

Does the battle for social supremacy being waged by Google, Facebook and Bing make this medium more or less viable for pharma marketers? Both, say **Michael Spitz and Fabio Gratton**



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Changes happening in social media present one big paradox for pharma marketers. Google+ improves and expands on the capabilities of Facebook, with features that create private subcommunities. At the same time, its goal to integrate search functionality into the social experience holds great peril. Ditto for the Facebook and Bing deal. The road ahead will prove rocky, but opportunities abound for savvy marketers.

Social media wars

The only thing more difficult than becoming the market leader is hanging on to it, most strongly and ironically exemplified in tech, where Google has been struggling to catch up in social with its latest Facebook-esque foray, christened, like a textbook example of a line-extension nightmare, “Google+.”

Yes, the name is awful and confusing, but the new platform is nonetheless of tremendous interest and even greater concern to pharma marketers. A wary, exhausted bunch, we’re caught between patient and professional audiences demanding real-time, two-way interactivity, and our corporate clients who, despite their desire to be innovative and trusted, find themselves heavily regulated, under-guided, and periodically disciplined.

As Steve Woodruff of Impactiviti has recently blogged, perhaps the time has finally come to throw in the towel on pharma social media altogether. But let’s take a look at Google+ (see sidebar for a tour of features) and determine if the game has changed for pharma and social media, for better or for worse.

Let’s start with what’s better: Google+ offers an intuitive, delightfully simple and visual solution to social media’s no. 1 problem, content filtering. Whether you have 10 friends or 10,000, Facebook has done a lousy job of getting you personally relevant shared content.

Awkward and virtually unknown, the Facebook “List” feature lets you group friends into categories but hardly anyone used it, forcing people to either remove friends entirely from their feed or deal with every undifferentiated post. Twitter has had an analogous dilemma, offering a generic interface with similarly ineffective functionality. (Its recent purchase of the TweetDeck is a step in the right direction).

Enter the Circles feature that Jonathan Richman of Possible Worldwide has astutely observed to be a game-changer. By empowering users with an easy and inviting way to categorize connections and content, people are for the first time able and encouraged to create closed subcommunities within their wider social network.

Imagine the potential such a feature could have for patients who drag and drop other patients, caregivers, mentors, perhaps even nurses and physicians into autonomous Circles where comments, links, and even real-time video chat (“Hangouts”) are shared exclusively and privately among a select, mutually consensual audience.

Gone is the problem of wanting to engage with a healthcare resource yet being forced to publicly self-identify with a disease state or treatment; instead, patients can now comfortably turn to closed communities of peers and professionals—and conceivably even pharma—for education, emotional support and guidance.

But Richman also points out how that very exclusivity brings with it the heightened risk of getting completely shut out of the conversation. The need for even greater relevance and flexibility on the part of pharma will therefore be necessary, enabled through several Google+ features that seamlessly connect personal preferences with search (e.g., “+1” and “Sparks”).

Many healthcare communications consultants have already jumped on the opportunity, advocating the embedding of such functionality into even branded online destinations. But a moment’s consideration forces more conservative observers to conclude that these search-related, “back end” functions could make things especially messy for pharma, in ways the work-in-progress Google+ can’t yet entirely reveal, and as we’re only now beginning to understand.

The problem again boils down to who gets to see and interact with an individual’s personal preferences and content. Whereas Circles creates closed loops of connections, Google +1 seems to share preferred comments and content not only with all of a user’s connections, but potentially with the entire web.

What is Google+?



Google might have the market cap, but Facebook has the traffic. Slow to the plate, with several missteps behind it, Google has finally gone full-bore with a social media platform that rivals Facebook’s functionality—if not its 750,000,000 users. Let’s take a quick look at Google+ and see how the platform is unique, letting you decide if Google+ is a viable contender.

Users start with their Google Profile (you’ll need to create one if you don’t have one already—and you’ll also need an invite). The profile page itself is remarkably similar in look and feel to Facebook.

Tabs running along the top include Home, Photos, Profile and Circles. The Home page features what’s called the “Stream,” analogous to Facebook’s “News Feed.”

Let’s take a quick look at each unique component.

Circles: Unlike Facebook, in Google+ each user is a digital object, one that can be dragged and dropped literally into designated “Circles” that act as tags for categorization. You can have distinct Circles for Friends, Family, Co-workers, what have you. Once tagged in this way, you can then choose to share content with one or several Circles, enabling the filtering of content to your stream, and through the various other functions available on Google+.

Hangouts: Up to 10 people can join a shared video chat. You can invite individuals or Circles to participate. (Facebook recently introduced a similar feature.)

Sparks: Enables you to create categories of searchable content, based on specific interests. For example, you can enter a search term as general as “music” or as specific as “Beethoven’s Ninth,” and then share the category and its results with individuals or with any of your Circles; their Spark content will then similarly be shared with you. The question remains, however: Who else are you—knowingly or unknowingly—sharing these preferences with?

Google +1: You can “+1” comments, photos, links and other content throughout your Google+ experience, creating designations that are then shared with your friends throughout the various Circle categories. Many external websites have a “+1” widget embedded into their properties, which can then be clicked, the information shared with your social network and even with others on the web.

Everything about Google’s approach to Google+ (including the name) suggests a broad integration strategy. Proof of Google’s attempt at bridging the gap between search and social is its insistence on making profiles public domain—not surprising considering the steadily expanding partnership between Facebook and Bing, where an individual’s search results have already started to reflect Facebook friend “Like” preferences, and the contextual integration of details from friend profiles into searches are now becoming commonplace.

‘Searchegration’

Searchegration, if you will, begs the question of whether or not people want to share health information in the first place, even with their closest friends. Perhaps the greatest misapprehension when considering the feasibility and viability of social health is the tendency to treat pharmaceutical products like conventional brands. Patients might be actively opposed to any association between their illness, their treatment decisions and the universal social graph.

So there’s the Google+ rub: Whether or not the platform ever really takes off, we get effective solutions to several of Facebook’s key weaknesses (non-visual interface, undifferentiated content), but we also get the expanding agony caused by the more public-facing integration of search and social functionality, so key to what Google, Facebook and Microsoft consider as dominance of the web.

Battle of the digital behemoths notwithstanding, this strategy hints at a larger paradigm shift in user experience where our operating systems and browsers inevitably integrate the finding and sharing of content. Five years from now expect a completely visual digital experience that intuitively combines smart search with our diverse communities, dynamically melding their preferences with ours across the various specialized and intuitively filtered categories of information: news, business data, shopping and, inevitably, health.

Whereas such integration seems like an excellent idea when it comes to personal information and preferences we’re all comfortable with sharing, Woodruff might be right in asserting the future of pharma social media might be buried under a digital tsunami inherently incompatible with regulated, closed-loop communications.

At the very least the simpler, more visual and intuitive functionality of Google+ will rub off on Facebook, no doubt improving the model overall. Perhaps novel approaches may enable pharma to gain a toe hold. As for who will dominate the interface of the future—Google, Facebook, Microsoft, or some as-yet unknown company—speculation abounds.

What should we advise our clients now?

Google+ is under scrutiny not only from marketers, but from Google itself as the interface continues to be refined. As far as making recommendations to pharma, we should no doubt wait until the first iteration is baked, and deconstruct its features with an eye for audience privacy, clinical accuracy and regulatory responsibility.

In lieu of formal FDA social media guidance, the best we can do is understand the tools at our disposal and proceed with caution, creativity, and the interests of our ultimate audience at heart—millions of patients who need solutions and are already discovering them through social media channels. ■

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