

Credibility lies at the heart of healthcare PR

By Andrea Doyle

After being pulled on charges that it misled the public by using a celebrity doctor endorser who's never practiced medicine, ads for Lipitor, Pfizer's cholesterol fighter, are back. They now feature John Erlendson, a non-celebrity talent agent who tells viewers he started taking Lipitor last year after surviving a heart attack.

The commercials, titled "Never Thought," shows Erlendson bicycling near a river and picnicking with his family while an announcer promotes Lipitor's safety and effectiveness. "I trust my heart to Lipitor," he says in the ad. Erlendson says his first heart attack was a "wake-up call" that prompted him to consult with his doctor.

The Pfizer brouhaha started when it was revealed that artificial heart inventor Dr. Robert Jarvik (who endorsed Lipitor and appeared to be giving medical advice in the ads) never completed licensing requirements to practice medicine. Pfizer, the world's biggest drug maker, pulled the ads as members of Congress became interested in whether or not these ads were misleading the public into believing that Dr. Jarvik was qualified to offer medical advice. To make matters worse, the ad showed Dr. Jarvik sculling at Lake Crescent near Port Angeles, Wash. It was reported in *The New York Times* that Dr. Jarvik does not row and that a Seattle rowing enthusiast and professional photographer, Dennis Williams, had served as a stunt double in the ad.

The Pfizer-Dr. Jarvik scenario demonstrates the importance of honesty, transparency, integrity, and credibility when it comes to healthcare marketing. Trust is of the paramount when it comes to the healthcare industry.

Celebrities enhance

When it comes to healthcare marketing, tapping into celebrities is nothing new. Take the Partnership for Prescription Assistance, (PPA) a patient assistance program clearinghouse that turned to Montel Williams, an Emmy-winning syndicated talk show host, author, and motivational speaker to be their national spokesman. Since then, the PPA has matched more than 1.2 million Americans to public and private patient assistance programs that may provide them with free or nearly free medicines. A prominent feature of the PPA's nationwide effort is the "Help is Here Express" — two buses that crisscross the country, stopping in hundreds of towns and cities to educate uninsured and underinsured patients about drug assistance pro-

grams. Efforts are made to match patients with programs that appear to meet their needs.

Billy Tauzin, President and CEO of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, said the naming of Williams as national PPA spokesman gives the effort "an articulate, compassionate advocate" whose views are well-respected. "Montel has embraced our goal of reaching as many uninsured, under-insured and low-income Americans as possible in what is going to be a continuing, long-term effort to assist people who need a helping hand."

Celebrities are a great tool for enhancing a multi-faceted campaign. However, communicators must ensure that the celebrity doesn't become the entire campaign. "Notable personalities can be very valuable assets in the right situations," says Jennifer Gottlieb, Director of East Coast Operations and Managing Director of the New York office for WeissComm Partners, a healthcare agency that specializes in the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries. "They can have a very particular role if they are suffering from a condition, are an expert in the field, or are an active caregiver for someone in the family. They have to be very committed to the cause. It must be a robust campaign that is education driven and the celebrity will just be an enhancement to that campaign."

Transparency is key

"People are more skeptical than ever now," says Paul Mahoney, Senior Vice President of Capstrat, a strategic communications firm based in Raleigh, NC. People are turning in droves to the Internet for healthcare and medical advice. Although there's no problem getting information, the problem arises when it comes to filtering out the unsubstantiated from the credible.

Mahoney recommends becoming a credible resource on the subject as a whole, not just the product you are publicizing. "Provide information that is genuine and of real value to people," he says.

Mahoney has helped plan "disease days," supplying certified physicians to answer questions and disseminate information. "These forums give people good information and leave them with a favorable impression of the brand," he adds.

In the current environment, Mahoney says it's best to work collaboratively. "The healthcare industry is very technical, very regulated which has a lot of bearing on how you communicate. It's a very complex industry that is political as well. There is a lot of turf you have to think about," explains Mahoney.

Capstrat has had much success with finding credible partners like academic research centers or consulting firms for its clients. For instance, Capstrat is talking with the Wharton School of Business about research related to measuring the cost of managing healthcare in a workplace setting. They have advised Wharton about where they think more research could inform pressing business decisions, like whether or not taking a more active role in employee health makes business sense.

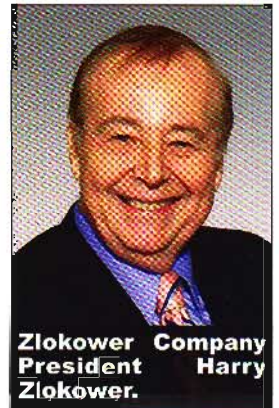
"By improving such metrics, it helps clients explain more clearly the value of what they are trying to do," said Mahoney. "Metrics help qualitatively and they give a case credibility.

A business-academic arrangement is a win-win for all parties. The key to these arrangements is being very transparent about what corporations are doing so that the independence of the research remains unquestionable."

Stamp out controversy

APCO Worldwide, a public affairs and strategic communications firm, was hired to help launch a new product, Alzheimer's Mirror, the world's first direct-to-consumer Alzheimer's disease risk evaluation test.

Although the service was being launched in March of 2008, APCO was hired by Philadelphia-based Smart Genetics in December of 2007. Given that genetic testing industry was emerging as a hot-button issue, APCO worked with Smart Genetics to identify — and craft responses to — each of the potential controversial areas, such as patient confidentiality and scientific integrity, explains Richard James, an APCO Vice



**Zlokower Company
President Harry
Zlokower.**



**Jennifer Gottlieb,
Managing Director
of WeissComm's
New York office.**

▶ Continued on next page

President.

For weeks before the product was introduced, APCO educated the press about Alzheimer's Mirror. When the service went live, *USA Today* ran a front-page story with hundreds of media outlets following in its wake. The CBS Evening News with Katie Couric did a substantial story related to the Alzheimer's Mirror as did "The Today Show," *AARP Bulletin*, *Neurology Today*, *Parade Magazine* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

"News media interest in Alzheimer's Mirror grew quickly," explains James.



APCO VP Richard James.



Capstrat's Senior Vice President Paul Mahoney.

Alzheimer's Mirror."

Not only has APCO undertaken a traditional media relations campaign for the product, but it has also arranged for company CEO Julian Awad to speak at medical conferences across the country.

Quality over quantity

Today, it's all about targeted public relations. "Long gone are the days when you put out a press release and pitched it to hundreds of reporters. It's now about targeting and tiering your audience," says Gottlieb.

Most medical journalists appreciate the opportunity to interview an actual patient when writing healthcare stories. "We start with a press release, support from published research, and then a patient they can interview. We ensure the patient privacy in whatever way they wish but have found that if they have had a successful experience they

are usually willing to share their story," says Hary Zlokower, President of Zlokower Company PR, a firm whose clients include several healthcare companies. "Medical reporters for the most part are more demanding than traditional journalists and studies and statistics are extremely important."

Another helpful publicity tool can be a "hotline" or what Bernie Ilson, President of Bernie Ilson Public Relations, a com-

pany active in health and medical areas, created for the American Digestive Disease Association, a "gutline." The public could call in to talk to gastroenterologists about their own digestive problems like ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, ileitis, colitis, and colon problems. The gutline started at two hours a week but was so successful that it was increased to six hours. ■

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