

Overview:

One of the most vexing challenges facing marketing and communications executives today is planning, managing and quantifying return-on-investment or “ROI.” In the case of Medicare open Enrollment, however, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) research team, consisting of Medicare’s in-house staff augmented by agency partner Porter Novelli and research provider PRIME Research, not only quantified the relative post-campaign returns on CMS’ investments in earned and paid media, but successfully planned its campaigns around formative optimization research undertaken before investing even the first dollar. Applying sound research fundamentals, the CMS team delivered high returns from a campaign that combined both paid and earned media by planning for ROI from the beginning; by setting objectives which were meaningful, reasonable and measurable; by deploying strategic investments through tactical channels with the highest potential; and, in the end, by quantifying a solid rate of return based on the extent to which the target audience behaved as a result of the communication. In this way, the CMS team overcame legacy barriers bound by “conventional wisdom,” territoriality and “dis-integrated” marketing communication to become one of the very few organizations to successfully link communications output with behavioral outcomes and meaningful business results. What is more, the study confirmed statistically what we in PR have always believed in our hearts to be true: **PR works...** and often more efficiently than other marketing and communication channels which command higher levels of investment.

All too often, research is formulaic. For formative research, focus groups represent the default. To assess change over time, initiate a tracking survey. And, when the goal is to assess earned media reach, conduct media analyses.

Admittedly, this formula offers useful results. But, it is time for measurement and evaluation programs to become more than the sum of its parts. This was the challenge Porter Novelli/CMS/PRIME team faced.

The **team’s objective** was to design and implement a research program that created key messages that could break through the clutter and encourage beneficiaries to review the plans available to them during the brief Open Enrollment (OE) period (October 15 – December 31). But more importantly, the research program had to **measure the relative impact** of paid and earned media tactics to determine which most efficiently communicated key CMS messages, and could do so within the confines of standard tools for data collection. By linking PRIME Research media analyses with pre- and post-campaign tracking data, the Porter Novelli/CMS/PRIME team

effectively broke down the silos of marketing and public relations to identify how these components of the overall campaign worked independently and jointly to produce the desired behavioral outcomes in the target audience.

Challenge/Opportunity:

Each year during OE, CMS encourages Medicare beneficiaries to review and update their health and prescription drug plans for the upcoming year. Given the plethora of often contradictory information concerning health care and health care reform, beneficiaries encounter a complex task when they select their Medicare coverage during OE. These choices can influence the doctors they see, the types of drugs they receive, and the costs of their medical care for the coming year. All of this can have a significant impact on their health and financial situation. In addition, Medicare consumers are frequently bombarded with conflicting messages from multiple sources, including health insurance companies (whose television ad campaign expenditures dwarf that of CMS), friends and family members, doctors, and pharmacists—all of which increase the likelihood of misunderstanding and confusion. It is no wonder that many beneficiaries often choose the path of least resistance by doing nothing.

CMS continues to strive for the most efficient use of the government dollar, and with such a paid media spending imbalance compared to insurance companies, it is even more vital for CMS to determine and learn the effectiveness of its outreach and which efforts most efficiently communicate the primary call-to-action—ensuring that beneficiaries compare and review their plans during OE.

The challenge/opportunity was to develop a research program that could gauge standard metrics such as:

- Beneficiary exposure to OE communications compared to previous years’ totals
- Target audience awareness of paid television compared to previous years
- Beneficiary knowledge of OE; and,
- Earned media coverage compared to previous years.

The ultimate goal of our research, however, was to **raise the bar** to measure the relative impact of paid and earned media tactics and determine which most efficiently communicated key CMS messages.

Strategy:

The key research strategies were communication and collaboration. Too often, research teams craft tracking studies without thoughtful consideration of whether or not the surveys accurately gauge all elements of campaign outreach. Similarly, media monitoring and analysis tools

reside independently of marketing evaluation. As a result, before any research was fielded, the Porter Novelli/CMS/PRIME team discussed how we could reach our ultimate measurement and evaluation goal, just by determining how best to incorporate a holistic set of key metrics.

Execution:

From these conversations, the Porter Novelli/CMS/PRIME research teams, ensured the following:

- The tracking survey measured awareness and recall of earned and paid media efforts, from both unaided and aided perspectives
- The media monitoring and tracking studies gauged pick-up/recall of the campaign's key and supporting messages
- All collected data could be matched at the CMS region level, providing another layer of analysis vital to CMS' future outreach efforts.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services conducted telephone tracking surveys immediately prior to the campaign in October 2010 (N = 1,019) and immediately following the campaign in January 2011 (N = 1,034). Through a partnership with PRIME Research, Porter Novelli obtained media analyses from early October through the end of December 2010.

Once all research concluded, Porter Novelli, CMS, and PRIME Research explored how to combine the data into one dataset. Thanks to the team's planning at the start of the campaign, data linkage at the CMS region level was very simple and straightforward.

Data analyses included standard frequencies and cross-tabulations to reveal recognition of campaign messages, type of content, and channels of exposure to awareness of OE, knowledge of options available and key behavioral actions (e.g., reviewing and comparing coverage). By employing statistical procedures above and beyond standard analyses, the team captured the impact of specific campaign components on overall campaign effectiveness. In this way, the statistical analysis revealed the extent to which PR performed relative to other forms of marketing and communication.

Results:

Despite the unique challenges facing the OE campaign, post-initiative evaluation research conducted confirmed that it successfully achieved a quantifiable outcome among its target audiences:

- Beneficiaries' exposure to OE communications greatly increased from 2009, with 64% reporting they had seen, read or heard information about OE, **representing an 11 percent increase from the same time period last year, and a three-fold increase from pre-to-post campaign.**
- **Aided awareness of the OE television ads increased compared to the previous year over the same time period by six percentage points.**
- By the end of the campaign, almost **nine-in-ten beneficiaries (88%) were aware that Medicare has an OE period.**
- Those aware of the OE television ads were more likely to have either reviewed their Medicare plans for changes or to have compared their plan with others. Among those who recall the OE ads, **68% reported having reviewed their coverage.**

The earned media efforts also enjoyed success:

- The combined impressions for earned media reached **nearly three billion (2,930,507,974) for print, online and broadcast clips, far surpassing previous campaign totals.**
- **News coverage during the campaign was overwhelmingly positive and factual.**

Most importantly, though, the post campaign evaluation program, using propensity score analysis, was able to show that exposure to both paid and earned media significantly improved the odds of taking the desired behavioral actions (reviewing/comparing plans) during the OE period. The effects of earned media, however, were particularly robust. Even after controlling for exposure to paid media and a variety of demographic and decision-making style variables, **beneficiaries who reported exposure to PR coverage and earned media about OE were 2.3 times more likely to adopt the campaign's primary call-to-action.**

These findings suggest that even in a complex and cluttered media environment, public relations can have a profound and often greater impact in message dissemination and comprehension than forms of more highly controlled marketing and communication commanding higher levels of expenditure. **In this case, the earned media program proved to significantly enhance the effectiveness of the paid media campaign because of its greater credibility and perceived third-party endorsement.**