

Engaging Healthcare Professionals WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media and technology have turned healthcare consumers into e-patients. The “e” is no longer for electronic, but rather for evolved, empowered, and engaged. E-patients are evolved to the point of being screen agnostic when it comes to digital media consumption. They are empowered to make choices about how they interact online, and what they are willing to sacrifice in exchange for something of value. And they are engaged in their own healthcare decision making. So much so that consumers are demanding healthcare professionals respond faster, with more information, visualizations, and technology that delivers healthcare on their own terms.

An Empowered and Engaged Environment

Empowered and engaged patients have created an environment where social media is dramatically influencing healthcare decisions. Access to information should be applauded, but only when the information is accurate and helps facilitate a better, more open discussion between the patient and doctor. Today a significant amount of misinformation in social forums has the potential to impact patients with unintentionally negative consequences.

How can pharma companies help? It is critical that pharmaceutical and healthcare companies have a voice in the social media space. Part of that voice may be directed to consumers, despite the challenging regulatory environment. But given the changing environment of the professional — they face increasing demands on their time and are more challenged by patients. They often find themselves using digital media for professional purposes at lunch or after hours or on weekends. And, as patients are more educated, they are looking for ways to enhance the quality of in-

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formation and ensure they are the most influential voice in healthcare decision making. Their worlds are colliding, and now is the best opportunity pharmaceutical companies have to engage the professional.

Engagement Tactics

There are three ways that pharmaceutical companies can get involved at varying levels of expense and effort, all of which are relevant to both browser-based and mobile social media engagement:

- 1. Buy** — Paid opportunities on existing social networks
- 2. Borrow** — Community building on existing social networks
- 3. Build** — Starting from scratch and developing your own environment

Most social media properties offer advertising and paid sponsorships.

This includes those targeting consumers and others geared toward professionals. Buying advertising space and running creative that is relevant to the audience, as opposed to the brand, is one way that pharma companies can engage professionals in the social media space. This can be very meaningful as many of these media buys can be targeted toward the exact professional profile or specialty that the brand needs to reach. Additionally, as rich media ad units become more readily available, pharmaceutical companies can create experiences that begin within the advertising unit and conclude at a branded website. Social media properties and applications should be able to differentiate their browser-based versus mobile visitors and give advertisers the opportunity to customize content and experiences.

Borrowing is another popular way to create dialogue with healthcare professionals.

Essentially this involves creating community where they are already spending time online, sites like Facebook and YouTube. This works best when the company is focused on adding value to the targeted group and is willing to create content that truly contributes to the community. By doing so, the company has an opportunity to build trust within the community and earn the right to share company or brand messaging. Borrowed communities, for example, can be closed Facebook groups that are only open to invited members and provide opportunities for information sharing and peer validation.

Or they can be public profiles on any social network such as Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook that are targeted toward and state the intention of engaging healthcare professionals.



We talk about this in terms of convenience and context. Convenience is key. While the audience may not turn to consumer-facing social networks for professional information gathering as their prime purpose, they are there anyway. Given they are online for professional purposes at night and on weekends, they are willing to absorb content if it is relevant. Context is also crucial because the content and experiences shared have to be relevant to the professional, while maintaining an appropriate tone for the forum in which they are shared.

The key on any property is to articulate the purpose of the effort, be authentic and transparent in the dialogue, listen carefully, and participate actively. It is also critically important to target the specific healthcare professional and recognize that different types of professionals access content and participate differently. It is very important to allow the community to have a significant voice and to facilitate a resource that is valuable to them. When professionals come to count on the community, they will ultimately assign value to the company or brand that made the opportunity possible.

Another way to borrow social media is to conduct online public relations. Pharmaceutical companies have conducted media relations to traditional reporters for years. If they follow the principles for borrowing as outlined above, they can gain coverage for their companies and brands with online influencers as well. The most important element of doing this successfully is to develop individual relationships with online influencers of interest and to provide content that meets their needs and the needs of their audience. Many of the online media properties in the healthcare space focus on reaching professionals, creating a rich and vibrant opportunity for companies to provide relevant content for physicians and other providers.

Building is perhaps the most expensive of the options, but over time has the potential to deliver the most value.

By building a community, pharmaceutical companies have the potential of truly engaging an audience in a branded environment. This is best done when there is a need to engage around proprietary information, or highly scientific content or data — that wouldn't be appropriate for a borrowed social environment. Building is well-suited for bringing large groups of specialists together, for peer valida-

tion, or for exchanging cases. Building social communities is less effective when the information is general, the needs can be met in existing forums, or when the company is only auditioning social media as a professional engagement tool.

An Opportunity and Responsibility

I believe that healthcare professionals have a personal opportunity as well as a professional responsibility. A professional responsibility because as patients spend more time online, physicians and other practitioners should influence the online dialogue by ensuring accurate information and professional perspectives are part of the conversation. This is especially important given that social media content is playing an increasingly important role in search engine rankings. Professionals can help ensure that accurate content is at the top of the page for health information searches.

Pharmaceutical companies can help by providing access to training, resources, and information that will help facilitate physicians and other providers engaging patients with social media. Pharma companies and brands can also help by creating disease-state content with a professional voice that helps patients get answers to their questions with the assurance of the industry.

The personal opportunity is significant too. Patients not only use social media to answer their own specific inquiries but to research potential services and providers as well. Professionals can use social media for practice-building purposes; especially given the impact that social media has on search engine results. As marketers, we all know how difficult the ongoing burden of content creation can be. Professionals who try to maintain a website, blog, Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter page will run into the same challenge. Pharmaceutical companies and brands can help relevant professionals by providing content that can easily be customized and shared on professional social media pages and profiles.

Rules of Engagement


So, what are the rules of engagement? First and foremost, companies considering social media tactics should approach this from a strategic perspective and determine their busi-

ness and communications goals and then decide how to proceed. The best social media programs are integrated with other traditional and digital tactics, and are measured individually and at the campaign level. Obviously, pharma companies need to be transparent in their role and objective when participating in social media.

Companies need to post clear terms and conditions that articulate how they will participate, what type of commenting is allowed, and how to reach the company directly for specific needs, i.e. adverse incident reporting or recruiting. They need to be selfless in trying to add value to their community, putting the community's needs before their own. They need to listen carefully, and follow the guidance of the community to allow the membership to determine the direction forward.

Ideally, a community manager will be in place to help respond to inquiries, monitor participation, and serve as the voice of the brand. Having a community manager in place will also help the company determine how to go beyond content to create experiences and even ask the community for help in creating advocacy on behalf of a company. We also believe that results against business objectives should be articulated and measured, with a plan to evolve over time if desired goals aren't being met.

Everyone Wins

Social media continues to be very influential in the healthcare information seeking and decision-making process. It is in patients' best interest to have a pharma and professional voice involved. Everyone wins when pharmaceutical companies engage healthcare professionals with the end goal of improving health outcomes and helping patients engage for healthier futures. 

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