

Social Media & HealthCare: Does it Make Sense?

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What if I told you that technology now allows you to reach millions of customers in the blink of an eye? What if I told you that the same technology could destroy your brand within the same blink of an eye? This is the reality of social media. Forty years ago (or even less) if you disappointed a customer with either an inferior product or bad service (or both), the extent of the damage to your brand was limited to Mrs. Jones telling all her friends at the bridge club or at the next community barbeque. Today, companies risk disillusioning and alienating millions of customers with a less-than-stellar foray into social media.

Healthcare companies need to tread very carefully into this space. Consider the large, multi-national pharmaceutical or medical device company that sponsors/hosts its own Facebook page and/or Twitter account. Life science brand names (think Viagra or Lipitor or Nexium) don't even exist anymore on Facebook. But company Facebook pages do. We 'facebooked' Pfizer, Astra Zeneca, Glaxo Smith Kline, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Johnson & Johnson, to name a few, and only two of the five companies mentioned even had a facebook presence.

And here's where you're automatically re-directed.¹if you should happen to land on the Facebook page of a major, multi-national pharmaceutical or medical device company:

Pfizer

Health/Medical/Pharmaceuticals

Thank you for your interest in Pfizer!

Here are a few things you should know:

Unfortunately, sometimes we have to pull a comment from our wall.

Here's Why.

¹ Facebook.com accessed November & December 2011

We've set up this page to share news with you about Pfizer. We want to get your thoughts on our updates, but below are reasons why we might need to remove your comment from our wall:

Your comment references a Product (ours or someone else's)

While we do not endorse any users' comments other than our own, we still have to be mindful of the important regulations that govern our industry. If your post references a pharmaceutical brand from any company – positive or negative – we will need to remove it because, among other reasons, we can't guarantee that it will represent Fair Balance.

Your comment references a Side Effect

If your post includes possible side effect associated with a Pfizer product, we may be required to contact you for further information. You may contact us to report an adverse event related to Pfizer products by calling 1-800-438-1985 (U.S. only). Or if you prefer, you may contact the FDA directly: please visit www.fda.gov/medwatch or call 1-800-FDA-1088. Non-U.S. visitor?: ask your health care provider for more information or contact your local health authority.

Your comment contains Vulgarity

If you use profane language, your post gets pulled (and it might get screened by Facebook's profanity filter before being posted in the first place). In addition to vulgar language, we'll be screening for personal attacks of any kind or offensive terms that target specific ethnic, racial, religious, age or gender orientation groups. We ask that everyone treat each other with respect.

Your comment contains Medical Advice

It is great to want to provide help to your fellow visitors, but given the serious implications unsolicited

and unverified medical advice might have, we can't allow it on our Wall. As always, we recommend consulting with your physician on any medical condition.

Your comment is Off-Topic

This can be a tricky one: we're not looking to censor you, but sometimes comments are spam, are clearly off topic, make unsupported accusations or promote services or products. If you feel we've been unfair in removing your comment, please reach out to us and we can discuss it.

Just in Case

There is a chance we'll encounter a situation not outlined above, which will require us to remove your comment. We'll try to update this list if we do find a new reason, but please know that Pfizer does reserve the right to delete any posting at its sole discretion. Of course, if this does happen and you feel it is unfair, please reach out to us so we can talk about it.

When one actually takes the time to scroll through the facebook wall of, say, Pfizer or GSK, one finds company news and information (quarterly earnings, health information, employee accomplishments, etc..) but one does not actually find the sharing of information. And therein lies the problem.

If you go to Home Depot and get bad service or find a great deal, you can 'tweet' that out in seconds and your 'followers' now have access to the same information and you have used social media (the term media and whether that is even accurate is a separate topic in and of itself) to its fullest extent and intent. Social networking and media were designed with the end goal in mind of empowering "John Q. Consumer" to share information so that everyone who has access to that information can make better decisions. This is what the economist would call 'perfect information.'²

² In microeconomics, a state of perfect information is assumed in some models of perfect competition. That is, assuming that all agents are rational and have perfect

Of course, let's not forget that much of what is on today's social networking sites has nothing to do with driving consumer adoption of a product. It's simply an individual sharing pictures from his most recent trip or her perspectives on that book she just finished.

Is that actually true, however? Are there tacit and implicit endorsements being made when you share photos from that fabulous resort or your opinions on the recent best-selling novel? Of course there are. This is no different than telling someone at the weekly softball game that they 'have to try that new Italian place' or 'go see that new action movie.' We've been doing this for decades—making endorsements for products and services that we believe in—without pay or remuneration. The difference was that the speed and scale with which those endorsements actually traveled across networks and drove market share gains was painfully slow. There are always exceptions to this rule (products did go 'viral' decades ago too).

Why is this important? Because we (and 'we' means the corporate world) have known that peer-to-peer influence drives adoption more than anything else. Trial of a product is important. Price of a product is important. Packaging of a product is important. But nothing beats peer-to-peer influence. When someone tells you that they have tried a product or service and it's good or bad, the tendency for the recipient of that information to act upon that information is higher than if they had not received an endorsement. So, the goal of companies hasn't changed: generate more positive experiences with your product or brand and leverage the power of social networks to (hopefully) create positive word-of-mouth through peer-to-peer influence in a much grander scale and at a speed that has never before been seen.

information, they will choose the best products, and the market will reward those who make the best products with higher sales. Perfect information would practically mean that all consumers know all things, about all products, at all times (including knowing the probabilistic outcome of all future events), and therefore always make the best decision regarding purchase.; From Wikipedia, accessed December 2011

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Here's the key to peer-to-peer influence however: it must be from a trusted and credible source—otherwise the 'amplitude' of its influence may be muted. Think about this carefully. Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods are not peer-to-peer influencers. They are endorsers. They are (expensive) pitchmen. Nobody actually believes that Tiger Woods ever drove a Buick—yet he pitched their products for years and years. There was a lack of credibility and trust (which would later prove to be all too foretelling). Nobody actually believes that Michael Jordan wears Hanes underwear. That's problem number one.

Here's problem number two: Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods are not your (or mine) "peers". You do not make \$100 million a year and live in a fishbowl and engage in a profession that has you in front of television cameras and stadiums around the world. Pitchmen and endorsers are very different than influencers. Does Leonardo DiCaprio actually wear a Tag Heuer and does Bono actually use Louis Vuitton luggage? Probably-- but since they actually never say anything about these brands and are merely photographed using them for glossy spreads in lifestyle/fashion magazines, the degree of influence that they hold is very little. So why do companies still use famous movie/rock stars/models/fill in the blank as endorsers? Probably because aspirational consumers are still a significant portion of the target audience.³

So what does all this have to do with healthcare marketing and big pharma and medical device companies? Well, like all companies, big pharma/medical device want you to be influenced by positive brand attributes and word-of-mouth. The

difference is that they can't afford "John Q. Consumer" to start blogging about the weird side-effects with a drug or his own concocted dosing schedule. Or worse yet, they can't afford him or her to start dispensing medical advice with Facebook posts or Twitter "tweets". There's liability there. And when there's liability, corporations get really conservative (which, in this case, is a good thing). It's one thing to influence an individual's choice of cellphone or brand of blue jeans, but it's quite another to influence the medications they take (or don't take).

It is at this intersection of the need for perfect information and peer-to-peer influence that social networking for big pharma/medical device falls apart.

³ In consumer marketing, an aspirational brand (or product) means a large segment of its exposure audience wishes to own it, but for economical reasons cannot. An aspirational product implies certain positive characteristics to the user, but the supply appears limited due to limited production quantities. An important characteristic of an aspirational product is that the part of its exposure audience that is at present economically unable to purchase it, thinks of itself as having a fair probability of at a certain point in the future being able to do so. (Source Wikipedia)