

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND PHARMA: GETTING THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIP?

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Many consumers today turn to social media to make health decisions, whether they are searching for information about a drug or treatment, make a self-diagnosis, educating themselves about a medical disorder or simply wanting to share their experiences as patients. The internet is now a leading non-approved healthcare provider for thousands, if not millions, of individuals around the globe. With the proliferation of social media sites, communications have become easier and transmission of knowledge faster. The power of social media is huge and almost every business is using it to promote its services and products.

Though many healthcare professionals and healthcare institutions are already on social media, pharma companies, by and large, have not taken this step forward, for various reasons. Part of the problem can be attributed to rigid industry regulations and guidelines which state what companies can and cannot do on social media. Another reason is that the industry has a history of seeing people only as patients and not as consumers.

As digital becomes more and more integrated into healthcare systems, pharma companies are recognising social media's potential to improve patient experiences. And it isn't only a marketing tool! It is much, much more. The potential for the industry of using social media platforms is enormous. By communicating with consumers, it can:

- 1) uncover new product development ideas;
- 2) assess the impact of adverse drug effects and determine the true incidence;
- 3) monitor drug reactions to newer drugs;

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- 4) understand how patients experience disease and how they recover with medications;
- 5) track how patients use their medications;
- 6) assess compliance rates;
- 7) understand what consumers want and
- 8) identify new audiences who have moved away to alternative healthcare.

In its turn, the industry can offer drugs for very rare genetic disorders and develop a database of patients who may want to participate in clinical trials.

However, an acceptable way of communication with consumers and pharma companies on social media has not been defined. One major risk that the industry faces when communicating on social media is how to maintain patient confidentiality and privacy. Currently, they have only used social media to communicate on their own websites via discussion boards, Twitter feeds and third-party social media pages, such as Patients Like Me or People Who.

Some have even set up Facebook accounts, but this is a calculated risk because this platform is neither safe nor secure. And that's one of the main challenges: the protection of the privacy of patient information. To this end, firms must also show that they are supervising the activities of their employees with access to patient information.

Many are using their own websites as a social media platform to provide information on their products and educate the public about certain medical disorders, especially chronic diseases like diabetes, arthritis and cancer. Most such websites are under full editorial control and consumers cannot interact or post messages. This makes it relatively easy to comply with the myriad rules and regulations concerning promotion of prescription medications, but it is not the way that social media works. Social media is about relationships. It is about communicating.

Another area where social media has helped pharma is in the area of clinical trials. Trials often require the participation of volunteers to assess the effectiveness of drugs. Many people have no idea that participation in such trials can provide free treatment, complete monitoring and education on their disorder. In order to ensure that the trial data remain confidential, the industry has gone to great lengths on social media to educate the public on this aspect of such studies.



Though the US FDA released a guide aimed at clarifying how pharma companies should use social media, experts consider it vague and many companies have decided that it is probably safer to stay away from social media for now.

Until big pharma is prepared to make changes in how it views consumers, the rules for engaging the public on social media will continue to be hindered, which may obscure all the good things that the industry does behind closed doors.

The FDA is actively watching pharma companies to ensure that they are in compliance with the online social media rules. If a drug is mentioned, its adverse effects need to be stated in full. Even liking a consumer's comment on a certain drug post on Facebook can get the company in to trouble, if all the information is not provided to the consumer. Further, all communication online has to be balanced and not misleading.

At the moment there is very little guidance for pharma companies who want to use social media. Those that do should comply with the current rules as fully as possible. At a minimum, staff should be trained and reminded that, while social media can boost the company's image, it can also go the other way fast. Facing the wrath of the FDA for some minor compliance issue can sometimes be both legally and financially challenging.

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