RESEARCH ARTICLE

MEDICAL MARKETING: BRIDGING THE GAP

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Abstract

The prevailing healthcare marketing has mostly been disregarded underpinning the mass marketing and fear-based campaigns that explicitly resulted in misunderstanding of communication. The existing research aimed towards exploring the wider influence of marketing within medical and healthcare sectors. It stressed over the importance of value-added strategies like personalized digital marketing and customised solutions. Moreover, through a broader analysis of four healthcare campaigns and surveying healthcare professionals, the study explicitly disseminated that affirmative and personalized messaging is far more effective as compared to fear-based approaches. The findings of the research recommended that customized and empathetic marketing strategies are significant for fostering trust and long-term relationships within healthcare industry.

Introduction

Marketing, both traditional and digital, has become the backbone for businesses, raising awareness about business and leading to its development. However, an area where marketing principles are not fully applied is healthcare. Despite being 10% of the GDP of most developed countries, healthcare industries still seem to be working in silo when it comes to using marketing principles. The research aims to understand what leads to ineffective marketing campaigns and what the success rules are for effective communication and providing value to the customers (or patients in many cases) thereby creating trust and long-term relationships. Some work has been done on this previously, however, the research considers modern digitization techniques and their overlap with the traditional healthcare industry.

While marketing today is indispensable in business, estimated to reach a cost of $786.2 billion for digital marketing alone globally by 2026, this is a sign that marketing is important in creating visibility and brand loyalty, as noted by Moncey & Baskaran (2020). The healthcare industry, however, which contributes almost 10% to the GDP of most developed countries, still appears hesitant concerning the full application of these principles. For instance, within the UK alone, it is anticipated that £ 276 billion will be spent on healthcare by the year 2025. Despite this fact, however, the industry still uses effective market mechanisms that might work towards bridging the gap that exists between healthcare providers their customers, and patients (Krupskyi & Stasiuk, 2023). To further support this assertion, it can be identified that only 35% of the total healthcare services operating within the UK make active utilization of digital marketing techniques to engage with their audience effectively (Aggarwal et al., 2020). This is significant because the problem with the core of this research involves two inefficient marketing strategies that cannot help to build and maintain trust and loyalty from their customers in the healthcare industry.

Although trust is an important factor in healthcare, studies have indicated that 60% of consumers still would not like to engage with new healthcare brands due to perceived risks. This points to one of the major challenges in the industry which is concerning how perceived risk mediates the association between trust and brand loyalty, especially as regards health and medical products (Krupskyi & Stasiuk, 2023). The current study investigates the mediating role of perceived risk in the relationship between customer trust and brand loyalty in the UK healthcare sector. It established what comprised the major constituents of effective communication and dissemination of value in the healthcare services industry through a judicious mix of modern digitization techniques along with conventional marketing strategies. This study is expected

to yield some useful insights for healthcare providers on how to improve their marketing activities, develop closer bonds with customers, and maintain long-term loyalty in today's digital world.

Literature Review

The relationship between customer trust and perceived risk and brand loyalty has been examined in many studies across various industries. However, in the healthcare and medical products industry these dynamics have their own specific features due to the specific sensitivity of consumers to questions of safety, effectiveness and compliance with the requirements of the existing legislation. This literature review therefore focuses on how these factors are related, particularly in the context of the UK healthcare industry, comprising organisations such as the National Health Service (NHS) and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

In general, customer trust is widely considered to be a major factor that leads to brand loyalty, especially in such industries as healthcare. In the UK, trust in medical products is often backed up by links to credible regulatory agencies. Another important factor is the role of the NHS and MHRA as their approval gives confidence in safety and effectiveness of the product. Greszczuk et al. (2018) show that UK consumers are more likely to trust medical products connected with the NHS, which is evidence of trust in public healthcare organizations. This trust directly translates to loyalty since customers are more likely to continue patronizing brands that they consider trustworthy, especially for brands in the over-the-counter and other essential healthcare products (Birkhäuer et al., 2017). As Portal et al. (2019) noted trust leads to attitudinal loyalty whereby consumers have a favourable attitude towards trusted brands. For instance, companies such as GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) operating in the UK have benefited from this phenomenon because they have long complied with the regulations of the British market and have significantly contributed to public health programs (Berlin & Bünder, 2022) This trust leads to repeat patronage and brand loyalty especially in industries where the consequences of choosing the wrong brand are dire such as the pharmaceutical and health sectors. However, the competitive nature of the private and NHS-endorsed products may pose some problems in this process of developing trust. A study by Miyake & Kuntsman (2022) shows that consumers are more loyal to products with the NHS logo than those from private brands, especially when there is little information on the effectiveness of products. The private healthcare brands such as Boots have, however, shown that trust can be built through the delivery of quality products and services, customer relations, and product reliability (Nelsen et al., 2021).

Perceived risk is another important determinant of brand loyalty and is most relevant in the health and medical products industry. Perceived risk is a measure of likely negative consequences, including ineffective treatments and adverse side effects (El Sherif et al., 2018). As an example, in the UK where the regulatory environment is particularly strict, perceived risk is generally lower where the product has been approved by the NHS or MHRA. According to Zhou et al. (2017), UK consumers will always stick to brands that minimize perceived risk through information disclosure and regulatory compliance. This underlines the significance of distinct recommendations from reputable organizations in lowering perceived risk and enhancing loyalty. New or foreign medical products, on the other hand, are considered to have higher perceived risk, especially where the approval process is not well understood or the product is not MHRA accredited (NAMSA., 2024). This perceived risk is higher, which makes it difficult for new or non-NHS affiliated brands to build customer loyalty in the UK. For example, the use of the generic medicines was met with suspicion in the UK until approval of the National Health Service (NHS) declared them safe for use (Ingrid, 2021).

Nonetheless, perceived risk can be managed through proper communication and information sharing with the customer. According to Bove & Benoit (2020), concerns about risk can be minimized through the provision of clear information on the product and assurance that the product is safe. For instance, Sanofi, a global healthcare company, has targeted the UK market with prescription and over-the-counter products

through consumer education (Perrot et al., 2019). Hence, Sanofi has managed to lower perceived risk and enhance brand associations by creating patient support programs such as online platforms that provide comprehensive product safety information (Slinn, 2017).

Perceived risk also plays the role of a moderator between customer trust and brand loyalty. High-risk sectors such as healthcare, Gur (2020) said that trust can help decrease perceived risk and therefore, increase customer loyalty. This is particularly important in cases like the United Kingdom where the NHS or MHRA certification helps to eliminate consumer skepticism as well as increases customer loyalty due to the reduced perceived risk of the healthcare products (Iliffe & Manthorpe, 2021).

The role of perceived risk as a mediator is further evidenced in successful brands such as P&G and Mac Cosmetics associating with an institution such as the NHS. Through lessening perceived risk by way of government endorsement, these brands are better able to convert customers' trust to commitment. Companies like Boots that provide healthcare advice services alongside their products can lower the perceived risk of their products hence increasing customer loyalty (Purcarea, 2019).

However, the perceived risk does not always play a role in meditating between trust and loyalty completely. Based on the studies conducted by Aggarwal et al. (2020), trust might help in lowering perceived risk but the effect of trust is not the sole contributing factor towards customer loyalty because other variables like product quality, customer service, and brand image also have considerable influence. In the more competitive UK market, therefore, perceived risk may not play the same mediating role as in other markets with less rigidity. However, eradicating perceived risk is still crucial for converting trust into loyalty in the most sensitive sector of healthcare.

In the UK healthcare and medical products sector, the findings showed that customer trust significantly affects brand loyalty with perceived risk as a moderator. Minimizing perceived risks through regulatory approval and informative communication is essential to establishing and sustaining customer loyalty in this heavily regulated industry. As such, the following brands are most likely to succeed in the market

Methods

The research integrated a mixed-method approach which is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative analysis assisting in the evaluation of the effectiveness of healthcare marketing campaigns. There were in total four healthcare marketing campaigns for analysis from which three campaigns were from the year 2023 and one from the year 2014. The campaigns were selected depending on the distinctive capabilities and versatile approaches in terms of addressing public health concerns. The stance allowed an in-depth analysis of various marketing strategies in the given span of time. Moreover, a comprehensive content analysis was conducted on each selected healthcare marketing campaigns that assisted in evaluating the messaging, tone and the effectiveness in terms of communicating with the target audience. The research analysis further focused on determining main themes as that of positivity, fear, personalization, and solution-oriented messaging which are deemed significant as healthcare marketing aspects. In addition, the supplement content analysis was further conducted through a telephonic survey that integrated almost 50 participants. The survey participants were a mix of healthcare experts like doctors and nurses well as non-healthcare professionals which helped in getting various viewpoints on how effective the campaigns were perceived to be. The survey had questions that ranged from choice to open ended ones to understand how the participants felt about the campaigns and their suggestions, for betterment. We looked into surveys and content analysis. Delved into past research, on healthcare marketing trends spanning the last ten years as part of study process too. This review of studies offered important historical background information and assisted in pinpointing the results of the information about the impact of various marketing approaches, in healthcare promotions and highlight the significance of tailored and optimistic communication methods..

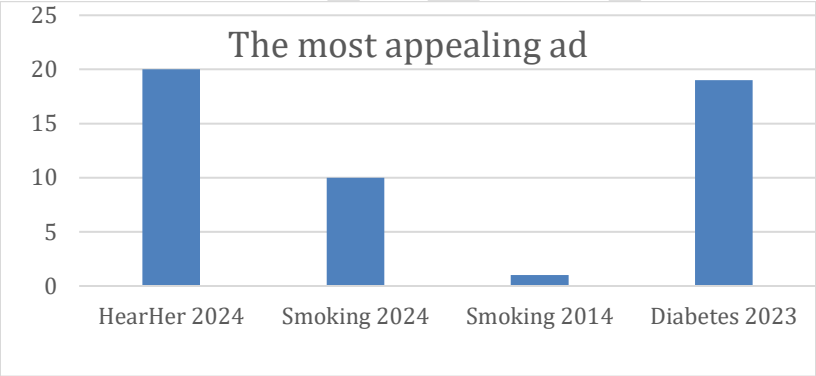
Results and Discussion

The survey found a correlation between positivity in health campaigns and their popularity, indicating that campaigns using positive messaging are more appealing and likely to receive support; compared to those that are negative, fearful, or disgusting. 40% of the participants liked the “HearHer” ad for being more personable. In contrast, smoking and tobacco ads were perceived as more fearful and difficult to relate to by 31%. The survey also aimed to understand the trends in "fearful" health campaigns over the past 10 years. It was observed that the tobacco ad in 2014 was perceived as more fearful and difficult to relate to by 21% compared to the smoking ad in 2024, which was perceived as such by 10%. 40% of the participants expressed their willingness to support campaigns providing solutions, and 28% preferred more personalized campaigns.

"The Fear-Persuasion Relationship" was previously studied by R.F. Soames Job. On the potential harm of ineffective healthcare campaigns, it states "the ineffective use of fear in health promotion campaigns may have more serious consequences than the tangible waste of time, effort, and money: such campaigns may produce the opposite of the desired effects, making the target audience more likely to continue with the unhealthy behavior. The argument that ineffective fear campaigns may immunize their audience against the message is not new."

The charts below summarize the key results:

Chart 1:

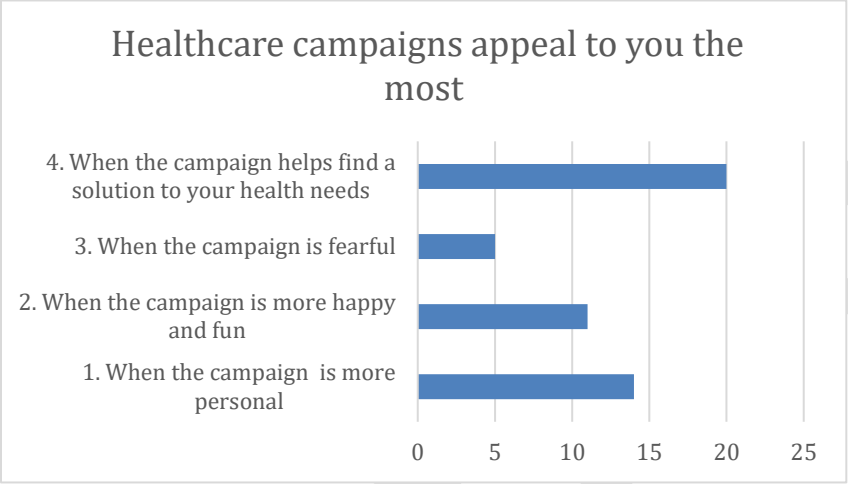


The chart titled "The most appealing ad" presents a comparison of four healthcare marketing campaigns: There are some successful examples: “HearHer 2024,” “Smoking 2024,” “Smoking 2014,” “Diabetes 2023. ” The chart demonstrates that two campaigns, which were probably most attractive to the surveyed people, received the highest mark of roughly 20. On the other hand the campaign “Smoking 2024” was fairly appealing, “Smoking 2014” appeal was quite low and only a few of the participants felt the campaigns were appealing.It was also established that the “HearHer 2024” and “Diabetes 2023” campaigns received a lot of support due to its positive, call to action feel that worked well with the target group. They probably also used aspects of individualism; detailing particular health threats in ways that could be easily understood and fun. The success of these campaigns is well aligned with finding of past research that healthcare marketing is most effective for audience based on support rather than fear.

However, the low appeal of the “Smoking 2014” campaign suggests that fear-based strategies might not work at the same level of success in the present context of the healthcare marketing. While implementing the threats of smoking the message of this campaign may not have focussed on the personal, which made it not as recognizable or effective. The boring appeal of the “Smoking 2024” campaign is clearly

intermediate between that of the 2014 campaign but still below the campaign of “HearHer 2024” and “Diabetes 2023”. Most importantly, these results highlight the significance of arriving at campaign messages that not only educate but are also positively framed, targeted and presented in a manner that depicts an individual experience. Thus, it would be best if the healthcare marketers did not rely on fear appeals but concentrate on creating long-lasting relations with the intended audiences.

Chart 2:



The bar chart labelled ‘The following healthcare campaigns appeal to you the most’ helps in understanding which healthcare campaigns are appealing to people. The chart below is the analysis of four sorts of campaign that differ by strategy and emotional appeal and concern. These are petty-selves, joyful and humorous, scares, and find-solution-to-health-problem campaigns. The most attractive campaigns thereby represented by the highest bar are those that assist people in getting a solution to whatever ails them. This has been apparently the most responded category with about 22 respondents who preferred this kind of campaign. This implies that people would rather conform to healthcare campaigns that are solution-oriented and provide them with the solutions to some of the problems they may be facing in their health. Consequently, the other closest campaigns which are more personalized were the next most attractive, with 13 persons being picked. This means that when a campaign is personalized and closely relates to an individual, then it will have a greater impact in healthcare. The results imply that people might be more affiliated with campaigns which pertain to their self-interest, which, in turn, may mean that individuals are more inclined to commit towards meaningful messages that are closer to them.

Similarly, there was about 11 tick marks for the happy and fun that can be related to campaigns,,. This shows that fun-skilled approach in communication works in the healthcare settings, although it is less powerful than the solution-seeking or personal appeal campaigns. The least popular campaigns are the fearful ones, and out of the respondents only 4 like this kind of a campaign. This implies that threat-based messages be least persuasive, perhaps because of the negative feelings they elicit, implying a audiences’ reaction of averting instead of promoting. To be precise, the chart shows how impactful and engaging healthcare campaigns with specific mechanical solutions and tailored messages are needed while not ruled out is the conventional positive and engaging campaigns. Punishment based campaigns however seem to be the most ineffective in motivating people.

Chart 3:

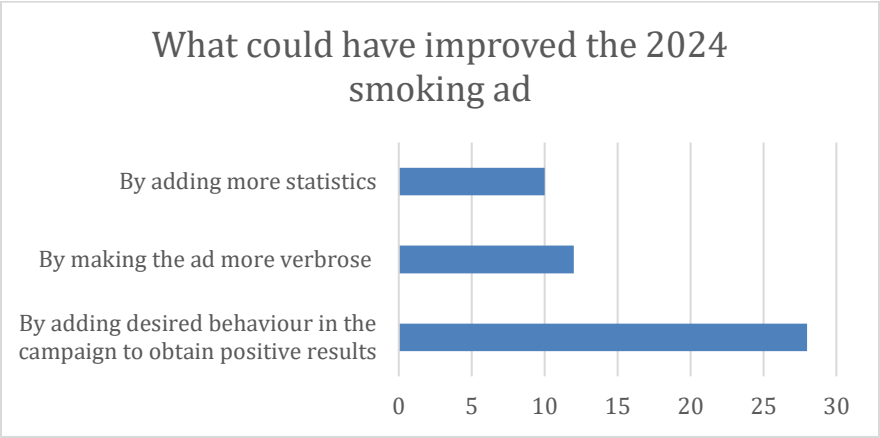


Chart 3 depicts the respondents' perceptions of what would make the anti-smoking campaign better. From this chart , the most crucial modification that could be made, according to about 28 respondents, is by "adding desired behavior in the campaign to obtain." This seems to imply that the participants acknowledged poor framing of the campaign and conducting it without clearly stating what desired behavior prospects should adopt. From the perspective of this study, this knowledge emphasises the role of behavioral signification in societal marketing communication, especially in the healthcare sector.

In the context of healthcare marketing and advertising, where the goal is to convince the consumer to trust a certain medical product or service, sometimes even elaborate numbers or words may not be enough. The greatest impact, according to the chart, is achieved when the passing of the campaign conveys the action or behavior. This is consistent with the idea that perceived risk reduction, brought by defining the correct behavior and making it tangible, may improve trust and therefore brand commitment (Ajina, 2019). It also underlines those perceived risks might be reduced, and the trust-loyalty relation, which is the cornerstone of healthcare marketing communication success, could be strengthened with an action-oriented message appeal (Hariyanti et al., 2023). In addition, this study underscores the importance of healthcare marketing messages as educating consumers as well as directing them to engage in certain behaviors that have positive health outcomes. In this way, they will be more effective in addressing consumer issues and become more powerful means of creating a healthier, more reliable population with less anxiety over their decisions in healthcare. This approach is crucial in an industry where the consumer’s trust determines brand and ultimately, sustainable business performance (Agarwal et al., 2020).

In addition to positive marketing, it was noted that mass marketing or generic campaigns may not always be the best approach to providing or solving healthcare issues. An understanding of the problem and how best to treat it led to a more personalized approach, which is more desirable. A similar approach has also been recommended by Professor Victor Lorin Purcarea, PhD, Executive Editor in the Journal of Medicine and Life. The concept of care, and healthcare in particular, is unique and very individualized, and mass media campaigns at times may not be quite valuable if we are trying to get the desired results or behaviors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, traditional and digital marketing approaches are crucial for raising awareness and encouraging desired behaviors in their target audience. However, in the healthcare industry, these tools can be more effective if approached with personalized, empathetic, and positive messaging. While mass media techniques are valuable, they require more personalized and focused messaging to resonate with

the audience. Persuasion using fear-based techniques is generally more harmful and often discourages the target market. This research has identified the significant mediating role of perceived risk in the relationship between customer trust and brand loyalty within the healthcare and medical products sector in the UK. The results indicate that while customer trust is a crucial element in developing brand loyalty, the perceived risks associated with healthcare products can very strongly affect this relationship. For example, perceived risks from product safety or efficiency may result in less trust in an entity and thus negatively affect brand loyalty. The available evidence shows that effective marketing strategies can be one of the direct and positive ways of mitigating perceived risks and hence increasing customer trust in a brand, leading to strong brand loyalty. Thus, personalized and action-oriented marketing messages that unequivocally convey the benefits and safe usage of healthcare products will work in appealing to reduce perceived risks. Such a process not only reassures customers but also leads to long-term loyalty through fostering customers' feelings of safety and confidence in the brand. Therefore, healthcare marketers should focus on those means of reducing perceived risks which would enhance the trust-loyalty linkage. This way, they can develop an even more solid relationship with their customers, which is an assurance of continued loyalty in a business where everything depends on trust.

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