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Public Relations' Role in the Pharmaceutical Industry

Health care is a prevalent aspect of American life. In 2017, this industry utilized \$3.5 trillion of the government's budget, approximately 18 percent of its total gross domestic profit, according to the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget (2018, p. 2). This is a major topic of debate in society because the United States is one of the few developed countries without universal health care. On one hand, if all citizens are entitled to health care, the United States will spend less of its budget on funding this industry and overall public health would improve. However, the other side of this argument, according to healthcare.procon.org, is that the government is neither responsible nor equipped to provide health care (2018, p. 3). Public relations plays a major role in health care because it serves as a management function for the company or corporation, and advocates for the public by remaining transparent. The industry includes fields such as pharmaceuticals, hospitals, and health care organizations. For the purpose of this paper, I will be writing about the role of public relations in pharmaceutical companies.

Public Relations in the Health Care Industry

Without the health care industry, individuals would have limited access to goods and services that are fundamental to their well-being. The pharmaceutical industry allows access for individuals to both over-the-counter and prescription medications. Public relations' role in this industry is to ensure that individuals are receiving the most up-to-date and accurate information regarding such products, while conserving the company's image. Next, hospitals must maintain a positive reputation within society to secure individuals' trust in their level of care (Parsons, 2001,

p. 21). In doing so, public relations professionals carry an important role in maintaining a balance between honesty and securing patient's right to privacy. Lastly, health care organizations play an important role in maintaining institutions such as elderly and assisted living facilities. Public relations practitioners must recognize individuals' needs in order to improve institutions and subsequently increase their credibility in society.

History

Public relations within the pharmaceutical industry has evolved substantially throughout the past several decades. The 1950's and 1960's were a period of time when public relations practitioners in this field felt as if they had the public's unending support (Heath, 2000, p. 571). As a result, they seldom focused on creating awareness or gaining public approval. Additionally, the industry experienced a shift from traditional to more individualized forms of health care, causing marketing departments to become more highly valued as they became faced with an increased amount of duties. Furthermore, practitioners focused on managing consumer criticism and improving their image in the public eye. In the 1970's and 1980's, health care providers struggled financially due to an increased number of individuals seeking health insurance. As a result, public relations professionals were in high demand in order to reconstruct means of communication between hospitals and organizations, and their publics. Presently, public relations is a major component in health care since practitioners work to increase media coverage, allowing the public to make cognizant decisions based on available information.

Advantages

Working in the pharmaceutical industry is a favorable career because one's work contributes to the greater good of society. Pharmaceuticals prevent individuals from suffering and improve the lives of those affected by unfortunate circumstances. Moreover, this industry

allows its employees to benefit the health of others and understand society's needs in order to assist in its improvement: "Pfizer has launched a programme to give away medicines for free to newly unemployed Americans who have lost their health insurance. The idea of the programme, which is called MAINTAIN (Medicines Assistance for Those who Are in Need), was proposed by Pfizer employees, who were witnessing those around them struggling after losing their jobs" (2009, p. 14). Without firsthand insight, these employees would not have been able to see the need for change and the subsequent opportunity to improve the image of their company in the eyes of the media. Finally, working in this industry allows one to be exposed to a broad range of people of different demographics. This is beneficial because such interactions allow one to gain new perspectives and view first-hand the positive impacts of their work on a large amount of people.

Disadvantages

Working in the pharmaceutical industry allows one to positively impact the health and well-being of citizens; however, it is a high-stake industry with a potential for detrimental outcomes. Since this industry manages potentially fatal products, pharmaceutical companies must always have a crisis communication plan. This means that the company is prepared in case something goes wrong. In an attempt to prevent crises from occurring in the first place, companies must state all potential side effects and consequences so that all publics are aware (Reis, 2018, p. 32). Companies often are reluctant to be entirely explicit due to the potential for lost revenue. If a pharmaceutical company shares all information, including negative side effects, customers may be reluctant to purchase their product. Moreover, it is difficult to balance a desire for profit with a desire to benefit the well-being others (Heath, 2000, p. 572). In some instances, public relations practitioners must decide whether or not they are acting in the best interest of the

company or of the consumer. Lastly, one must have proficient knowledge in the subject matter which may constitute additional years of schooling or training. Having a deep understanding of the intricacies of the industry is beneficial since information about the company must be accurate. Likewise, it is important for employees to be informed because of the importance of control over information, limiting the masses' ability to make uneducated assumptions (Clausen, 2017, p. 18).

Similarities

There is a lot of overlap between communications activities essential to public relations in pharmaceuticals and other industries. Fraser P. Seitel, publicist and author, suggests that health care public relations is similar to other fields since the overall aim of the profession is to "harmonize long-term relationships" (Heath, 2000, p. 571). Additionally, practitioners must be adaptable to given circumstances due to the unpredictability of society. Similar to other industries, new and innovative ideas are always in high demand in order to make health care a more efficient and cutting-edge field. Practitioners in the pharmaceutical industry, as in other fields, are always looking for product promotion in order to maximize sales. Lastly, they use a variety of media forms to expose as many possible people to their product in hopes of targeting those who may benefit.

Differences

While the main principles of public relations in pharmaceuticals are similar to other fields, there are many differing intricacies stemming from the complexity of the field. High demand and prices complicate this industry, since such factors impact a patient's ability to access pharmaceuticals which may be imperative to their survival (Lattimore, Baskin, & Heiman, Toth, 2011, 332). Additionally, it is not uncommon for individuals to be denied access to medications

due to factors such as insurance or geographical location. While crisis situations occur in a majority of industries, it becomes much more complex when dealing with pharmaceuticals since a practitioner's job is to protect both the citizens and the agency (Wilcox, Cameron, & Reber, 2014, p. 557). In the instance of an individual negatively affected by a pharmaceutical, it is the practitioner's responsibility to both portray the company in the best light and tend to the needs of the patient. Lastly, it is often difficult to find investors willing to donate money to pharmaceutical companies due to the public's tendency to criticize industry-backed research (Reis, 2018, p. 32). Furthermore, it is exponentially imperative that pharmaceutical companies are transparent in their information in order to secure the public's

Special Skills and Training

As a public relations practitioner, it is important to fully master the intricacies of the pharmaceutical industry to represent a brand's image and accurately relay its messages. To work in this industry, one must have prior knowledge of or learn about medical science to know how to best suit the needs of the industry (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2013, 12-13). Without proficient knowledge about pharmaceuticals, it becomes difficult for a public relations practitioner to fully comprehend the industry and its needs. In some instances, medical professionals who have mastered the ins and outs of the industry are later taught public relations concepts. However, more commonly, public relations practitioners must take a step backwards to grasp the subject matter by attending additional training.

Future Prospects

Since the industry is constantly evolving, public relations within pharmaceutical companies must adapt to such changes by acting quickly and in the best interest of the consumer. Pharmaceutical companies have adopted three-dimensional printing for purposes such as

prosthetics and customized medication (Lau, 2006, pp. 28-29). Due to advanced technology, companies are able to operate more efficiently by manufacturing products specific to the needs of the patient. Furthermore, the pharmaceutical industry is beginning to take interest in fields such as nanotechnology and virtual reality, in order to make positive changes for the benefit of the consumer. From a financial standpoint, one of the largest flaws is a patient's out-of-pocket costs, since such costs are not fixed and instead are determined by circumstances such as insurance (Lilly, 2018, p. 12). Medications may cost one patient three times as much money as another patient in a different city; therefore, pharmaceutical companies are working to standardize costs and subsequently improve sales.

Personal Interest

Despite the positive impacts of pharmaceuticals on society, the subject matter itself does not interest me personally. While the constantly-evolving nature of this industry is appealing, my limited knowledge regarding the subject matter causes me to feel as if I would be more well-suited in a different industry. Additionally, this industry puts a lot of pressure on its employees due to the potential risks at stake. Along with long hours during the week, a public relations practitioner in this field must always be on call in case of an emergency, due to their imperative role in crisis communications. It is very difficult to work in an industry where one wrong move, such as false promotion or neglecting to inform the public of a potential side effect, may result in fatality.

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