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eSampling: A new standard in today's Pharmaceutical sampling initiatives

To discuss eSampling effectively one must first define it for discussion. There are a host of opinions regarding what constitutes eSampling. I agree most succinctly with the definition from S. Jaya Krishna, Faculty Member & Consulting Editor, ICFAI University, and author of the book, "E-Trends in Pharma Marketing". Mr. Krishna defines eSampling as follows:

"Electronic Sampling uses online tools/promotional websites accessed by physicians to collect the details of sample distribution. It provides pharmaceutical companies with a cost-effective way to reach physicians who have been routinely under-covered by sales representatives. It allows manufacturers to meet increasingly challenging sales and marketing goals by reducing the significant costs associated with the traditional sample distribution process."

"eSampling" is sometimes confused with "alternative sampling". Alternative sampling provides incentives other than actual product directly to the HCP or consumer such as vouchers, coupons, loyalty cards, or trial quantities at the point of sale. eSampling, on the other hand, offers the HCP the ability to receive detail information and place an order online, receiving product samples without any required outside intervention. The most advanced level of such eSampling can be found in systems such as J Knipper & Company's "MySampleCloset.com®" where HCPs can view literature or eDetails, and utilize "electronic signature" for a completely paperless ordering experience. So with eSampling now well defined, let's discuss some of the drivers and the many benefits.

Today's economic conditions are forcing pharmaceutical manufacturers to seek new ways to sustain sales force effectiveness despite the reduction of those sales forces. Even more challenging for manufacturers are the current sales conditions as physician group practices restrict the access of the remaining sales reps by putting a larger number of physicians behind a smaller number of gatekeepers. As eSampling has become a highly accepted, and sometimes preferred, method of sample procurement by many physicians, and virtual sample closet solutions have advanced in flexibility, robust feature sets, and ease of deployment, the use of eSampling solutions is expanding dramatically.

eSampling provides the ability to cover thousands more physicians at an affordable cost and to expand coverage in unserved or underserved HCP markets. It can also play a part for promoting brands which, although they are well covered by reps, get a lower share of voice during the detail.

As more effective technology driven and delivered marketing methodologies are being produced, incorporating powerful CRM databases, and tracking multiple e-marketing and eSampling efforts across various brand initiatives, eSampling is becoming a focal point. In cases where budget is limited or time to launch is minimal, such eSampling initiatives have taken on the “primary” responsibility of the sampling campaign. These broader, highly powerful, and deep reaching marketing solutions have even been utilized as the core strategic effort for “new product launches”.

eSampling is the perfect fit for Multi-Channel Marketing in Non-Personal Promotion (NPP) and Healthcare Professional Relationship Marketing (HCP RM) initiatives. In both cases, multiple marketing channels take advantage (or at least SHOULD take advantage) of longitudinal or panel data to leverage the preferences of the target audience and achieve the best possible results from the marketing effort. eSampling fills the needs of many of the preferences which speak to limited face time, flexible schedule, simplicity, and of course “online” availability. Truly effective NPP and HCP RM solutions utilize a flexible and efficient response data structure that provides for ongoing iterative analysis of these multi channel efforts. Such solutions allow for real-time or near real-time monitoring of associated marketing and continued collection of preference data thus allowing for proper adjustment of strategy and tactics to increase the effectiveness of eSampling components among others.

The real test of any sampling solution is its ROI. With today’s economic conditions and budgetary constraints, marketing is often one of the first targets of spending cuts due to the misperception of elusiveness in the measurement of its ROI. Well developed eSampling solutions provide excellent statistical data for incorporation into marketing’s ROI analysis. The cost of deployment and operation is fractional with respect to traditional sampling efforts. eSampling’s ability to respond to strategic changes in audience needs, budget shifts, and increased or variable targets (as in the case of Vacant Territory Management) is excellent. Costs associated with these changes are often incremental. The best solutions are highly scalable and can offer the facilitation of additional products and/or literature at minimal up-front cost and with added cost savings through consolidated shipping of multiple product samples and associated marketing pieces.

It is a fact that more and more Healthcare Providers are turning to online resources for product information. An ever growing number of these providers are taking advantage of online sampling solutions as they find themselves hampered with busier schedules, tighter operational budgets, and ultimately less opportunity for face to face meetings with sales representatives. Manhattan Research’s 2009 e-Pharma physician study estimates that roughly 87% of all physicians now use the Internet to find pharmaceutical, biotech, and device product information online. They also estimate that 38% of this group prefers eSampling over traditional sampling methods. This is not simply a trend; it is a cultural shift in provider preference, inside of a broader culture that is moving more and more online every day.