



10 ways...

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to reach midlife women with health messages

A practical guide by Kelley Connors

Midlife is a challenging and dynamic time for the tens of millions of Generation X-ers and baby-boomer women today and for the healthcare marketers who care about their wellbeing in midlife, too. It's a significant time period that lasts three decades and many more years than women in earlier generations enjoyed.

If lifestyle changes are made early enough in midlife during pre-menopause, many common conditions of aging can be prevented, like osteoporosis, heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers.

It's perfect timing to acknowledge and participate as communicators in this sea change. For this year marks the 20th anniversary of the Office of Women's Health, which pioneered women's inclusion in clinical trials and – just 50 years ago this year – Margaret Sanger helped to introduce the availability of the Pill, a single prescription that singlehandedly represented the women's

health icon for decades. While this year's milestones are significant reminders of progress for women's health, new product innovations as well as adoption of social technologies will accelerate progress even more – as more women turn 50 than 30, and seek quality-of-life solutions that make 60 'the new 40'.

Today, the holy grail for marketers is not simply to create a series of influential transactions with women; the holy grail is to gain women's trust and advocacy. Women have the desire and motivation to make the world a better place and now have the technology and tools that support them in connecting and inspiring others to do the same.

It's well known that women make or influence more than 85% of all health and healthcare decisions, but, ironically, a landmark global study, conducted by the Boston Consulting Group and published in the Fall 2009 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, described the new 'female economy'

but noted healthcare as one of six major industries that does a poor job of marketing to women. Listed below are some thoughts about how to turn that around.

1. RECOGNISE MIDLIFE WOMEN'S POWER

It's an unprecedented time for women in the US who want to share their voice. Never before have women entered politics at the local, regional or national level in more numbers, and women are starting their own small businesses at twice the rate of men.

The table is set for women to inform the debate around national health policy issues such as healthcare reform and major public health initiatives that impact women's and their family's health. Women's voices have never been stronger and they're sharing their opinions increasingly online and in a more socially active environment.

So, if women are raising their voices as leaders and change agents, why aren't

marketers more successful in making an impact with them and taking their share of a whopping \$800m that working women in the US alone contribute to the US economy?

2. RECOGNISE MIDLIFE WOMEN'S COMPLEXITY

For a growing number of women aged over 40, midlife represents a defining moment as they become mothers for the first time and some begin menopause before their child turns five. For other women, midlife is a time of focusing on self-care as the obligations around motherhood diminish and the 'empty nest' time period provides more opportunity for re-examining life and choosing a new career or becoming an entrepreneur.

Research shows that, at this time in life, women connect with each other to provide support systems that help deal with stress and difficult life experiences. Physically, this quality 'girlfriend time' helps women to create more serotonin – a neurotransmitter that helps combat depression and can create a general feeling of wellbeing.

Clearly, these paradoxes in midlife confound marketers, and a one-size-fits-all description is neither desirable nor possible. "Women have multidimensional roles that make marketing to the 50-plus woman especially complex, unless you dig deeper and recognise what's truly motivating her," says Carol Osborn, PhD, Senior Strategist for VibrantNation.com and co-author of *Vibrant Nation: What Women 50+ Know, Think, Do and Buy* (Reily/Orsborn).

As women continue to work well into their sixties, and with additional elderly caregiving responsibilities, work-life issues are of paramount concern. There is a need to aggregate services and provide complete solutions for caregivers. But, fundamentally, healthcare communicators must strive to understand the emotions of this life-stage so the products and communication resonate.

3. LISTEN TO REAL WOMEN IN REAL TIME

Consumer insights are the lifeblood of any marketing program, and are critical when communicating with women real-time. Healthcare communications and public relations professionals can make significant contributions to building brands and organisations that benefit women's health and wellbeing by harnessing social insights, not merely observations.

There are many online strategies aimed at listening to women that can be executed simply and fine-tuned with text analytics. As Carol Osborn notes: "Women over 50 bring a richness to their conversations online, unlike what you might find when they know marketers are listening... such as in traditional market research behind the glass mirror."

Importantly, with almost two million women aged over 55 each month on Facebook, the top social networking site may represent a treasure trove of information, especially in areas of women, business, health, fitness and leadership. While women over 55 may not necessarily share their own health information on Facebook, it can guide direction to deeper levels of social networking sites where women do congregate to talk about health and wellbeing in context of their life-stage and personal experience. Whatever your method, meaningful insights need to be the goal of any impactful social listening effort.

4. GO BEYOND THE BRAND

"Women don't love brands," says Mike Silverstein, co-author of *Women Want More*, the book inspired by the Boston Consulting Group's Global Study. What the global research showed was that women do cherish a sense of fulfillment based on top values. This is the hallmark of a nuanced but values-based approach to marketing health with women. This is a business opportunity that changes how you shape your brand or organisation's

strategy, how you allocate your spending, whom you invite to the dining-room table and how well your social skills are executed.

Marketing with women effectively releases women from being captive to one-way messages and transforms their role from passive to active co-creators of the brand. The focus, however, is not on the brand directly, but on a sense of fulfillment that comes from their most important values like love, health and security. In achieving their own sense of fulfillment, women want to be able to give back and support other women on their journey to improve health or wellbeing. It's about women becoming their own best health and wellness advocates.

5. SEND AN INVITATION

Women over 40 are typically not as influenced by external events such as sales and marketing – so they certainly don't want to be targeted – but they have shown up in droves in online communities and social networking sites and typically belong to more than two or three that they enjoy participating in.

The process of social networking – such as sharing their opinions, supporting other women and learning about health – are sources of fulfillment as women choose to connect with 'women like them'. With almost half of women online seeking health information through forums, message boards, blogs and other social networking sites, the opportunities to engage are obvious.

"As long as women feel safe in a community, they will feel free to express their personal viewpoints, which adds authenticity and attracts other women 'like them', increasing a community's value," says Toby Bloomberg, founder of Diva Marketing Blog and recognised by *Forbes* as a top woman blogger.

What's interesting is that most women care more about being invited to a social network

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where their friends and women like them are congregating than they care about the size of the network. In fact, women are three times less likely to care about the size of their network than men. Once again size matters for men... but, it turns out, not for women.

Put another way, women prefer more personal attention, as they desire to connect with others like them. This sheds more light on the power of social media as a marketing opportunity and business opportunity for brands and organisations that want to connect with women, not just reach them.

6. DEVELOP SHAREABLE CONTENT

By developing content that is socially shareable, communicators build value and trust. Shareable content includes sponsored music and inspirational videos that have the power to ignite support for women's health. For example, Medline, the manufacturer of pink latex gloves, help fund mammograms for women who can not afford them through the Breast Cancer Research Foundation. They created a video in 2009 called the Pink Glove Dance. It started with healthcare workers at one hospital in Portland, Oregon, dancing to raise awareness. Today, the video has virally attracted more than 11 million views, and tens of thousands of emails and events spurred throughout the country. Its 2010 sequel video features more than 4,000 healthcare workers and breast cancer survivors from San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge to New York's Times Square and many sites in between. That's the power of sharing to fund awareness and save women's lives.

7. GIVE WOMEN A VOICE

As healthcare communicators and educators, we're often focused on the typical 'patient profile'. Have you ever explored how you might create the typical 'woman's voice'? If there was such a thing as typical, the challenge would be easy enough. But for marketers who address key emotional, physical or spiritual aspects of women in midlife, creating a rich context around their concerns, dreams, desires and passions is both challenging and critical.

That's precisely why Robin Strongin, founder of the healthcare blog 'Disruptive

Women in Health Care' invited influential women passionately engaged in healthcare innovation to share their voices through a common online platform. The voices serve as a rallying cry for women to disrupt the status quo. Since its launch in 2008, 'Disruptive Women in Health Care' has posted blog articles with headlines such as *Mentioning the Unmentionable* and *Now I've Heard Everything* and they've published an e-book series on patient advocacy.

The concept of the voice of the consumer is important, particularly for healthcare companies that are committed to the development of consumer relationships. Giving voice to customers suggests that a company is interested in hearing from them and in giving them their say so that improvements can be made and creative initiatives launched.

8. LOOK BEYOND THE EXPERTS

A recent validating study in *Medical Marketing and Media* showed that boomer women engage with a few meaningful sources after getting a script from their MD. Why automatically fill a script these days when there's so much skepticism in the press about safety of long-term use of medications, especially prescription drugs?

Gretchen Goffe-Wagner, Senior Vice President and brand planner at GSW Worldwide's Pink Tank unit, which conducted the research, was quoted as saying: "What was really surprising was what happened after women left the doctor's office with script in hand. Half of them didn't go straight to the pharmacy. They went online to weigh the pros and cons, and what they're really looking for is: 'Do I feel comfortable committing to taking this?'"

An expert opinion is good, and it does matter, but women would rather talk to other women who are going through – or who have gone through – making the same decisions than rely solely on medical experts.

Women prefer to turn to other 'women like them' rather than just 'authorities' for information they trust and healthcare is no different. That's why a community for real women, called Real Women on Health!, was developed as an online radio show where women can hear the tips and strategies

from other women coping with breast cancer, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis and other serious conditions. The shows are archived for downloading and sharing in on-line communities.

9. OFFER COACHING

Women value a personal and interactive experience that shows that you care about their health and are also interested in their wellness or wellbeing. From a marketing perspective, this is a critical first step in behavior change. From smoking, osteoporosis, high blood pressure and heart disease to obesity and weight management, behavior-change tools are key to improving women's health.

By providing a coaching service that reinforces self-management and personal responsibility, obstacles to self-efficacy are identified and talked about openly. GlaxoSmithKline's Alli 'Are You Ready?' question gives women control, empowering them with accountability. This is an effective strategy towards long-term behavior change and provides a leadership position from which others to follow and expand upon.

10. MAKE IT FUN

Studies show that many women today prefer to make lifestyle changes when there is a 'fun' component included. Dr Michelle Segar, a research investigator at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan and founder of a women's lifestyle coaching methodology called EssentialSteps, has done extensive research showing that women will sustain health behavior changes if they do so to enhance their life and not simply to achieve a single goal like losing weight.

In her study of two groups of women – one motivated by desired weight loss, the other by positive impact on mood and stress level – the women who were motivated by the potential for positive impact on mood and stress level had a higher rate of success in remaining engaged in a regular exercise routine. According to her research, exercise is related to improving mood which increases the desire to continue, which ironically then results in weight loss as a delightful by-product.

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