

Why social media is good for medicine and why pharmaceutical companies should engage online

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There's nothing more important than our health, but should we trust the Internet when we seek information on medicines? In advance of a free public Polis seminar on social media and pharmaceuticals this Thursday Katherine Relle describes her new research looking at what we can learn from what people say about medicines in online forums.

Social media forums for healthcare contribute to the public knowledge base and offer practical value.

When pharmaceutical companies engage in social media forums to debate health issues, they must balance direct advertising messages toward patients with their unique social responsibilities for advancing medicine and public health.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) acknowledge that these tensions exist for the pharmaceutical industry. In December 2011, the FDA published long-awaited draft guidelines for a social media policy aimed at upholding a necessary degree of risk communication for online advertising by the U.S. pharmaceutical industry.[1]



Social Media Policy

However, the FDA has been slow to issue formal regulations to provide an official social media policy, and a wooly relationship exists between leading pharmaceutical players and the market capture of social media.[2] Benefits of engaging in social media include enhancing reputation, customer service, and sales. Challenges include individual or corporate lawsuits, cyber-security regulations, and, most extremely, public health crises. Therefore, a balance must be struck for the pharmaceutical industry to appropriately harness online information. This is no easy task.

Original Research

My original research on Internet healthcare forums concludes that social media forums are more than mere talking shops. They provide a valuable point of reference for both patient-consumers and companies engaging in social media listening.

A ten-variable content analysis which looked at a total of 600 posts across three randomly selected online health-related forums, at 200 posts per forum, makes it apparent that, with more industry involvement in social media, the negative aspects of risk communication can be mitigated. The positive aspects of personal profiling, education, and sentiment can be strengthened.



The following is a summary of data-related evidence from my research, which allows me to make such conclusions:

First, nearly half (47 percent) of the online posts that were analysed involved risk messages. Online risk messaging threatens company branding because informal social media messages may be inaccurate when not vetted by

industry experts. Big pharma needs to engage with social media to protect company brands.

Second, even though patient-consumers were reluctant to provide much personal information (i.e., gender or age), the information that was provided often elicited decipherable traits due to the nature of the posts. Personal information in these posts provided interesting characteristics based on legitimate profiling assumptions, which could help inform relevant marketing practices concerning which issues to convey and what tones to use in product advertising.

Third, a quarter of the analysed posts explicitly sought information, and a majority of the posts engaged in an informative dialogue about oral contraceptives. The educational nature of social media is apparent for the benefit of product development.

Fourth, positive and negative sentiment about a wide range of oral contraceptive brands was varied. Increased engagement in social media listening would allow companies to learn from these praises and dismissals, associating brand names with sentiment analyses to examine best practices within the industry.

Finally, the current lack of regulatory guidance tilts the public sphere toward the consumer, but consumer sovereignty is not necessarily the ideal.^[3] When consumers fail to understand the complexity of science behind the development of drugs, the industry's advertising motives, or the politics involved with industry funding, dangerous assumptions can be made. This negatively affects pharma and creates issues for public health.

Benefits of Engaging

Big pharma should enter into the public sphere for the benefit of the industry and patient-consumers alike. The benefits of engaging in the online public sphere seem to outweigh the risks, and suggestions for doing so are vast.

For example, if pharmaceutical companies wish to engage with social media, stakeholders could create their own customized policies in a system of self-governance in lieu of widespread FDA regulations, so that individual companies may advance within the industry. In doing so, a pharmaceutical social media ombudsman role might be created in which registered physicians work impartially as appointed officers to police the communication between pharma and the online public sphere of patient-consumers. This would require that impartial and trained physicians be appointed to work within the industry as social media managers who proactively seek to rectify false information about prescription drugs.

Innovation of this sort is crucial if more pharma companies choose to engage with social media forums. Such a system of governance could also establish precedents for co-regulatory practices with the FDA. These steps will define the future of the pharmaceutical industry. Further research conducted via interviews and focus groups will contribute to the conclusions made in this research. For now, we can settle on the idea that the introduction of social media into the corporate world is changing industry governance in unique ways and on a grand scale.

For more:

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/12/20/marketing-medicine-online-social-media-and-pharma/>

[1] Ringler, Jennifer. "FDA Social Media Guidelines: Irresponsible?" *PharmExec*. n.p., 1 February 2012. Web. 26 February 2012. <<http://www.pharmexec.com/pharmexec/Back+Page/FDA-Social-Media-Guidelines-Irresponsible/ArticleStandard/Article/detail/757971>>

[2] Ringler, Jennifer.

[3] Sunstein, Cass. "Television and the Public Interest." *California Law Review* 88.2 (2000): 499. Print.

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