

Chapter VI

E–Health Marketing

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we review key concepts, using the marketing mix framework, to identify the needs of healthcare consumers, and the tools and services that can fulfill these needs. Unlike traditional healthcare delivery, patient-centered e-health (PCEH) involves the consumer as a partner and has a number of marketing implications. A more informed understanding of PCEH will help practitioners and researchers to formulate marketing strategies that improve healthcare outcomes and are acceptable to patients.

INTRODUCTION

Over 100 million Americans use the Internet for healthcare purposes (Fox, 2006b). Consumers not only find and read information related to their health, but also purchase medications, choose their providers, and in some cases engage in virtual discussions with doctors and fellow patients.

Healthcare providers now have direct access to consumers; bringing great opportunities and responsibilities. Practitioners marketing their

services or promoting healthy lifestyles to consumers need to stay abreast of the changing needs of patients, the most current evidence base for diagnostic and treatment decision-making, and the rapidly developing technologies. They must also understand the dangers of the unregulated nature of the Internet and provide safeguards to prevent harm to patients.

In this chapter, we critically review patient-centered e-health (PCEH) marketing efforts by examining the current state of the science

and exploring real world applications. We also review social and ethical implications of the technology and provide suggestions for future opportunities.

WHAT IS E-HEALTH MARKETING?

Marketing is the study of how to optimally communicate information to consumers about a product, service, or idea (Berkowitz, 2006). Marketing theory highlights the roles of product, place, promotion and pricing, also called the *marketing mix* (Kotler & Keller, 2005). Marketing is an essential strategy to inform consumers about the availability of a product or service to satisfy their needs.

In healthcare, marketing is widely used to increase awareness and adoption of healthcare services for patients. Many physicians, dentists and other providers use marketing strategies to attract patients to their practices, and pharmaceutical companies spend billions of dollars annually in direct-to-consumer advertising, carefully crafting their marketing campaigns to increase sales of their medicines. Hospitals use marketing to inform patients about the availability of services and to direct patients to practitioners credentialed at their institution. Marketing can assist in meeting business goals of healthcare organizations, but it also can have repercussions. Recently, pharmaceutical companies have come under question for the practice of *disease mongering* (i.e., manufacturing the need for problems that consumers may not previously have been aware that they suffered) (Healy, 2006; Lexchin, 2006). In response, Web sites such as *nofreelunch.org* and *pharmedout.org* have been created to educate clinicians about the dangers of accepting pharmaceutical company gifts.

Marketing on the Internet is different from traditional offline marketing. First, the Internet has attracted a demographic group that is relatively affluent, educated, and homogeneous, although

people with more diverse characteristics are joining the online community in increasing numbers. Second, the Internet is a unique marketing medium in that computer programs can customize interactions to meet individual preferences.

Healthcare providers necessarily target PCEH to serve and retain current patients, but PCEH can also be applied to other purposes that include recruiting new patients, enhancing public relations, and providing community service. This range of functions implies many opportunities to apply marketing principles. In this chapter, our focus is to address how PCEH marketing can help patients and other consumers leverage the Internet to gain health benefits.

WHO WILL USE PCEH?

Defining a target market is a critical component of marketing. It is estimated that almost 100 million Americans have used the Internet to search for health information (Fox, 2006b). All these individuals are potential users of PCEH delivered by their healthcare provider. However, they are not currently representative of the broader population. Internet users are more educated, younger, and have higher incomes on average. More females than males use the Internet for health-related searches, and individuals with a disability or chronic disease are much less likely to use the Internet than healthier individuals (Fox, 2006a; Fox, 2007). As computer technology becomes more affordable and access to the Internet more prevalent, Internet user demographics are likely to become increasingly inclusive.

In the meantime, for PCEH to have the largest effect it must be accessible to those with the greatest need: individuals with limited means who are afflicted with chronic diseases. Marketing strategies that account for limited health and e-health literacy are likely to be key in assisting these groups to participate in PCEH, especially

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