

Pearson: don't be shy of social media

Bob Pearson doesn't want to hear any more excuses for poor or non-existent social media programs from healthcare companies.

"One of the great myths in social media is that regulated industries can't do as much," says the Austinite, who serves as chief technology and media officer at WeissComm Group. "It's completely false. Healthcare companies can do everything we did at Dell with the caveat that they must have the right policies, procedures and triage mechanisms in place."

Pearson got a crash course in the emerging discipline at Dell, having joined the firm in 2006 from Novartis communications. His first week there, Michael Dell asked him to figure out how to reach increasingly dissatisfied customers more effectively online, and Pearson set about building Dell's acclaimed social media program, which includes 25 digital media properties in seven languages that garner 200 million page views a year.

He now serves as president of the Social Media Business Council, a forum that includes big blue chip companies like Dell, Microsoft, The Coca-Cola Company, P&G and Pfizer (and he also chairs Texas' Emerging Technologies Fund). Pharmas, he says, are behind the curve.

"The pharma industry has a great story and companies are incredibly passionate about the customer, yet they often feel they can't connect directly so they try through advertising or other means, which aren't that effective," says Pearson. "It's obviously more effective to talk directly to customers rather than running ads on TV randomly. The more we move to conversations in healthcare, the more compelling the story becomes. The old model doesn't work. It's been proven ineffective in telling the story for a quarter century. That's long enough."

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Bob Pearson
chief technology & media
officer, WeissComm Group

2006-2009
VP corp. group comms, communities & conversations, Dell

2003-2006
Head of comms, Novartis

1998-2003
President, Americas/chair,
healthcare practice, GCI Group



Regulatory hurdles are no excuse, says Pearson. "The rules of engagement companies have always had continue to apply—the code of ethics, privacy guidelines, and so forth," adds Pearson. "Companies can always be clear on their guidelines with or without clear FDA guidelines."

Pearson advises a stepwise strategy with the aim of building momentum. He says starting with "great analytics and monitoring" and to committing to learning and training are key. The biggest obstacle he sees for healthcare companies is what he calls the "antibodies"—people who mean well but look for reasons why something can't happen.

For the last few months, Pearson has been helping Pfizer move aggressively into social media. Pfizer, he says, is taking a leadership position in the space. He cites the Mayo Clinic and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as making strides, and says GlaxoSmith-Kline and Johnson & Johnson are headed in the right direction. "We recognized well over a year ago that Pfizer has to get engaged in social media," says Ray Kerins, VP of worldwide communications and head of global corporate media relations. Kerins has known

Pearson since they worked together at GCI Group 14 years ago. "Bob has helped us avoid pitfalls and make sure our voice is heard," says Kerins. "Not a corporate voice, but a real voice of a person and personality."

A fundamental mistake Pearson notices companies make is adopting social media platforms and dumping content without a clear understanding of where customers are and what's relevant to them. Many also fail to appreciate that consumers are loyal to

quality content, not sites, online, and that share of conversation trumps share of voice.

"The Dell experience illustrated that it's most important to understand where customers are, what conversations they're having and where the larger conversations related to your customers are happening," says Pearson. "It's not about the company—it's all about the customers, and that's a big epiphany for a lot of companies." —Tanya Lewis

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