

FEEL BETTER DESIGNING HEALTH CARE INNOVATION

With service perception as poor as that of the airline industry, a numbingly conservative and risk-averse culture rivaled only by the financial industry, and the most politicized and bureaucratic organizational structure in business today, the U.S. healthcare industry is the single most challenging sector in which to innovate. But innovate it must. With an oncoming healthcare epidemic brought about by lack of exercise and poor diet, and the single largest, aging population in the history of the country, **the stage is set for a seismic shift in an industry whose patient experience has changed little over the preceding 35 years.**

Add to this scenario constantly shifting perceptions about public healthcare and the possibility of a dual healthcare system – one public to service the poor and middle class and the other, a private service for the wealthy. **In a country that prides itself on egalitarianism, this already explosive topic could become the most divisive issue in our culture.** In other words, change appears simultaneously inevitable, desired, and necessary for all parties concerned.

The challenge, however, is that most current approaches to innovation are in fact, not innovative at all, but instead incremental improvements to current processes and experiences. Processes and experiences that neither maximize the current potential of the industry nor address the rapid and significant changes that lie right around



To be fair, change has already been occurring. Across the country, hospitals, insurers, prescription drug companies, and over-the-counter consumer packaged goods brands are developing new products, services, processes, and retail offers – all designed to combat both the shifting landscape and to ward off association with the most negative aspects of the industry. As importantly, these companies are also attempting to establish and maintain strong, positive, and emotionally based relationships with their patients and subscribers.

Heretofore, however, the role of consumer strategy and design of these initiatives has been relegated to decorating around existing operational parameters (i.e. how a patient is admitted to an emergency room). Strategic consultants have utilized observational research methodologies to understand the current paradigm and to make recommendations to improve and alter the current methodologies. Likewise, **designers have been retained to improve way-finding, to create positive branding collateral and to design more zen-like, eastern-influenced surroundings deemphasizing the clinical in favor of more relaxed and meditative environs.** While each is a welcomed improvement to current practices, they are often only band-aids treating the symptom, not the cause.

Unfortunately, these prescriptions, generally lumped under the buzzword “wellness” have failed to provide holistic solutions, giving the catchphrase a bad name. Given the slow, incremental degree of change, it is little wonder that these modifications, while positive, have not added up to increased loyalty, let alone to building strong, positive and lasting relationships. Observational research alone, for example, only allows one to fix the status quo rather than challenge its relevancy and conventions entirely.

DESIGN OF LIFE ENHANCING EXPERIENCES REQUIRES AN IMMERSIVE APPROACH THAT IS ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THE LIVES OF CONSUMERS.

the corner. With provocateur Michael Moore's new documentary “Sicko” set to premiere this summer, the pharmaceutical, medical, and insurance industries are bracing for an exposé uncovering their most significant weaknesses and flaws. Depending upon your perspective, Mr. Moore's film will expose the truth or stretch it to the breaking point. Regardless of your political predilections, however, “Sicko” will likely exacerbate an already controversial topic and accelerate the call for change across all facets of the industry, and marketing and experience will not be exempt.

If medicinal brands are to establish such a degree of loyalty with their consumers, they will need to go a lot further outside their comfort zone and truly innovate once and for all. This means transformational growth and paradigm-shifting strategic decisions and creative concepts that stop expecting average, everyday people to suddenly become interested in their health. **Put differently, the healthcare industry is delusional in the belief that our “couch potato” culture will suddenly embrace health and wellness.**

Instead, the industry as a whole and the thousands of B-to-C medical and healthcare – related brands individually, must transcend the “sicko” mentality and go to where the consumers are, particularly where the younger, healthier segments of the population are living their lives – the workplace, the grocery, the gym, the restaurants, even the nightclubs and bars – to reach out and explain the most life – enhancing and immediately beneficial aspects of their offers if they are to remain relevant and viable.

This approach will be transformative because the healthcare brands will finally be trading in the emotional currency that consumers understand and appreciate – life enhancement, instead of those they would rather avoid such as illness management. Design of life – enhancing experiences requires an immersive approach that is actively involved in the lives of the consumer. Instead of mere sponsorship or “cause marketing”, healthcare brands must participate in the lives of their target consumers through the creation of pop-up events, co-sponsorships, promotional tie-ins, interactive informational sites, in-store experiences, and brand communication systems that demand and get consumers to actively participate in their health – hopefully while they are still young, healthy, and open to forming a relationship with a brand.

To accomplish this, the industry and the brands that comprise it must accept that addressing the needs of consumers only when they are sick is not only outdated, but is a self fulfilling prophecy. **Building loyalty with consumers requires that they view healthcare brands as friends, confidants, and trusted advisors.** Accomplishing this requires that we really care about and support consumers first when they are happy, well, and young so that when they really need help – when they become sick, injured, and older – they know and trust who to turn to.

As designers and strategic marketers, it's our responsibility to help the healthcare industry transcend the bureaucracy and risk – aversion to create truly people focused innovation. Innovation that celebrates the value the industry can provide in creating healthy lives.

- Mike Bills, Managing Partner, the Americas

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