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FEATURE

Modern Times: New Avenues of Orthopedic Product Awareness



AAOS talk explains how OEMs are using the Web for brand identity with customers

"If it keeps up, man will atrophy all his limbs but the push-button finger."
~Frank Lloyd Wright

Probably no truer words have ever been written, although the prospect of man losing the use of limbs wouldn't bode well for the orthopedic industry as it relies on motion of the human body to have purpose. But what can be learned from this poignant quote is that the forward motion of new technology, specifically the Internet, cannot be ignored.

It is no great speculation, then, that the majority of potential orthopedic patients seeking information via the Internet will increase dramatically in the years to come as the baby boomer generation (and the rest of the US population) ages. In fact, according to Eric N. Berkowitz, speaking at the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS) annual meeting in Chicago at the end of March, nearly 56.1 million adults used the Internet to find healthcare information in 2003, compared with an average of 7.8 million in 1996.

"The Internet is a significant source of information regarding treatment options, surgical procedures and medical devices," said Berkowitz.

This knowledge poses an opportunity for orthopedic manufacturers to promote brand recognition via the World Wide Web. For instance, patients researching a surgical procedure such as a hip or knee replacement can be directed to manufacturer Web sites, where they can learn more about the surgery while building "brand" loyalty to and trust in the company educating them.

Furthermore, as surgeons ramp up efforts to promote their practices via the Internet, device manufacturers have yet another unique opportunity to embrace the Web as an outlet for product awareness, as they work with surgeons to develop mutual links—ie, a surgeon can link to a manufacturer's site so the patient can learn more about a product or procedure, and the manufacturer can link the site of a surgeon using its product.

But that's not the only avenue in which manufacturers are finding the Internet alluring for enhancing business. According to the research firm Frost & Sullivan, "The increasing use of e-commerce will help manufacturers increase awareness of their products and create patient and end user communities that can be translated into customer pools."

Much of the growing dependence on e-commerce can be attributed to cost-containment concerns, which are forcing orthopedic manufacturers to use unconventional sales techniques such as online purchases of medical equipment.

An excellent example of this increase in Internet awareness is the

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formation of the Global Healthcare Exchange (GHX) by several medical device companies in an effort to leverage the potential of e-commerce and improve efficiencies in the healthcare supply chain.

Revolutionary Technology Presented

Perhaps one of the newest technologies manufacturers can promote via e-commerce channels is hip resurfacing. Smith & Nephew is expected to be the first company to introduce the Birmingham Hip Resurfacing system pending FDA approval. According to Goldman Sachs Global Investment research estimates, the hip resurfacing market could reach $400 million in the United States by 2010.

Orthopedic surgeon D. McMinn, speaking at an exhibit hosted by Smith & Nephew at AAOS, reviewed the benefits of the technology and noted a remarkable claim that, thanks to this technology, only "one pinhead of metal debris [was] produced over a period of 15 years."

Hip resurfacing replaces the two surfaces of the hip joint, unlike total hip replacement, which completely removes the head of the femur. CEO of Smith & Nephew Sir Christopher O'Donnell said of the technology, "The benefit is that you spare the bone, since you remove relatively little of it. Therefore, it's very stable, making it good for more active and younger patients."

A Hollywood Connection

Not only can technology, the Web and e-commerce provide a springboard for orthopedic manufacturers, so can Hollywood. Radio and television ads, coupled with high profile celebrities, are giving new orthopedic technologies high visibility. The AAOS meeting was a springboard for launching orthopedic manufacturers' promotional/education campaigns featuring household names.

As the baby boomer generation ages, and our life span increases, the orthopedic industry is projected to grow substantially in the upcoming years, and device manufacturers need to be aware of the emerging avenues for product awareness and visibility to reach the more technologically savvy consumers. And with less than four years left in what has been coined the "Bone and Joint Decade," by the United Nations, the World Health Organization and 37 countries, now is the time to capitalize on that demographic. ❖

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