

DOLs IN PHARMA, AN EXPLORATION





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WHO ARE DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS?

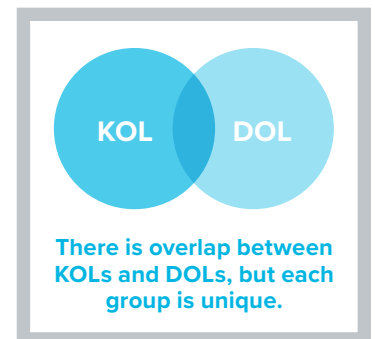
We have long known that healthcare providers (HCPs) prefer to learn from their peers. For decades, key opinion leaders (KOLs) have been the go-to peer experts from whom HCPs prefer to learn. Holding prestigious positions at universities and centers of excellence and typically having published numerous peer-reviewed papers, KOLs can be easily identified for their expertise and depth of experience and knowledge. However, a new type of opinion leader in the healthcare landscape has emerged over the last half decade or so—the digital opinion leader (DOL).

While influencer marketing has been around for as long as there's been advertising—think Santa Claus and Coca-Cola, Michael Jordan and Nike, Britney Spears and Pepsi—digital influencer marketing is relatively new and has become ubiquitous with the emergence of social media. (Today, 93% of marketers across all industries are engaging in influencer marketing.)¹ In healthcare, digital influencer marketing, and specifically DOLs, are an even newer phenomenon, and many healthcare marketers are asking themselves: what exactly is a DOL? Is it a celebrity? A famous doctor? Are KOLs the same as DOLs?

Non-HCP celebrities are certainly “influencers,” but they don't meet the criteria for a DOL. Nor are celebrity partnerships guaranteed to be advantageous for pharmaceutical companies. Khloé Kardashian, a famous reality television personality, became a spokesperson for a migraine drug and the reception of the partnership was quite unfavorable among the general public.² Additionally, there's little evidence that non-HCP celebrity endorsements of therapies have any sway among practicing HCPs.

So, if not celebrities, who are DOLs exactly?

Masters of scientific communication in the digital space, DOLs are usually doctors, but are sometimes nurses, dieticians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, or other HCPs. They have a strong following on public social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, and occasionally have a presence on closed social media platforms targeted to HCPs, like SERMO, Doximity, and Figure1. This following and presence translates into real influence over healthcare trends and discussions in local and national healthcare communities. DOLs are passionate about sharing information with their colleagues. They can be KOLs, holding prestigious institutional positions and publishing a high volume of peer-reviewed papers, but they don't have to be. Many of the DOLs we see today are passionate, authentic, and tech-savvy HCPs who have synthesized the latest medical literature and provide keen insights into, and share important information about, new therapies and disease states.



Beyond being master communicators on digital platforms, one of the greatest value propositions DOLs provide is they break geographic barriers allowing rural primary care physicians (PCPs) and other HCPs cut off from major urban centers of excellence or universities to follow them and learn—they are transforming care across the world. Historically, HCPs have attended association meetings to get the latest information on disease state research and new therapies. This leaves many HCPs out of the loop on information that could radically transform the lives of their patients. For example, there are many rural oncologists who are the only specialist in a 50–100 mile radius. They don't have the institutional support, or can't justify the cost, to go to the next American Society of Clinical Oncology meeting in Boston or New York or San Diego. DOLs can help bridge this knowledge gap, giving community clinicians the information they need to improve patient care without sorting through hundreds of peer-reviewed journals or attending national conferences.

WHY ARE DOLs IMPORTANT?

Although the COVID-19 pandemic, and the near-total disappearance of traditional face-to-face interactions that followed, spurred an uptick in pharma marketers engaging with DOLs, many in pharma are still skeptical about their value. They ask: why can't I continue to rely on KOLs for my peer-to-peer marketing efforts?

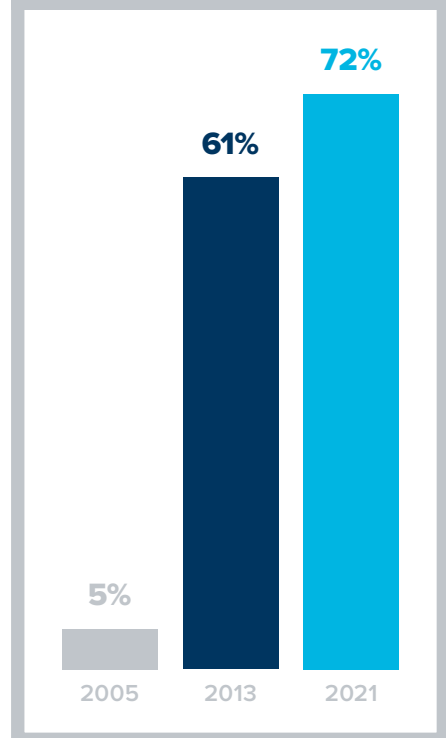
Blame the Internet.

As I stated earlier, while KOLs can also be DOLs, that's not always the case. KOLs have historically been sought after by HCPs for unbiased and valuable information on new therapies and they provide this through traditional channels such as congresses, roundtables, annual meetings, advisory boards, and more. While many of those channels are still valuable, they're becoming less relevant than what's happening online. DOLs provide much of the same value of KOLs, but they do it where HCPs, like the rest of us, are spending much of their time.

- 90% of physicians use some form of social media for personal activities and 65% of them use social media sites for professional reasons⁴—the most popular being YouTube and Twitter
- In 5 years, 75% of the workforce will be digital natives: Millennials who have not only grown up with social media, but bring it into their professional lives⁵

More broadly, pharma needs to engage DOLs because doing so will allow pharma to maintain relevance in the national and local conversations around various therapies and disease states. The time where pharma could solely drive the conversation on a therapeutic area through traditional platforms (advertisements, advisory boards, etc) has passed and it's time to reckon with the power of online communities. Patients and HCPs of all stripes have been empowered by the Internet and unlike traditional KOLs, many of whom serve in research and more academic roles with fewer patient interactions, DOLs with large online followings can give insight into how a patient community is responding to a given therapy or even current challenges or misconceptions with a health condition. This means pharma now needs to tap into a wealth of expertise that it previously overlooked—perhaps less credentialed HCPs who nonetheless possess immense influence.

US ADULT SOCIAL MEDIA USE (OF AT LEAST ONE PLATFORM) OVER TIME³



SOURCE: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>



IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT DOLs FOR YOUR BRAND

Now that we have an idea of what a DOL is, let's look at how we identify the right DOLs for your business needs. This begins with identifying your strategic goals for your DOLs and you do this by asking a few questions.

QUESTIONS TO IDENTIFY STRATEGIC GOALS FOR YOUR DOLs

What is the community with which I am trying to engage?

Is the DOL going to serve as a brand ambassador or a one-off sharer of content?

Does my DOL also need to play the role of a traditional KOL (high volume of academic research, prestigious job title)? Does my DOL need to specialize or be a master in a specific therapeutic area? Additionally, could my DOL be a NP or PA or in a similar role?

Additionally, do I want a regional DOL that's highly involved in the local community? Or do I need a nationally (or even internationally) known DOL that will bring traffic from all over the world?

Once these questions are answered through strategic planning, you can begin to identify the DOLs with which you want to partner.

COMMUNITY ANALYSIS—L IS FOR LEADER

What puts the “L” in “DOL” is involvement in the therapeutic area community. Before you even start using sophisticated data gathering techniques and measurements to identify the best DOLs for your brand, it's good to start looking on message boards, local community forums, and even private HCP-focused social media platforms like SERMO and Doximity and try to locate the HCPs who are most active in your therapeutic area. How often are they posting original content? How often are they sharing content from highly reputable sources? And how often are they commenting on the content of others? If the answer to these questions is “quite often,” then you can feel confident that you've started identifying a DOL and can proceed to dig a little deeper.

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

The rise of social networks, integrated websites, and connected devices has unearthed nearly unlimited possibilities in data gathering and insight. This wealth of data is indispensable to DOL identification and perhaps the most popular way to collect data from websites online is using an Application Program Interface (API)⁷—a way to directly obtain large volumes of information from websites. At Avant Healthcare, we use APIs as well as a social media listening tool that crawls through multiple platforms—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, blogs, various websites, and RSS outlets. The type and amounts of data unearthed by this approach can be staggering (age, sex, race, therapeutic area, you name it), but when it comes to DOL identification there's three we typically look for: reach, spread, and impressions.



REACH

Reach is the total number of people who see a DOL's content.⁸ Regardless of how many times an individual encounters a given piece of DOL content, reach only tracks the number of unique users to engage with the content.



SPREAD

Spread refers to the amount of time a DOL's content is shared and reshared, aka, goes "viral." This is content that shows up in the "trending" section on the Twitter homepage and is pushed to the forefront by most social media algorithms.



IMPRESSIONS

Impressions are the total number of times a DOL's content was displayed across various platforms, timelines, and feeds, regardless of whether the content was engaged with (clicked on or shared).

That last metric is the one we use the most at Avant Healthcare to sort and rank our DOLs during the identification process. Impressions tell us how much muscle a given DOL's social media activity has and how far your brand messages will travel after being shared. You can go a step further and generate profiles with channels, topics of interest, follower count, geographic location, and other criteria. From these robust profiles, you can create network maps that identify connections between DOLs and their followers. The network maps also provide a foundation to examine the strength of relationship between a DOL and their colleagues. In other words, you can quantify a DOL's sphere of influence and determine connections in an otherwise diffuse network.

However, you don't want to lose sight of special sauce—the human element, individual judgement rooted in expertise to find people that are the best match for the business objective. For data, you need to look beyond social media. You want to ensure DOLs are authentic, credible, and knowledgeable in their respective area of expertise. For example, an internist speaking to peers on cancer treatment isn't as credible as oncologist speaking in the same space. No algorithm or software platform can replace the insight supplied by individual judgement.

ENGAGEMENT

This last piece is something pharma marketers are still working out. There are things we do know, though.

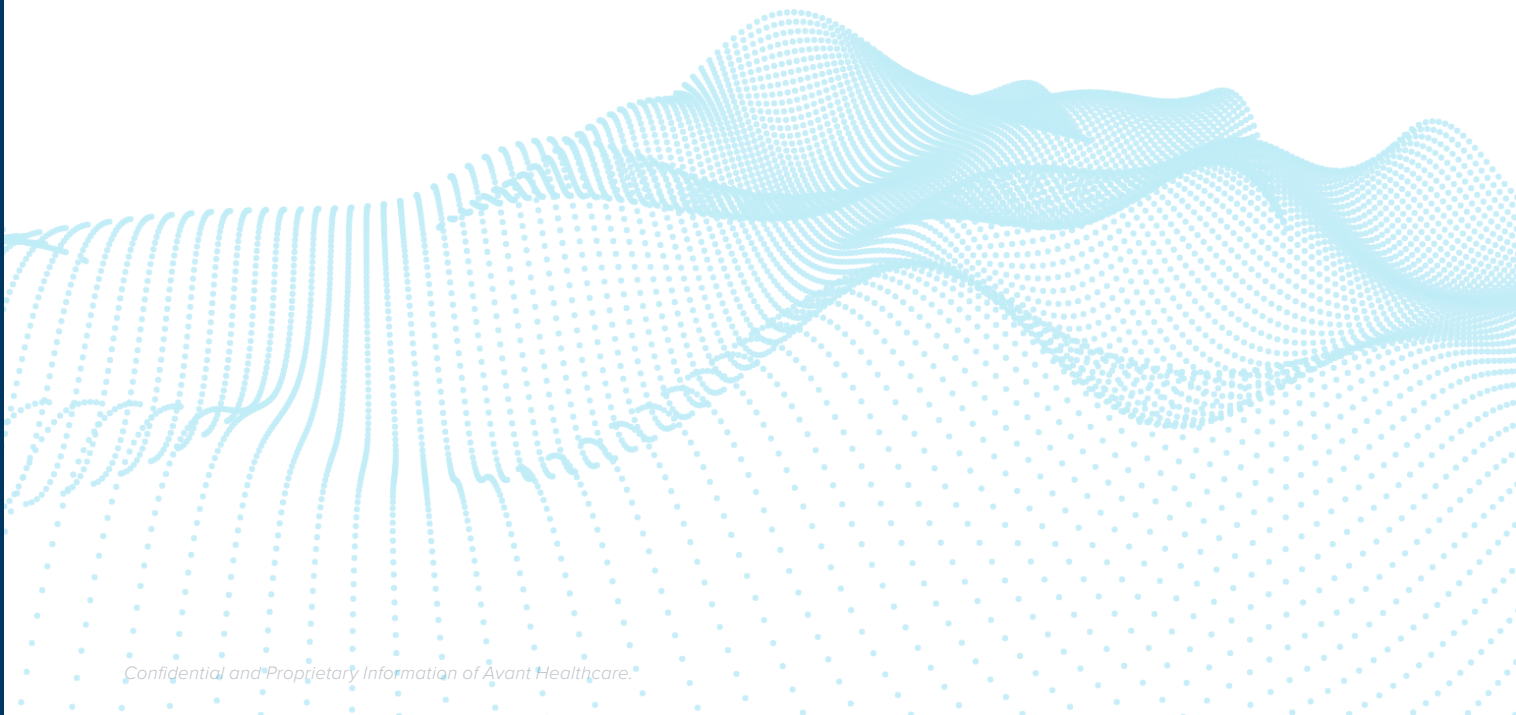
1. As in standard KOL engagement, it's important to foster cultivated relationships and formulate individualized plans that are going to meet the business and DOL's objectives.
2. Your engagement practices need to be mutually enriching and grounded in an understanding of what drives DOLs. Additionally, when engaging with DOLs, you should consider fitting them in to the overall brand strategy based upon their interests/areas of expertise. For example, if they already have a very solid multichannel plan for their own content on social media, consult with them on your own multichannel plan. Or perhaps they could help you create content that is specifically designed to be easily shared via social media.
3. There are two types of engagement to consider: structured/paid and earned/organic.

Structure/paid:

In this relationship configuration, pharma pays a consultant to serve in a traditional role in the virtual realm. In this instance, DOLs will be paid to consistently serve as advisors on content or share promotional materials on social media platforms like Twitter. While the efforts produced by this relationship will be more fruitful, they run the risk of being perceived as inauthentic.

Earned/organic:

This relationship configuration is less straightforward. DOLs will organically share and discuss pharma content and although the promotional efforts will be received as more authentic, there is no guarantee of consistent engagement.





CHANGING YOUR DOL STRATEGY FOR A CHANGING WORLD

Many pharma companies are still hesitant to fully invest in DOL engagement and identification. This needs to change. While the old paradigm of speaker programs, advisory boards, and a fleet of well-trained sales reps is not completely irrelevant, there is a sense in which our entire civilization, not just the healthcare industry, is in the midst of epochal change. The way we shop for consumer goods, the way we communicate, and the way we learn about the world has completely changed over the last 15 years. The line between our lives out in the world and our lives online has all but disappeared. Our efforts to deliver the crucial messages to HCPs that will transform patient lives should reflect this reality. If opinion leaders matter, and they do, then we should invest in the types of opinion leaders who are thriving in this new paradigm and leading the way to a new future in healthcare.

A strong DOL identification and engagement strategy can bring authenticity and authority to your brand. Unsure where to start? Contact us today.

AvantHC.com

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