

Social Media: Changing The Rules Of Pharma Marketing

Nobody can stop the forward march of an idea whose time has truly come and not only has come but has already become an integral part of the 'now' generation. That is social media. It has become a huge psychological and social human experience

It has become the preferred mode of engaging, networking and building relationships among the individuals, institutions and organisations. So much so that it is being used by the corporates to connect with their various stakeholders and in some cases, also empowering them to create their own content and engage in conversations

If it is said that if content is the king, then conversation is the queen! And social media helps in marrying both king & queen

Leading names in Social media are Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn. As per Nielsen Social Media survey (2009), 2/3rd of world internet population visits online communities and spends at least 10 mts on them everyday. And the time spent on these websites has increased 3 times the rate of overall internet growth. It has caught the fancy of both young and 'old' in equal measure. As per the Nielsen survey, people aged 35-49 is the fastest growing segment on Facebook. In the last year, Facebook has added twice as many 50-60 year old visitors (14 million) as it has 18 year olds. One third of Facebook audience is 35-49

If such is its power, then how can pharma industry remain untouched by this tidal wave? And more than that, like what any other powerful idea does, splits the industry into supporters and cynics. But as on date, it is the supporters seem to be having an upper hand. Few examples:

Pfizer

Pfizer, maker of the well-known drugs of Viagra and Celebrex, is exploring social by creating a social networking site that will bring together patients and clinical trial researchers. On this site patients will have the opportunity to confidentially post personal health information that will only be made available to researchers studying their particular condition. Trial sponsors can use the site to recruit patients and patients will have an opportunity to learn more about the studies that relate directly to them. Presently following 479 on Twitter, Pfizer has attracted 1425 followers with 72 tweets as on date (There are 479 people / bloggers which Pfizer is following & 1425 people / bloggers are following Pfizer)

Johnson & Johnson

The company's YouTube channel now has over 90 videos. Its corporate blog was built around a simple question that serves as its premise - 'everyone else is talking about our company, so why can't we?'

Videos are also based on human interest stories. For example, when Cindy pregnancy ran long, labor was induced and the baby suddenly began to bleed out from a rare and often undiagnosed condition. Fast action and an immediate blood transfusion saved baby Julia.



Novartis

It has gone on a different track. It has developed a community platform dedicated to Chronic Myeloid Leukemia or CML, which is an innovative Google-like mash-up that interacts with patients, patient groups, and healthcare professionals from around the world.



AstraZeneca US

AstraZeneca US tweets, though only outgoing & one-way communications has 266 following, 1613 followers and 1645 updates. Also its product Symbicort has its own presence on YouTube called 'My Asthma Story'.



Bayer

It has probably the most creative and unique presence on the social media. It recently launched a new online community and blood glucose monitoring tool for young people living with diabetes in the United Kingdom.

The tool, named Didget connects directly into the youth's 'Nintendo DS' and rewards the user for building consistent blood glucose testing habits and meeting glucose targets. The Nintendo DS tool is supported by 'Didget World', a password protected social network where kids can interact with other users and build their own profile. Based on the popularity of online 'gaming' with young people, this is an ingenious use of social media to help monitor a health condition.



As Head of Bayer Medical Care, Sandra Peterson says, "The Didget meter is a revolutionary development in healthcare management. Up until now, blood glucose monitors have been created with adults in mind

There are more such examples, like GSK which focuses on creating dialogue on pressing issues, Boehringer Ingelheim has gone more aggressive and made Twitter as part of its communication strategy to engage with its stakeholders, Roche went one step ahead and organised a 'Social Media Summit'! In this they invited 29 diabetes specialists and bloggers with the intent to 'listen & learn' in the area of diabetic care

Even there is a social networking site only for cancer specialists. One can even use it for doing for online survey. Examples are galore and possibilities are immense!

Yet there are nay sayers. They are fearful of running afoul of USFDA regulations that govern the advertising and promotion of prescription drugs. They believe in the adage, 'safety in caution'. With USFDA, already started the process of inviting industry and other stakeholders for hearing to regulate the communication on social media, they may not be able to avoid it for long. Though it would still require some monitoring as unsubstantiated user generated content may harm a company or drug reputation. It's the regulatory and legal people who have major concerns.

Social media offers new opportunities to not only activate but also create enthusiasm. It allows one to be both publisher as well as marketers. That is one can use social media as PR tool (unpaid media) as well as a paid communication tool as well. People may not believe what you tell them but they definitely believe what they tell themselves. That's the power of user-generated content.

There is also a strong financial logic behind using social media. In a world where every media is getting more expensive, the price of digital technology continues to fall and the differences between those two economies is growing. If novelty was a factor sometime ago, saving money is the stronger motivation this time

As some wag said, social media is like teen sex! It's all around us but no one knows the exact width & depth of it. But it's part of social conversation. Same is with social media. It's a good conversation point, but a smart pharma marketer can encourage the right & relevant conversation

May be it's time for Indian pharma industry to give it a first look