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The benefits of social media rely on pharmas showing "a human empathic face"

Pharma's finally booted-up but too robotic for the social web

It holds the promise of progress for the pharma industry, from providing a platform for efficient and authoritative information, to aiding recruitment and proceedings of clinical trials. But has pharma finally harpooned the giant that is social media? **Lucie Ellis** investigates.

Social media is the world's worst kept secret to creating a strong, well-connected, professional web presence in the tech savvy generation of curiosity + search = 100,000,000 results at your fingertips. The pharmaceutical industry has in the past lagged behind as the general public evolves from traditional consumer to web surfer, and though historically wary of embracing the social media surge, the industry is finally letting the waves wash over it.

In October 2012 WEGO Health/Digital Health Coalition surveyed 356 health activists (people who regularly participate in online health communities) on the topic of health social media and results showed 81% believed pharma used social media 'to provide their communities with

important updates on products or services'. A view point up by 9% from 2011 survey findings. Participants were also asked to name a pharma company that stood out from the rest in its use of social media platforms; Pfizer took the top spot with 32 mentions, ahead of Janssen with 14, Novartis with 13, and Sanofi with 10.

Rob Halkes is the principle consultant of Dutch company Health Business Consult, that focus on creating and developing health solutions, marketing strategies and specifically online solutions to integrate care. He says he was skeptical of social media in the beginning but believes the continued use of online networking sites by the pharma industry will only improve their image with the general public.

He told *Scrip* it is "important for pharma to find ways of proving that it can be a trusted source of fair, balanced, and accurate health information on the social web, supporting the dialog between healthcare professionals and patients in the most appropriate way it can".

"Every corporate company is doing something on social media," he said "some more than others." But Halkes urges pharmas to continue their use of digital sources; however, he complains that it is still dealt with in a corporate way. The benefits of social media rely on pharmas showing "a human empathic face in the frame of public relations".

BIG PHARMA = BIG TWITTER?

A spokesperson for Novartis, told *Scrip* that "leveraging social media channels like Twitter and YouTube helps create

a 'surround sound' effect, amplifying important information. Social media can help educate about, and increase awareness of, diseases and conditions and encourage conversation among key constituents."

But who is embracing the digital media evolution?

Displayed in the table opposite are current examples of pharmaceutical companies who are operating various social media tools in a variety of creative ways to communicate with patients and a wider web audience.

Still, web networking holds an ocean of opportunities for pharmas to utilize its various platforms.

For example, social media as a tool for clinical trial recruitment allows companies to target demographically diverse patient groups quickly and cost effectively. Eli Lilly is one company who has already piloted digital media as a recruitment system for clinical trials as appose to using traditional media.

In early 2012, Lilly conducted a trial recruitment program that used Facebook, Click-it-Forward and YouTube as well as propriety health networks for trials in the areas of diabetes and head and neck cancer. Lilly reported the trial as delivering a "meaningful volume of responses" and a cost saving of 10-15% through the elimination of multiple project fees.

In August 2011, Mayo Clinic reported results on a pilot social media recruitment process. The company used social networking platforms to recruit 12 subjects for a spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD) study within one week. This particular trial was chosen for a provisional

COMPANY	SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL	HOW THEY USE IT
GSK	Sharing	GSK, in the company of other big pharmas, provide buttons on their website to 'recommend this page' allowing browsers to share the content on Facebook, Twitter or email to friend. Viewers can also 'like' or comment on content.
Boehringer Ingelheim	Gaming	The first of its kind, Syrum is a Facebook-based social game about developing pharmaceutical products. The game allows players to link to Facebook friends, track their progress, exchange lab equipment, recruit them as lab assistants and even steal their discoveries. Syrum aims to demonstrate BI's commitment to research and innovation, and "make pharma fun".
Bayer	Pinning	In early 2012 Bayer quickly joined social media platform Pintrest under the user name 'Bayerus'. Currently displaying seven Pinterest boards, including Business, Sustainability and Innovation. Bayerus have also used the site to pin images and video content.
AstraZeneca	Careers	AstraZeneca currently run a Facebook forum discussing recruitment opportunities within their company. The page has more than 3,800 'likes'.
Pfizer	Blogging	Think Science Now, launched by Pfizer, is a blog site designed for communication between Pfizer employees across all areas to discuss their work.
Sanofi	Digital media	Sanofi TV is a video news collection projected on YouTube. Currently the channel has 444 subscribers and nearly 200,000 views.
Boehringer Ingelheim	Going viral	In 2011 BI released a video that went viral on the web, incorporating talking parrots conditioned to correctly pronounce the company's name.

Source: Scrip Intelligence

recruitment process as it was seen by appropriately named co-author, Dr Marysia Tweet that "patients with rare diseases tend to find one another and connect because they are searching for information and support".

It is not only in the patient recruitment aspect of medical research that digital media has shown potential. In 2011, Pfizer launched a 'virtual' clinical trial program in the US. The pilot program operated patient clinic visits via smartphone or computer interaction and provided simple information for potential trial patients to understand how they could get involved and what to expect on a dedicated website.

Patients on social media often form online communities. Halkes for example, follows the hash tag #hscm or healthcare communications and social media, a community who discuss global healthcare news on Twitter.

However, Scott Connor, marketing vice-president for clinical trial recruitment company, Acurian, told *Scrip*, that what the industry thought "in the beginning would be the silver bullet if to solve all problems" is not yet there.

He said: "It is a great channel because you have so much aggregation of people online to the extent that you can target those people, it's great but when it comes down to actually filling hundreds and hundreds, sometimes thousands of patients on studies you can't use social media as a single tactic approach."

Connor said that currently social

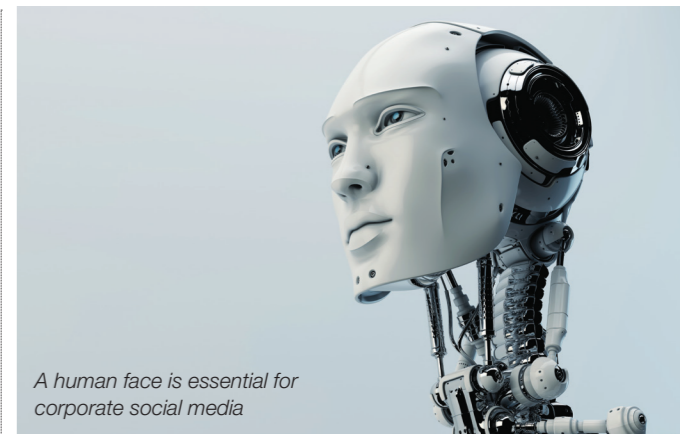
media pulls in around 25% of the patients Acurian recruits for clinical trial research. "It has been increasing but not in leaps and bounds," he said. "It didn't go from 5% straight to 25% and we don't expect it to go from 25% to 50% but we do think we are going to see detrimental gains as we dig more into the online spaces and little corners of the social media world, the online world that hasn't been tapped yet."

A recent study carried out by Best Practices, into pharma strategies for effective messaging around new products and the medical conditions they treat, found that "more than 50% of leading pharma companies expect social networking, online video and other types of digital marketing to grow in use as critical tools for communicating disease state and product information".

PATIENT CHATTER

Acurian also uses social media to ask patients their experiences of a disease, which Connor said was "a great way to use social media where you don't have to worry about regulations because all you're doing is having a discussion about how you feel".

He says Acurian use social media platforms this way to get quick and relevant feedback from patients on a specific illnesses and the conversation forms a market research tool, "you use that as part of your promotion, your advertisement to resonate with a potential patient".



A human face is essential for corporate social media

Halkes echoes the idea that working on a more human approach is the next step for pharmas.

"The only way that the industry can represent its position on key issues in the discussion about the pharma industry is to participate in these conversations in its own words," he said. "As relationships develop, trust is generated and opinions may be revised, accelerating the proliferation of the image of the company."

Those still labeling pharma lagging in digital and social media trends may themselves be at risk of falling behind the times. That being said there is plenty to still discover, test and perfect in the ever changing environment of social networking. Digital media will have progress throughout areas of pharmaceutical reputations and research, specifically in the area of clinical trials, but it cannot fully replace the human aspects of interaction with patients yet.