



# Digital Health: Building Social Confidence in Pharma



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## ▶ Introduction

With a greater number of patients seeking health information online and engaging in two-way conversations with other patients and caregivers via social media, the healthcare industry has entered an exciting and game-changing era. In fact, 72% of online U.S. adults have looked for health information online in the past year,<sup>1</sup> and a similar proportion of European online consumers are social health users.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a recent study found that adoption of physician-only social networks by European doctors almost doubled in 2012.<sup>3</sup>

It has never been more imperative for pharmaceutical companies to engage with their audiences and become part of the conversation – by building valuable relationships with patient communities, participating in disease awareness, listening and gaining insight into physician, patient, and community needs.

Weber Shandwick is widely known as a thought leader in digital media and communications trends in the healthcare industry. To answer the frequently asked question of how to build the social confidence of healthcare companies in a heavily regulated sector, **Digital Health: Building Social Confidence in Pharma** examines what social engagement means to a rapidly-changing pharmaceutical industry.

## ▶ Why We Did the Research

Building upon a previous global quantitative survey jointly conducted by Weber Shandwick with Forbes Insights, [Socializing Your Brand: A Brand's Guide to Sociability](#), Weber Shandwick wanted to better understand findings from that study that suggested obstacles facing the pharma sector may be more internally-constrained, yet surmountable, than previously thought. With various internal functions, such as legal, regulatory, marketing and communications, involved in social media decision-making, responsibility for the medium and its strategic implementation is complex.

**Digital Health: Building Social Confidence in Pharma** explores how global pharmaceutical companies are using social media in their external communications. A particular focus is on understanding specific challenges that pharma communicators face in developing and executing social strategies, and identifying how professionals are overcoming these barriers. The goal of this research is to help them leverage this important medium and ultimately get closer to their audiences.

“ Patients are increasingly harnessing the Internet to gain knowledge about health conditions and even self-diagnose, leading to a more empowered health consumer and contributing to more informed patient-physician discussions. In this new age of participatory medicine, pharmaceutical companies must start by understanding what health communities want and need, then use digital technologies to reach them with information that meets that need and does not run afoul of applicable regulations. ”

Laura Schoen, President Global Healthcare, Weber Shandwick

## ▶ How We Did the Research

This report presents learning from 12 in-depth telephone interviews conducted at the end of 2012 with senior in-house pharmaceutical executives responsible for social media decisions and one marketing consultant with comprehensive industry experience. Interviews were divided by regional markets, where we conducted four interviews with executives located in the U.S., four in Europe, three in Asia and one responsible for communications in Latin America. Where possible, differences between these markets are summarized.

Prior to the in-depth interviews, we interviewed healthcare professionals at Weber Shandwick to hear their perspective on social communications in the industry and to better understand pharmaceutical regulations by region.

<sup>1</sup> Fall, 2012 Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project

<sup>2</sup> Manhattan Research, Cybercitizen Health® Europe 2012

<sup>3</sup> Manhattan Research, Taking the Pulse Europe 2012

## ► Four Key Take-Aways

Our research identified four paradigm-shifting conclusions:

1

### **Regulatory is no longer the primary barrier to engagement:**

In lieu of clear guidelines, companies have recognized that they must find ways to engage. It's now more about "how" than "if." So, while regulations are a persistent concern, companies are more challenged by internally socializing the strategy, instilling confidence in the ability of teams to make social engagement effective and aligning the right resources.

2

### **ROI in an often unbranded space is uniquely challenging for the pharma industry:**

Without the ability to directly correlate social media activity to the bottom line, non-branded disease and corporate social efforts are difficult to value. However, pharma communicators are increasingly recognizing that listening to patient communities is a powerful benefit of being social. The insights that can be gained through monitoring and assessing social media postings is akin to participating in a 24-7 focus group at a fraction of the cost.

3

### **Don't underestimate the value of social confidence:**

It is imperative to gain experience in using social platforms with distinct audiences. Pharma communicators are starting with small pilot projects, often with listening and monitoring of constituent activities. Starting small, but starting somewhere, is the name of the game in building organizational confidence in this digital medium.

4

### **In today's "open 24/7" world, it is riskier to not engage than to engage:**

Social engagement is too often deemed a business risk by pharma companies. Ensuing inaction often results in brand invisibility which consumers find suspect and which can have a negative effect on the reputation of the company.

It is the responsibility of pharma communicators to drive the industry's social engagement. Pharma companies have been slow to recognize the valuable role communications, as a discipline, can play in building engaging relationships in brand or disease awareness communications. At times, social media has been thought of as the domain of regulatory personnel and marketing. However, well-crafted communications strategies aimed at engaging consumers and health stakeholders in meaningful dialogue ultimately enhance brand and company reputation.



The following details our learning about social media in the pharmaceutical sector – from the benefits, to the challenges, to resolutions. We distill our learnings into 10 Rules of Engagement that serve as a guide to pharma companies working to build their social confidence.

## BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ARE UNDERSTOOD

Interviewees cite a variety of advantages from their existing social media programs:

### ▶ Allows direct communications with audiences

Many appreciate the ability to communicate with patients and caregivers in such a direct manner.

**“Social media is very important, because this is the first opportunity that the pharma industry has had to really be able to engage with groups of people we haven’t been able to before. The walls are down.”**

*Director of New Customer Channels, European Commercial Division*

Notably, communicators emphasize that social engagement should not assume a one-size-fits-all approach. While Facebook continues to be effective, especially for disease awareness and community building, other specific social platforms offer unique benefits. For example, Pinterest and YouTube can effectively communicate employee culture to job applicants while Twitter can help build a following among government and media audiences with its simple and targeted features.

### ▶ Adds value to patient and physician communities

Communicators recognize that social media is a platform where caregivers, physicians and especially patients exchange information. As one interviewee observed, “People are helping each other and getting good value from the medium.” Some communicators are engaging in these online communities and carving out a supportive role for themselves.

Importantly, the social programs managed by these interviewees are driven by the needs of their communities and not by the communication priorities of the pharma company. For example, one executive described how advanced cancer patients can feel underserved by broader advocacy groups and therefore the communicator developed YouTube videos focused on coping strategies for this audience. The benefits of this type of engagement are multifold, including a better-informed patient community, a sense of emotional support for all involved and goodwill towards the sponsor company.

**“As a company or industry with expertise in treatment and patient education, we are actually one of the stakeholders – like nurses or moms of patients. We try to find a role that is valuable for the community...If you look at traditional marketing practice, you try to find a platform and get your message out. But, social media is another level of engagement...It has taken time for companies to learn that.”**

*Associate V.P. of Communications, European Business Unit*

### ▶ Shapes perceptions

One global communications executive described how her company’s lack of social engagement was deemed a business risk by the corporate board of directors. Inaction had led to misinformation about the company and its products that lingered online. Correcting misperceptions and monitoring has now become a priority at this company. Another digital executive shared how her team is building greater trust among key audiences, including advocacy groups and government officials, through regular tweets as well as transparent social policies that clearly state the purpose of different platforms and rules of conduct.

**“Social media is very important from an issues management perspective; we have to know what people are saying about us and work on how to reply.”**

*Global Head of Communications, Europe*

## ▶ Gains insight into patient populations

Some have gained valuable learning into the lives of patient groups through hosting or monitoring of social communities. For example, one interviewee learned why patients were not complying with a regimen – a specific treatment produced anxiety for the patients and their families. This insight resulted in a company-sponsored education effort around the advantages of the treatment and led to better patient outcomes as well as business results. Digital communicators who have engaged in category-specific efforts believe that social media can serve as a valuable market research tool.

**“From a medical perspective, we have lots of accumulated information. But the more we talk with patients and doctors, we realize that these are people and they have their challenges, as well as fun parts to their lives...Traditionally, the way pharma supported patients was to work with doctors and that was it. You believed the patient would take the drug and that was it. But the more you understand patients, you realize they may not be using [the drug] as prescribed or they may drop the prescription and they don't share all their questions with their physician.”**

Director of New Customer Channels, European Commercial Division

**“First, you need to listen. Be humble if you really want to understand patients...You can do this in many ways – interviews, talk to nurses...Social media is one of my tools – it is one element of a bigger picture and then once you know your patients, you can develop solutions and programs.”**

Associate V.P. of Communications, European Business Unit

## ▶ Extends important messages

Some view social media as a complementary channel that strengthens key messaging programs. One company's core priority is to demonstrate how it serves as a trusted partner in health and education and therefore the communications team uses Twitter to share proceedings from medical congresses with healthcare professionals and journalists. Slideshare is also considered to be an excellent and cost-effective resource for disseminating professional papers and presentations.

Another company's business unit regularly offers disease education on their corporate Facebook page and has also found that Twitter and YouTube work well together in promoting one core message to important advocacy groups by building followership and driving traffic to relevant content. Others have used YouTube, Twitter and Facebook to support traditional media relations.

**“We think Twitter, YouTube and Facebook all work in a holistic way of speaking with one strong voice.”**

Global Head, eCommunications and Social Media, U.S.-based Business Unit

## REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT IS NO LONGER THE PRIMARY CONCERN

For many executives in this research, the regulatory environment understandably presents serious consideration when developing social strategies. Yet it is perceived as a given or price of entry for the pharmaceutical industry. Most interviewees cite regulatory issues first when discussing challenges to sociability but they also readily offer solutions that have worked for them.

In discussing industry regulations, European interviewees generally articulated less anxious opinions around this challenge than those in Asia and the United States. And while rules can vary by European country – where France is seen as particularly strict and Germany and Switzerland less so – there appears to be an overall understanding of where European rules fall. In April 2011, the United Kingdom’s PMCPA’s release of Q&As helped resolve some reservations among European interviewees about that market.

Asia Pacific respondents characterize regulatory issues as complicated. For them, requirements differ within their wide regional market, especially between more advanced markets such as Japan or Australia versus developing ones, including China. Still, aside from adverse event reporting, these communicators were vague about other requirements that present challenges to social activity.

In the United States, brand and disease-specific social communications are of concern as companies await FDA guidelines, which have been expected since 2009. While hopeful that guidance will be issued by a July 2014 deadline imposed by Congress, some interviewees expect any

rulings to be non-binding (as were their off-label recommendations published in December 2011) or even somewhat vague. With such a new and evolving medium, these executives don’t believe that regulations can remain relevant for long. The specific rules that govern current anxieties in the American market include adverse events, first use submission requirements, fair balance and off-label promotion guidelines.

Regardless of geography, adverse event concerns are mentioned most often by communicators, yet the fear may be overstated. With experience and research showing that less than half a percent of social media mentions contain an actionable adverse event (AE)<sup>4</sup>, pharma companies have realized that they are unlikely to be presented with large numbers of new AEs. However, what remains bothersome is the difficulty in researching of ten anonymous AEs reported through social media and demonstrating “good effort” in doing so to regulators. Without clear guidance on what constitutes good effort, communicators are concerned about the investigative work involved in even a small number of events, especially within a 24-hour reporting requirement. Moreover, as an increasing number of companies start to see the value in listening to social discussions occurring outside their own digital properties, it is unclear whether pharma communicators are responsible for claims made on non-proprietary platforms.

“Yes – these are important issues, but you just have to put in the time to understand them and get them right.”

Director of Communications, Europe

“ The adverse event concern has evolved beyond volume. How much of the Internet they are liable for is becoming the next question that pharma communicators want addressed. ”

Stacey Bernstein, Senior Vice President, Director of U.S. Digital Health, Weber Shandwick

<sup>4</sup> Visible Technologies

## INTERNAL IMPEDIMENTS TO SOCIABILITY

Interviewees cite corporate culture and strategy barriers for delaying social media adoption:

### ▶ Decentralized culture

Research participants portray how business divisions work in silos, with only limited consideration given to broader corporate communications priorities. As one interviewee stated, “They need to build a presence in specific disease-related markets and that is their focus.”

An important consequence of this decentralization is **minimal knowledge sharing** company-wide. In fact, only one of the emerging market interviewees was able to describe larger corporate-wide or category-specific communications initiatives.

It was clear how isolated those regions are in terms of their ability to build upon existing activities and experience. In developing markets, interviewees feel particularly disadvantaged from a resource perspective, pointing to larger budgets enjoyed by corporate and central brand groups. One Asian executive addressed this challenge by bringing a digital expert from the company’s North American operations on a tour of Asian offices to share the benefits and how-to’s of their social strategy.

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“ Currently, a number of overarching internal barriers hinder adoption of social media in the pharma sector, and they all point to a need for stronger internal alignment and understanding of the medium. ”

**Rachael Pay**, Managing Director, Health, Europe, Weber Shandwick



## ▶ Diffused control over social media

In some companies, social activities are divided into two loci of ownership: corporate is responsible for reputation issues, including IR, public affairs, employee recruiting/retention and media relations, while marketers – who are diffused throughout business units – are responsible for disease education and brand communications.

Execution of social programs is locally-driven, mostly at the country level, by various functional disciplines. Reasons for this local management of social media vary. Some point to stronger experience in specific geographic markets (especially the United States) or resource allocation differences by region and business unit. Others describe how communications must be tailored to specific standards governing industry communications which vary by country. For example, privacy rules differ in Europe, necessitating one interviewee to disable community registration functions of their custom social platform in some markets. And importantly, others suggest that diverse information needs, cultural, language and social characteristics are best addressed at a more local level.

Further complicating the organization of social media responsibilities, some interviewees shared how different corporate functions are vying for command over the medium. One interviewee with a regulatory background believes their newly-formed commercial function is best equipped for social communications decisions while another believes PR and marketing should not be privy to all results from social media tracking so that pharmacovigilance issues can be properly managed. On the other end of the spectrum is the global head of communications for a large multinational, who is responsible for all social media risk management and is currently devising a company-wide social policy.

Another level of complexity is in developing markets for some pharmas, where distribution partners are responsible for communications (including disease education/advocacy) on behalf of the pharmaceutical company, making decision-making around new platforms a challenge.

What results from this multi-layered landscape, where different and sometimes competing players manage social programs, is an environment that lacks coordination and produces inefficiencies. To begin addressing these issues, a few interviewees shared how their companies are beginning to consolidate overarching social decisions within either corporate communications or a commercial/operational function at the centralized level. The role of these central professionals will be to share a corporate vision, standards and rules governing social media as well as best practice examples.

However, implementation of social programs will still remain the purview of local staff.

## ▶ “Unsocial” orientation of upper management, not CEOs necessarily

Two-way dialogue and direct contact with the public represents a tectonic shift in thinking for the marketing organizations of pharma companies. As one interviewee described, “These are heads of business units or marketing divisions that are experienced, one-on-one physician sales experts or highly skilled project managers. Communications and marketing with a broader public are very new to them.” Accordingly, when making decisions over how to allocate limited resources, pharma marketers are wary of choosing what is new and unproven.

This challenge does not appear to extend to most members of the C-suite, however. Some interviewees point to overall support by the CEO and/or regional leadership for social media, while others describe minimal involvement by the company’s leadership in these decisions. None of the executives interviewed mentioned top corporate leadership as an issue.

Aside from senior marketers, the other internal pockets of resistance to social media can come from the legal, regulatory and medical departments, a challenge that is unique to the pharma industry. Interviewees recognize that these functions do not often have the headcount available to address social media communications, impeding social program execution. Those communicators who have more sophisticated social strategies have built strong relationships and support from their legal and medical colleagues, but others still struggle in developing these important partnerships.

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“ If pharma companies are going to truly leverage social media, internal legal, regulatory and medical functions will require improved understanding of the risks and benefits of social channels as well as greater support to sustain their contributions to digital programming. ”

Rachael Pay, Managing Director, Health, Europe, Weber Shandwick

## ▶ Limited and constrained resources

The respondents in our study frequently acknowledged that they did not have the proper social media architecture in place for supporting a world-class social initiative. Resources would be required in three areas...

**1 STAFFING** – Many recognize that executing longer-term, two-way programs involve larger staffing commitments. For many, however, budget allocations are not yet adequate to cover this need.

**2 EDUCATING** – Many believe that senior executives as well as colleagues responsible for regulatory approvals need to be educated on the basics of social media and how it can positively support their company's strategic objectives.

**3 HIRING AND TRAINING** – Interviewees are concerned with the existing level of experience among staffers who are responsible for social programs. A few participants would like to hire social media professionals but find it challenging to attract them to an industry often viewed as unfavorable to young, entrepreneurial Web 2.0 professionals. Others are concerned with the involvement of in-house IT staff in social media decisions.

## ▶ Lack of industry-specific ROI measures for social media programs

Interviewees are struggling with how (if at all) standard metrics such as number of "likes" and followers can be linked to social objectives unique to the pharma industry such as engagement with disease communities and support for patient journeys.

Part of the ROI challenge is finding appropriate benchmarks, especially difficult when starting a new education or support initiative where the needs of a disease community are still unknown. Communicators also mention the complexity of linking social efforts to sales. Without click-through data, sales can be challenging to measure. Some are considering pre-post research surveys to explore attitudinal and behavioral changes resulting from social campaigns. Others are measuring the quality of their social engagement, examining who is retweeting and the sentiment of those retweets. Another consideration is whether to measure total engagement with all of the social channels employed in digital programming, or whether each channel requires separate metrics.

Interviewees believe that finding effective ROI metrics will simplify the process of selling-in social communications to internal stakeholders. This challenge is especially pressing for those who have more advanced social media programs, as they believe that in order to sustain and grow their efforts, clear and relevant measures of success will be required. Unlike consumer goods companies, pharma can't use coupons or sweepstakes to tie social activities to sales. ROI becomes a lot more challenging when you're dealing with qualitative metrics.

**"Senior management asks for it, but trying to explain the tangible benefits of implementing a social strategy is hard."**

Director of New Customer Channels, European Commercial Division

# HIERARCHY OF SOCIAL IMPEDIMENTS



Research participants were presented with a list of 18 specific challenges. The internally-derived challenges tend to rank higher than externally-driven ones in terms of the degree to which they impede social efforts. Interestingly, internal challenges were mentioned as especially problematic by those interviewees who had experience with general public/consumer social programs.

## MOST TROUBLESOME:

- Identifying the most effective ROI measures for social media programs

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- Insufficient communications staffing for social media programming

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- Insufficient internal communications expertise in building and executing social media programs

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- Effectively engaging the company's internal stakeholders, such as legal or medical departments, to sell in the need and benefit of social media communications

## TROUBLESOME:

- Monitoring and reporting adverse events

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- Clarity over what is and isn't permitted by government regulatory bodies

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- Fear of making mistakes, incorrectly reporting something or insufficiently reporting something when using social media

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- The need to monitor and potentially filter out comments (such as off-label discussions) posted in social media

## NEUTRAL:

- The expense or cost involved in executing a social media strategy

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- Difficulty working with internal legal/regulatory department on social media communications

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- Lack of social media structure or policy, where responsibilities and standards are clearly established organization-wide

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- IT infrastructure and IT abilities or knowledge to execute on social media platforms

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- Concern over knowing what to communicate on a regular basis

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- Concern of antagonizing regulators or drawing their criticism

## LEAST BOTHERSOME:

- Consumer privacy or data leaks

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- Lack of senior management support for social media

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- Clarity over ownership of and responsibilities for independent opinions voiced on social media

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- Lack of a comprehensive social media strategy that can ladder up into a larger, enterprise-wide story



# 10 Rules of Engagement: Building Social Confidence

## 10 Rules of Engagement: Building Social Confidence

Based on our in-depth interviews with industry professionals, Weber Shandwick recommends that pharma companies consider the following strategies to maximize their social confidence:

- 1 **FOCUS ON THE CONTENT, NOT THE CHANNEL** – Anything you can do offline, you can do online, as long as your content adheres to current regulatory standards. Companies have run afoul of regulators when they have not followed standards that apply to non-digital rules of communication. Insuring that content adheres to established codes of conduct, regardless of the medium, will build social confidence and allay the anxieties that currently encumber pharma companies.
- 2 **START SMALL** – Test the waters with focused projects – perhaps around corporate goals, news and reputation issues – to gain an understanding of what works, how to begin finding audiences and building reach. Interviewees agree that starting small, such as with pilot programs, is key to gaining the experience and assurance they need to build their digital social strategies.
- 3 **PREPARE, BUT REMAIN FLEXIBLE** – Many state that preparation is important, principally to anticipate problems and devise solutions. However, interviewees caution against devoting significant resource to developing a fully “buttoned-up” strategy, as it will change and evolve over time. They describe how they learned, adjusted and needed space to experiment without the pressure of stringent expectations or metrics.

**“Be prepared to get little sleep for the first three months. Problems always come around 11:00 p.m. on a Friday night...You learn as you go along; you learn when to be quiet and when to intervene...It is quite a journey.”**

Director of New Customer Channels, European Commercial Division

One communicator described how a company-wide social strategy, currently in development, will encompass an overall vision for what social media means to the company and specific rules of operating within existing regulations. However, it will also allow for flexibility to adapt by region or country, business unit or platform.

“ Of the FDA warning letters issued to pharmaceutical companies in the social space, very few were actually related to an activity that was ‘social’ in nature. In most cases, online violations would have solicited a warning letter had the exact same tactic been undertaken offline. ”

Stacey Bernstein, Senior Vice President,  
Director of U.S. Digital Health, Weber Shandwick

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**CHOOSE YOUR CHANNELS WISELY** – Some interviewees portray industry colleagues as quick to jump into social media simply for the sake of “being there” and they advise on a more strategic approach, especially in choosing platforms. Facebook, for example, may not be the most appropriate platform for some audiences or may be more effective in a supporting role.

Communicators suggest initial monitoring and research of specific audience groups to explore where they currently engage and what types of information they seek as well as share. Developing a strategy without this “social listening” is not recommended. Additional considerations around platform choice include the resources required for the development and maintenance (a long-term and generally larger expenditure) of each channel. One digital media executive warns against developing communities on custom platforms instead of using existing applications such as YouTube or resources such as PatientsLikeMe.

**“There is a reason why you find competing gas stations on the same street corner – you go where the masses congregate.”**

Director, Digital and Social Media, U.S. Commercial Division

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**ENSURE TRANSPARENCY AND HONESTY** – Interviewees insist on clear rules of engagement and making them plainly visible on all social platforms. Some companies make a digital code of ethics available to both internal and external audiences. Others point to “soft” and “genuine” tones as most effective with consumer audiences. Offering information or support that is valued by a community such as detail on clinical trials or lifestyle advice demonstrates that a company cares more than simply “pushing” or “selling” a message.

6

**DEPUTIZE A PERSON OR TEAM, AND GIVE THEM FULL SUPPORT** – Allocating staff resources for social endeavors and providing all appropriate training and support are key in successful social programming.

**“First, you need a dedicated person who can really focus on your channel(s). This can’t be unowned.”**

Director of Digital Communications, U.S.

Relatedly, empower social media staff with the authority to post by agreeing upon what is and is not acceptable, and as the organization’s social confidence increases, move beyond the need to pre-approve all posts or tweets. This model of empowerment works in conjunction with clear rules of conduct provided to all employees, insuring protection against rogue internal social posters.

7

**BRING OTHERS INTO THE FOLD** – Working to gain the support of internal colleagues, especially from legal, regulatory and medical teams is critical. Additionally, including socially-supportive leaders from business units in strategic planning will ease the process of resolving any issues that arise in social media programming. One communications executive described how an internal audit became a “godsend,” producing a companywide mandate for social media where senior executives sit on a steering committee to oversee strategy development.

8

**RAMP UP INTERNAL EDUCATION EFFORTS** – Sharing the benefits and best practices around social communications will go a long way towards gaining broad support for the medium. Some interviewees are engaging outside experts to evangelize social platforms to internal company stakeholders. A few guidelines to consider include:

- Use case studies (from within the company or outside) to show what works and importantly, how to apply the learning to a company or business unit’s particular situation. Share relevant examples – as one interviewee said, don’t showcase an online community for a high-incidence condition when considering rare-disease communications. Share examples from the geographic region in question when possible. Describe the benefits of specific social platforms for specific audience groups (and how they use the platform).
- Share what has NOT worked or where companies and brands have run into trouble – especially on the regulatory front. Directly addressing these setbacks and how to avoid them will help alleviate trepidation. One interview stated his interest in learning from others so that... “if we have to fail, we fail quickly and only once.”
- Customize education efforts for your internal audience.
  - For those who are unfamiliar with the medium, offer hands-on examples of what a platform is about and how it is used. Let socially-inexperienced colleagues explore a Facebook page or Twitter feed for an organization they may be interested in following (for personal or professional reasons) to illustrate the value of the medium. Offer interactive opportunities.
  - Consider the information needs of internal content approvers. For example, medical and regulatory staffs do not require training in actual rules and regulations but may benefit from demonstrations of how regulations work with digital communications and what to look for during the approval process.
- Especially in developing markets where pharma is less active in social media, provide statistics on the adoption of digital technologies to demonstrate the potential of social communications. Additionally, share the particulars of regulations in individual markets and their implications for social activities. Discuss how various audiences in the region are currently using social media. Communicators in Asia and Latin America want to understand the overall social environment in their respective markets.

## 9

**STAFF FOR SOCIAL CONFIDENCE** – A large proportion of interviewees find the level of current staff experience to be lacking, while others recognize that they require additional resources to execute social media programs. Therefore, it is important to:

- Offer ongoing training on company guidelines and codes of conduct. Don't assume that one session is sufficient. Supplement training sessions with updates.
- Identify internal and external resources that can supply fresh and relevant content for social platforms. Cultivate multiple sources of content as access to a robust information pipeline will insure that social channels regularly engage their audiences.
- Similarly, determine which resources are needed to implement a social monitoring program – this can be time-intensive and should be considered upfront.
- Develop an employee attraction and retention strategy that demonstrates exciting opportunities for socially-skilled professionals. Consider ways that a young, entrepreneurial prospect could flourish in a digital communications role and shape job descriptions to support individuals with social media skills. Research participants are concerned about their ability to retain digitally-savvy employees. Thus, it is imperative to work with internal HR staff or outside resources to help shape an environment where these professionals can succeed.

## 10

**CONTINUE PUSHING THE LIMITS OF ROI** – While no one has answered the unique ROI challenges faced by the pharma industry, it is imperative to persistently seek better ways to articulate the ROI from social media. Consider:

- How to value the benefits of listening to audiences and developing new market insights. Set up monitoring programs to get closer to important constituencies, and keep track of actionable learning.
- Developing internal benchmarks to measure what different business units or markets have done to determine resource allocations. Capture data such as overall cost of monitoring different platforms, average maintenance expenditures, average hit rate, share rate, etc.
- Taking into account the audience served by social programs – their potential size, disease-state incidence, information needs.
- Participating in industry-wide initiatives to compare data for benchmarking purposes.



## Conclusion

Given the diffuse ownership over social media at many global companies, communications professionals must demonstrate the importance of their discipline in shaping social strategy and implementation.

Notably, communicators should:

- Evangelize the value of social communications to those who are new to the medium and impact its implementation, including medical and regulatory professionals.
- Disseminate successes and how-to's across markets and business divisions to bypass the decentralized operating culture that prevents knowledge sharing at some companies.
- Recognize the critical pharmacovigilance priorities involved in social programming and work with relevant internal functions toward a team approach in addressing these issues. Additionally, monitoring the regulatory environment for changes as well as industry trends and POVs will be important in demonstrating full knowledge of this evolving environment and equip communications teams for internal discussions addressing relevant requirements.
- Be more vocal in influential industry and marketing blogs, conferences and working groups that address the digital social activities and concerns of pharma companies.

It is truly an exciting time for pharma communicators to build on the learning already achieved over the last few years of digital social experimentation. It is not too late for those companies that have been slower to engage the medium to reap the rewards of being social. Our research clearly demonstrates that some of the obstacles often cited against pharmaceutical social confidence are manageable and those that require greater energy derive from the internal cultures of pharma companies themselves. With this knowledge, communicators can take steps to more fully inculcate social media into their organizations and lead them in establishing deeper relationships with important stakeholders that yield business success.

## APPENDIX: RESPONDENT BACKGROUND

The extent of digital social confidence represented by our interviewees ranged from no current social media experience to ongoing, consumer-facing and two-way dialogue platforms. Four interviewees are actively managing disease-related social media platforms, three of which incorporate two-way dialogue features. Three additional interviewees described their experience with corporate reputation-focused social programs, mainly targeting media, investors, government officials and employees (current and potential). The three Asian-based interviewees and fourth marketer responsible for Latin American operations are not currently engaging in any social media in their respective regions despite their interest in and active exploration of social possibilities.

All of the digital communicators we spoke with described their efforts as early-stage or experimental. Many believe they are at fairly rudimentary points in their social media experience, even if they have been managing active properties for over two years. These executives depict a careful and thoughtful approach to their use of social media, pacing themselves to gain learning and tweak their activities as their efforts evolve. Additionally, very few express confidence, let alone expertise, in social strategy and implementation. Most feel they have developed a strong understanding of what works for their specific audience(s) and how to begin planning for next-stage activities. Revealingly, few interviewees were able to cite more than one or two companies or information sources that they were tracking to help inform their efforts.

**“We are proceeding carefully and reasonably slowly. We’ve limited the number of channels so that we can give each one enough time and effort to develop it in line with our strategy.”**

Director of Communications, Europe

**“Our social media strategy is lean. We’re not cautious; we’re not afraid of it. We’re evaluating it and doing cost benefit assessment...and we ask ourselves whether we’re doing it because of general consumer expectations or because we have something to say here.”**

Director of Digital Communications, U.S.

Even if the social experience of these executives is in formative stages, each interviewee recognizes the significance of the medium for their communications strategies. Moreover, everyone believes social media will continue to grow in importance for their company. Many recognize that key industry audiences will only increase their use of social media and interviewees also point to growing acceptance of and experience with the medium within the industry.

**“We recognize that the web and digital channel is where people are going first to get their information; they’re not looking to traditional channels as much anymore.”**

Director of Digital Communications, U.S.

**“The need for people to be connected with others like them won’t go away This is human nature... [social media is] bringing a lot of benefits to a lot of people”**

Global Head of Communications, Europe

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