



## A 'Dose' of Interactivity Alters Healthcare Landscape Equations

**Carol Yvette Thorney**, Senior Vice President  
Healthcare, WNS Global Services

Web-based, interactive media tools have revolutionized healthcare and the manner in which people receive and give out information on their health. Poring over 1000-plus-page medical encyclopedias to source information is today almost a legend. Interactivity and instant access are the game changers of the new healthcare landscape. Be it mega health portals such as Yahoo! Health, Revolution Health or WebMD, the change is undeniable.

According to a 2009 report released by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project and the California HealthCare Foundation, as many as 61 percent of American adults look online for healthcare information. Of this, 59 percent have done at least one of the following — read someone else's experience about health issues in a blog, Website or newsgroup; consulted reviews and rankings of hospitals, doctors and other medical facilities; signed up for updates on medical issues and listened to a Podcast on health-related topics. The report also states that 20 percent of the American adults, who browsed online for health information, have also actively contributed reviews, updates and comments.

The healthcare information landscape today allows e-patients to source information, identify doctors, schedule appointments, maintain records and share experiences. This new trend has generated a great deal of interest among healthcare companies as it gives them direct access to customer feedback and provides insight on what customers are really looking for.

### Interactive Media and the New Health Paradigm

In its January 2010 *Global Social Media Online Survey*, Forrester made an interesting observation between the Maslow hierarchy of needs (the levels being physiological, safety,

belonging, esteem and self-actualization) and what makes people share their information online. The analysis states that people become a part of online communities to fulfill the more basic need of 'safety'. People join online forums and social networks like Facebook or Twitter to seek out advice, gather experience and be re-assured about their healthcare decisions.

A new relationship is also fast developing between physicians, patients and the Web. Patients browse sites such as *PatientsLikeMe* and *Doctissimo* to check on the symptoms they are experiencing before they visit the physician. Physicians are now facing a volley of questions from over-informed patients, who have to be told most of the time that they still need medical advice on the ailment and the treatment. Social platforms such as Vitals.com allow patients to even grade their physicians! Doctors, too, have begun to enroll in virtual communities such as docboards.com to exchange information and gain access to newer insights on diseases and patient expectations.

### Healthcare Joins the Interactive Media Phenomenon

Catering to this paradigm shift in managing patient expectations, healthcare companies need to incorporate interactive media into their marketing mix. Some of the popular interactive media include blogs, microblogs, social networking, Podcasts, social sharing and forums.

Healthcare organizations are using interactive media with increasing effect to:

- **Train medical personnel:** Mayo Clinic has incorporated interactive media in a training presentation for the American Heart Association. Participants were encouraged



to tweet and contribute to the discussion, allowing presenters immediate feedback from trainees. It also promoted the use of videos and pictures on sites such as Flickr and YouTube.

- **Provide access to live procedures:** In February 2010, Henry Ford Hospital was the first to tweet a live procedure (kidney surgery to remove a cancerous tumor) from an operating room.
- **Target mainstream media:** A Middleberg Communications survey (2010) has reported that 70 percent of journalists are now on interactive media networks. Healthcare organizations can now reach out to them through blogs, forums and microblogs.
- **Offer accurate information to patients:** Given the vast amounts of information available on the net it is important to recognize that many customers may be misinformed. Interactive media can help provide accurate information on a particular procedure or medication.

### The Challenges of Employing Interactive Media

Since healthcare marketing is highly regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Division of Drug Marketing and Communications (DDMAC), most companies are still hesitant to use interactive media as the boundaries of communication remain blurred. It is important for healthcare firms to remain rooted in ethics, ensuring that they communicate the absolute truth about their products. Firms must also keep themselves informed on local laws and regulations. In Europe, for instance, communication is routed through healthcare professionals only. In USA, communication regarding certain drugs directly to consumers is permissible, while for others it is not allowed.

Until there is a definitive interactive media policy from the FDA, healthcare firms will continue to exercise a degree of caution on interactive media engagements. When working in a highly regulated market, firms must:

- Remember consumers are using interactive media whether healthcare firms are doing it or not.
- Know what can and cannot be said. Work closely with the legal team and plan campaigns after consulting them.

- Ensure that all information, including risk is clearly disclosed and does not provide misleading information.
- Outline the interactive media roadmap, strategy and measurement – decide which networks the firm will employ and ensure coordination between the various channels.
- Connect with the consumer: Remember that interactive media is driven by the inherent desire in people to connect with others. Human-interest stories and success stories enhance public goodwill towards the company.

### The Time for Integrated Interactive Media is Now

Interactive media guidance is expected during the first quarter of 2011. Healthcare companies need to chart the course for interactive media as a part of their corporate strategy, going forward. For instance, over-the-counter drugs such as Comtrax, Oprofar and Bufferin from the Novartis stable have used interactive media to increase sales. Johnson & Johnson effectively used interactive media when it recalled its Tylenol and Benadryl tablets and issued apologies to consumers.

The age of one-way advertising or endorsements from the business or media is clearly passé. Globally, people are looking forward to a dialogue rooted in trust and transparency.

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