Enough already. It’s time for pharma companies to become household names

And then the sector can become meaningful to the lives of ‘ordinary’ people

Have you ever noticed how pharmaceutical companies are portrayed in films? Like well-spoken British actors, when they do score a part, they seem to be typecast as villains. Whether it’s The Fugitive; The Constant Gardener or Rise of the Planet of the Apes, pharma is positioned as the multinational meanie that our repressed heroes (be they human or ape) must battle.

Yes, companies in these films are fictitious, one-dimensional pantomime villains to be booed, but I find it bizarre that it’s acceptable, nay common practice, to portray organisations that create lifesaving products in such a light. I don’t know about you, but I’m also not hearing many cries for ‘fair representation for pharma’.

We don’t need a 10-year clinical study to identify what the problem is - there’s simply no emotional connection between the public and the industry. Pharma helps people survive heart attacks, beat cancer, manage depression and control diabetes, but until the companies behind these medicines become a visible part of people’s lives, they’re never going to feel the love of the population at large.

Now, some might argue I need to get off my hippy soapbox. Talking to targeted stakeholders is a well-established model (and anyone can find company e-literature if they choose to) - there’s no need to proactively reach out to the public, especially given direct-to-consumer (DTC) regulations. These are valid points, but they’re short-termist and you only have to look at company websites, YouTube channels, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds to see the industry wants to be recognised for the value it brings. These platforms are awash with corporate philosophies and examples of how organisations are going beyond the pill through corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability programmes.

Given we now live in a world where transparency and reputation are central to any business, isn’t the old approach of healthcare companies staying on the cultural sidelines outdated? Isn’t it time for these businesses to be household names? This is how you become meaningful to the lives of ‘ordinary’ people. It’s also how the industry can take its rightful place as a leading commentator and contributor on all manner of global concerns from the environment to supply chains and wellness to antibiotic resistance. Again, let’s be clear, this is not a rallying cry for DTC communication of prescription medicines. I’m talking about corporate visibility and authentic leadership, manifest through commentary and insights on issues that matter to the person on the street. I’m talking about joining the final dot between available information and proactively putting it in people’s faces.

Think how differently the industry would be perceived if the companies that make it up were household names? If people knew what each stood for and recognised the contribution they’d made to their lives or to society, attitudes would change completely. Casting pharma as the movie nasty wouldn’t make sense.

Many household names are active in global or national causes, but few have contributed in such meaningful ways to our existence as the pharmaceutical industry. Coca-Cola makes sugary drinks, but proudly talks about sustainability work with WWF or investment in grassroots football. Of course there are sceptics, but millions are listening and responding positively. They know the company and they like it. There is a relationship. It’s the same for the likes of Kellogg’s, M&S or Google. You don’t have to be saving the world to be a loved brand. You don’t even have to get everything right.

Pharma can, and should, be providing global leadership, but it has to connect with the population it serves first. Yes, there’s information out there, but companies have to get proactive about telling people about it - more corporate level PR and advertising to a broad audience. In a world where reputation is more important than brand, communicating with people and becoming part of their lives is a must.

Things have come a long way since the days when ‘sponsored by an unrestricted education grant’ was as personal as it got. But, there’s a final puzzle piece that needs placing because the average person still knows very little about one of the world’s largest and most important industries and most people (outside the US) couldn’t name more than a couple of companies.

Surely it’s time to get proactive about how the industry is perceived? Let someone else be the pantomime villain for a change.

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