

Mind Your Step: Take the Ladders, Not the Chutes

A Practical Guide to Improving DTC ROI

With advance planning and rigorous review, marketers can overcome the potential pitfalls that plague unsuccessful DTC marketing efforts.

By Ellen Hoenig-Carlson



The year 2007 marked the 10th anniversary of the FDA ruling to allow direct-to-consumer/patient (DTC/P) marketing – adding a new dimension of competition to an already fiercely competitive market. More than \$5 billion dollars were spent on DTC/P advertising in 2007. Earning maximum ROI is more challenging than ever – especially with DTC generally under greater public and industry scrutiny.

In our increasingly cluttered Information Age, identifying a few powerful actions to move key segments is mission critical. Like the children's game Chutes and Ladders, taking the right steps in DTC/P can propel you far ahead, while missteps can set you back irreparably. Unlike the children's game, your brand's performance does not depend upon rolling the die, but rather upon driving competitive advantage with thoughtful, rigorous planning and implementation. Here's a guide to the steps to take and missteps to avoid in building a successful DTC campaign.

Treating DTC today simply as "traditional" branded TV or print advertising is a misstep you can't afford.

LADDERS

Organizational and Product/Market Assessment

One often-overlooked ladder is a baseline understanding of consumer ecology from engaging a thorough 'up-front' disease and brand assessment. Identify knowledge gaps, opportunities and potential leaky buckets. Think beyond the broad audience and dig into segments to better understand targeting opportunities and priorities that will best power brand growth.

Tough questions will help you climb the rungs:

- Have you identified the optimal role of the consumer for your business and stage of lifecycle?
- How deep is your understanding across high potential targets' treatment pathways or "buying" processes? What are the barriers, timing, and key influencers?
- How can the brand's uniqueness be leveraged?

Planning, market research and the team

It seems so obvious, but using both time and teams well is rare: seize the advantages.

Make the consumer an integral part of early planning and clinical design such that resulting claims and messages are most relevant and differentiating. Key opportunities with physician marketing may also emerge.

Great work often takes several rounds of creative development and market research. Most brands start too late; two years is not too early.

- Question whether consumer marketing will begin soon enough to allow for segment feedback and interpretation early in the development process, as well as true integration and synergies with physician marketing.
- Question whether timelines allow for enough strategy and creative refinement and collaboration.

Mindful planning affords a far-reaching ladder: enjoy a bigger bang than competitors with less action. It can seem counter-intuitive in our time-pressed industry, but pausing frequently at this stage pays off. Scrutinize objectives, strategies and tactics before committing to action. Wield a sharp red pencil for sacred cows and other habits that may be obsolete or tangential to objectives – and a sober eye for how far resources can go.

- Question whether a path of least action is defined: the fewest yet strongest mix of strategies and tactics, matched carefully with objectives, budget and resources.
- Question whether strategies and tactics are well-integrated across consumer partners and brand customers, and whether the resources, skills, and processes are in place to ensure execution is a cut above competition.

Take a ladder to meaningful consumer insights and interpretations along the treatment pathway and among high potential targets. Consumers are busy and impatient; no brand has slack. Relevance and resonance are imperative to break through market noise and motivate action. Rigorous, well-designed market research will leave you in shape to prioritize target opportunities, learn how best to tell the brand story, and how conversations may go between physician and patient or caregiver and patient.

- Question whether consumer insight(s) are precise enough to unlock a unique brand promise for priority targets and ignite powerful creative.
- Question whether brand communications have enough visibility and persuasion to break through and garner action.

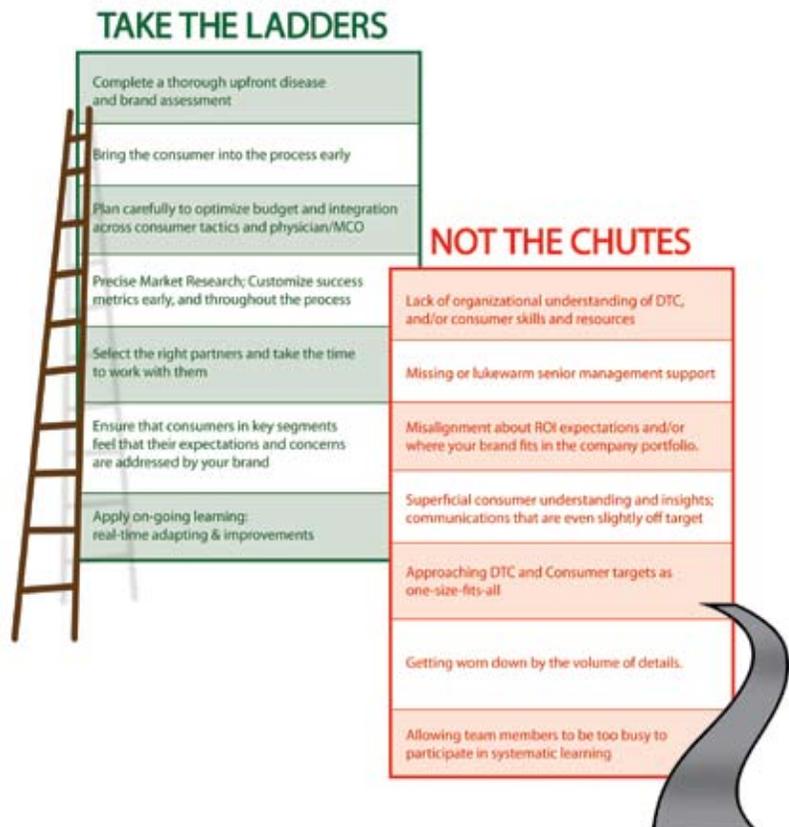
Metrics provide another ladder up: it can be tempting to leave them to the end, but identifying the most meaningful success measures for your strategies at the start improves competitiveness. Customized and precise metrics raise the bar throughout the consumer development process, from idea conception through a no-go decision, and generate advantages of early and continuous learning and improvement once in-market. Disciplined tracking of program performance throughout pays off both in ROI and in a robust team of growing professionals and partners.

- Question whether brand and performance metrics are objective and well-tailored before campaign kick-off. EG, when measuring an awareness tactic, is your primary measure awareness rather than response?
- Question whether measurement techniques are consistent across all customers, tactics and media. EG, is ROI for a DTC/P tactic measured the same way as a physician tactic?

Partnerships present another ladder. Select and manage them as though brand success depends on each one. Look for partners that also know how to collaborate with other partners. Beware organizational and cultural differences among pharmaceutical companies and outside partners often add a layer of complexity.

Take the time to communicate and collaborate, and get to know what will enable each partner to do their best work. Figuring out how to make your brand their favorite project earns an extra rung or two.

- Question whether the marketing team has the skills and experience for top-drawer collaboration with external DTC/P partners.
- Question how consumer programs and teams are being managed – they often require a different approach than what might work well for a professional agency or gearing up for a POA.



Superior Execution and Continuous Learning

Take the ladder to superior execution by ensuring that target consumers feel their expectations and concerns are being addressed by your brand. Speak to consumers in their own language, based on a meaningful story for each segment – consistent with their view of the category and themselves. Cultivate two-way dialogue and synergy across all touch points.

- Is your story consistently delivered across all tactics and media, regardless of various agency partners, and timely?
- Question whether communications are honest and two-sided. Has the team explored new ways to get consumers involved and speaking to other consumers on the brand’s behalf? (Often works better than messages coming directly from marketers.)

Everyone agrees that learning is essential, but has your team built the ladder of a systematic, on-going process to capture and respond quickly to market changes and consumer feedback? Take bimonthly or quarterly ‘deep dives’ for each brand, and disseminate best practices and ideas. Include learning about the physician; this can maximize the physician-patient dialogue.

- Once in-market, is a cross-functional team regularly reviewing metrics and learning to assess performance and adapt as quickly as needed?

CHUTES

Organizational and Product/Market Assessment

One chute that often trips marketers is that DTC/P – despite being around for 10 years – is still not well understood among pharmaceutical marketers and traditional functions. Organizational understanding of DTC/P as a comprehensive discipline provides an important foundation for a winning brand strategy. An internal assessment of consumer marketing strengths and weaknesses, and where the brand and disease-market fit within the company portfolio, can prevent stepping over important implications for ROI and resource allocation.

- Question how consumer marketing is viewed by key stakeholders in the organization. By uncovering expectations, brand leaders may gain alignment from key senior managers and departments.
- Question where your brand fits in the organization’s investment hierarchy.
- Find out early whether internal consumer bench strength and resources are sufficient.

Planning, market research and the team

Another remarkably common chute is mediocre market research. Though everyone agrees that market research

is important, lack of budget, time or skilled resources can beget short cuts or superficial analysis. Brands can miss new information, new interpretations, and with it, the chance for precise targeting, messaging and communications.

Don’t fall into the chute of approaching DTC or consumers as one-size-fits-all.

Treating DTC today simply as “traditional” branded TV or print advertising is a misstep you can’t afford. Beware of relying on what may have worked in previous campaigns or for another brand.

- Is the team contemplating how to achieve DTC objectives in new, better ways

Creating value-added relationships requires careful differentiation. Strategies, tactics and dialogues will succeed only when based on the unique, current wants and needs of each segment—not the manufacturers’.

Superior Execution and Continuous Learning

Consumer marketing involves an enormous amount of detail to ensure effective execution. While the demands can be maddening and exhausting, here is another chute to lose competitive advantage. Being thorough and doggedly focused pays off in well-coordinated and synchronized program execution. The best strategies can – and often do – fail in delivery.

- Question whether each target touch-point reinforces branding and messaging and gets the desired results.
- Is the media budget sufficient and creatively planned to impact and “surround” targets?
- Assess the backend operation: is it in shape to support brand initiatives? Are phones ready to be answered, IVR scripts optimized to generate maximum lead generation?

Being smart does not pre-empt taking time to learn; don’t fall into the chute of being too busy (or allowing team members to be too busy) to participate in a disciplined, on-going learning process that allows for real-time adapting. The world is changing at galloping speed – what worked in the past may not work in the future. You couldn’t do your competitors a bigger favor. ■

Ellen Hoenig-Carlson is president and founder of AdvanceMarketWoRx, a consulting firm known for powering consumer and healthcare brand growth, through traditional and non-traditional marketing, leveraging critical customer interpretations and insights at key points. Voted among the 25 most powerful marketing executives by Advertising Age magazine in 1999 and 2000, Hoenig-Carlson is experienced domestically and globally in developed and emerging markets. She has led consistently in the field of DTC/P marketing since the August 1997 change in FDA regulations, spearheading more than 40 campaigns for 20 brands. She can be reached by telephone at (609) 333-0549, or visit the Web site www.advancemarketwoRx.com.