

# DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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## J&J FACES THE BIGGEST MARKETING CONUNDRUM YET

*Conundrum, noun.* A confusing and difficult problem or question.

The general public tends to give Johnson & Johnson a lot of much-deserved credit—for well over a hundred years' history of manufacturing superior-performing, totally safe, and (best of all) highly trusted products. And a good many blue-chip companies—including competitors—also give J&J high marks, even kudos, both for persistently sound marketing and brand-building.

Yet, despite positive publicity heralding J&J's development of a Covid-19 vaccine, J&J faces the biggest marketing conundrum. No, it's not being third to market. Instead, it's perceived product performance inferiority versus competitive vaccines. For many marketers, the conundrum is how to drive preference for parity performance products. We've addressed this issue in many past DISPATCHES' articles. However, we seldom encounter situations where the product in question is perceived as inferior, particularly a J&J product.

While the Company has faced many conundrums—some self-inflicted such as Duragesic Fentanyl Patch gel-leak/overdose issue, the Johnson's Baby Powder asbestos issue, and Tylenol's shipping pallet chemical-odor issue—the biggest conundrum J&J faces, outside of the overcoming the 1982 Tylenol Brand tampering deaths, is marketing the Company's Covid-19 vaccine. It's an issue with which the Company has no familiarity: *perceived product performance inferiority*. It can be legitimately argued that, along with the competitive Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, the J&J vaccine *effectively* prevents hospitalization, intubation, and death from Covid-19. However, there is no getting around the significant differences among the competitors in Phase 3 trials: 95% efficacy at preventing Covid infections for the former two versus 66% for J&J's entry. Given the choice of vaccines, which would you choose? Exactly! That's the conundrum.

How to position such a brand when (a) there exists such urgent, overwhelming consumer need for Covid infection prevention, and (b) despite ever-surging total vaccine supply capacity, global availability remains woefully insufficient, and (c) the Company is entirely unaccustomed to marketing a less-than-parity performing product? At crises times like now, when a "sense of urgency" could not be more

significant to the survival of so many of us, what tends to work best is to depart from conventional positioning strategy. Big companies with big household name brands like Johnson & Johnson are not typically adept at such unconventionality. And yet, confronted with a stand-out differential in Covid prevention efficacy, what is there to lose, really, by *resisting the usual* in strategic thinking?

Here are a few positioning strategies that, to our way of thinking, not only resist the usual but also just might work:

- 1. Find a product advantage/benefit that the brand can win with and elevate its meaning.** The obvious advantage for the J&J vaccine—the one everyone's already been talking about—is its single dosing versus the three-to-four-week double dosing for Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. Positioning this single dosing as merely a "convenience" benefit would be both conventional and short-sighted. Instead, positioning the **only** single-shot available as either: (a) "faster elimination of hospitalization and death from Covid;" or (b) "faster herd immunity to overcome the virus and its inevitable variant risks, resulting in faster normalcy for all." This positioning would elevate mundane convenience to something grand.
- 2. Find a market target segment for whom these advantages are significantly more critical.** The press has widely pointed out that there are such target segments, both here in the U.S. and in vast regions of the globe (South America, Africa, Asia). Call them mainly non-urban or rural or even far-flung geographic markets. But considering in aggregate the total populations of markets such as these in, say, Africa, calling them segments grossly minimizes their importance. They comprise billions of people. Along with the possible exception of some rural towns in Europe and the U.S. where hospitals might more readily freezer/refrigerator store the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, most rural or far-flung geographies have no such capability. This highlights not only another J&J vaccine difference-advantage but a damn solid reason for targeting J&J's product so pointedly.
- 3. Finally, keep pushing as hard and fast as possible for ways to make the J&J product part of something bigger, like a more comprehensive treatment regimen.** Pharma marketers in more recent years have much more frequently looked beyond their single brand silos for positioning. Making their brand an *adjunctive* to another drug or even medical device—for even more complete efficacy or, in some cases, virtual condition cures—has shown to be a more compelling and profitable approach than simply positioning their asset as one of three or four options with "class effect" efficacy. It's hard to know just now what treatment regimen the J&J vaccine might yet become, say, an adjunctive to. But, in keeping with resisting the usual thinking, why not explore a range of tests or trials? For example, might the J&J vaccine achieve 95% Covid prevention efficacy—or something more compelling, with some added, alternate dosing form, like an oral vaccine

"supplement" within a year of the initial injection? Is there any way in which, following the J&J vaccination, a Pfizer or Moderna "booster" (when much more fully available) might be combined with it for ultimate Covid protection?

Solving the J&J Covid-19 vaccine positioning conundrum will not be easy. However, J&J must rise to do it. Our collective, desperate need is much too great. Moreover, it can be done. Zithromax is an example of an antibiotic that proved clinically inferior to other antibiotics. But its marketers found a silver lining. Specifically, it helped minimize Health Care Practitioners (HCPs) contributing to growing antibiotic resistance by prescribing it to patients for whom the infection's origin is unknown—bacterial or viral. In those cases, it made sense and represented sound stewardship—consistent with their Hippocratic oath—for HCPs to lead their treatment with Zithromax.

When we first heard, back at the start of Project Warp Speed, that Johnson & Johnson would be among the first to pursue vaccine development, we were instantly relieved. We thought that if J&J is working on it, who better could we trust to discover and bring us a successful solution? Given the Company's history and talent, we remain hopeful that—with some out-of-the-box strategizing—they'll figure a way to manage the (and, perhaps, their) biggest marketing conundrum yet.

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