

Patient education and brand affinity: a symbiotic relationship

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My 20 years in the South African and global healthcare industries have taught me that successful marketing should move beyond branding and sales. Ultimately, it should serve patients, primarily keeping their needs in mind.



Source: Supplied. Rennie Naidoo, the head of Marketing and Communications at Roche Diagnostics.

Symbiosis from supplier to end-user naturally leads to better brand affinity at every level of the supply chain. And purpose-driven marketing is both more successful and serves patients better.

Patient self-management education is the driving force behind this approach. In our current context, we can empower patients to take control of their health management, understand their conditions and utilise digital health products to build a streamlined relationship with their healthcare providers. Fewer complications in the patient's life mean more quality years with their families and greater success for the medical practitioners in the middle.

While my role is in marketing, beyond the business-to-business communication that is our immediate role, a human element is essential to growing any healthcare brand. Marketing should not be about the product or brand per se. The patient-centric approach should always be the centre of our universe. If you really understand the impact of a condition or risk factor and you want to make a difference to individuals, it will automatically build sustainability for your brand.

Patients need to understand their diseases and what it does to their bodies. Healthcare providers can help them recognise the value in taking care of themselves and learn how to self-manage their conditions. Successful treatment is assisted when patients practise proper self-management.

This was evident when I once led a business unit that specialised in haemophilia with inhibitors – a very rare genetic condition. At the time, the cost of the particular treatment that was available was extremely prohibitive – probably more expensive than gold per gram. We were faced with several challenges in helping patients get access to treatment.

Unfortunately, it's rarely wealthy families that are affected by hereditary diseases like haemophilia. It is often the poorest of the poor. To address the care gap, we elected to collaborate with the Haemophilia Foundation, through investment and support in educational meetings and programmes. We also collaborated with treatment centres to rehabilitate physiotherapy facilities.

Patients would often go without treatment because they wouldn't have funds to travel to the hospital. This is where we partnered with the Foundation to step in to assist with money travel grants for patients to get to hospitals for treatment. We found that access to the treatment grew considerably because of committed investment in patients and we gained support – both from healthcare providers and end-users because we were perceived as an organisation that put purpose before profit. This case study was eye-opening. It served as solid proof that investment in patient outcomes pays off.

A patient-centric focus yields results

Our marketing efforts link all stakeholders to the patient. Each cog in the wheel needs to invest in human wellbeing for a business transaction to be successful. There are many links in the chain; for example, when you work in diagnostics, you collaborate with NGOs, health departments, doctors and healthcare organisations, all influencing outcomes for patients.

We are all effectively engaged in business-to-business interaction on some level, so it is easy to forget the human life at the end of the chain. But it is essential to move beyond our blinkers and ensure that everyone who is a part of the healthcare journey adds value that will trickle down to patients. At the end of it all, marketing is an area where you can truly roll up your sleeves and design and implement programmes that help people.

Investing in the patient is still an investment in your brand. If you can already visualise the benefit for the patient at the beginning of the chain, it trickles down, creating a sustainable marketing strategy that serves multiple purposes. If you can't visualise the benefits and all the dimensions in play, your strategy is simply not sustainable.

Together, we can break down barriers and increase the adoption of solutions across Africa and the world. It is our job – both as marketers and as healthcare providers – to match unmet needs to solutions. Let's use our status and investment power to inform meaningful solutions for patients.

Putting the patient at the centre of your healthcare business-to-business environment just makes better sense. When you start with a focus on the patient and you share this value with your business-to-business partners, it is a sure recipe for success.

As author and neuroscientist, Dr Abhijit Naskar said: "Your warmth has more healing power upon the patient than all the medical tools in the world.

Perhaps this is a sentiment we should try to remember when we go to work every day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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