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# Using On-Line Education to Reach Physicians and their Patients:

## An Emerging Tactic for Pharmaceutical Marketers in the Post-DTC Era.

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## USING ON-LINE EDUCATION TO REACH PHYSICIANS AND THEIR PATIENTS

### Using On-Line Education to Reach Physicians and their Patients: An Emerging Tactic for Pharmaceutical Marketers in the Post-DTC Era.

What if you could reach your customers and your customers' customers at the same time? It is a marketer's dream. For years, consultative marketing experts have taught us that positioning your product as part of your direct customer's product or service to their own customers is the ultimate go-to-market strategy. Unfortunately, the issue for pharmaceutical marketing has always been the difficulty in reaching both physicians and their patients in a coordinated manner.

Historically, pharmaceutical marketers have pursued a "divide and conquer" strategy that has treated physicians and their patients as separate customer groups – each deserving their own independent set of strategies and tactics. As a result, most pharmaceutical marketers find themselves investing in direct marketing campaigns aimed at consumers and patients while selling to the physician is often a separate activity left to the direct sales organization. What's missing in this equation is the fact that patients and their physicians are not independent decision-makers.

### The Importance of Patient-Physician Communication

At the very core of healthcare there is a relationship between a patient and their physician. This two-person decision making unit wields a lot of power and can influence the fortunes of many healthcare entities including managed care organizations and pharmaceutical companies. As the ROI (return-on-investment) for many of the traditional pharmaceutical marketing tactics pointed at either physicians or patients/consumers continues to drop, a new integrated marketing opportunity is emerging that is supportive of the patient-physician relationship. The idea is that proactive support of this joint decision-making unit may increase the chances of having your product incorporated into their plans much more than non-coordinated marketing efforts.

Only 15 percent of patients fully understand what their doctors tell them...  
50 percent leave their doctors' offices uncertain of what they are supposed to do to take care of themselves.

– *New York Times, 2004*

Pharmaceutical marketers can gain a whole new level of insight to their product's market position just by learning more about the interaction between patients and their physicians. A 2004 *New York Times* article entitled, "Tell the Doctor All Your Problems, but keep it to less Than a Minute" reported that only 15 percent of patients fully understand what their doctors tell them and that 50 percent leave their doctors' offices uncertain of what they are supposed to do to take care of themselves. No wonder the non-compliance rate with most prescription drugs is so high – one side of the decision-making unit clearly doesn't know what to do next.

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On the other side of the coin, there's some intriguing research that supports the importance of positive patient-physician relationships. In the same *New York Times* article, Dr. Sherrie H. Kaplan, associate dean of the college of medicine at the University of California, Irvine, is identified as a physician who has participated in several studies that found that good doctor-patient communication resulted in lower blood sugar levels in diabetic patients and lower blood pressure in hypertensive patients. In addition, other research has demonstrated a connection between positive patient-physician encounters and the reduction of pain in cancer patients; improved emotional and physical health in people with a variety of illnesses; reduced stress and anxiety; and a higher degree of adherence to prescribed treatments.

What's interesting is that both physicians and their patients are trying to bring more to their encounters. In December of 2005, the *Archives of Internal Medicine* published a nationally representative study of 6,369 US adults, which reported that although consumers trust information from their doctor the most, most will go on-line for health information before visiting their physician.

At the same time, the number of accredited CME hours delivered online has increased 50% over the past two years according to the annual Physician Insight Study from Pri-Med, as more physicians turn to the Web to get their medical education and information.

### Education and Pharmaceutical Marketing Meet On-Line

In January, ePharmaceuticals published a report entitled, "The emerging trend of ETC: Using education campaigns to reach consumers and physicians", which documented pharmaceutical marketing's recent increased interest using a more educational approach. In the report, Paul Ivans, president of Evolution Road Consulting and a pharmaceutical e-marketing consultant is credited with creating the term, "ETC" to describe the new "education-to-consumers" philosophy as an upcoming replacement for the past emphasis on "DTC" or "direct-to-consumer" marketing. The key take-away in the shift from "DTC" to "ETC" is the recognition that providing the appropriate education to help consumers and patients make informed decisions will make for a more effective marketing investment than the volume-based awareness tactics that characterized most DTC campaigns.

"Partnering with physicians on patient education helps build a positive relationship."

– David Stern, EVP, Serono Inc.

Some pharmaceutical marketers already believe in the value of using education to bring their prescribing physicians and their consuming patient customers together. David Stern is the Executive Vice President of Serono's Metabolic Endocrinology group and he believes that, "Partnering with physicians on patient education helps build a positive relationship."

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David's article, "e-Marketing at the Tipping Point", which was published in *Pharmaceutical Executive Magazine*, goes even further to point out the obvious upcoming intersection between education-based pharmaceutical marketing strategies and the Internet as the ultimate targeted delivery mechanism to reach patients and their physicians. As a veteran pharmaceutical marketer, David Stern sees his investment in providing patient education via the Internet as more than a technological improvement; it also, "provides Serono's reps a competitive advantage when it comes to gaining access to doctors."

### What's Next: the Patient-Physician Portal

As more and more patients and their physicians search the Internet for health information, it was only matter of time until a healthcare community-building marketing opportunity emerged. Enter the Patient-Physician educational portal. Patient-Physician portals are multi-user web sites that link patients with their own physicians. The benefit is that patients get what they want – health information and education from their own physician – and physicians get what they want – the ability to provide non-commercial, medical education to their patients and receive professional news and information in the same location. And... pharmaceutical marketers now have the opportunity to reach both doctors and their patients through a single channel.

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Innovative companies like Burlington, MA-based HealthBanks, Inc. use customized medical education and news feeds to draw both physicians and patients into their on-line patient-physician portal. In the portal, patients access educational programs customized by their own physician while their doctor can review medical news highlights and read summaries of recent medical conferences – all sorted by therapeutic specialty. The breakthrough for patients, physicians and sponsoring companies alike comes when patients provide anonymous feedback to questions about their treatment and medications – a rare opportunity for the manufacturer to help both the customer and the customer's customer in healthcare.

As pharmaceutical marketers strive for innovative ways to become part of the healthcare solution, using the Internet to help connect their customers will become a must-have and education-based Patient-Physician portals will emerge as a key component of each brand's go-to-market strategy.

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