

# PRWeek

OP-ED

## New influencers alter health strategy

Who can forget the TV ads of past decades that ended with the words “three out of four doctors recommend,” or “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV”? Even now, direct-to-consumer advertising, after a mouthful of disclaimers, ends with “talk to your doctor.” It had been axiomatic that health-focused products must have physician endorsement to ensure credibility.

However, “Health Attitudes and Well Connections,” a consumer study designed by Ketchum and conducted by Ipsos, suggests that this once-conventional wisdom is no longer the case. The study of more than 4,000 U.S. consumers looked at health and wellness motivations and influences in five psycho-demographic clusters: neutrals, sharers, traditionalists, elites, and isolates.

One of the most striking findings of this study is that one size does not fit all when it comes to healthcare influencers. Physicians resonate most strongly with traditionalists, who tend to be a little older; and with sharers, many of whom are married women with children at home. These groups are vigilant about seeing a primary-care physician at

least once each year and seek their recommendations.

Elites, the best-educated group and those most proactive about their health, do not look to physicians for advice, but are more apt

### The patient empowerment movement... has upset the apple cart

to find information on the Internet. Isolates, the group at the other end of the spectrum that is least proactive and knowledgeable about their health, also disdain physician recommendations while relying more heavily on advice from pharmacists.

It is not surprising that the patient empowerment movement, fueled by an explosion of health information on the Internet, has upset the apple cart of traditional influencers. There are currently 60,000 healthcare Web sites and 50 million blogs in existence, and 8 million people search for health informa-

tion online every day. Just as “citizen journalists” are revolutionizing politics, consumers are changing the landscape of influence and effectively democratizing health and wellness marketing.

Word of mouth has emerged as a powerful vehicle in influencing health and wellness decisions, with 61% of consumers using it to improve their health. This is borne in the research where sharers and elites dispense health information to others on an active basis.

The implication of this seismic shift in the world of healthcare influencers is enormous. While physicians will always carry weight with a sizable number of consumers, they no longer have the large umbrella of influence that they once did. Health marketers who want to reach elites should have strong online strategies. Similarly, elites and sharers can be effective brand evangelists.

Knowing and understanding the new levers of influence in health and wellness are crucial to reaching today’s consumers. That TV doctor of yesterday might be unemployed for a long time. ■

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