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It's Time to Get Engaged

While this special *PM360* supplement is all about great creative achievements in the industry, one agency insider identifies a disturbing trend in healthcare advertising and suggests a need for more customer engagement.

By Mike Rutstein

Have you taken “the path forward,” been on “the road ahead,” or been part of a “cornerstone solution” lately? If so, you’ve likely been traveling on the wrong road to developing or experiencing ground-breaking creative.

For far too long, the creative product in the healthcare arena has been operating in a sea of sameness, a montage of metaphors, and a collection of clichés you can see coming from a mile away. How many campaigns have you seen that feature lions, balance beams, waves, cycles, and sunsets?

Clichés like the rising sun worked for decades because clients marketed products that basically differentiated themselves and uptake was quick. But in many cases, it was the science selling the story, not the warm embrace of the rising sun. And when companies employed an army of foot soldiers with a fistful of samples as ammunition, they didn’t need too much creativity. A brown paper bag and a magic marker could pretty much do the trick.

But now the game has changed. There are fewer blockbuster drugs

and more me-too products being pushed by fewer sales reps spending less time with doctors. In today’s world, winners and losers will be determined based on their ability to market products through customer engagement, unexpected creative, and, in many cases, perceived differentiation. This requires more than a “talking product” and a list of functional benefits. Instead, we need a *top-down* approach to building brands. And that starts by recognizing that great creative is born out of unearthing provocative insights and building platform ideas around those insights—as opposed to *bottom-up* campaigns built around specific claims.

One of the greatest weaknesses of the work in the healthcare arena is that it is often being created in a myopic way and through a scientific lens only. As an industry, we need to start recognizing that the power of an idea comes from the outside-in; that the spark doesn’t come from a biology degree, but from popular culture and nuance.

Clients and brands deserve a lot more than they are getting. But to

get there, three critical things need to happen.

1) *Stop the excuses.* As an industry we need to stop apologizing for being in a highly regulated category. There are many highly regulated categories that yield great creative work. That’s not to say that we don’t need to be responsible or be on label. But MLR is no excuse for flat functional creative work or expected metaphors.

2) *Bring the outside in.* The successful healthcare agency of the future will recognize that we are now in a world where we need to create true customer engagement and that big ideas born out of new and different research techniques will drive the business, not a wish list of claims. And to get there, we need to source people from outside the industry (particularly strategic planners and creatives with CPG experience) to help build brands and create meaningful differences. Ultimately, we need to be able to fuse the “science and the sensation” together to create unexpected work and clear competitive advantages for brands.

3) *Change the game.* Too often we see clients default to what’s worked before. The old “2 X 4” is likely not the most powerful weapon that will lead to today’s perceived advantage and product uptake.

Yesterday, I opened a medical journal and saw a frog on roller skates and I laughed. Not because I thought it was funny, but because it reinforced what’s so blatantly missing in our industry—big ideas that get results. Platforms and iconic approaches generated from popular culture that resonate across the board from consumer to clinician to caretaker. Clients and their agencies have an opportunity to go a lot further. It’s time to get engaged. No Excuses. ■

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