



Meeow! **Marketing medicine in Germany**

by Ursula Schoenberg

I once heard a public relations professional sigh "Trying to implement a marketing plan with doctors is like trying to herd cats!" I can only agree wholeheartedly with this observation. Please don't get me wrong. I like cats. I also like doctors (one would hope so, as I'm married to one). But both species are (mostly) highly intelligent and independent-minded entities, and this can make working with them a real challenge, as the Americans put it. Here's a case in point:

I was approached by the CEO of one of Germany's most recent "inventions", a "Medizinisches Versorgungszentrum" or MVZ for short, who needed PR and marketing support. Let me give you a little background on this: when Germany was re-unified in the 1990s, one of the fiercest battles waged between East and West German health system reformers concerned the East German polyclinics. Polyclinics pooled personnel and technical resources to supply outpatient care, and their organisational structure was fundamentally sound, if deplorably under-financed. West German physicians' organisations lobbied successfully to disband the polyclinics and have specialists go into private practice. Now new legislation has strengthened the position of the GP, putting specialists under considerable economic pressure and encouraging the formation of cost-effective co-operatives, or, you guessed it, MVZs.

My job was to craft a corporate wording for the MVZ and to prepare a regional press conference to market it. I will spare you the story of the image brochure. (Although the scene where I was shown the first layouts with the "gynaecology" section graced with a picture of an obstetrical chair were pure Edward Albee). The real test was the press conference. Though the strict regulations on how doctors may advertise in Germany have eased up a little bit in the last couple of years, it is still auspicious to tread lightly in some areas. You have to package the message right, because if the news is just "there's a new medical practice in town", the press will not be beating down your door.

You need to find an interesting teaser topic to dovetail with your client's news and then build an appealing story around it that will convince journalists to come and eat your buffet. We decided to host the event on a fitting World Health Day, and I was delighted to find that there were some brand-new data on an innovative drug used in one of the main treatment areas of the MVZ that we could factor in. Having demarcated the broad approach with the CEO, who, incidentally, was wonderful and needed no convincing or explaining to, I was ready to start with the nitty-gritty of preparing the press conference panel with the resident MVZ physicians.

When I got the doctors together and explained what we planned to do, reactions ranged from the blasé to the hysterical. Unsurprisingly, these reactions correlated directly with

the frequency with which the individuals had been in direct contact with journalists, enhanced by their perceptions on how subsequent coverage had made them look. For the briefing, I decided to focus on the following three aspects, tailoring them to each panel participant and his or her level of experience with the press.

Mindset

There is a fundamental difference in the mindsets of physicians and journalists. The journalist is interested in one thing: the story, i.e. the answer to the underlying question "What is going to interest my reader?" When he or she has the feeling of having found the story, everything else falls into place. The physician is also interested in one thing: the correct diagnosis and treatment of an illness. But due to the complexities of the human body, there lingers the niggling worry whether he or she has really taken every vital aspect into account and reached the right conclusions. This may lead to feelings of insecurity that can effect other areas. Which is why I went to some lengths to explain that a question posed by a journalist during a press conference is not necessarily a direct attack on a speaker's integrity or grasp of subject, but JUST A QUESTION or to put a Buddhist slant on it, to find a branch of the path to THE STORY.

Language

There seems to be an ubiquitous preconception among German members of academia (including doctors) that for something to be deemed truly important, it must be explained in as convoluted and complex a manner as humanly possible. This makes my job so delightful. In my opinion, there is nothing as satisfying as taking a totally outlandish piece of expert-ese and converting it to something that your parakeet can understand. I did this with various texts that were to constitute the press kit – gently but firmly re-iterating to the respective authors that no, journalists were not total imbeciles, but were not necessarily on a day-to-day footing with the alpha-beta-gamma-lipido-chromo-thingy.

Coverage

Last but not least, I had to do what I call "expectations management" with regard to the quantity and the quality of the coverage. Firstly, you have to explain to people that though they think their news is extremely important, it takes work and planning to make sure the press think so too (see above). Secondly, if the press takes an interest, the important thing is the general gist of the coverage, and not whether each word is exactly correct or placed at precisely the right spot. Especially with fast-paced media like television, if interviewees come over as reasonably personable and competent, you have scored a huge success, because the meta-message the viewer (i. e. patients) receives is "Wow, my doctor was on TV!" Of course there is such a thing as bad coverage. But if you have invited journalists for the first time, like in this case, and your management has not been going around putting its hand in the till or harming patients, chances are pretty slim that someone is going to start a smear campaign against you.

The press conference turned out to be a success, garnering positive television and print coverage. A few weeks afterwards, I visited Helsinki and chanced upon a truly amazing street artist with an animal show. The star of the show was a cat that squirmed through a narrow tube and then walked a tightrope – QED.

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