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Marketing communications PR-Technologies and tools in the system of medical product promotion in Ukraine

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Abstract

The article substantiates the role of PR in the system of marketing communications, expands on the theoretical aspects of the principles, tasks and functions of public relations in the formation and development of harmonious and mutually favourable relations with all market actors, considers the features and advantages of certain PR-technologies and tools in promoting Rx-medical products on the market that are expedient to be applied by pharmaceutical enterprises. Drawing on official printed sources and the Internet publications, the author has exemplified the practical application and realization of certain public relations events organized by Ukrainian and international pharmaceutical companies.

Keywords: Marketing communications, public relations, medical products, promotion, pharmaceutical companies, pharmaceutical market

1. Introduction

The current terms of the market development are characterized by a cutthroat competition in the communicative space, the constant effort of manufacturing and commercial enterprises to win the consciousness of the public, a high interactivity of society, a rapid information aging, and an increase in the requirements for the social and ethic character of the company activities. In this regard, the issue of establishing and maintaining relations with the public has assumed scientific interest and practical value which causes an increase in the importance of marketing communication activities of pharmaceutical enterprises and public relations as a component of the above activities [2]. The indisputable factor of the public relations intensive development in Ukraine is internationalization and globalization of the main society life areas. The pharmaceutical companies dominating modern world markets have introduced Ukraine to their commodities, technologies and business as well as to highly competitive management methods. Each and every enterprise has faced the necessity for systematic research, information, coordinating, influential, and regulatory actions that aim to establish amicable relations with the public and its individual groups [1, 3, 14].

The aim of this work is to classify the marketing communications PR-technologies and tools and substantiate their special features in promoting medical products in the pharmaceutical sector of the health care industry.

2. Materials and Methods of the Research

The basis of the research was Ukrainian and foreign scientific literature on the practical application of the public relations technologies and tools as a component of marketing communications in promoting medical products as well as the Internet resources of the official web-sites of pharmaceutical companies. The methods of content analysis, monitoring, system analysis, logical generalization, etc. have been applied in the course of the research.

3. Results and Discussion

Public relations is an independent function of management aimed to establish and maintain the communications between an organization and the public. It is a system of noncommercial relations with public organizations, an impact on public opinion through mass media and influence thereon in order to shape a business-like image, increase and intensify popularity.

The public relations objective is considered to be the establishment of bilateral communication in order to find common ideas or interests and arrive at an understanding based on truth, knowledge and complete awareness.

According to PR, the paramount objective of pharmaceutical and pharmacy enterprise activities is to provide population with fine and accessible medical products and medical ware

as a means of meeting the public needs for actions aimed to maintain and repair health.

In order to meet the above objective PR-specialists are to face a number of challenges including:

- studying the consumer opinions and shape their enterprise-friendly attitudes;
- meeting the need for and maintaining two-way communication with mass media; clients; suppliers of raw materials, accessories, and technologies; financial establishments, investment companies and other representatives of the market infrastructure;
- improving the internal social and psychological atmosphere;
- establishing social partnership between the enterprise administration and its personnel;
- promoting the enterprise products and achievements;
- building and maintaining the enterprise strong reputation, publicity and positive image.

The efficient practical application of public relations methods and procedures is impossible without clear knowledge of public relations principles, objectives and functions as well as other theoretical aspects of establishing and developing harmonious and favourable relations with all market actors.

Regularity, complexity, expeditiousness, continuity, objectivity, legality, and efficiency are among the general concepts of public relations establishment and maintenance.

Regularity in PR-activities of pharmaceutical enterprises includes forecasting tendencies in the public opinion change, a long- and short-term planning of various events and programs for communications development. For this purpose, all plans for public relations establishment and maintenance are to be economically sound, well-resourced and timed to coincide with the organization of high-profile events.

Complexity in public relations communications means working out and organizing major PR-events from the perspective of the interests of all the public categories and groups.

Expeditiousness in organizing public relations events requires specialists to be sensitive to the rapid changes in public opinion that are related to the pharmaceutical enterprise activities. A prompt response to the development of the situation may reduce the likelihood of negative consequences and prevent complications in relations with certain public

groups.

Continuity in PR-activities requires ensuring a permanent influence on certain information consumers as well as on public opinion on the whole. The non-stop flow of news spread by pharmaceutical enterprises is expedient to follow up with regular PR-events such as conferences, exhibitions, presentations, scientific seminars, etc.

The objectivity of PR-events is ensured by the use of reliable and exact information, the ability of specialists to do an unbiased analysis of the data received, the willingness to admit to making errors, an ability to quickly react to biased publications and statements about the enterprise activities, skills in defending the correct point of view and achieving the necessary refutations.

Legality in the pharmaceutical enterprise PR-activities is to be ensured in the acquisition, processing, and distribution of information. The above principle realization involves the use of legitimate methods only and is quite important for planning and organization of special PR-events and promotional campaigns.

Efficiency in the pharmaceutical enterprise PR-activities is evidenced by the change of certain economic indicators that are to exceed the cost of organization of and carrying out certain events and programs ensuring public relations activities [2, 5].

The PR broad-spectrum activities involve carrying out a range of functions necessary to achieve the stated objectives and corresponding tasks (Table. 1) [6, 10, 11, 17].

PR includes a number of individual sub-functions [18, 19] targeted at the organization of similar PR-event groups:

- The information sub-function aims to inform about the enterprise activities, its resources, products, and services;
- the barrier sub-function serves to legally impede the promotion and marketing of the competitor enterprise products;
- The pre-promotion sub-function ensures the conditions and situations that strengthen the enterprise promotion;
- The reminding sub-function aims to popularize the enterprise trade marks, its image, and activities, etc.

The practical realization of the PR sub-functions at a pharmaceutical enterprise requires the performance of a number of typical activities: information, prestige, barrier, reminding, etc.

Table 1: The Public Relations Functions

| The Public Relations Functions | Meaning |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Analytical and prognostic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • examining the target audience; • analyzing the possible situations while working out marketing activities; • assessing public opinion; • obtaining analytical data to make effective management decisions, etc. |
| Organizational and technological | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organizing PR-campaigns, conferences, exhibitions, and venues with mass media coverage, etc. |
| Information and communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • disseminating among the public information about the enterprise activities; • shaping corporate identity; • developing corporate culture and personnel loyalty; • introducing ethic standards in the enterprise activities, etc. |
| Consulting and methodological | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working out cooperation and social partnership conceptual models, PR programs, events, and campaigns, etc. |

The information sub-function

- Organizing periodic events and venues with mass media coverage to discuss the problems of the enterprise activities;
- Providing mass media with information statements,

press-releases, etc.;

- Creating TV- and video-films, TV- and radio-commentaries;
- Systematizing newspaper and magazine reports, video-copies of telecasts with the enterprise reviews.

The prestige sub-function

- Publishing in the open press of annual financial reports on the enterprise activities, their dissemination through the Internet and among the shareholders;
- Organizing presentations, anniversaries;
- Charity.

The barrier sub-function

- Informing the public in a professional way that the enterprise's own products lack the shortcomings typical of the competitors' products;
- Monitoring competitors against using the brands, advertising messages, etc. similar to those used by the enterprise itself.

The sub-function of advertising the enterprise and its business strategy

- Inviting the enterprise representatives to participate in conferences and scientific seminars for the industry specialists, professional and public organizations;
- Shaping the public opinion favourable for the enterprise.

The reminding sub-function

- Organizing photo-exhibitions featuring the enterprise activities;
- Organizing Doors Open Days;
- Promoting the enterprise production and commercial achievements.

The sub-function of influencing legislative and state administration agencies

- Promoting the enterprise representatives as candidates to state authorities (lobby formation);
- Inviting the heads of the corresponding authorities to participate in the special events organized by the enterprise ^[10].

The practical realization of PR functions, sub-functions and typical activities is a powerful tool for handling the tasks of the enterprise marketing communications. The practical application of public relations skills enables pharmaceutical and pharmacy enterprises to competently realize the strategic functions of the organization management.

The keen interest of the pharmaceutical sector of the health care industry in PR can be attributed to the social importance of the medical product market, the mass target audience either of which is concerned about their own health as well as to the impediment to the promotion of medical products especially of those prescription ones by means of open mass advertising caused by numerous legal restrictions.

The application of various PR-tools enables the pharmaceutical industry to handle certain strategic tasks:

- Establishing direct and favourable communicative relations between the manufacturing enterprise and its key target audience, i.e. distributors, pharmacies, doctors, and consumers;
- Shaping public opinion favourable for a certain marketed medical product by focusing attention on the issues of the disease it is meant to treat and increasing the awareness of consumers of its treatment methods;
- Conditioning the consumers' loyalty to the manufacturing enterprise as a source of reliable and complete information about a certain disease and medical

product, etc.

The program for promotion of medical products involves the application of various PR-technologies and tools aimed to establish long-term constructive relations. The medical product being a prescription or over-the-counter one determines the choice of PR-tools and methods and the scale of promotional activities.

The key PR-technologies and tools that can be applied by pharmaceutical enterprises while promoting Rx-medical products are represented in Figure 1.

Social events are PR-events that aim to both promote the sale of medical products and enhance the positive image of the enterprise in the market. They help pharmaceutical manufacturing enterprises hold themselves as health care agents. The various social patient support programs currently run include support programs for patients with grave diseases; company medical product supply programs for patients, information and methodological literature dissemination programs. Medical product producers support health-improving programs for children in sanatoriums and sports camps, provide technical and information support services at schools for doctors, participate in equipping medical treatment and preventive care institutions. With the aim of popularization of medical products pharmaceutical enterprises can:

- Assist doctors of certain specialties to participate in theme conferences and seminars both in Ukraine and elsewhere to exchange experience in the administration of medical products in clinical practice;
- Prepare information materials, lectures for patients, methodological recommendations for doctors as to the use of the company products;
- Publish specialized periodic newspapers and magazines, bulletins;
- Sponsor the publication of medical textbooks, the organization of sports competitions and contest;
- Organize regular meetings with doctors to introduce the specialists to certain medical products and the peculiarities of their administration, etc.

Thus, one of the global pharmaceutical companies "Boehringer Ingelheim" has been marketing its medical products in Ukraine for over 20 years already. The results of the company activities that nowadays can be seen in many medical industries – cardiology, pulmonology, neurology, immunology, endocrinology, etc. – are attributed not only to the development and practical application of innovative medical products. The company "Boehringer Ingelheim" is well known among doctors, patients and organizers of health care services for their participation in a number of social projects such as education programs for doctors "School of the Cardiologist", "School of the Pulmonologist", "School of the Gastroenterologist", "School of the Endocrinologist", etc.; the launch of a chain of free diagnostic cabinets for patients with respiratory diseases within the framework of the program "The Healthy Lungs of Ukraine"; providing newborn babies with the HIV infection prevention medical product Viramun®, as well as for launching grant programs for medical students. At one time, the company's management team initiated in Ukraine a new social project "Boehringer Ingelheim" for AH patients" that made possible a more than 30 per cent decrease in the price of Micardis®, an original

Angiotension II Receptor Blocker (ARB) Telmisartan for anti-hypertension therapy^[15].

A well-prepared media campaign is a key tool used in pharmaceutical PR. While promoting a medical product, it is expedient to draw the public attention to the issues of the disease it is meant for, and not to the disease itself. A PR-campaign to become more topical, informative, and trustworthy it should involve well-known doctors, pharmacutists, health care sector management, and other opinion leaders whose interviews have a good public response and heighten interest in the marketed medical product.

Sponsorship targeted at public opinion shaping is one of the PR-tools widespread in Ukraine. Sponsorship of various projects helps shape the positive image of pharmaceutical companies, increase the consumers' trust in the manufacturing company medical products, establish positive associations, disseminate information about the company and its products, etc. Medicine and health care, education and science, environmental protection, sport, and culture are the core areas of sponsorship activities of pharmaceutical enterprises. Sponsorship of pharmaceutical enterprises in social sphere involves assistance to medical and educational establishments, underprivileged groups of medical product consumers – disabled people, children in orphan homes, low-income retirees, mothers with many children; granting nominal scholarships to medical and pharmaceutical students; financing environmental protection projects.

The social activity and humanitarian project support constitutes an integral part of the global pharmaceutical company “Novo Nordisk” corporate philosophy. The representative offices of the company in more than 180 countries worldwide run a long-term project to hold annual events to support underprivileged citizens. At one time, the employees of the Ukrainian representative office of the company “Novo Nordisk” offered sponsorship to the specialized infant home “Our Children”. The staff of the Ukrainian representative office gave up a New Year corporate party and New Year gifts from the head office in order to organize a party for the children and transfer the saved amount into the infant home account which enabled the establishment to purchase medical equipment, scales, auxanometers, and other things necessary for the children. In addition, the concerned employees of the representative office initiated a fund-raising to purchase gifts and sweets for the children to enjoy on Saint Nicholas' Day^[13].

Ukrainian pharmaceutical companies also get actively involved in sponsorship of various PR-projects and events. Thus, the pharmaceutical company “Zdorovya” actively and regularly renders sponsor support to ICP children, social projects, events for children, sports competitions such as freestyle wrestling tournaments, etc.^[7].

The Internet is an effective PR-tool for promoting and marketing medical products. Pharmaceutical enterprises use web-sites to provide complete and visual information about medical products in understandable terms. Internet-resources enable specialist to get acquainted with the company new medical products, to exchange experience with other doctors, to be sure to obtain information about the medical product pharmacological properties, therapeutic indications, contra-indications, and side effects. The Internet space makes it possible to put up a private web-site on a certain medical problem, to hold a press-conference with well-known opinion leaders. The advantage of the above PR-event is an opportunity to discuss various health problems, to ask

specialists questions anonymously and without having to voice ‘touchy’ issues. The interactive, flexible, and effective nature of the above technology as well as its efficiency, information richness is also worth noting. Nowadays, the Internet offers health care specialists a great variety of interesting resources. Medical Internet resources cover gastroenterological, otorhinolaryngological, cardiological, and infectious diseases, antibacterial therapy, and other issues. On-line communications enable doctors to get in contact with specialists both in Ukraine and elsewhere. The web-site materials fully comply with the basic principles of evidence-based medicine, contain references to the original information sources, and are contributed by key Ukrainian and foreign scientists. All the information presented on theme-based web-sites is generally accessible and free. Useful to health care specialists may be the Internet resources presented in a Table. 2.

Setting up public organizations, funds, associations, societies for patient support, etc. is another demanding and very interesting PR-tool for promoting prescription medical products. It is advantageous since such organizations can enlist the cooperation of patients, doctors and journalists. Apart from educative and propaganda activities, such organizations can hold press-conferences, seminars, and meetings with opinion leaders. The low-budget and the highest possible social orientation of such PR-tool are among its advantages. On the one hand, the manufacturing company renders real help to its current and potential consumers; while on the other hand, the company promotes its medical product as number one among analogs.

Thus, the All-Ukrainian Celiacia Society has been formed to draw attention of the general public to the problems of the patients with this pathology – a chronic disease that occurs in genetically predispositioned people in response to complete food intolerance of gluten found in some grains such as wheat, barley, rye, and oat. The All-Ukrainian Celiacia Society aims to help the medical public effectively diagnose and treat this pathology since the importance of the above issues is being somewhat belittled in Ukraine. The Society conducts its activities in medical and social areas. Within the framework of the medical area, the Society holds seminars and special schools for physicians and related specialists – allergologists, dermatologists, rheumatologists, and endocrinologists. Within the framework of the social area, the Society specialists give talks and publish materials on celiacia in scientific and popular editions. Together with the company SOLWAY, an importer of special gluten-free foodstuffs for celiacia patients, the All-Ukrainian Celiacia Society organizes special Schools for patients to unite people, teach them how to live with the disease and encourage them to join efforts against their common problem^[16].

A number of international funds – “Diabetes Mellitus”, “Haemophilia” – operate under the patronage of the pharmaceutical company “Novo Nordisk”. They aim to assist the developing countries in facing the various disease-related issues. The funds annually finance numerous social projects worldwide, investing considerable amounts in public health^[13].

In an effort to promote medical products, pharmaceutical enterprises open issue-oriented help lines that maintain a continuous feed-back with consumers thus increasing the consumers' trust in the company and its products and contributing to its gaining in the marketed medical product sales. Help lines enable companies to meet the consumer's

need for domiciliary professional medical advice, to get prompt feed-back, to shape the positive image of the medical product and its producer with the consumer. The hi-tech equipment and specially trained staff, required to organize and run such help lines, can be provided by specialized call-centers.

The highly-qualified urologists of the free help line “The New Formula of Man’s Confidence” organized in Ukraine within the framework of the educational program on erectile dysfunction provide patients with information about the disease and offer psychological support [4].

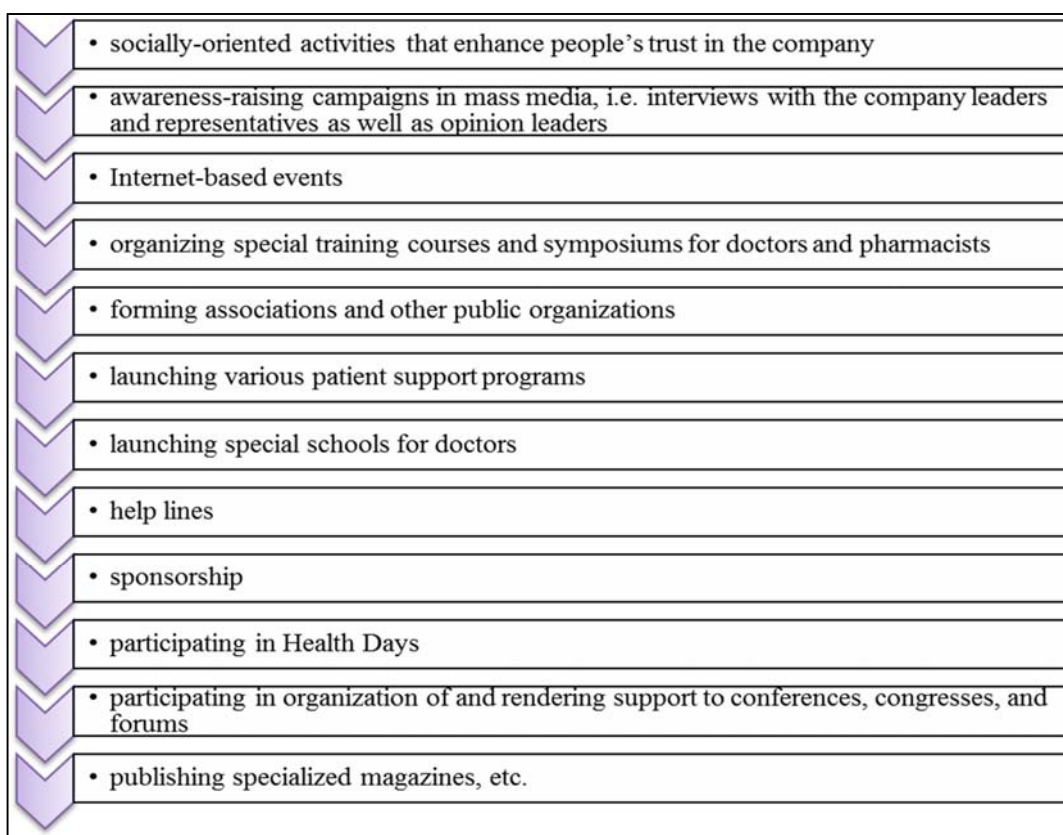
Furthermore, a national help line on replacement supporting therapy within the framework of the program “Investments for Resisting Tuberculosis and HIV” has been set up in Ukraine [8].

The participation of pharmaceutical producers in organizing Health Days is of major social importance. Within the framework of the above PR-event pharmaceutical companies

can hold scientific seminars and conferences to enable specialists to exchange experience in prevention and treatment of certain diseases with specific medical products. The Health Day event is a means to help doctors join efforts and provide the general public with important information.

On May, 29, the Fund of World Gastroenterology Organization (WGO) supported by 103 member organizations from 50 countries all over the world holds an annual World Digestive Health Day. This PR-event aims to focus public attention on the growing number of digestive disorder issues and work out the means to face them. In 2008, the World Digestive Health Day was held in Ukraine. It offered a variety of events such as seminars, conferences, and social campaigns with mass media coverage [9].

There exist other effective communication PR-technologies and instruments for promoting and marketing medical products that don’t involve direct advertising [12].



Source: The results of the author’s content analysis of Ukrainian and foreign scientific literature.

Fig 1: PR-technologies and tools applied to promote the Rx-medical products

Table 2: Medical and Health Care Internet Resources (fragment)

| The Internet Resource Name | The Resource Access Mode |
|---|---|
| The Ukrainian Medical Portal “The World Medicine”. | http://msvitu.com/pages/home.php |
| The specialized Internet-navigator “Consilium Medicum” that posts an Internet directory and news feeds for medical professionals, a library of medical magazines published by “Media Medica”. | http://www.consilium-medicum.com |
| The specialized online media for medical and pharmacy specialists “Medicine and Pharmacy News”. | http://www.mif-ua.com/ |
| The medical newspaper “The Health of Ukraine” that publishes articles by key Ukrainian scientists, topical interviews, scientific and practical conference, congress and convention reviews. | http://www.health-ua.com |
| “Doctor Komarovskiy” web-blog on child health. | http://www.komarovskiy.net/blog |
| All-Ukraine health portal created to promote healthy lifestyle that posts articles and video-materials on health care, literature, health-improving programs. | http://vitaport.com.ua |
| The scientific and practical general medical journal “Ukrainian Medical Journal” that covers key issues of clinical practice. | http://www.umj.com.ua |

Source: The results of the author’s monitoring of the Internet services.

4. Conclusions

The role of public relations as a component of marketing communications in the pharmaceutical enterprise activities has been substantiated.

The theoretical aspects of the principles and functions of public relations in the formation and development of harmonious and mutually favourable relations with all market actors have been expanded on.

The features and advantages of certain PR-technologies and tools in promoting prescription medical products on the market that are expedient to be applied by pharmaceutical enterprises have been considered.

Practical application of certain PR-tools by Ukrainian and international pharmaceutical organizations has been exemplified.

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