



The Fierce Urgency of “Why” Social Media and THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY

Most discussions regarding social media engagement in the pharma context start with the question of “how?” How can a brand properly monitor its Facebook page, or prove a social program’s ROI, or escape FDA scrutiny, or even convince the regulatory department to give a program the go-ahead in the first place?

But “how” is precisely the wrong question to start with. Before getting to “how,” the smart brand manager — and the smart marketing agency — should first ask “why?”

Why? Not how to launch a Facebook page or YouTube channel, but why should we engage with our customers in the social space at all? If “why” has a sufficiently compelling answer, then “how” becomes just a matter of tactics.

Creating a Social Engagement Strategy

So, why should pharma companies engage?

First, because you’re going to have to do it whether you want to or not.

Five years from now, a pharma brand going into the marketplace without a social presence would be like launching a brand in today’s digital market without a website. As consumers continue to embrace social media and share more and more of their experiences with treatments and devices, the ensuing health-related conversations will be happening with or without industry participation.

Five years from now, a pharma brand going into the marketplace without a social presence would be like launching a brand in today’s digital marketplace without a website.

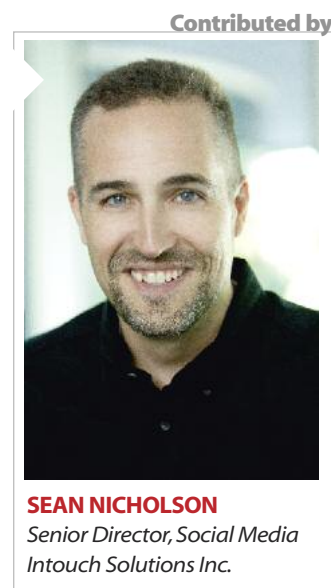
Pharmaceutical companies exist to serve patients. Those patients are using social media in greater numbers every day. The technology exists for us to offer those patients a wealth of information and answers, not to mention actual tools that can improve their health.

A brand can play a part in defining and shaping its product perception, or simply sit back and allow the contours of that perception to be defined by others.

Second, because social offers a direct channel into a brand’s target community, to learn about their wants and needs — and through this understanding a roadmap can easily be created that will show marketers exactly how to grow a brand in ways that will better serve its customers.

And third, pharma companies can use social to benefit the communities that they serve by offering supplemental services like customer support and disease state advocacy. And what goal is more fundamental than that? Pharmaceutical companies don’t exist to merely make drugs. Their larger mission is to help make people feel better.

There are some topics that people just love to talk about. And the industries



SEAN NICHOLSON
Senior Director, Social Media
Intouch Solutions Inc.

whose offerings cross into or through those topics are the ones that have taken the greatest strides in social. Do women like to talk about shoes? Zappos earned more than 2.8 million followers on Twitter and 800,000 “likes” on Facebook by encouraging them to do something they love to do anyway. Do coffee shops have a strong social and conversational component? Starbucks has its clientele interacting with its brand without ever walking into a store, with more than 4 million Twitter followers and nearly 35 million fans on Facebook. Do people need mutual support and competition to help them exercise? The Nike+ app and Nike+ FuelBand use technology to help runners track their performance, discuss topics related to running and exercise, and share run statistics with friends, and have helped earn their company nearly 1.8 million Twitter followers and more than 15 million Facebook likes.



In social media before getting to “how,” the smart brand manager — and the smart marketing agency — should first ask “why?” If “why” has a sufficiently compelling answer, then “how” becomes just a matter of tactics.

But of course, more than shoes or coffee, our health is the universal social topic. Perfect strangers will happily talk about the most personal health matters in an airport, at a party, or online. And patients, especially newly diagnosed patients, are desperate for information about their specific disease — what can I do? What should I do? What have others done? Who are the experts? What do the experts say?

Breaking Barriers

But in spite of the enormous conversational potential of health, some in our industry have been using the FDA as an excuse to stay out of social media conversations. The FDA's regulations do place limits on what pharma marketers can say. But those limitations are mostly regarding branded, direct-to-consumer advertising, regardless of medium. Yes, if you talk about your brand and make claims about it without including the required fair balance, FDA regulators may come knocking. But our experience has been that, in the social space, the vast majority of people just aren't interested in talking about pharmaceutical brands or companies. Instead, they want to talk about the impact that a disease has on their lives, for example, “What does it mean to have diabetes? My son was just diagnosed. The doctor threw all these terms at me, and I have no clue as to what they mean. How do I learn what they mean?” Or, put differently: “Hey, pharma, don't advertise your treatments and devices to me. Help me understand how my son is going to continue playing soccer while managing his diabetes.”

Setting a Good Example

Outside pharma, Nike is a great example of using the full scope of social to provide real

value to a health community outside of a company's core offering. You don't have to wear Nike shoes to use the free Nike+ mobile app or wear the Nike+ FuelBand, and that's because the leadership at Nike understands that their company exists in order to serve the community of all runners, not just Nike shoe-wearing runners. And because they serve all runners, and offer tools like Nike+ to create a positive halo around the Nike brand without marketing it directly, people will be more likely to consider Nike shoes in the future.

This sort of thinking goes well beyond the Nike+ app, and pharma executives would do well to take note here. What is Nike's slogan? It's not, “Just buy our shoes.” Long before social media was even a speck in anyone's imagination, Nike saw the wisdom in making its brand messaging not about the company or its

offerings, but about us, the consumers. “Just do it,” they say. And by the way, so you can just do it, we are going to provide you with everything we possibly can to enable your success, including products, services, and access to information. Coming from a company that thinks that way, something like Nike+ or the FuelBand is not at all surprising. It seems unlikely that the rise of social led


to any pushback from the marketing team at Nike as has been the case in pharma; they probably just saw it as a new and better way to fulfill their mission, and proceeded accordingly.

Social is Customer-Centric

One key distinction here is unbranded versus branded. Most modern marketing executives, and especially pharma marketing executives, have the idea of ubiquitous product branding etched into their consciousness; anything that isn't branded isn't worth the invest-

ment. But, even aside from the regulatory implications, a pharma company launching a branded channel in the social space is a lot like trying to sell its services at a dinner party — it's a wonderful way to turn people off. People don't come to parties to find out what a great CPA you are, and they don't join social networks to find out how great Lipitor might be for them. They join social networks to build relationships, talk, and find resources and get questions answered.

But talking with customers isn't easy. In fact, the tragedy of all this is that pharma has spent the last 15 years automating everything in our industry so we don't have to talk to our customers. We use automated Web forms, auto responders, e-mail CRM systems, IVRs in our call centers — we do everything we can to not have to talk to the very people we are supposed to serve. And here before us sit tools that permit the virtual aggregation of giant communities of patients from all around the world, patients who want nothing more than to access the very information we possess and share their experiences, wants, and needs with us.

A Hollywood screenwriter couldn't have dreamed up a more perfect scenario for pharmaceutical companies to rebuild the trust between consumers and “big, bad pharma.” And yet we sit and stare at each other and worry about “how.” “How” is the wrong question. Pharmaceutical companies exist to serve patients. Those patients are using social media, in greater numbers every day. The technology exists for us to offer those patients a wealth of information and answers, not to mention actual tools that can improve their health. That's the “why,” and it's all the “why” we need. 

Intouch Solutions offers strategic, cutting-edge marketing solutions for pharmaceutical companies that want to educate consumers, build communities, and ultimately allow patients and healthcare professionals to experience their products.

▼ For more information, visit intouchsol.com.