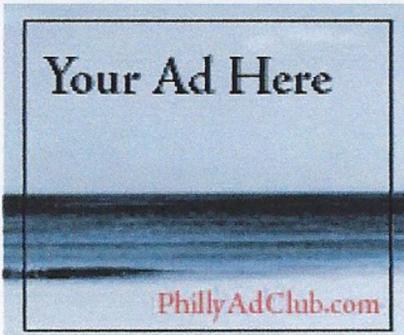
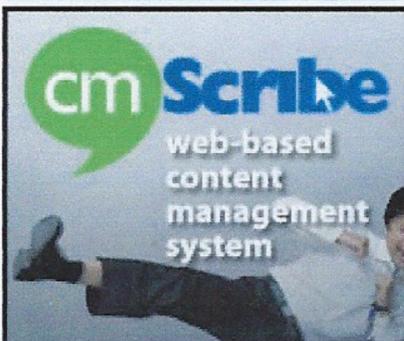
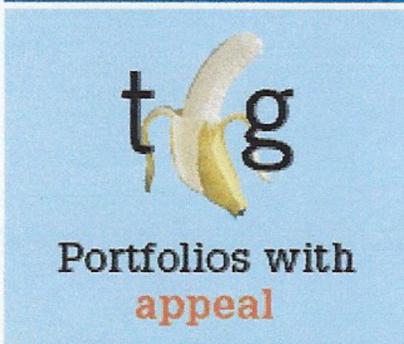


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Managing the Consumer in Online Pharmaceutical Marketing

by [Nita Taide](#)

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The mentality of today's pharmaceutical consumers is changing, according to a recent article on ClickZ <http://www.clickz.com/showPage.html?page=3627084> Today's consumers are not only more technologically savvy, but are more independent in their discovery process. Therefore, they are spending more time online performing their own research and subscribing to resources to educate them about their diseases or conditions.

Many also resort to the internet because they are too embarrassed to talk to their doctors. RealAge, Inc. reports that more than 40 percent of people suffering from GI disorder symptoms are too embarrassed or afraid to discuss their symptoms with their doctors.

RealAge is taking advantage of these trends, and is a prominent player in a newly emerging marketing channel in the pharmaceutical industry. Focused on customer relationship management, the company serves as an intermediary between the pharmaceutical company and the customer. RealAge offers online surfers a 150-item questionnaire to gather data ranging from cholesterol level to driving speed; it then estimates the visitor's age. Following the survey, consumers are given care recommendations, along with the opportunity to subscribe to content-specific newsletters with pharmaceutical sponsors.

Gaining a strong presence

While independent health publishers like RealAge only represent 3.4% of pharmaceutical advertising dollars, they are gaining a strong presence in this market. A study by MedTrackAlert highlights why: Consumers are more likely to act on messages about the mechanism or symptoms of a disease than on those about price or effectiveness. Like RealAge, MedTrackAlert focuses on providing educational information on specific conditions through resources such as newsletters. The newsletters are especially helpful in targeting consumers with less common conditions in more abstract segments of the online population.

Besides newsletters and online media campaigns, a wealth of information exists directly on the websites of these publishers. If you go to www.medtrackalert.com, you can find a medication glossary, as well as recent news articles on many different conditions and health-related topics. You can also join "CareCircle," and create a medical profile for yourself or your loved ones; you can then receive relevant information and special offers tailored to your profile.

Providing an interactive experience is critical in the healthcare industry today; companies like DailyStrength.com are realizing this, and are cashing in on the opportunity. DailyStrength is an online social network which allows people to share their medical struggles and discuss the effectiveness of treatments used for specific conditions. The site already has an impressive user base, consisting mostly of women – the prime users of social networks. In the next few weeks, the company is planning to enhance user experience even further by introducing chat, video and improved photo sharing capabilities.

Adopting online communities

More and more pharmaceutical brand sites are adopting the idea of online social communities - a vital part of today's online marketing. For example, MyAlli.com has a discussion forum directly on its site. However, online communication tools such as forums and blogs are rare in the pharmaceutical industry, due to heavy government regulations. A major obstacle is the requirement of "fair balance" in pharmaceutical advertising - essentially, a medication's risks and side effects must be fully disclosed and given equal print or air time as the description of benefits. Still, companies are managing to include such resources on their site. For example, DailyStrength has a discussion space which it closely monitors, taking measures to advise against or delete medical recommendations posted by users.

Many pharma companies are also taking advantage of other tools which do not require such strict monitoring and adherence to regulations. Sites like www.lexapro.com incorporate interactive elements such as videos of users sharing their stories, FAQ's, tips on managing symptoms, self-tests, and more.

According to eMarketer, online advertising in the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry

will reach \$975 million this year - a growth rate of 18.9%. An even larger growth rate is projected for next year, with a higher percentage of investment in companies such as RealAge and MedTrackAlert. In addition, more companies will shift their marketing dollars away from traditional channels such as television and toward microsites like www.inyourcorner.com (for the breast cancer drug Arimidex). The integration of customer relationship management through interactive tools and online communities will ultimately mark the success of pharmaceutical companies in the future.

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