

# Healthcare Marketing Report

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## Dispelling The Myths About Communicating With Physicians: Doctors Are People Too!

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Healthcare marketing professionals almost always list physicians among their key target markets. It's a fact—whether you're working at a managed care company, a hospital setting, a pharmaceutical or medical device manufacturer, or a healthcare advertising and marketing consulting firm.

We all know that it's essential to reach and influence physicians to achieve important marketing goals; however, the task of doing so is often associated with high anxiety, misinformation and misunderstanding. Too often, healthcare marketers fret about developing the right approach to effectively communicate with physicians. What will work? What will fail? Should the message include elaborate medical terms? Or should it use simple, plain English? More often than not, the challenge is unnecessarily troubling.

That's because those of us in the healthcare marketing space—who normally think clearly, professionally, and confidently about our work—may find ourselves clouded by myths, inaccuracies, distorted stereotypes and blatant misinformation concerning physicians and how to communicate

with them. As a result, we may become ensnared in a labyrinth of medical marketing myths and find ourselves going through burdensome mental gymnastics, struggling to formulate unnecessarily complex approaches to reach and influence physicians.

In the two decades-plus that we have operated our healthcare-focused marketing communications firm, we have been able to separate fact from fiction and identify certain truths about how to reach physicians. From our own experiences, coupled with the wisdom and experience of some of our very savvy healthcare clients, we have assembled five of the most troublesome myths about communicating with physicians. And

we replace those myths with simple truths.

### **Myth #1:**

"Physicians are very different from other audiences, and they respond to marketing communications differently."

**Fact:** Doctors are people, too, just like you and me. While their profession may be unique and require years of training, as people they represent the same continuum of diversity that any other population would have. Therefore, among



them, you'll find doctors just like you, and doctors not at all like you!

It's true there are certain characteristics about doctors that are unique, and therefore, they may require some tailored communications approaches. (But so do other target markets, as well.) Fortunately, though, as healthcare marketers, we have an array of tools and resources available for assistance. So, don't be intimidated by their medical degrees. Take the challenge in stride. Instead of feeling burdened by the challenge, embrace it with enthusiasm.

**Myth #2:** "Physicians require and respond more favorably to messages that contain medical, clinical and technical jargon."

**Fact:** Doctors, like other audiences, prefer messages that are clear and simple. Most people prefer not to deal with overly complex, technical, academic, or scientific language. This applies to physicians as well as to their very-important office staff. Therefore,

use copy that is clear and easily understandable. Doctors, their administrative staff, and their nurses need to be able to read your messages quickly and easily. So avoid the inclination to dress your message up, unnecessarily, with medical terminology.

On the other hand, when medical or technical language is required to achieve your communications goal, don't hesitate to use it. But be certain your inclusion of medical terminology is accurate and is as simply stated as possible.

More importantly, effective healthcare marketing communications targeted to physicians should demonstrate an understanding of the physician's reality. So while a doctor may not require—or even want—language that is overly clinical, she or he will want the communication to speak to her or his needs and experiences. In this regard, healthcare marketers need to research and understand the circumstances surrounding the product or service being marketed. In the simplest terms, know your product, and know your customer.

**Myth #3:** “Doctors are driven primarily by financial incentives and the need for professional recognition.”

**Fact:** it's easy to be cynical in today's environment, but the truth is that doctors care most about quality patient care. At some point, many of our healthcare clients assume that money and recognition are the primary motivators for physicians. Ultimately, however, they come to recognize that most physicians, as well as other healthcare professionals, chose their professions because they provide opportunities to help people by delivering quality care.

Without doubt, doctors, like most of us, want to earn more money. However, we cannot overlook the fact that doctors are healers, who care about their patients. As medical professionals, they want to

maintain their expertise. In this regard they want to continue to learn about products, services, techniques, procedures and organizations that will enable them to better serve their patients.

**Myth #4:** “Doctors don't respond to direct mail.”

**Fact:** Direct mail can be one of the most effective mechanisms for reaching and influencing physicians. It's not unusual to hear clients or others say “Direct mail won't work with doctors. They won't read it. They're either too busy or just not interested.” Of course, doctors *are* busy. But, chances are, they're no busier than other successful professionals and business people whose time is equally precious. And like other

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audiences, including other professionals, some doctors won't read or respond to direct mail (or email), but some will.

In fact, in our work, we have typically seen *better* response from mailings directed to physicians than from direct mail campaigns to other audiences. Sometimes the response rates may be two, three or even four times greater than the expected response rates which meet industry standards for direct marketing effectiveness. The bottom line for the healthcare marketer, don't dismiss the value of direct communications as an important tactic for reaching physicians. Use direct mail and email.

**Myth #5:** “Conventional marketing approaches don't work with physicians.”

**Fact:** Proven marketing principles work with physicians just as well as with other audiences. Therefore, don't abandon tried and true marketing communications principles like AIDA—Attention, Interest, Desire, Action. Doctors, like the rest of us, are constantly bombarded with communications. Be bold and relevant. To cut through the clutter, our messages must capture the physician's attention. Don't be afraid to use bold graphics, provocative messages, or unique formats. Conversely, don't give in to the temptation to develop overly conservative communications. Despite the stereotype, not all doctors are gray-haired men who don't watch MTV.

Arouse their interest by relating substantively to her or his needs (see Myth #2 above). Seek to elicit desire for the product or service offered, and seek action by generating a response.

The best way to get action is to ask for it. It's remarkable how often marketing messages directed to doctors fail to ask for the business. Spell out exactly what you want the doctor to do. If you want the physician to try a new procedure, ask. And to make it easy to respond, provide a relevant response mechanism. For example, to elicit a response, develop and offer a special diagnostic screening tool, a referral guide, or reference materials. These are all likely to appeal to physicians far more than an ad specialty item.

I have always admired physicians and the medical profession, and in view of the insights I've gained as a healthcare marketer, my respect and admiration continues to grow. Along with those insights, I've also come to realize that by dispelling the myths associated with communications to physicians, we can do our jobs better, and that means that through the valuable products and services we offer, we can help doctors to do their jobs better. ■