



Marketing Medical Products to Baby Boomers

The pharmaceutical industry is on the threshold of big change with respect to marketing trends and opportunities. Evidence-based medicine is one tool marketers can use to their advantage, however the aging population is not as concerned with being "less sick" than they are with quality of life. The challenge facing marketers will be in explaining more complex health information, including the importance of compliance, to an aging population.



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The move toward offering people more integrated health care solutions and the proliferation of evidence-based medicine will allow marketers to appeal to customers in new and exciting ways. On the other hand, there is a growing market comprising more than 76 million people who are between the ages of 40 and 60 years. An aging population obviously means an increased need for medication. One should also keep in mind that this generation practically defined consumerism. To them, health care is not about the absence of illness; it is about quality of life.

Pharmaceutical firms that attempt to understand the aging market will reap benefits, but most companies have not tried to reach this market. The research data are in: As people age, they process information differently than when they were 30 years old. Marketing pharmaceuticals to the baby boomers requires knowledge of these differences and how they effect message development.

The Pharmaceutical Industry's Powerhouse

Savvy pharmaceutical marketers know baby boomers are the most dominant force in health care. However, most marketers agree that they are not the easiest group to target, especially concerning medical products and services. This is partly because baby boomers demand more customized information driven by personal needs that extend far beyond their medical health. For example, they want age-specific information that speaks to their particular age group's characteristics, not solely generic information on how to cope with illnesses.

These consumers want new lifestyle-enhancing drugs—from antidepressants to erectile dysfunction agents. They are eager to learn about defying the aging process in addition to wanting facts on their specific conditions and how to best cope with them. Unlike their parents, who passively accepted whatever medical advice was offered, this generation expects more personalized attention because they have demanded and grown accustomed to this type of treatment.

Baby boomers are Internet savvy. Having access to this expansive knowledge base makes them less likely to take advice at face value. They tend to supplement advice from physicians with other sources that together can improve their overall health care experience.

Baby boomers have vast financial power. They outspent their parents long ago, and many continue to outspend their children. Individuals 50 years and older comprise one-third of the U.S. population but control 75% of the wealth. They account for 77% of prescription drug sales and 61% of OTC drug sales. They view themselves as healthy and active and will do and pay whatever it takes to stay that way, including out-of-pocket expenses. In return, they want and expect high-quality service.

Baby boomers consume an unprecedented quantity of medications annually, both OTC and prescription. Many individuals have multiple diseases.

These issues have strong implications

for the pharmaceutical marketer. For example, to what degree must the company provide guidance in treating multiple illnesses? This basic demographic background is a critical starting point for the pharmaceutical product/market manager to deal with this large group.

The Pharmaceutical Marketer

Pharmaceutical companies have traditionally failed to address the needs of a group that promises to be their largest market segment for the next 20 years. Faced with an empowered generation that wants, and has the means, to

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maintain a high quality of life, what looks like oversight actually happens for a combination of reasons: Many firms believe they do address this segment. This belief may be influenced by the fact that, in the past, fewer types of drugs were available, with even fewer targeted to an older population. Thus, in an industry that prizes the 18- to 49-year age group, the same marketing campaign appeared to work equally well regardless of age. If older people needed additional information, they simply asked their physicians. However, this simple formula no longer works.

Most pharmaceutical companies hire marketing professionals who are trained to focus on “look and feel.” Whether information is presented in brochures, booklets, videos, or on the Internet, the tendency is to emphasize style, motion, color, and interesting images. With regard to drug information intended to inform and educate, the older crowd might enjoy interesting advertisements but their needs are quite different. Marketers may not draw the important distinctions between marketing information and educational information. Above all else, people want this information to be understandable and useful so it can help them make safe and sound decisions about their health care. Should they take the drug? How should they take it? When should they stop taking it? Baby boomers want answers to these questions, ideally using words and formats that speak most clearly to them. By taking an age-sensitive approach to designing this type of information, the pharmaceutical marketer produces greater satisfaction with a brand, which is where customer trust and loyalty ultimately begin. By doing this, no longer are pharmaceutical marketers perceived as just providing information. Instead, they are partners in helping customers solve their health issues.

Ineffectiveness of Traditional Marketing

When targeting an older crowd, marketers must reflect on the inevitable effects of aging: Diminished problem-solving ability; slower response times; and increased difficulty with complex tasks and procedures and in interpreting graphics and icons (Sidebar).

Yet, the typical marketing approach to patients does not address these characteristics. In fact, it does not reflect much difference between a target customer who is 30 years old and one who is twice that age. For example, a study conducted by the Communication Research Institute of Australia (Melbourne) on print information about drug use intended for consumers found that only 18% could answer the question: What can this medicine be used for? Only 6% knew when to stop taking the medicine. A study by the Nielsen Norman Group (Fremont, CA) found websites to be more than twice as difficult as print instructions for older individuals. In one instance, a person clicked for information on a particular drug and the system launched Adobe Acrobat. An overcrowded page appeared with highly technical information, probably intended for physicians and pharmacists. The

problem stemmed from the fact that the page was accessed from the patients and caregivers section of the website. Patients responded by asking why messages were not specifically designed for older people? Individuals that produce marketing messages account for some of the blame. Typical marketing product managers are generally between 30 and 40 years of age, and are understandably less sensitive to the complexity of medical information. Proof of this can be seen among traditional pharmaceutical marketing efforts, whether print or electronic. For instance, material is often content heavy, layout is not reader friendly, layout does not move the reader through the piece easily, relevant information is difficult to pinpoint, graphics appear to be positioned randomly, and at times, instruction seems vague.

The Case for Change

Baby boomers are a lucrative market for the pharmaceutical industry. In addition, most pharmaceutical companies that assess their baby-boomer advertising efforts against what the group really wants and needs would agree that it is time to consider change. No longer should the baby boomer's genuine need for information be put on hold.

Accordingly, if making the right information available to the right audience is the lifeblood of pharmaceutical marketing,

PHYSICAL AILMENTS THAT INCREASE WITH AGE

Declining Eyesight. Changes in eyesight typically begin with middle age and deteriorate gradually. Of key importance to the pharmaceutical marketer is that people who experience such gradual deterioration of eyesight naturally begin to rely on memory to compensate for the loss. Also related to eyesight is the knowledge that roughly half of people diagnosed with diabetes are 55 and older. The disease is known for having a negative effect on eyesight.

Diminishing Memory. Memory in this population can be negatively affected by some drug therapies. Memory aids such as pillboxes and blister packages help, but their usefulness diminishes as the complexity of the drug therapy increases.

Declining Ability to Draw Inferences From Reading Information. The pharmaceutical marketer must create instructions that are clear and simple for an individual to apply to his or her specific situation. For example, one study found that only 22% of elderly adults could translate the phrase “take every six hours” into an accurate medication plan.

Declining Ability to Decipher Symbols. Literacy rates vary widely across the country. Therefore, many marketers have found the use of symbols to be a good alternative, especially with warnings. However, some studies suggest that older adults have greater difficulty understanding symbols without substantial text to explain them.

then product managers must understand the critical elements to presenting the best information. Until marketers provide information that helps customers better integrate their medicines with their lifestyles, they will struggle in their efforts to serve this expansive and powerful market.

A Customer-Centric Performance-Based Strategy

Pharmaceutical information should be presented from the customer's perspective. The concept is stunningly simple. By identifying the way age influences information processing and applying that knowledge to a new way of providing product information, pharmaceutical companies can achieve greater results with future marketing efforts.

A new method of providing product information may be thought of as customer centric and performance based. Information is tailored for a targeted population segment. The approach is designed to help a pharmaceutical end user answer four common medical questions: (1) What are my goals for taking this medicine? (2) What do I need to do? (3) What do I need to know? and (4) How can I gauge my efforts toward reaching my goals?

All patients, particularly the elderly, may become confused and overwhelmed if they are bombarded with data. Therefore, information should be organized according to a person's mental model: how the customer, and not the marketer, views the world. When medical information is designed based on the person's mental model, comprehension and performance increase. For example, information about a particular medicine is often separated by topic area, such as how the drug works, warnings, and usage. However, consumers are more likely to organize information based on how and when to take the medication. Rather than separating warnings into individual parts as is typically done, warnings should appear within the section that contains "when and how-to-use" instructions.

On a larger scale, it may be helpful to consider diabetes, a high-incidence chronic disease. According to the American Diabetes Association, Alexandria, Virginia, approximately 17 million people in the United States have diabetes, nearly half of whom are 55 years or older. Owing to complications caused by this disease, half of these people

will die from heart disease and stroke. Whereas there is an almost unlimited volume of information available on diabetes, heart disease, and stroke, each patient has the responsibility of sifting through it to find what is relevant. Virtually none of the information is organized as to how the multitude of diseases may affect the person at various life stages. If individuals with diabetes had access to facts and tips that would contribute to better health and greater longevity, it could ultimately change the face of health care.

Another challenge faced by marketers is presenting the information in an appealing manner and in a way that is easy to read and follow.

Age Has Everything to Do With It

As the trend grows toward providing integrated medical solutions through individual's lifecycles, the information must be appropriately presented to the aging population. Research has shown that older people process information differently, in ways that can affect adherence. Quality of life is a driving force for this population. They want to be active participants in managing their health. It makes good business sense to provide them with the information they want and to present it in ways they can understand and use. In an industry that spends between five and six times more money than most to get a new customer, this approach is the ticket to connect with the aging population.

Conclusion

Yesterday's older population was compliant, loyal, and patient. Today's elderly population comprises activists who are impatient and care more about meeting their needs than brand loyalty. Baby boomers do not think in ways similar to the previous generation. They are waiting to be catered to with only the medical information they seek. Pharmaceutical marketers should not expect them to wait too long.

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