

MARKETING: *health*

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Get The Healthcare Bump

by Vince Parry, Columnist

Imagine patients in a doctor's office asking questions like: Which brand of sunglasses should I wear? Which desk chair is best for my back? Which brand of green tea has the most health benefits? The fact of the matter is that such interactions happen all the time, and your brand could be the answer that a healthcare professional gives when such questions are asked. All you need to embrace is The Healthcare Bump.

Many brands have taken full advantage of what was called 'the white-coat endorsement'—layering in a "health" value for a non-therapeutic brand so that it differentiates itself as a better lifestyle choice. Nike shoes for toddlers' developing feet. Folgers decaffeinated coffee for insomniacs. Cheerios to help lower the risk of cardiovascular disease. In general, experience shows that for every 10 people who receive a doctor's recommendation for a consumer brand to a question they have, 7 will make a purchase and try it out.

Now doctors are not in the business of hawking goods, so let's not get carried away. Healthcare professionals will make a branded recommendation only if framed in a clinical context. Here are some criteria:

- If the brand provides any clinical rationale about its health and wellness benefits;
- If the recommendation reduces adverse events and/or boosts the course of treatment being recommended;
- If the brand is also endorsed by a third-party healthcare society (e.g., The American Cancer Society);
- If the brand has a reputation for high quality and responsible marketing.

And it is a two-way street: having a ready recommendation to give patients seeking their advice elevates the doctor's standing in patients' eyes as a valued mentor, and further cements the doctor-patient partnership.

Somewhere in the 1990s, Dove beauty bar (it's technically not soap) became and stayed the number one selling brand for healthy skin. Why? Because Unilever, Dove's parent brand, spent a sufficient amount of time and money explaining to dermatologists that the ingredients in Dove not only effectively cleaned away dirt and oil from skin, but it also did not interfere with the topical medications that the derms were prescribing.

Derms learned about the chemistry behind Dove; they received pamphlets and coupons and free samples from Unilever to give to their patients. Were there other facial cleansers equally up to the task of being part of a healthy skin routine? Sure. Olay, Cetaphil and Neutrogena were all readily available. But none of these had The Healthcare Bump—the added value of health layered into the brand by enlisting the endorsement of medical professionals.

Check out the math. Unilever discovered that 24% of its Dove sales were linked to a professional recommendation. Further, customers were three times as likely to remain brand loyal and stay committed due to a doctor's recommendation than to an ad in print or on television. And because one doctor sees hundreds of patients per week, promoting to them was much more efficient than promoting to the masses: for every \$1 spent on marketing, promotion to healthcare professionals yielded a return of \$9.40, compared to \$5.60 for mass marketing.

If you market a brand—it could be clothing, a device, or anything fitting the above criteria—perhaps it could benefit from The Healthcare Bump. And seriously consider building in more of a healthcare rationale than just a call-out on your label. Back it up with an active white-coat endorsement. There have been plenty of jokes about “4 out of 5 dentists recommend,” but Trident is laughing all the way to the bank as the healthiest brand for people who chew gum. Any other gum is, well, just another gum.