

September 2014

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“The most successful brands have a branding strategy at the core, a central idea of the brand experience.”

VINCE PARRY / Parry Branding Group

Companies that truly understand the role that medication, therapies, and services play in the lives of consumers know that positioning healthcare brands is vastly different from positioning consumer goods, says Vince Parry, president and chief branding officer of Parry Branding Group.

With consumer goods, it is a celebration of self, an outward expression of embracing brands that help reflect the buyer's personality. However, when people get sick, they are not themselves. Illnesses fundamentally alter the way a sick person behaves and makes buying decisions. With healthcare brands, it is not a celebration of self, but rather a protection of self.

"What we all expect from a healthcare brand is to help us return to a state of normalcy, in other words, an 'unsick' state, as much and as quickly as possible given a particular disease or condition," Mr. Parry says. "You want to resume your pre-sickness life even if that resumption is not completely back to the levels before you became ill."

Healthcare brands must view the patient as a consumer who has become ill and seeks to restore essential aspects of self that illness has compromised.

"So in today's consumer-driven marketing environment, the brands that recognize and reflect that a 'resumer model' is the goal of positioning will thrive much better than brands that still believe they are positioning to a traditional consumer model," Mr. Parry says.

Other challenges for the industry include grappling with the value of digital venues and, most importantly, integrating them with other, nondigital media. To date, these efforts are still very fragmented.

Mr. Parry says multiple agencies are still the norm for delivering the brand experience.

"Most of the time, clients are not getting the benefit of a unified brand experience, but rather a splintered one, with each agency putting forth initiatives that are — at best — not amortizing parallel initiatives, and — at worst — going off in different directions," he says. "The most successful brands have a branding strategy at the core: a central idea of the brand experience."

Agencies and salesforces delivering tactical solutions should all be guided by a branding strategy, not just communication and sales strategies. But unless there is a central branding authority, business will proceed as usual, and clients will over-spend on doing and redoing promotional plans.

"In today's noisy market, the healthcare brand that shouts with one, resounding voice will trump a chorus of inharmonious solo performers," Mr. Parry says.

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