

Consultative Selling and Value-added Programs Add Up to Results In Pharmaceutical Share Wars

How Organon used online patient education to triple its fertility market share in three years



By David Stern

In 1997, my company, pharmaceutical manufacturer Organon, faced a challenge familiar to today's pharmaceutical executive: how to build market share for a new product in a market dominated by a well-established competitor.

Our new product was Follistim, a fertility medication that stimulates the ovaries to make eggs. Its competitor was a similar product from a company that had dominated the fertility market for decades. While we had achieved a 15 percent market share between 1994 (when it entered the market) and 1997, we were increasingly challenged to differentiate our product from the de facto industry standard -- since neither product held a compelling clinical advantage over the other.

A Value-added Solution

To compete, Organon opted to provide value-added services to its physician customers. The strategy was to transform the company's representatives from mere sources of product information to indispensable business partners. How? By adopting a consultative approach and developing highly customizable practice enhancement tools the representatives could offer physicians.

As the Associate Director of Product Management for Women's Health, I knew we needed a way to get our representatives in and get them seen by physicians on a regular basis.

Among the tactics our representatives have employed are helping individual practices to develop referral sources and assistance in crafting marketing plans.

"It's very practice-specific," says Bob Crist, who heads Organon's fertility sales force. "Many of our reps have gone to business school; they're using their education and training to provide real consultative solutions that help practices grow. As a result, they don't come across as just another 'drug rep' who's trying to sell something."

For example, one of Organon's representatives uses his marketing background to brainstorm with a fertility practice on their overall approach to awareness programs, assists his practices in evaluating advertising opportunities and other promotional initiatives to ensure that they are focusing their marketing efforts most cost-effectively.

"By being so focused on their customers' needs and priorities, these reps gain an extraordinary level of trust with the practices they call on," Crist says. "They're perceived as part of the practice's team."

One of the most well received value-added services Organon representatives offer is a personalized web-based patient education program from HealthBanks. It has proven to be a powerful relationship-builder leading to significant and quantifiable bottom-line results. Here's how it works:

Using its own network of nationally recognized medical experts, HealthBanks creates educational web content on specific medical topics – the causes and treatment of infertility, for example. Pharmaceutical companies – in this case, Organon – then select key physicians they wish to sponsor for the HealthBanks service. HealthBanks' proprietary technology, in turn, creates a completely

customized online patient education program for the individual physician's fertility practice – including streaming audio and video of the physician.

There is a great demand for information on the Internet, but a lot of it is not good information, and HealthBanks gives doctors a way to bring patients high-quality, unbiased information that they can be confident in using to counsel patients.

Physicians then "prescribe" the service to new patients, giving them a password that takes patients to the customized program, or through a link from an existing practice website. There the patient sees and hears her own physician giving information on the basics of fertility problems and treatment – often *before* her first visit with the doctor.

That translates into better-informed patients and a timesaving for doctors' offices. Michael Alper, MD, one of the world's leading fertility experts, studied the impact of the HealthBanks service on his practice, Boston IVF. He found that it cut 30 minutes from the time needed to bring patients up to speed on such subjects as in vitro fertilization, egg donation and injection instructions.

David Kallenberger, MD, program director of the Bennett Fertility Institute in Oklahoma City, has been using the HealthBanks service for about six months and also appreciates the time it saves him and his staff. "I think it's great," he says. "It saves us a large amount of time since the patients can go straight to the website before we meet for the first time. It's easily accessible and easy to understand."

The online presentations also have the advantage of consistency – each patient receives the same information, every time. Plus, patients can review the online materials at their convenience, in the privacy of their own home or office. And because audio or video of each patient's own physician is a part of the program, patients feel a stronger bond and see their doctors as patient-friendly.

"It's allowed my patients to be able to understand information more rapidly and more concisely," says Dorothy Mitchell-Leef, MD, a reproductive endocrinologist at Reproductive Biology Associates in Atlanta. "They can develop questions before their first consultation and subsequent consultations, and it has expedited their understanding. Most patients, after their first [HealthBanks] program, say to me, 'I know what you're going to tell me.'"

Pharmaceutical Representatives Given A Compelling Role

But while the HealthBanks system helps to extend the physician-patient relationship, it also helps to extend the relationship between the representative and his or her physician customer.

In addition to the educational content, the program also includes interactive patient surveys. From the representatives' perspective, this is where the *real* added value comes in.

Survey questions address such topics as clinical issues (are patients more concerned about side effects or multiple daily injections, for example) and marketing (e.g., how the patient first heard about the clinic). About 15 percent of patients fill out the questionnaire, a rate comparable to in-office satisfaction surveys, says Bob Crist.

Organon representatives are able to regularly bring personalized survey reports to their physicians regarding not only their practice and patients, but also comparisons with regional and national results in other practices. "They want this information," notes Crist. "They feel it gives them a competitive advantage." In fact, in a survey this fall, 92% of Organon representatives and district managers agreed, "The HealthBanks program provides me with a competitive advantage over our competitor's sales force."

“It gives me a real reason to visit the practice on a regular basis,” adds Maryann Bonamassa, an Organon representative working in the New York/New Jersey area. “Many of the practices are very interested in the information and they are excited to see me.”

Boston IVF's Alper concurs. "The pharmaceutical company realized, quite smartly, that once the HealthBanks program is in a practice, [the representative] will develop a better relationship with the physician and staff in that practice," he says. "It's providing a tremendous service to patients, and physicians and nurses appreciate that."

What's more, the sponsor's marketing team gains exclusive market data information linking the physician's attributes to the attributes of his or her individual patient population. This information can include patient answers to questions posed by the sponsor (with appropriate patient confidentiality protection). This information is available to the sponsor as it's collected – in real time.

The results

Organon's consultative strategy has yielded spectacular results. Since 1997, the company's share of the fertility market has grown from 15 to 37 percent, and it may become the market leader by the end of 2004.

Since the program was launched in 1998, Organon has seen Follistim prescriptions rise an average of 17 percent per year in the practices in which HealthBanks has been installed. In addition, the program has helped Organon establish itself in practices that didn't use its products before. Overall, I believe the HealthBanks system is directly responsible for 25 to 30 percent of Organon's fertility market growth. We're getting a good return on our investment.

The program is now installed in 200 practices, mostly high-volume fertility clinics. Another 50 sites are scheduled to go up within the next few months. Some practices were so impressed and saw so much value in the product, they offered to buy the right to use it for their practice.

"It certainly gives Organon an advantage," says Crist. "There's no one else who can offer these services. They have to come to us."

Broader applications

The consultative approach is clearly the way to go when it comes to marketing pharmaceutical products to physicians. Having an agile, customer-focused sales force with the ability to deploy a variety of value-added tools that help physicians build their practices is a key success factor.

While the HealthBanks service is only one arrow in the Organon representatives' quiver, it has turned out to be a powerful one. What's more, our company has realized that the technology could be applied to any area of medicine where comparable products vie for market share; diabetes and asthma management are two categories where possibilities are apparent. As a result, we're considering using HealthBanks for other product lines.

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