



Digital Marketing in Health Care

Consider This

A recent study found that the majority of young people between 18 and 24 years choose the internet over GP visits when they feel ill.

Another study found that nearly three quarters of consumers of all age groups go online to research more information about their diagnosis after they have visited their doctor.

Furthermore, physicians are notably spending more and more time in front of their computers.

Do you see a trend emerging? Digital marketing can no longer be ignored by the pharma sector.



By: Jean-Luc Kastner

The Pharma Sector - Traditionally

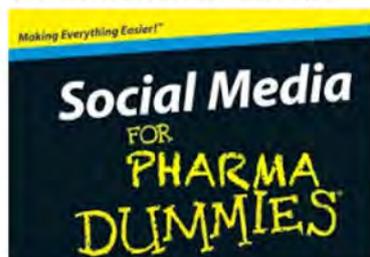
Compared to other sectors, the pharmaceutical industry has been notoriously slow to adopt and develop digital marketing strategies, preferring instead traditional media such as direct mail, journal articles, television adverts and of course a vast investment of time and effort in face to face meetings with physicians.

These traditional channels have grown to prominence and remained popular through a process of natural selection based upon the specific rigours of the pharma sector.

This stagnation which has occurred also contributes to the slow uptake of digital initiatives and is especially caused by progressively tighter government and regional regulations which restrict how far pharma organisations can 'push' their communication with consumers via social media, for example.

In fact, over three-quarters of pharma marketers interviewed, stated that industry regulations were their top concern when using digital and social media campaigns.

Innovation and Change



Nonetheless, pharma professionals tend to agree that digital channels are important and will play an ever increasing role in future sales and marketing efforts.

Pharma brands typically take a two-pronged approach to marketing as they usually have two audiences – mass consumers and physicians / medical professionals. Digital marketing is valuable to both.

On one hand, pharma marketers need to understand the priorities of their physicians, which often requires a holistic approach rather than focusing, as marketers traditionally do, upon a particular individual product. But now that medical professionals are spending more and more time online, it makes sense to exploit digital opportunities.

The consumer audience is already targeted by a lot of marketing but digital channels are still under-utilised, especially where they can provide more personalised communication.

There is no doubt that to achieve such 'digital success' requires that your organisation play a delicate balancing act. But the results are worth it – evidence of recent efforts are easy to find and are disrupting the market and positioning those organisations who have responded quickly to digital opportunities, with distinct competitive advantages while at the same time remaining safely within the strict boundaries of the law.

For example, a popular anti-histamine brand plots national pollen counts on their website and delivers messages to visitors thereby generating genuine value for their audience while at the same time building valuable relationships.

Another organisation has brought transplant patients together via social media and yet another organisation has created its own social community for epilepsy sufferers.

Digital Marketing Strategies for Pharma

All of the above examples, and many more besides, use digital channels to great effect by playing on their strengths and using them to create value through often interactive communication rather than one-way - which attracts an audience.

Big on the list is dissemination of genuinely useful and often sales-unrelated information and of course a focus upon the emotional aspects of the conditions which the brands target.

Pharma marketers should consider the following to enable a successful digital campaign:

- Create their own digital communities from the real-world groups which already exist.
- Participate, sponsor or be in some way involved in these communities.
- Provide value to these communities, be that emotional, informational or motivational
- Monitor and learn from the community in order to better understand how customers and stakeholders perceive their brand.
- And of course, build these communities – the more you put in, the more you get back



Make It Work

What's holding some organisation's back? Why hasn't pharma marketing raced forwards like other industries? After all digital channels are more cost effective than traditional versions.

Apart from the strict regulation, mentioned above, the issue is commonly one of resourcing - there is currently a shortfall in the supply of digital marketers who understand the pharma sector and its regulations and restrictions.

To make it work, pharma organisations need to hire 'digital natives' and build their knowledge of the pharma industry so that they can unleash their creativity and their innate understanding of the digital environment in a way which will work within the industry's strict policies.

Alternatively, focus upon the many individuals with deep pharma industry knowledge and train them in the complexities of digital marketing, most importantly:

- How to use social media marketing for business and personal use.
- How to use digital to build brand awareness, engage in conversation and increase visibility.
- Learn the various popular digital channels and social networks such as websites, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and many others.



- Learn how to use rich media and blogs for business and personal use.
- Learn how to manage social media using prominent industry tools.
- Learn how to develop digital and social tactics.
- Learn how to develop digital strategies and execute digital programmes.
- Learn how to measure the impact of your digital marketing efforts not only per channel but as a holistic whole.

Lastly, the message is that consumers want to know more about their condition, so nowadays, they use so called 'alternative' information channels. These channels will not be categorised as being 'alternative' for much longer.

If the pharma industry fails to understand this, consumers, patients and medical professionals will eventually side-step them and go online as standard. This is already happening and is solid evidence of the need to adapt pharma marketing – which starts with training the right people with the best digital marketing knowledge.

References

- *“Digital marketing to play a greater role in the promotion of pharmaceutical companies and products?”*, www.nigelwright.com (2013) [[Link](#)]
- *“Trying to Connect with Physicians? What Marketers Need to Know”*, <http://digitalblog.exlpharma.com/> (2014) [[Link](#)]
- *“Pharmaceutical Digital Marketing”*, IAB (2012) [[Link](#)]