

DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS: FLIPPING THE SCRIPT ON ACTIVIST MEDIA

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CASE STUDY

our client

Prominent direct-to-consumer dietary supplement producer.

the issue

The nature of this company's direct-to-consumer business model leads to more interaction with their consumers, including consumers who want to report adverse effects. When consumers report their adverse effect claims, the company reports them to the FDA's CAERS database; this database is a completely voluntary system. The company, who has the highest concern for their consumer's safety, reports every consumer complaint, no matter how small.

A well-known consumer publication began asking questions regarding the incident reports submitted to the CAERS database concerning one of our client's products. The reporter inquired about the raw numbers of reports but failed to understand that while complaints existed, no actual safety or health concerns were ever determined by the FDA.

the challenge

The supplement industry is under constant scrutiny by the media, the scientific community, and social media warriors, who attack the safety and validity of many products. Any negative story questioning the safety of a supplement can be detrimental to a company and their profitability. This particular company is well known for their direct-to-consumer advertising so the potential for a story to go viral was very likely.

the opportunity

We had the opportunity to be aggressive from start. We needed the reporter to know all the health and safety facts, the flaws with federal reporting system – both in terms of the public database but also the pitfalls when looking at a direct-to-consumer company. If played correctly, we could ensure the article is not about the company or product, but instead raised issue with the FDA reporting systems for supplements and cosmetic products as a whole.

the plan

Our first step was to determine all of the questions from the consumer reporter and use those as the base for a detailed fact sheet about the business' history, how their direct-to-consumer marketing works, the demographic of their consumers, and define the history and flaws of the reporting system used by the FDA.

We did our research on the reporter. Reading every article provided on his online portfolio, we knew exactly the tone he liked to take and knew going in that his reporting usually had an agenda.

We then provided the reporter with the fact sheet and prepared answers to his questions. We also proposed and held an off-the-record meeting with the reporter and his Editor to allow the client to necessary nuance and context in how the federal CAERS database should be interpreted.

In the end we had to be more aggressive, so we orchestrated a strongly worded letter from a well-known defamation lawyer to the reporter's editor and the publication that explained if the article went down the path that the original questions alluded to, it would result in litigation.

the result

The article finally published but instead of hurting our client, the article depicted them as over-achievers who try their best to deal with a broken and unintelligible FDA system. The article highlighted their product safety history in contrast to their number of consumer-driven complaints.

The client appreciated our aggressive and matter-of-fact approach, their product remained unscathed, and an article that could have cost them real dollars ended up being a net positive.