



## Medical, health and science communications: Public relations trends in Germany

by Ruth Bastuck

### Introduction

For a long time, the healthcare PR sector in Germany seemed to be an orderly playing field with predefined roles for companies, agencies, print media, doctors, and patients. Today, the business is undergoing sweeping changes that are affecting every one of these players. Complex market conditions, an altered media landscape and society's shifting media habits are major changes. Therefore modern communications strategies must not only convey the medical facts of a new treatment to an expert audience (**medical communications**). More than that, it is a matter of establishing a way of 'thinking outside the box', across disciplines and media. This thinking focuses on both patients and consumers (**health communications**), and takes the scientific and research effort behind a new treatment into account when addressing the research community, universities, funding agencies and political opinion-makers (**science communications**). It goes without saying that this kind of perspective demands new ideas and fosters new trends in public relations.

### Medical communications—Between print crisis and online boom

Leading daily newspapers and magazines have long been worried about their dwindling advertising income. Publishing houses are discontinuing publications, reducing editorial staff, pooling departments and working more with freelance journalists. This feeling of uncertainty has spilled over onto medical publishers. The medical print media landscape in Germany has traditionally been very broad. General practitioners, for example, can choose from more than 30 journals, and many specialised niche journals figure prominently on the market. The segment catering to GPs has been hit especially hard by the crisis. A case in point is the *Ärztliche Praxis*, a journal with a long tradition that was just recently discontinued. Other publishing houses concentrating their forces under a common brand, like 'Springer Medizin'. However many publishers are seeking other sources of income, notably by expanding their online products. German doctors are increasingly looking for information on the Web. Roughly two out of three GPs and internists use the Internet for advanced professional training; 45 per cent take part in Internet discussion forums [1]. Many physicians find they need to market their practices professionally on the Internet, because today's patients expect an online introduction to the surgery's team and its medical services.

*Medical communications* in general addresses medical experts, i.e. doctors in clinics and surgeries as well as pharmacists and other specialists. Particularly in the field of prescription drugs, communication with experts remains a mainstay of PR. The doctor is still the ultimate authority, deciding whether or not a drug will be prescribed. Even patient communications measures (e.g. Direct-To-Consumer campaigns) will only be successful if doctors have been convinced first. So, will everything remain the same in medical PR? No, it won't, and communications managers must be prepared for a new era in specialised PR.

### Classic press conferences are becoming rarer

To begin with, companies' expectations have changed. Today, more than ever, they are demanding strategic and creative PR approaches that convey messages across several media. Where the classic press conference was once the standard tool of medical communications, it is being used more sporadically today. The reasons for this development are that medical publishing houses are being consolidated and the print media market in general is shrinking. The approach of press conferences has changed, with the aim of intensifying the dialogue with journalists. This has fostered new settings and event formats, e.g. more informal talk sessions and small roundtable or 'meet-the-expert' get-togethers that facilitate in-depth discussions with specialists.

### Digital formats becoming more popular

Live video streams of events at congresses and press conferences have long been the rule in some industries. The healthcare sector has been slower to embrace such practices, but digital formats are making inroads. More publishing houses are offering platforms for video podcasts, accommodating online inquiries and enabling the publication of electronic newsletters. Advanced training for doctors via the Internet is on the rise. Certified continuing medical education (CME) is usually offered in print and online, giving doctors a choice of communications channels.

### Supporting medical practice marketing

Direct communication with the doctor is becoming increasingly important in the communications mix targeting expert audiences. That is why PR strategies aimed at supporting the marketing activities of medical practices are gaining in significance. Doctors need to know how to go about staging patient events in their surgeries and attracting the necessary attention in the local media. German doctors also need advice on how to broach the topic

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Figure 1 Elements of Modern Communications in the Healthcare Sector



of privately reimbursed individual healthcare services (IGEL) during consultations with patients. A whole new field of activity is opening up here for PR.

### A good medical writer pool is a must

A fundamental prerequisite for professional communication that addresses an expert audience is always an accurate and credible representation of the issue, often a very complex one. PR agencies and the press departments of companies need good medical writers who understand the subject matter and are able to present the topic in a form that is tailored to the target group and satisfies specified demands. Agencies are well-advised to have a pool of medical writers with different strengths on hand. Obviously, writing a review article for a sophisticated science journal demands a more formal academic style, while engaging PR copy calls for a more journalistic approach that breaks topics down so they are comprehensible for a wider audience.

### Health communications—New chances and challenges

Health communications traditionally addresses patients. Keeping doctors and pharmacists informed has always been essential, but developments in recent years have increased the importance of communicating with patients. With magazine articles, TV programmes and many websites providing health-related information, doctors and pharmacists often encounter very well-informed patients. Patients in general are more health-conscious and want to exert greater control over their health. All this has given rise to a tremendous demand for communication on the part of this target group. This opens up many opportunities for the PR sector, but also poses challenges. For example, in Europe the law on advertising in the health care system (Heilmittel-Werbegesetz, HWG) still prohibits direct communication with patients about prescription drugs. It takes smart strategies geared towards credible communications to succeed with a PR campaign on this terrain. Reasonable expectations and a sustainable approach are essential because the forces that influence opinions and change consumer behaviour act over a long period of time. Success will also hinge on print publishers' ability to adapt to the challenges of the new media age.

### Focused PR in the print sector

Despite the increasing importance of the Internet, print media remain a significant channel of information for health-related topics in Germany—witness the fact that major publishing houses are marketing new formats like *Stern Gesundheit* and *Spiegel Wissen*. However, companies and PR agencies need to rethink their approach, factoring in publishing houses' increasingly strained resources. Even major publishers such as Springer and Bauer are working with much smaller editorial departments than just a few years ago. The scope of health communications measures in the print sector is also changing. Elaborate and time-consuming media events are giving way to a more personal and focused approach. It is essential for PR managers to know what topics are currently relevant and when they have the best chance of being addressed—not to mention who is the best person in an editor's office to approach. Success comes to those who help editorial departments emphasise their role as advisors.

### Online communication on the upswing

While doctors constitute a target group whose media habits are changing at a rather leisurely pace, patients' habits are evolving much faster. Best-agers, the target group that is so important to health communications, account for the fastest growth rates among Internet users today. More than 60 per cent of 50- to 59-year-olds are now on the Web [2].

The trend towards Online PR is clearly picking up steam. Some companies now employ PR managers for online communication and PR agencies are key trend scouts on the online frontier. Many press departments have shifted media co-operations into the online realm because Internet forums catering for special interest groups can be used to target precisely this audience. There is a general trend towards greater visualisation and a stronger focus on dialogue in online communication, for example incorporating animated graphics into online newsletters or the increasingly popular use of video podcasts.

### Social media is empowering patients

'Dialogue' has become another buzzword in Internet and especially patient communication, heralding the rise of social media enabling interactive discourse across Internet platforms. Once merely passive recipients of information, they are now engaging in dialogues with other concerned and interested parties, tracking blogs and online consultations >

Figure 2 Modern Media Structures Require Dialog Focused Communications



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> or asking pointed questions in patient forums. Journalists and the media are no longer the sole gatekeepers of information. Players in the healthcare market are certainly aware of this trend towards social media, since it offers companies the opportunity to communicate on an equal footing with relevant target groups. A study conducted by the University of Applied Sciences in Cologne [3] shows that bloggers definitely want information from companies. Many companies are still reluctant to engage in social media and Twitter, perhaps because using these channels means relinquishing some control over one's messages. It is, however, imperative to monitor discussions concerning issues of interest to the company. The opinion-making potential of Twitter and the like is palpable, and companies are well-advised to extend their media monitoring to cover this area.

### Science communications— Emerging role in the PR-Mix

Yet another trend in PR is the rising significance of science communications, which is a diverse field that addresses different target groups. Simply launching a new drug is not enough to succeed on the market, but that another approach is needed to convince all key healthcare players that a new treatment has merit. Science communications does things like stress the scientific and research effort behind a drug to underpin its credibility. It also gives journalists the opportunity to imbue what appears to be a rather bland academic topic with emotion, for example by flavouring the article with a vivid personality story about the agent's 'inventor'. It also entails activities that encourage communication within the scientific community and supports research facilities' efforts to share information with a broader audience.

### Science PR as image factor

Even top-notch science journalists value a talk session with a small but select group of scientists as a source of information for a focus article or editorial. The key to success is to enable open scientific discourse, freed from the all-too-constraining restrictions of marketing demands. Points can be scored by providing well founded press material that offers real added value, e.g. sophisticated visualizations or well founded research content.

When approaching a top level journalist it is important to choose the right moment. For example, a company on the verge of licensing a new drug offers the perfect opportunity to contact a top-level newspaper or magazine and offer a special interview session with the CEO or the director of international research. A move like this promises success when working with the mainstream press that shapes public opinion. Science communications provides valuable support for a company's image-enhancing PR. Personal relationships with editors and freelance authors, developed and nurtured over time, are important in establishing a feeling of trust which is essential for good communication.

### Science PR to support emerging market access strategies

Today the development of specific market access strategies is an important part of communications in the healthcare market. For example in these difficult economic times, increasingly demanding healthcare policies are posing challenges for many healthcare and pharmaceutical companies. The days of simply informing prescribers about a drug's benefits are over. Today, authorities like Germany's Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) assess drugs' benefits, compelling pharmaceutical companies to argue their cases. Other regulations like reference pricing and the need to directly negotiate individual pricing and discounts with health care insurance funds are challenging. On top there is a broad discussion on so called "Scheininnovationen" (supposed me-too products) that also influences the climate for market access.

Companies are responding by installing specific market access strategies in which they step up efforts to communicate with the people who make fiscal and political decisions. An important part of such market access strategies is direct communications and negotiations with political key opinion leaders and payers including health insurance funds.

Many healthcare companies also want to use concerted PR to voice their arguments in the health policy debate. This is a tall order to fill. It requires striking a delicate balance, framing the issue in a health policy and socio-political context without the company representative being written off as a lobbyist with a biased agenda. And it demands the courage to take part in an open discourse, even engaging opponents without complaint or condescension, as well the support of relevant opinion-makers. This is why the quest for alliances is an important aspect of health policy-related communication. PR tools in this field also include informal background discussions and health policy roundtables as well as classic media relations like arranging interviews and distributing press releases.

### Conclusion

Manifold changes in the healthcare market will have a lasting impact on PR strategies and tools. Complex challenges are inspiring new ways of thinking in many areas. This is true of medical, health and science communications, and in the ways healthcare companies deal with health and socio-political developments and increasingly difficult market access. Only those professionals who are able to work in multiple dimensions and persistently cultivate all relevant fields of communication are ready to face the future.

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