



LEVELING THE FIELD

Social media has the potential to elevate challenger brands to the highest step on the podium. But with many companies still languishing in the blocks, medal-worthy performances remain few and far between. It's time for pharma to step up its social game, as **James Chase** reports

THINKSTOCK

There's a joke that has been doing the rounds at digital pharma events for four or five years now. It's the one about how social media in pharma is like teenage sex: Everyone talks about it, no one really knows how to do it and everyone thinks everyone else is doing it—so everyone claims they're doing it as well. It's funny because it's true, even in late 2015. And that has to change.

There's no cookie-cutter approach to doing great social media. Beyond learning the rules, knowing your audience and setting your objectives, it's really about embracing the medium as fully as you can.

"Those who are doing it well are offering awesome content in a voice that's authentic to the brand," says Rich Levy, chief creative officer, FCB Health, which partnered with Novartis on the groundbreaking social-media rollout for MS drug Gilenya, including one of the first comments-enabled brand Facebook page. "Because those offerings are valuable, and they deliver a service, people are engaging in the brands. We need to demonstrate that we understand them as people and that we're just not trying to sell them something."

Levy believes social media can help a challenger brand explode onto the market, especially if the category leader is languishing socially. "If they are saying, 'I don't have to change and do social media,' then it absolutely allows a second or third entrant to have a social-media conversation with the leader's audience."

A digital leader in big pharma, who prefers to remain anonymous, agrees that social media can be a great leveler. "The opportunity is the same for everyone," he says. "It's all about where your customers are. You fish where the fish are."

Why aren't more companies fishing, then? "Like everything else we've done, social media is coming along slowly," says a digital strategist in global pharma, also required to remain anonymous due to in-house media rules. "There's been a lot of ink spilled, a lot of hand-wringing and a lot of experimentation ... but it is coming along."

Why is the industry moving so slowly? The first observer sees a disconnect between brand marketers who are "stuck in the old paradigm" and consumers. "People on social media don't want to hear about branded anything. They are looking for information," he explains. "But marketers fit into the commercial organization and their job is to convert them to customers."

Perhaps pharma is still uncomfortable conversing with patients? "It's not that we don't like to interact with patients—we're just unskilled at it," says pharma observer #2. "But there are risks, too."

REGULATORY, SHMEGULATORY

Levy believes the FDA guidance doesn't go deep enough, noting that companies are interpreting it slightly differently. "When the guidance first came out, we found that our internal Gilenya guidance was actually far stricter," he says. "So we were able to loosen the reins and do even more."

Indeed, pharma person #2 has little patience with marketers who won't look beyond regulatory barriers. "You see this pattern of the majority fretting over what can't be done," she says. "Meanwhile the few go ahead and figure out how to do it."

Ritesh Patel, chief digital officer, Ogilvy CommonHealth Worldwide, agrees. "Pharma is being too conservative," he notes. "There is a way to do it. Gleevec [Facebook] proved it."

Pharma person #1, too, is over the complaining. "We all know you have to play within the rules. Stop trying to make the rules your enemy."

When social is done right, it can be extremely effective. FCB recently executed a successful Instagram campaign for Plan B around the Her Conference. The agency set up a photo booth at the event and people posted their pictures. The clever tie-in? The conference lasted 72 hours and Levy notes Plan B is most effective 72 hours following unprotected sex. "It was perfect. Not only did we get people to engage, we also got an important brand message out there."

Pharma exec #1 suggests that every brand should create a "digital patient journey ... It's understanding where patients are going, what their touch points are and where's the right place to engage without being intrusive." It's important to note that some diseases have stigmas. "People don't want to talk on Facebook about being depressed."

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Levy says the success of social media increases greatly when it's a two-way conversation. "One-way, which is how most companies are dipping their toes, is just not effective," he stresses. "But two-way allows you to have that dialogue with the audience where they truly feel like you understand them. When you start looking at the analytics, that is when the tipping point will happen," he adds. "The ROI of a two-way program is just so much better."

Of course, more complex, dialogue-rich programs require resources. The agency needs staff to create content and manage the communities, while the client needs dedicated people on the legal side. "Pharma marketing staffs are getting smaller, but it does take a small army to do social well," says Levy.

SOCIAL SUCCESS STORIES

When companies do make the leap, one of the biggest challenges—structurally and culturally—can be the jump from one-and-done campaigns to 24/7 social programs. Pharma exec #2 believes issues more commonly arise when social media is housed with marketing and corporate communications. "It's going to become a one-off in that situation, because of the rotation of product managers and the way the budget cycles work," she says. "But as we begin to see social become more the purview of the customer-relations department, I think you will see more of a consistency and a longevity of programs."

Patel sees the roots of pharma's structural compatibility issues with social media running deeper. "In all other industries multichannel means connecting you with all these places that you're in," he explains. "But in pharma, it's just an internal way to keep track of all the individual departments that are not connected. They should make everybody sit together."

Pharma person #1 is predicting an industry-wide swing toward social. "Companies will make this shift, whether grudgingly or on their own," he says. Levy, too, is confident it will happen: "In the next 18 months to two years, every major pharma company will be engaged in two-way social. It's a tidal wave you cannot ignore."

Pharma marketers must remember the ultimate motivation for any social push. "Never forget that it's not about you—it's about them," pharma person #1 says. "Your *raison d'être* in social is to help people solve their problems. If you don't lose sight of that, you'll be fine." ■