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Background

In this era of instantaneous information retrieval, healthcare professionals are increasingly searching for medical information online. In a survey, eighty percent of U.S. physicians currently report using the Internet to identify medical information, including literature searching, accessing online journals, and general searching for medical information. It was determined that more recent medical school graduates use the Internet more commonly than other physicians, and 84% of physicians anticipate increasing the frequency of Internet searching in the following year. Specialists are more likely to have used the Internet longer than primary care physicians; however primary care physicians use the Internet more frequently than specialists. The largest obstacles cited by medical professionals in terms of searching were lack of time, frustration with speed, and difficulty finding information. In a survey, 41% of U.S. physicians felt that the credibility of the source was most important factor to consider when seeking medical information on the Internet while 35% stated that quick and 24-hour access to information was most important.¹

Objective

To analyze the delivery of medical information via websites provided by pharmaceutical companies.

Methodology

Design

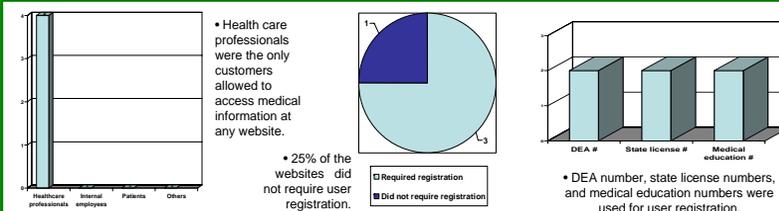
A web-based survey consisting of 35 questions regarding user registration, search terms, and content provided on medical information websites was disseminated to 23 representatives at pharmaceutical companies. The survey was structured to assess which customers were allowed to access the medical information website, how the customers were informed of the website, and what information was provided. Of the 35 questions, 25 were multiple choice and 10 were short answer. Participants were allotted four weeks to complete the survey. All responses were kept anonymous.

Evaluation of Survey Respondents

- Of the 23 representatives that were contacted, half completed the survey (n=11)
- Of the 11 representatives that participated in the survey, 36% had medical information websites at their company (n=4)
- A medical information website was being planned at 1 company

Results

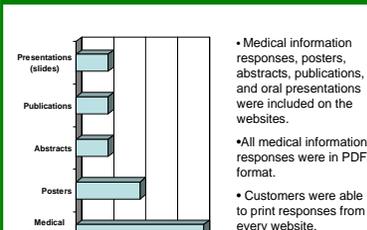
Access to Medical Information



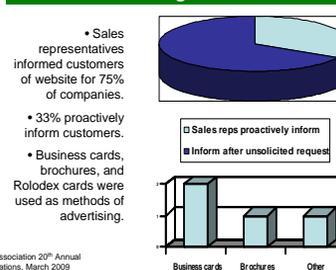
Medical Information Searching



Content Provided on Websites



Advertising of Websites



Discussion

- Medical information websites existed for 36% of pharmaceutical companies surveyed. The majority of the companies provided a link from a promotional product-specific website (75%).
- Metrics were obtained from 75% of the websites. This included demographic data, visits, new/returning users, content of downloaded material, and time spent on website.
- Health care professionals were the only customers allowed to access the website in all cases. In 75% of cases, user registration was required, which included DEA number, state license number, or medical education number. Registration was verified in only 50% of the cases.
- Prescribing information was readily available on all websites. In addition to medical information responses, poster, abstracts, publications, and presentations were provided to customers. On all websites, the documents were in PDF format to prevent editing.
- In the case of an unsuccessful search, some websites provided a toll-free number/email to contact, while others provided a link directly to an MI request form.

Limitations

- Small sample size (n=4) makes it difficult to generalize these findings to all pharmaceutical medical information websites.
- Customers (i.e. HCPs) were not surveyed so their perspective of medical information websites is not included in the findings.
- Size of the pharmaceutical companies contacted varied; size of the company may contribute to whether or not companies have medical information websites available.

Conclusions

- For all the companies surveyed, HCPs were the only intended users of their medical information websites. However, some of the sites do not require user registration, which allows any user (i.e. patients) to access the site. Even in the cases where registration is required, not all the websites verify that the registration information given is legitimate.
- For all the companies surveyed, documents can be downloaded, saved, and printed. This allows HCPs to disseminate the medical information to a third party. Medical information may be distributed to users other than the intended audience.
- In the majority of cases, sales representatives informed HCPs about the availability of the medical information website. In some cases, sales reps proactively tell their customers about the website, as opposed to in response to an unsolicited request. In addition, 25% of the websites do not set a maximum number of results displayed for an inquiry. This could be viewed as soliciting HCPs to obtain MI from the website.

References

1. L. Casabee, N. Bennett, R. Kristofco, et al. Physician Internet Medical Information Seeking and On-line Continuing Education Use Patterns. The Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions 2002;22:33-42.