

What's Your Social Media STRATEGY?

Social media has radically transformed the way customers and patients learn, act, and behave. So much so that many of our clients have come to expect it. So it is no surprise that the race is on to stake out an approach to integrate social media into the brand marketing mix. But unlike earlier transformations in the interactive space, (like Web 2.0, APIs, apps, and broadband), the social media revolution has been remarkably difficult for healthcare to integrate.

Social tactics typically derive their impact from open, real-time conversations, and open conversations have proved to be challenging to support in the regulated healthcare context. Further, social engagement requires an entirely different kind of vigilance and commitment: one that stresses long-term support and engagement with individuals and a willingness to respond immediately and transparently. The challenge for us is to identify a path that will enable us to integrate social behaviors within our programs. There is hope. Social media isn't a single tactic and social engagement is not monolithic.

Establishing a viable social media strategy and charting a course to a successful tactical implementation requires both a top-down and bottom-up approach: only by establishing top-down guidelines and support at the enterprise level will individual brand teams be empowered and practically able to implement social tactics. From the tactical level, a more granular analysis that examines different methods and modalities within the broader social media channel can help identify social tactics that provide value and be practical with the brand and the enterprise.

Social Media and Healthcare Customer Experience

The healthcare customer journey begins with disease awareness. Social media has dramatically changed the way that providers, patients, and caregivers access and evaluate disease-related information. And, because disease awareness efforts don't always have to be branded, this makes it a prime opportunity to use social media tactics.

Accessing and Evaluating Health-related Information

Increasing awareness of disease, research into treatment options, sharing personal stories, and experience, are all activities for which social media excels, and it provides an easy entry point for pharmaceutical companies and brands to make a mark in the social media

space. Using prevailing social channels is a good starting point because of their high penetration and daily usage rates. According to Comscore, in 2012, Americans spend, on average, roughly 25 minutes per day on social network sites. These are effective channels to raise awareness of diseases, promote screening, and drive physician dialogue. Unbranded, highly visible, and automatically networked, these are effective and relatively risk-free ways to leverage social channels to benefit patients.

Making Treatment Decisions

Many highly personal decisions that once were made behind closed doors have become a kind of public spectacle through the magic that is social media. And it might be tempting to leverage this phenomenon for promotional purposes. But in fact, this is an area about which we need to be extremely circumspect. We recommend evaluating tactics on the basis of whether or not they provide real value. One approach that works well is to provide socially sharable tools and resources that assist in the decision-making process. Building share functions into interactive tools, including the ability to share results with social networks, can truly provide value.

Social Communication

While brands have a difficult time developing socially enabled communications due to regulatory concerns associated with specific products and treatments, most pharmaceutical companies have been successfully leveraging social strategies for years on the enterprise level. For example, most major pharmaceutical companies have been using Twitter for years for corporate communications and many have accumulated and maintain many thousands of followers. What most companies have learned is that launching a Twitter feed requires near constant vigilance. Replies and reposting can be generated by anyone at any time and can spread instantaneously. Companies and brands must be prepared to monitor and respond to posts at a moment's notice in a responsible manner and they need to be armed with a playbook for appropriate responses. Similarly, on Facebook open commenting puts a tremendous burden on brands to monitor and maintain the quality of posts. Perhaps it is no surprise that these tactics often fall to the cutting room floor once a risk/benefit analysis is mentally calculated.

Developing a Strategic Position

Just like the rest of your marketing and

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communication plans, social media needs to be recognized as a tactic and not a strategy in itself. That being said, getting the enterprise lined up strategically around what sorts of social tactics are permissible and supportable is critical. The prevalent brand-centric organizational structure that we work within decentralizes decision-making. This yields the benefits of creativity and independent thought, but can also result in a guessing game when it comes to what is and isn't permissible. Lack of a social media strategy can result in inconsistent regulatory pronouncements from different regulatory teams, each of which interprets risk independently. This confuses and frustrates brand teams while wasting time and money.

Capitalize on the Opportunity

Despite the pervasive and profound impact that social media has had on customer behavior, few pharmaceutical companies have been able to integrate social media into their marketing plans effectively. The result of this stagnation is that pharmaceutical marketing is lagging behind and missing a huge opportunity to engage with prevailing behaviors and trends that are shaping customer behavior. So, while social media approaches must be evaluated from a risk management perspective, doing nothing is not an option. **PV**

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