, which will feature an interview with Fard Johnmar, founder of Envision Solutions, LLC. Topics for discussion include:

- What are some examples of pharma cause marketing?
- More details about the survey, including a look at negative media stories regarding disease mongering.
- To what extent is bad press versus lack of transparency the cause of Americans' distrust of pharma's motives with regard to financial support of non-profit patient organizations?
- What's your view on the likelihood of Congress passing laws to regulate more closely educational grants and/or cause marketing by the pharmaceutical industry?

Visit the [Pharma Marketing Talk Channel Page](#) for more information on listening live or to access the audio archive after the podcast.

Pharma Marketing News

Identify These Images

See page 15 for a little visual quiz.

You can find the answers on Pharma Marketing Blog at these locations:

The top image is part a traveling art exhibition of photographic images produced through micronphotography, designed to encourage discussion of drug safety. See <http://pharmamkting.blogspot.com/2007/04/this-is-your-inner-ear-on-drugs.html>

The bottom image is a concept of what a new diagnostic kit produced by Pfizer looks like in action. See <http://pharmamkting.blogspot.com/2007/04/pfizers-erection-hardness-meter.html>