

Welcome to the Triple A era

Why healthcare's hour of need demands a change in focus for health communications

When he was asked to assess changes to healthcare in 2007, William Weldon, chairman and CEO of Johnson & Johnson, noted: '...the solutions healthcare systems most need come from the convergence of science, technology and services'. Today, future healthcare solutions should also be considered in light of important new factors: an entrenched economic crisis and the ensuing questions over the affordability of healthcare innovation.

Science, technology and services may need to converge in new ways to drive system improvement, but their value is under more scrutiny than ever.

Healthcare systems are faced with the challenge of improving delivery and promoting better service integration while spending more efficiently without undermining the best aspects of existing systems. They must also foster greater patient education and self-management where appropriate, and aim to improve outcomes while procuring better value for money.

As communicators, we must play a role in shaping healthcare solutions, but our ability to make a difference in this environment will challenge conventional PR capabilities. Success will in part rely on our capabilities in three core areas of healthcare comms: advocacy, access and audience insights.

Patient advocacy groups have often been supported as advocates for a single service, product or commercial aim for mutual benefit. But this is truly too narrow an approach to deliver comms campaigns that lead to real change, especially when we now need to address healthcare issues across more stakeholder groups – policy, professional, payer, patient – to drive meaningful debate and reform.

Our approach to 'advocacy' needs to court relationships with all potential 'advocates'. What is required is a new way to identify all relevant



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influencers for a given healthcare aim and a commitment to work in true partnership to align all parties to a common cause.

A commitment to prove value must be started early and remain constant. Our communications must be aligned around value arguments that resonate widely. Payers or 'investors in health' are now one of the most critical audiences who need to believe in the real world value of a given intervention.

Communicators are well positioned to help engage payers effectively and shape an overarching environment that accommodates innovation, delivers commercial success for clients and addresses a healthcare system's need for efficient resource delivery. To be effective, we have to prepare a more robust argument than ever, and we must convince payers, among others, that a given treatment is not just effective but worthy of investment.

While our audience has broadened, the good news is that they are increasingly using digital communications platforms. The opportunity this presents is obvious, but it also challenges healthcare communicators to learn how to navigate this medium successfully to deliver the right information, to the right people at the right time. The ability to identify online audience segments and deploy web analytics to measure online information provision is key to success.

There is no doubt that debate over healthcare provision will continue unabated, given its inherent complexity and its fundamental human relevance. The current financial crisis has only added to this complexity and propelled the urgent need for reform.

Perhaps this is healthcare's 'hour of need,' but it presents an opportunity for communicators to help deliver much needed yet hard-wrought solutions.

Jeff Smith is managing director, healthcare at Cohn & Wolfe

Views in brief

What must you consider when devising a strategy to communicate risk?

Transparency is key. If the principles that drive your decision are part of your ethical code, then they should be known. If not, you should challenge your decision. An honest and open assessment of all possible outcomes is the most credible way to manage expectations and reinforce objectivity.

Which patient group has deployed the most effective comms strategy?

Children in Need has used celebrity power, broadcast appeal, multi-channel outreach to capture the heart and imagination of the British public. It is an impressive and important achievement by a worthy cause.