



Powerful Healthcare Marketing Communications Solutions

Hair, Medicine and You: The Power Of Emotional Branding

At times it can seem as though the airwaves (especially late at night) are saturated with commercials touting the latest cure for hair loss. Some of the most ubiquitous advertisements are for hair transplant surgery. Many are familiar with the Hair Club For Men's famous tagline: "I'm not just the president, I'm also a client." (Incidentally, the company is now named "Hairclub" to indicate its wider focus on the hair restoration needs of men, women and children.)

Hair transplantation surgery is a controversial business. In 1996, Bosley Medical Group settled a lawsuit leveled against it by the district attorney of Los Angeles for nearly \$650,000. The attorney general alleged that the company had engaged in "dishonest and harmful advertising" about its services. Specifically, the attorney general said that before and after photos of hair restoration surgery were misleading and that the amount of pain the procedures caused was minimized.

Despite these allegations, Bosley Medical Group continued to attract clients. And, in August 2001, the firm was sold to the Aderans Group, a Japanese wig manufacturer, for \$45 million.

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How can we explain consumers' continued uptake of hair transplant surgery, despite the risks and uncertain results associated with the procedure? The success of the hair restoration business can be partially attributed to the power of emotional branding.

Continue reading for an overview of emotional branding, an analysis of how it drives hair replacement surgery sales and how pharmaceutical companies have employed it in product advertising. The final section provides guidance on how you can utilize emotional branding to boost uptake of your products and services.

Emotional Branding: What Is It?

Emotional branding refers to marketing communications activities that seek to connect a brand to specific consumer feelings and emotions. Marketing expert Marc Gobe has suggested that successful emotional branding "brings a new level of credibility and personality to a brand by connecting powerfully with people at a personal and holistic level." Gobe cites Ben & Jerry's, Nike and MTV as a few of the brands that have successfully identified their customers' most basic needs and moved to satisfy them.

Emotional Branding and Hair Replacement Surgery

Drs. James Harris and Emmanuel Marritt, authors of "The Hair Replacement Revolution," have asserted that men unconsciously associate hair loss with death. Specifically: "Loss of hair = Loss of youth = Inevitable aging = Death."

The powerful emotions associated with hair loss are significant drivers of behavior. Hair replacement surgery marketers have learned to leverage these emotions. Their advertisements suggest that hair restoration surgery is a safe, highly effective procedure that can forestall death. This brand of emotional marketing speaks to the most basic of human desires: long life and prolonged physical attractiveness.

The emotional branding associated with hair transplant surgery has driven sales of procedures despite their expense, uncertain results and safety concerns. It appears that the procedure's ability to mask the appearance of aging is enough to convince people to undergo it – in spite of the risks.

Emotional Branding and the Pharmaceutical Industry

While the hair transplant industry has successfully utilized the power of emotional branding, pharmaceutical companies have had mixed results with this marketing tactic.

Traditionally, pharmaceutical marketers have sought to differentiate medications according to their functional attributes. For example, Kos Pharmaceuticals has differentiated its cholesterol medication, Niaspan, by focusing on the fact that it significantly raises "good" or HDL cholesterol. Other cholesterol medications like Lipitor primarily lower "bad" or LDL cholesterol.

Since 1997, pharmaceutical companies have increasingly used DTC (direct-to-consumer) advertising to tout the emotional benefits of their medications to patients. Some of these benefits include increased vitality and mobility (anti-pain medication Vioxx), freedom (allergy medication Claritin) and empowerment (acne medication Differin).

The pharmaceutical industry has been roundly criticized for its advertising efforts. Critics have suggested that DTC advertisements have boosted sales of expensive drugs. In addition, they have noted that some heavily advertised medications have been proven unsafe. Commercials for Vioxx, which Merck removed from the market in 2004, have been cited as an especially egregious example of irresponsible pharmaceutical marketing.

Pharmaceutical marketers have responded to calls for more responsible DTC advertising. In August 2005, the Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers Association (PhRMA) announced new industry guidelines. A key objective of the recommendations is to educate patients more effectively about the benefits and risks of medications.

These developments have prompted significant changes in the tone and tenor of recent pharmaceutical advertisements. In general, advertisements have begun to feature physicians and other health care professionals more prominently. In addition, some commercials have focused more on increasing consumer awareness of a disease state than promoting a specific product.

This adjustment in advertising strategy can be viewed as another form of emotional branding. With the headlines filled with news about product withdrawals and lawsuits, the industry has concluded that people want reassurance. The primary emotion that the new advertisements convey is security. Manufacturers want people to feel comfortable about taking a medication. One way to do this is to ensure that information about the risks and benefits of medications is clearly communicated.

Emotional Branding and You

Organizations of all types can benefit from emotional branding. The more people associate a product or service with a positive emotion, the more willing they will be to rely on it. For example, after the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, the American Red Cross received the vast majority of donations. People may have felt secure supporting the Red Cross's efforts because they trusted it. They believed that the organization would deliver what it promised.

However, recent developments indicate that the Red Cross's brand reputation is at serious risk. In December 2005, Congress began investigating allegations that the organization was slow to respond to Katrina and provided uneven service -- especially to African Americans. It will be critical for the Red Cross to quickly address the concerns of its constituents and Congress to maintain its position as one of America's preeminent service organizations.

Following are some ways to strengthen the “emotional quotient” of a brand and reap the benefits of emotional branding.

* **Focus On The Customer:** Customers respond well to brands that establish partnerships based on mutual respect. Organizations should respect customers’ boundaries and respond to their needs.

* **Fulfill The Customer’s Desires:** Try to associate your product or service with a customer’s desires rather than needs. For example, a customer needs a car to get from point A to point B. However, they may *desire* a car that will make them feel different, flattered or important. To be more successful, fulfill your customers’ desires.

* **Be Trustworthy:** Deliver on your brand promise: Be what you say, and say what you mean. This builds trust and trust drives uptake.

* **Build A Relationship:** Customers like to feel that those they are dealing with care and respond to their needs and desires – both stated and unstated.

Emotional branding is a powerful and useful tool. When applied correctly, it can boost uptake of your products and services and help you establish a stronger bond with your customers.