

# Use of social media strategies among the top 10 pharmaceutical companies in September 2012

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## Introduction

The prominence of social media in our culture has grown throughout the past decade. Social media platforms have allowed for increased interaction between pharmaceutical companies and the general public. Traditionally, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has regulated the rules of conduct for industry, but comprehensive guidance have yet to be established in this relatively new realm.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, few studies<sup>2,3</sup> have looked into the evolving role of how the industry is utilizing social media. Our goal is to use quantitative and qualitative metrics to benchmark the level of public engagement that pharmaceutical companies have through their social media presence.

## Methods

We assessed social media use by the top ten pharmaceutical companies (based on 2011 prescription sales<sup>4</sup>). The social media platforms (SMP) were all in English, intended for an American audience and included: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and company-sponsored blogs. Sites dedicated to over-the-counter subsidiaries were not considered.

Each SMP was evaluated qualitatively, by assessing whether or not a measure was captured, quantitatively and, by counting the predetermined metrics. Quantitative metrics included: number of “likes”, “followers” and comments posted. Qualitative measures considered the type of information discussed and included: product and disease state education, Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategies (REMS), community outreach, company highlights, policy updates, health news, drug safety/adverse event reporting, surveys, direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising and legal compliance.

Assessments were conducted for all posts created during the month of September 2012, and data were collected for all SMPs on September 30, 2012. We conducted a comparative assessment to validate the social media analysis tool.

The percentage of posts by company (Fig. 1) was calculated to demonstrate the relative amount of activity on SMPs per company. The percentage of public response (Fig. 2) was calculated using metrics that represented activity from the public and included the following: YouTube – number of subscribers and views, Facebook – number of comments, “people talking about this,” and likes, Twitter – number of re-tweets and followers, blogs – number of comments.

The percentage of social media response by category (Fig. 3) broke down the posts found in each SMP by qualitative measure.

The percentage of use for social media platform (Fig. 4), assessed the amount of usage of each SMP amongst all ten companies combined.

## Results

Sanofi had the greatest amount of social media utilization in the month of September, followed by Eli Lilly and GSK. Other companies’ activities were minimal; Abbott did not have any social media involvement (Fig.1). Public response, defined as any activity (i.e. comment, shares, likes, followers) resulting from a company’s post, was heaviest for GSK, followed by Pfizer and Novartis (Fig. 2). Excluding the ‘Other’ category, Community Outreach and Health News were the most discussed topics in all four platforms combined. DTC-related and REMS posts were not found in any platform (Fig. 3). Twitter was the platform used most heavily, while blogs were used the least by both the companies and the public (Fig. 4). It should be noted that most companies, except Sanofi, Roche, and Eli Lilly, disabled the comments feature for YouTube. In addition, the company-sponsored blogs were the most under-utilized SMP assessed (3.8% of all posts) both in terms of company use (Fig. 4) and public response (Fig. 2).

Figure 1: Percentage of posts by company (in order of RX sales)

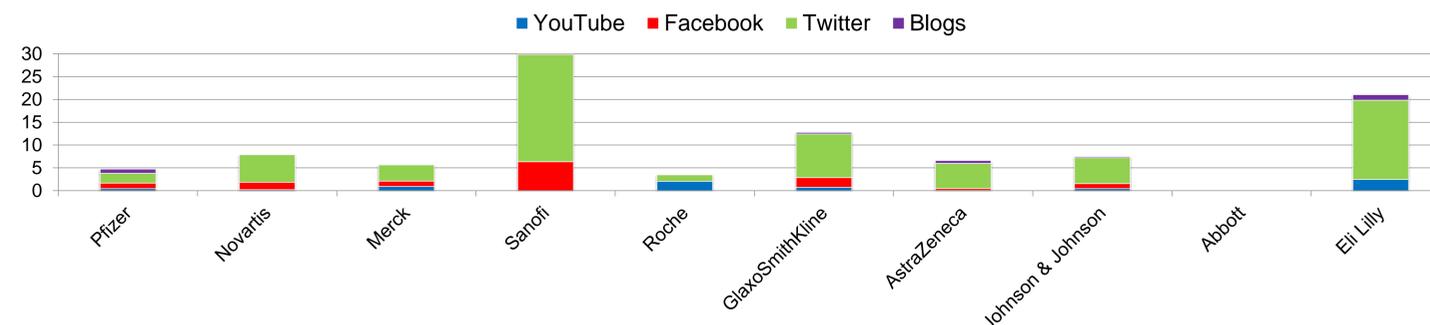


Figure 2: Percentage of public response

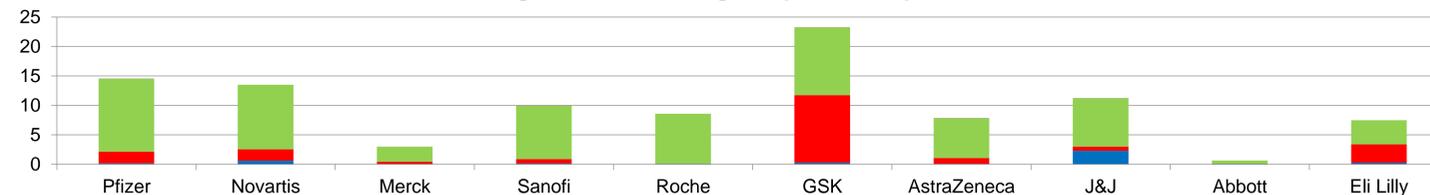


Figure 3: Percentage of social media post by category

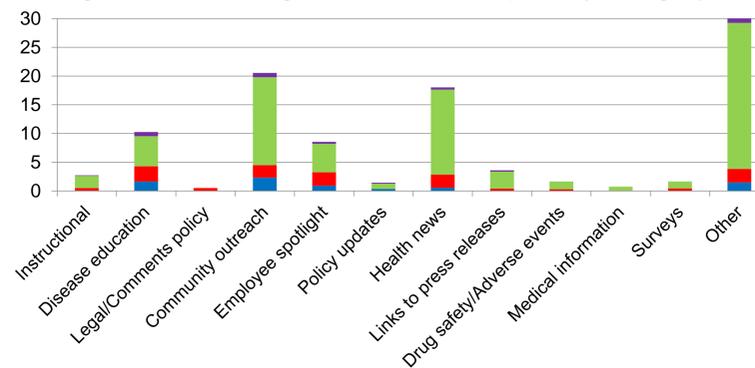
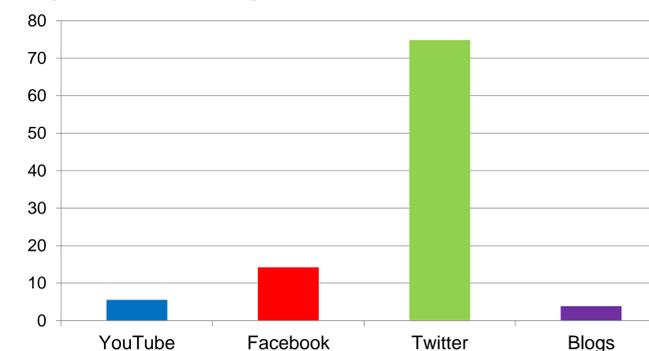


Figure 4: Percentage of use for social media platform



## Discussion

### Quantitative Metrics

Current social media utilization amongst the top ten pharmaceutical companies focuses on a strong presence in Twitter and Facebook (Fig. 4), which may be due to their ease of use and extent of public reach. However, utilization of SMPs was not consistent across companies. Additionally, the amount of company social media utilization was not proportional to sales (Fig. 1) or public response (Fig. 2). Sanofi, for example, ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in sales<sup>4</sup> but 1<sup>st</sup> in social media utilization and 5<sup>th</sup> in public response.

### Qualitative Measures

The top categories often communicated disease and company-specific information, which provide general information to the public. Individualized responses are absent from SMPs, which may indicate established company protocols reflecting current FDA guidances<sup>1</sup>. It also should be noted that the information presented to the public varies greatly between organizations and may focus on business interests. This may contribute to the difference between company SMP utilization and public response (Fig. 2 & 3).

### Limitations

- Assessment limited to one month, which may not fully reflect overall a company’s social media activity, and focused only on US-based SMPs and websites
- Data categorization had subjective components that may not have been adequately controlled during assessment
- ‘Other’ category was a significant portion of the data not included in the final analysis, which may skew results

## Conclusion

- Twitter is currently the most prominently used SMP across the top ten pharmaceutical companies
- Company SMP utilization is not indicative of the amount of public response
- Future research opportunities can include a company-specific assessment of qualitative measures, inclusion of biotech/biopharmaceutical companies and social media utilization comparison between over-the-counter and prescription manufacturers

## References

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