



Picture of Health: Capturing a Market with Un-Standard Procedures

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A new condition seems to be spreading among consumers and how they gather their health information. While most still prefer to go to the mailbox than the waiting room, an increasing number are returning to doctors and nurses as one of the primary sources for their health-related information.

Consumers also are pulling back from the Internet as a preferred mode of health information, including for sensitive health information, according to a North American survey by ICOM, taken in January.

These results capture a potentially critical shift in consumer attitudes about how they receive health related information. For instance, consumers continue to prefer to get their health news from traditional mail over email, citing convenience, privacy and trustworthiness as the leading reasons why. For marketers, the resonant message resides in what is not said: Concerns about privacy could be driving consumers away from online sources.

Key results of the survey also reveal:

- Twenty-nine percent of U.S. respondents prefer to get their general health information by traditional addressed mail, down from 33 percent in 2008. In Canada, the percentage declined to 24 percent from 28 percent. The results indicate a switch to friends/family and professionals, like doctors and nurses, with US respondents indicating “other” 20% compared to 12% in 2008 and in Canada 17% compared to 14% in 2008.
- The percentage of consumers who prefer traditional mail for sensitive health rose, by 1 percent, in the U.S. and Canada, to 39 percent and 37 percent, respectively.
- Online sites appear to be the least trustworthy source of general health information. Nineteen percent of U.S. respondents said they prefer the Internet as a means for such information, down from 23 percent in 2008 but in Canada the figure nudged up – to 21 percent from 20 percent.

Examining the Results

These are compelling numbers, but they do not mean the web is becoming a wasteland for health information – 20 percent is a respectable segment.

It is simply a matter of targeting consumers in a way that assures their buy-in. When it comes to the important health category, marketers should focus less on channel and more on consumer sentiment. Remember the reasons why consumers prefer traditional mail to email: Trust, relevance, convenience and privacy. Those feelings will determine the behaviors that will lead marketers to the most effective, and profitable, outcome.

Consider that 53 percent of U.S. respondents and 56 percent of Canadian respondents said they pay closer attention to information sent by postal mail than by email. Yet while consumers do generally

prefer postal mail to email, 49 percent of Canadian and 45 percent of U.S. respondents said they are now using more email because they signed up for an e-newsletter.

This demonstrates the key role that relevance plays in channel preference, and is perhaps the most important determinant in whether information is accepted – by traditional mail, email or another channel.

Once that connection is made, a marketer can expand its touch points across all channels. Consider, for instance, that 50 percent of U.S. and 40 percent of Canadian respondents said they do not have a Facebook account. This may scare many health industry marketers away from the social media site, but if they can utilize currently trusted channels to drive consumers to a Facebook fan page (perhaps through an opt-in e-newsletter), there is significant segment growth potential.

Note that messaging is important here – social media sites might be more effective for influencing consumers than for actually selling to them.

Prognosis: Highly Treatable

But social media is just one of many information outlets. While postal mail is the most preferred source of health information, television and newspapers also rank high as most-used references for health information, after family and friends. Twenty percent of all U.S. respondents used these outlets on a weekly basis, while a slightly higher percentage of Canadians (24 percent and 23 percent, respectively) used TV and the newspaper.

Combined, these modes can formulate a remedy to re-engage and retain the consumer. But doing so means understanding their personal preferences, and paying particular attention to concerns about privacy, which are elevated in this category. Once engaged, these consumers can be thoughtfully led to other channels, where marketers can offer unfolding volumes of content, each piece tailored to its specific medium.

With a deft hand, marketers can strive to gain as much trust in the inbox as in the doctor's office. This will translate not only to healthy returns for marketers, but to more meaningful, and helpful, information for consumers.

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