

## **Social Media for Pharma Companies: Just What the Doctor Ordered**

What do you do when you are feeling rather unwell and are experiencing unfamiliar symptoms? I'm guessing the answer is: Google your symptoms or ask your social network for advice. For many of us today, the social media has become the go-to place for self-diagnosing health issues, gathering feedback on the efficacy of medicines, figuring out treatment options, and understanding diseases. While this instant accessibility to information empowers consumers, it creates several challenges for pharmaceutical companies, making them reluctant to embrace social media platforms.

For instance, people can easily use social media platforms to report adverse drug reactions and related issues. How can companies determine if these are genuine cases? Social media does not make it easy to verify the authenticity of reported incidents. Fake reporting has the potential to harm stakeholders and manufacturers and damage their brand reputation. [Aon's 2015 Global Risk Management Survey](#) identifies brand and reputational risk as the top overall concern for global organizations, with only 56% readiness to manage it.

Despite these challenges, pharma companies must not lose sight of the fact that social media platforms make it easier for patients to reach drug manufacturers and share information about adverse reactions, enabling them to take quick corrective action. The FDA has also published a [guide](#) to help pharma companies overcome the challenges and effectively utilize social media.

### **Making Sense of Anonymous Data**

Online medical forums and social media provide the perfect platform for customers to freely post queries and interact anonymously with peers as well as medical experts. But this very anonymity makes it challenging for pharma companies to effectively engage with patients. Many ecommerce companies have made the switch from website to apps for easy access to customer contact information. But this may be difficult to enforce in the medical community where customers prefer to remain anonymous.

To tackle this challenge, industry players need innovative methods. For instance, they can encourage patients to provide relevant information such as product name, manufacturing date, and lot number or use hashtags.

### **Using Hashtags to streamline side-effect reporting**

Hashtags can help identify social media posts about reactions or events and enable pattern recognition. It is estimated that there are more than a million tweets on healthcare related topics every day<sup>1</sup>, and hashtags make it easier to find and categorize topics. Take a look at this customer tweet for example:

“The great/bad thing about being on prednisone is that I can finish a six pack at 3am and still have a clear head. #asthma #summerflu” <sup>2</sup>

The hashtags used here #asthma and #summerflu - help quickly draw attention to medical conditions and the drug that can be used to combat them – in this case prednisone.

Companies can also create their own hashtags and encourage customers to use them to highlight specific issues. For instance, if a company is trying to gather feedback on a specific drug, it can create the hashtag #DrugXYZ, so customers can tweet their feedback using the hashtag. The drug manufacturer can then use this information to improve a product or correct a problem.

Companies can also use hashtags to generate notifications and send them to stakeholders such as manufacturers, local affiliates, licensee partners, and data centers. This can help generate instant reports, and assist affiliates in reducing their data gathering time and effort.

### **Understanding patient experiences to improve outcomes**

Social media insights can help pharma companies improve their customer service in the form of better products, greater access to information, and better communication. For instance, they can provide better value to patients who are interested in receiving information by suggesting that they like their facebook page or sign-up for newsletters. Other benefits of increasing social presence include unearthing new product ideas, identifying new audiences, and creating messages that resonate with the target segment. Johnson & Johnson is a pharma company that uses social media well. It routinely engages with consumers and healthcare professionals on social media platforms and encourages them to share ideas and concerns to create powerful conversations.

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<sup>1</sup> PharmaVoice, The Power of the Hashtag, May 2014, accessed February 2016, <http://www.pharmavoice.com/article/healthcare-hashtags/>

<sup>2</sup> Pharmaphorum, The power of the #hashtag, August 2015, accessed February 2016, <http://www.pharmaphorum.com/articles/the-power-of-the-hashtag>

Pharma companies can employ special teams to glean insights from social media reports. The results of such analysis can help deepen engagement and improve communication between the company and the customer by creating a better understanding of patient experiences.

Call to action: How does your organization leverage online platforms to improve customer service?

Meta tag: Pharma companies that employ dedicated teams to engage with their customers on social media are more likely to limit the repercussions of false reporting and improve customer service

SEO: Online customer engagement helps pharma companies improve customer service

CI: Digital Reimagination, Strategy, Agility, Healthcare