

Healthcare Decisions in the Age of Social Networks: THE FACTS ABOUT INFLUENCERS, TRUST AND PRIVACY

Clearly, social networks are an integral part of our lives today. But how much do they impact healthcare decisions? Do people trust — and act on — what they read online?

To find out, SSI conducted a study with more than 1,450 U.S. consumers 13 and older. About half of our respondents are from our proprietary panels while the other half are from web communities.

Social Networks: Not Just for the Young

Many pharmaceutical marketers share the misperception that social networks are for the young — so not productive for reaching older audiences. Our findings show, however, that all age groups have enthusiastic social networkers.

As expected, about 90% of respondents 18 to 24 have visited social networking sites within the last week. Some might be surprised to see high participation rates in older age groups, as well. About 70% of those 35 to 44, 60% of those 45 to 54, and half of those 55 and older also have been social networking within the last week.

Avids Dominate Activities

In all age groups, there is a particularly active group of participants we call “Avids” — those spending five-plus hours a week social networking. Avids account for the majority of online discussions. They are most likely to post a comment, answer a poll, or share opinions about a product. They are also more likely to chat about healthcare topics. While 15% of respondents overall have commented about healthcare subjects on social networks, a quarter of “Avids” have posted health-related items.

Social Networks Influence Prescription Decisions

“Avids” are more likely to recommend prescription products to others. While 33% of respondents overall have suggested a prescription drug to others, 42% of “Avids” have made Rx product recommendations.

Contributed by



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“Avids” are not only more likely to post Rx product reviews, they are also more likely to be influenced by them. More than half of “Avids” say a positive review on a social networking site about an Rx product by someone they didn’t know would influence their decision to use the drug, compared with 39% of all respondents.

The impact of social networks is even greater when a post is by someone the respondent does know — a friend, a colleague, or a family member. Almost two-thirds of respondents overall say their decision to use an Rx drug would be impacted by a positive review from someone they know and 81% of “Avids” say they would be influenced by positive comments from friends, family, or colleagues.

Trust Remains an Issue

Social networks do impact behavior. About a third of respondents have asked a physician for a prescription drug based on a comment they read online. That number soars to more than half for “Avids.”

Although social networks are effective in sending consumers to their doctors, they are not yet trusted sources, either for OTC or Rx brands. While almost three-quarters of respondents say they would trust their pharmacists for OTC information — and 71% would trust

their physicians — just 5% say they would trust social media. The pattern is similar for Rx drugs. Physicians and pharmacists are still the top information sources for Rx brands, trusted by 79% and 64% of respondents, respectively. Just 3%, however, trust social networks.

Privacy Is a Concern

Many people are uncomfortable sharing health information online. Overall, more than half of respondents are very concerned or extremely concerned about companies monitoring their online activities. While financial information and email content are their top concerns, about a third are worried about their health information. People want to connect with others but don’t want personal information, including healthcare information, shared unless they control the process. That’s why they are comfortable with survey research as opposed to social network “eavesdropping.”

Conclusions

Online postings can be effective both in sending consumers to their doctors, seeking information on a treatment — and in impacting Rx and OTC brand decisions. To be effective, pharmaceutical marketers and researchers need to understand social networks and begin incorporating them into their plans. **PV**

PODCAST



**UNDERSTANDING HOW
SOCIAL NETWORKS DRIVE
HEALTHCARE DECISIONS:
MAPPING THE NEW
"INFLUENCE" LANDSCAPE**

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