Seeking Total Transparency

With no direct competition, millions of prospective "patients," and simple single-pill solution, alli appeared to be a home-run product in the weight-loss category. But for marketer GlaxoSmithKline, the anticipated success has not yet been realized. Our advertising expert offers his view on what's happened.

>> What was your New Year's resolution? If it was to lose weight, you started the year in very good company. According to statistics, weight loss was the number one New Year's resolution, with more than 100 million people committed to the cause. And for very good reason, when you consider that two-thirds of Americans are overweight and 31 percent are obese. In fact, more people are overweight today than ever before and experts believe that we are facing an "obesity epidemic."

Here's the problem. While we all start diets and exercise plans with the best of intentions, after a few weeks, most of us fall back into our usual unhealthy lifestyles, and the weight that we did lose slowly creeps back on. If we only had a partner, that could help us through this painful process.

Meet alli (orlistat capsules). Alli is not a weight-loss dietary supplement. It's the only over-the-counter weight-loss aid. Approved in 2007, alli is a reduced-strength version of Xenical (previously sold as a prescription product).

GlaxoSmithKline launched alli in 2007 with a $150 million advertising spend. And given the tens of millions of people who could benefit from alli and the blatant un-met need in the marketplace, the brand was expected to fly off the shelves and trigger huge sales numbers for GSK. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. In fact, despite the massive marketing effort, alli was tried by just 4 million people in its first year on the market!

This begs the question: Why?

GOING BEYOND THE FORMULAIC

It's not often that marketers such as GSK have an opportunity like this to capitalize on. No direct competition. Millions of frustrated patients desperately seeking a solution. And a simple pill that's available over the counter. What could possibly stand in the way?

Here's the catch. Some people can be convinced to try anything. But driving critical mass and creating behavior change for a weight-loss product (in a category fraught with skepticism, broken promises and baggage with previous medications) requires something fundamentally different. Gaining trial and adoption in this space requires education, motivation and the ability to pinpoint and address barriers to action.

And more importantly, when a product, such as alli, is plagued with an unmistakable, unwelcome and a HIGHLY publicized side-effect profile, which includes leakages, loose stools and oily discharges (which has been fodder for late night com-

An early print ad for alli.

ics), it requires total transparency – Upfront!

Instead, alli has served up expected, formulaic packaged-goods advertising, including typical talking heads/testimonials espousing the wonders of the drug and its safety as well as big bold headlines bragging about the number of patients who have tried the product, which, again, in context, is not many. And that's about it. No effort to connect on a deeper emotional level to address barriers to action and no mention whatsoever to address a widely known negative side-effect profile.

It has been proven time and time again in healthcare marketing that the key to a product's success and sustainability is through understanding and total transparency, particularly when the product has a negative or potentially very unpleasant side effect profile such as alli.

MISSING THE MARK

Alli is a brand that has the opportunity to make a positive, meaningful and significant impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of people if it can only get its message and story right. Instead, alli seems to miss all of the hallmarks of an effective campaign for this category and this specific product. And, in my view, this is a glaring oversight that is impacting the total consumer experience and success of the brand.

All is not lost for alli, however. Given the fact that following a low-fat diet with alli can yield better results and significantly fewer side effects, I think there is a terrific story that can and should be told in the brand's advertising, which could a turn a negative into a positive. (A recent alli TV spot makes a half-hearted attempt at doing this, but there's significant room for improvement.)

To GSK's credit, a central role of its relationship marketing program has been to encourage healthy eating, which lessens the likelihood for these unpleasant side effects, aids in weight loss and, in theory, establishes healthy eating behavior.

That's an interesting story on multiple levels. I believe it's now time to bring it forward in a bigger way in the advertising.

Through a deeper level connection with consumers and total transparency, alli might find that, it is able to drive a more successful consumer experience, which, in turn, should yield greater trial, adoption and advocacy for the brand. «

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