

HFMA Bulletin

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Three challenges for natural health products in the new decade

Given the speed of change in health and wellness, a trends piece is definitely high risk! So, this is not a prediction, but an attempt to highlight three potentially important things for the new decade.

1. Trust.

Edelman's current Global Trust Barometer highlights that despite lots to be positive about, people's trust in key institutions – including business – is declining. The health and wellness sector is no different. In fact, you could argue we potentially face more challenges given the nature of the claims and benefits we market and the available (usable) data to support them.

This needs to be tackled head-on. We must build on the existing strengths of the best in the industry – with honesty, authenticity and customer focus – and better communicate why our products have value. This requires more consumer understanding and a commitment to transparency.

2. Information, experts and referrals

Labels like millennials and Gen Zs are too simplistic, but it is clear that their needs and behaviour will change our future marketing approach. Central to this is that the digital generation researches brands/products online and relies on word of mouth recommendation – from trusted sources – more systematically than any previous group.

The marketing challenge is to ensure that we have the right product in the right place with the right information at the right time. It starts with building an authentic brand but will be delivered through our approach to supporting the customer's buying journey with relevant and engaging information delivered when it is needed. We need to work together with our expert community to ensure they have influence and are fully integrated into the journey.

This is hard and requires sophisticated digital skills and an understanding of influence/word of mouth, but given these consumers are highly engaged with their health and wellness, a failure to do this will have consequences.

3. Better data and user experiences

At the risk of repetition, this goes right to the heart of the previous points on building trust and credible sources of information. To extend the penetration and usage of the great products our industry produces, we need to make the benefits we deliver easier to buy.

I learned my trade in OTC medicines, a regulated world with a proven problem solution communications model. A market where generic ingredients are differentiated by branding/marketing and product claims that build trust – all underwritten by the experts (pharmacists *et al*) who can influence product choice.

My proposal is not to try and replicate this – it has its own shortcomings – but a model based on evidence/information and the magnification of the genuinely positive consumer experiences we deliver, all underpinned by expert recommendation, is essential to put wellness at the heart of the future of healthcare. To do this we must offer consumers more meaningful claims and reasons to believe. As an example, at Comvita we have created a simple Triple Test Guarantee for our manuka honey to explain that not all products are the same and the way they are produced has an impact on quality and effectiveness. This approach requires the confidence to invest in data and an environment that allows brands that do invest in data to protect and commercialize it.

Secondly, we must have the confidence to measure our consumers' usage experiences in a more robust, outcomes-led way, to demonstrate the tangible value – physical and emotional – which people get from committing to wellness regimes. This is key to move us from niche to mainstream.

Conclusion

Brands that can best define and deliver their source of credibility, that have the digital marketing skills to integrate themselves into the consumer buying journey, and that invest in evidence which demonstrates the positive experiences of their users – they will be the winners. These three future-facing ambitions are central to our collective ability to engage with the vast numbers of people searching for better, simpler solutions to support their health and wellness.

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