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What's the fuss about stars pitching drugs?

Kathleen Turner, Lauren Bacall, Carne Wilson, Olympia Dukakis and Rob Lowe are among celebrities getting paid by pharmaceutical companies to

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Push to 'brand' spurs healthcare PR growth

By Diane Feen



The trend to "brand" a good or service has made its way to the healthcare sector. This branding momentum provides another

Push to 'brand'

Continued from page 10

pros to boost their profile, and pitch lucrative elective surgeries that appeal to the vanity of aging Baby Boomers.

"It's become a situation of 'promote or perish,'" said Katherine Rothman, CEO of

K M R Communications, which represents more than 30 physicians. She has secured top placements in media, such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* for Botox parties.

Jason Roth, Director of Healthcare for Olson-Ballard

Communications in Las Vegas, sees an upswing in the number of clients wanting media outreach for "out-of-pocket" procedures. "Many doctors are targeting Baby Boomers with disposable income and the desire to keep their youth and health intact," he said.

His firm generated publicity for HealthSouth and its virtual colonoscopy that makes a 3-D computer image of a



"What you have is consumers demanding to play a larger role in healthcare decisions; that's why complementary healthcare has grown to be a \$40 billion business in the U.S.," said Ross Goldberg, President Kevin-Ross PR, who represents American Specialty Health, the largest network of alternative therapies.

person's colon. Seven Las Vegas TV stations featured the \$600 procedure, according to Roth. "We got so much publicity for this client that we had to back off for a while because they were booked months in advance," said Roth, who also promotes Trivex, which has a non-invasive procedure for the removal of varicose veins.

Dinner with Docs

Doctors are using PR to generate a buzz that leads to referrals from peers.

"Specialists need referrals and often times they come to PR firms to ask our help in creating newsletters and putting on events such as 'Dinner with Docs,'" said Don Silver, Executive VP of Boardroom Communications.

PR firms, such as Boardroom, are creating events such as DWD to give specialists a chance to demonstrate their expertise among peers. The events are usually underwritten by drug companies and sponsored at hospitals.

"Doctors are coming out of the managed care fog and are learning how to survive by being proactive with their marketing and PR efforts," said Silver.

"I see doctors upgrading their PR budgets, as opposed to advertising because advertising is so expensive. If you do an ad here and there, it doesn't mean anything. I think the healthcare profession is rediscovering the value and effectiveness of media relations," added Silver.

Rothman said the same about her clients. "They realize advertising is not yielding them the kind of name recognition that they hoped for," she said.

"Patients electing [to have] these procedures are generally from an upper income bracket, and they don't open the yellow pages for medical care. They rely on word of mouth, or what's dictated by the media much the way they would pick a vacation or luxury good," said Rothman.

Net turns healthcare upside down

The vast amount of medical information available has turned the healthcare profession upside down, according to John Seng, CEO of Spectrum Science PR. "People go to the Internet before they go the doctor or healthcare facility to learn about impending procedures," he said.

SSPR has a four-person web development staff that creates websites for clients to communicate with patients. For Bristol-Myers Squibb it created cycleofhope.org, which encourages people with cancer to stay active and involved in treatment. Lance Armstrong is the role model for this site. "Healthcare PR is not only alive, it's stronger than ever. Healthcare PR people need to recognize that the boundaries and limits are changing, and if it involves influencing audiences, then their job is to be able to use as many tools as possible to inform and edu-

Doctors must either 'promote or perish,' says Katherine Rothman, CEO of KMR Communications, which has gotten media hits in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* for a client's Botox parties.

cate," said Seng.

Kathryn Metcalfe, CEO of Cohn & Wolfe New York, said there is another reason why the Internet is important today. "A lot of our efforts are focused on trying to help patients understand all the contradictory information that the media reports on," she said.

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