

ONLINE OPTIMIZATION

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WENDY WHITE, Founder and President, Siren Interactive, discusses the benefits of online marketing and how pharmaceutical companies must engage new media in order to survive a changing market.

How has the pharmaceutical executive's mindset about internet marketing changed in the past several years?

Pharmaceutical companies are now taking advantage of the tremendous potential that the internet has to reach niche markets, target special interest groups and increase their ROI by combining offline and online channels. Combining traditional offline channels with online strategies is a tremendously effective way to reach specific audiences that might have been missed in the past.

A great example of this change is search marketing. Both search engine optimization and paid search campaigns allow new users to find your site in a much easier manner. I think pharmaceutical companies are now seeing the importance of search in their marketing campaigns and are allocating more resources to making sure that their message is easily accessible to the target audience.

How do you see the Internet playing a part in the healthcare marketing in the next few years?

The most important thing, I believe, is a focus on user experience. That includes not only usability, but also behavior change: identifying where people are, identifying where you want them to be and developing strategies to move them there. That is the real power of online marketing channels – understanding the user – and if you miss that, you've missed the boat. Of course, to really understand the user, what you need are effective metrics and reporting. Only by studying their habits can you really craft something intuitive that they will really respond to. In addition, unlike more traditional marketers, we have to power to finely refine that message extraordinarily quickly based on trends we observe. An interactive agency should also offer you strategies for integrating online channels with other media, helping you cross promote, using website offerings and registration opportunities to build lists, driving traffic back to the website and keeping the sales team up-to-date with online campaigns.

What do you see as e-marketing's biggest area for growth in the next few years?

I think the biggest growth will occur in segmentation and integration. Segmentation is important so that you can accurately define your target audience. You have to be able to distinguish the characteristics that make up your audience so that you can send the right messages to them.

Another aspect of growth is the whole idea of building customer communities. There are chat rooms and blogs for nearly every disease you can think of today. At times, they offer much needed support and information, but they can also be wildly inaccurate and even detrimental. It is important to monitor what's being said about your therapies, not because you can control it, but because pharmaceutical companies have a responsibility to offer reliable, well-referenced, medically accurate information about their therapies. In a sense, pharmaceutical companies have become one of the best sources of healthcare information on the internet because their messages are so closely monitored by federal agencies. Providing this kind of accurate and reliable information – and working to fill the gaps in the information offered by patient organizations – is one of the best ways that pharmaceutical companies have of proving their value to the patient and healthcare professional communities.

What are some of the biggest differences between the online marketing you do and offline marketing?

The biggest difference is that online marketing is a pull medium, instead of a push medium. You have to have something of value to offer your audience. That's one reason why you can't just take a message that was developed for a different channel and post it on the web. The strength of online messaging is that it can be customized. So it's much more likely to hit the target. There's also immediacy in online marketing that can't be matched. You can get your message out faster and react more quickly. Ideally, what role should online channels play in pharmaceutical marketing campaigns?

I see online marketing as the heart of effective pharmaceutical marketing because it supplements and extends all the other channels. Patients have huge informational needs that can't be easily satisfied by traditional media such as television and print.

Short of sending out a visiting nurse, websites and e-newsletters are the best tool we have to educate patients and bring them the information they really need. The same holds true for healthcare professionals. Offering eDetails, customized to the needs of the physician, makes it easier for busy doctors to stay current with new developments or therapies. This also helps the sales reps since, through eDetails, physicians are better prepared or more predisposed to talk to them. The educational and informational potential of interactive marketing allows you to marry acquisition and retention. You give the audience a message offline and then you send them online for another piece of information that they can take away. By linking to the web, you give the audience an opportunity to stay engaged and a reason to keep coming back for more.

How have marketing styles of your healthcare clients changed in recent years?

I think clients are becoming far more knowledgeable about online marketing and more open to creative approaches and targeted campaigns. Clients are realizing that you can get so much more done, and get your message across far more effectively, online.

Can you give one quick online tool or strategy every online marketer should know about?

Many marketers fail to utilize the user metrics produced by their campaigns. Whether it's an email broadcast, patient or physician website, or pay-per-click campaign, metrics should be used to modify and adjust content so it's most useful to the user. It seems so simple, since metrics are basically your way to actually listen to your audience as far as gauging what piques their interest and what doesn't, but a lot of marketers seem to miss that point.

Can you think of any opportunities that pharmaceutical companies are missing concerning online marketing?

Public relations, for one thing. I believe there's a huge potential to tell stories that make audiences feel good about pharmaceutical companies. Of course, online public relations requires a unique strategy because you can't just build it, you have to give them a reason to come. That's what makes close relationships with patient organizations important. It's also the reason it's important to use your website to build a strong data base of registered users. It will help you get your message out. Keeping physicians abreast of new developments through professional associations, eDetailing and email updates should be part of this effort as well. Moreover, it's also important not to overlook the value of maintaining your website, staying current and maximizing the opportunities you have to announce new developments across all platforms: your therapy website, your corporate website, patient and physician organizations and so on.

What is the one thing you wish you could change about the marketing industry?

I would like to see pharmaceutical companies focus on lesser-known disease states, as well as the high profile diseases like cancer, MS and Parkinson's disease. I think the healthcare industry as a whole would benefit if drug companies worked together to educate patients on a wider variety of health issues.

Where do you see Siren Interactive five years from now?

I think we will be doing what we are doing now, only better. We'll be offering our clients more power, more precision and a broader range of new strategies. Siren has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to delivering customized solutions. That's what accounts for the tremendous growth Siren has experienced over the past five years; we command the resources to generate better services that consistently meet the growing and changing online marketing needs of our clients.

Wendy S. White is President and Founder of Siren Interactive. She has been leading the company since 1999 with her uncompromising commitment to excellence, her ability to anticipate client needs, and her understanding of the best uses of new technology. Under her leadership, Siren has delivered interactive programs for Baxter, Abbott, Medtronic, American Hospital Association, OptionCare and many other corporate clients. Wendy is responsible for Siren's overall business strategy – specialization in the healthcare industry. Please visit www.sireninteractive.com for more details.
