New KOL Engagement: Building Relationships with the Digital KOL Generation
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Building Relationships with the Digital KOL Generation

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Research methodology and objectives

Through industry insights, this FirstWord Dossier ExpertViews report examines the growing trend in the exchange of medical information via social media channels, and the rise of a new generation of key opinion leaders (KOLs) who are influential in the online community.

The information for this report was gathered from multiple sources, including primary research from in-depth telephone interviews with digital opinion leaders and pharmaceutical industry executives, supported by secondary research, mainly from publically available sources of information.

Key questions explored in this report include:

- What is a digital opinion leader and in what ways do they differ from KOLs who publish in traditional channels?
- How important is it for pharma companies to identify and engage with digital opinion leaders?
- What challenges do pharma companies face in developing relationships with digital opinion leaders?
- What level of influence does a digital opinion leader have within the medical community?
- How is the influence of the digital environment changing medical practice?
- How can pharma companies leverage value from a digital opinion leader network?
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What is a digital opinion leader?

Figure 1: Attributes of a digital opinion leader

Experts interviewed by FirstWord note that the rise of social media has enabled commentators in every field, including healthcare, to assert themselves as experts within an online community. By sharing their experience online through blogs and other sources, they have established a reputation and developed a following in a particular area of interest.

For the purposes of this report, a digital opinion leader is defined as someone who influences other healthcare stakeholders through their digital activity. Digital opinion leaders are characterised by their prolific online presence and include medical key opinions leaders (KOLs) who are active in the digital environment. A broader definition also includes patients who are influential in helping other patients living...
Why should pharma engage with digital opinion leaders?

The pharmaceutical industry has dedicated significant resources to understanding who the main influencers in healthcare are and in trying to engage them. Access to the traditional KOLs has, however, become more of a challenge in the post-‘Sunshine Act’ era, particularly in the US where academic institutions have introduced restrictions that make it more difficult for pharma companies to gain access to their leading doctors. Time pressures on physicians generally also mean they have less time available to talk to the pharma industry, and in some therapies areas companies are competing for the limited time slots KOLs have available.27

Budgetary constraints also mean that teams are expected to do more with less and are having to find new ways to interact, leading to an anticipated increase in virtual engagement with HCPs in the future.28

In parallel, the digital domain has rapidly become key to the exchange of medical information between HCPs, and the rise in social media has presented the pharma industry with new challenges. Physicians are able to use social media to extend their influence and engage with other medical professionals around the world, thereby making the traditional measures of influence less relevant. At the same time, the dissemination of medical information is no longer controlled and the vast amount of misinformation available online is likely to outweigh that which is accurate.29

While the potential for inaccuracy due to the sheer volume of information that is available online provides industry with a significant challenge, it is important to recognise the value attributed to online sources of information and, therefore, to digital opinion leaders. “The digital opinion leader is as important as digital media itself. If social media had never become a source for people to educate themselves about products and services, and one that really captures people’s attention and incites them to take action, then no one would care. But social media has become that arrester of attention, that inciter of action, and the source of the wisdom of the crowd.”

_Digital Multichannel Marketing Strategist_

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