

PRYWERK

Do healthcare firms use fear to sell pills?

In an attempt to strike a chord with consumers, healthcare PR pros have become experts at "humanizing" the stories of their clients. But do these campaigns play too much on peoples' fears and emotions? Jessica Sung investigates

Hi-tech PR agencies have endured most of the negative headlines in the national media lately, but earlier this month a healthcare firm shared the ignominy. Healthcare boutique Fischer & Partners came under fire in *The Wall Street Journal* for allegedly conducting a misleading PR campaign to push the BIS monitor, a medical device manufactured by its client, Aspect Medical Systems.

Fischer's PR campaign was singled out because instead of highlighting the technology of the device, it raised public concern about intraoperative awareness, a rare phenomenon in which patients wake up during surgery because of low anesthetic dosage.

Although Fischer VP Lorie Fiber denied that she single-mindedly promoted the intraoperative awareness issue, the story claimed that Aspect's marketing efforts misled hospitals and patients into thinking that the BIS monitor, which only measured consciousness levels, could in fact prevent intraoperative awareness.

Healthcare pros call these pitches "humanizing the story," but such tactics can lead PR pros down a slippery slope with tactics short on scientific information and long on human drama.

Marketers bypassing MDs

The roots of this trend date back to 1997, when the FDA eased regulations on TV and radio ads for prescription medicines. Since then, marketing campaigns for pharmaceuticals, medical devices and even medical procedures have tended to bypass doctors to target consumers directly. According to a recent survey by DS Simon Productions, health-related VNRs were the most popular VNRs among TV stations.

And according to Kym White, managing director of Ogilvy's global health and medical practice, health-related information is the most widely searched topic on the Web.

Ame Wadler, chairman of the US healthcare practice at Burson-Marsteller, says that consumers are also taking a much more active role in self-care. "People are much more empowered [now]. There is a growing trend of people educating themselves."

While it's unclear which came first—proactive patients or more aggressive advertising and PR—healthcare pros have found an effective way to bring about behavioral change. Wadler says that in the past, "the [scientific] story alone was enough. Today, the story has to be how



Matter of trust...most drug studies are paid for by drug companies

science impacts someone's life."

To get rheumatoid arthritis patients to start taking a new drug called Enbrel, Wadler says that messages were developed after seeing how the disease permeated patients' lives: "We wanted to use a mix of emotional and rational drivers to motivate change." For example, a rational driver would be the fact that Enbrel could relieve pain in patients' hands; an emotional driver would be the reassurance that the arthritis sufferer no longer had to give up his or her social life because of pain.

But oftentimes the emotional/rational balance is skewed. Manning Selvage & Lee conducted a diabetes campaign for Eli Lilly's insulin treatments at a time when its client wanted to maintain market share. MS&L held a search for diabetics whose blood glucose levels were "out of control." VP Mark Bennett says that the phrase "out of control" was chosen to drive patients to get more information from their doctors on ways to manage their blood glucose levels. He claims that the phrase "connotes that you can regain control. That's the beauty of it."

And sometimes the science is not mentioned at all. Kath-

erine Rothman, president and CEO of New York-based KMR Public Relations, represents plastic surgeons, dermatologists and group practices. "Many times when I do stories with my clients, I'm not promoting something they do, but what's dangerous out there—the dangers in large volume liposuction or what's hyped in plastic surgery," she says. "We're not trying to scare patients into anything, we're trying to save people's lives." Her justification? "Patients don't ask about a doctor's training. What patients respond to is that [the doctors] have been in *InStyle* or *Allure*."

Are consumers to blame when science is given short shrift in general healthcare stories? The point is debatable, but when consumers are in fact ignorant about a healthcare issue, many PR pros undertake campaigns for clients in the name of public education. To promote a medical device that helps sufferers of sleep apnea, Dana Perino at the San Diego-based Gable Group decided to educate the public on what sleep apnea was, how many people it afflicted and the dangers (increased traffic accidents) that could affect the general public if treatment was neglected.

Death by bedwetting?

Other PR pros have campaigned to reposition a common ailment as a more serious one in need of medication. Noonan/Russo Communications in New York, in publicizing a drug to treat juvenile bedwetting, positioned the childhood occurrence as a serious medical condition using clinical studies conducted by the drug manufacturer. The firm encouraged parents of bedwetters to ask their doctors how their children could be treated.

Are these efforts in the gray area? Some PR pros simply view such campaigns as examples of the natural evolution of healthcare marketing. Last year pharmaceutical companies

such as Pfizer and Glaxo Wellcome gave public affairs and PR work for their drugs to consumer PR specialists. In particular, Glaxo Wellcome handed the PR campaign for its flu drug Relenza to NY-based boutique DeVries PR, whose clients include Old Navy, Noxzema and Tupperware. White chalks this up to pharmaceutical companies seeking the creativity they see in ads. "What pharmaceutical companies are looking for, and they have every right, is the perfect mix between the creativity found in consumer marketing and an understanding of the science, issues and regulatory system more typically found with health and medical practices."

Complicating the issue is a decline in journalistic standards. In June, *The New England Journal of Medicine* published a study of news coverage of three drugs in TV and newspaper reports between 1994 and 1998. It found that out of 207 stories, only 47% mentioned potential harm of the drugs to patients, only 18% reported both absolute and relative benefits of the drugs and only 50% mentioned a cited expert's ties to the drug manufacturer. In short, the *NEJM* found that news stories about drugs were not accurate enough.

NEJM deputy editor Robert Steinbrook says that it's unclear where the deficiencies in the news reports originated, adding that it could be in either the reporting or editing. In an editorial accompanying the study, Steinbrook, a former medical writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote, "Press releases, whether the work of universities, manufacturers, organizers of medical meetings or medical journals, inherently involve self-interest. Although some reporters find press releases helpful, I have always found that there is no substitute for basing a story about a report in a medical journal directly on the report."

Jim Naureckas, editor of *Eureka*, a media criticism magazine published by watchdog group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, says, "It's hard to find people who don't have a vested interest in drugs. The fact that almost all tests are funded by the makers of the drug is a real problem. You don't have a whole lot of independent checking of the safety or efficacy of drugs."

He adds, "Most reporters don't have a medical background and don't have the time to independently research the merits or demerits of the various drugs that come out and need to be reported on. There's a vacuum that's filled by PR in that PR provides a whole raft of people who are willing and able to give them the information they need to put together an article. Unfortunately, these people have a definite interest in spinning stories in a certain direction."

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