Social Media: The Pharmaceutical Industry In The Web 2.0 Era

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Background
The current and future social media landscape of the pharmaceutical industry has become a very popular topic of discussion recently, especially in the anticipation of greater regulatory guidance by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on social media activities in the near future. A number of pharmaceutical companies have utilized, or are starting to utilize, social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to advance their agendas in the Web 2.0 era. Web 2.0 is associated with web applications that facilitate greater user interaction in the process of information exchange. A recent report stated that 85% of pharmaceutical companies maintain a presence on one of the three earlier mentioned social media platforms.1

The pharmaceutical industry’s involvement in social media has not been fully characterized. Whether companies are actually involved in social media by allowing participant interaction or how internal departments interface on social media initiatives is largely unclear. It is reasonable for promotional departments to be involved with social media initiatives, however, the role and perception of the Medical Information Department in company social media activities have not been elucidated.

Objective
To evaluate pharmaceutical companies’ involvement in social media, including the role and perspective of the Medical Information Department in the Web 2.0 era.

Methodology
Survey Design
A web-based, anonymous survey created through SurveyMonkey® was disseminated to 153 industry contacts, including representatives from the Medical Information Department, from 35 different pharmaceutical and biopharmaceutical companies. The questionnaire design consisted of two surveys each containing 34 questions; 45% (n=17) did not complete the entire survey. * Current analysis included information provided by these respondents.

Evaluation of Survey Respondents
• 153 industry representatives were contacted. Of the 60 contacts who responded to the survey:
  - 55% (n=33) completed the entire survey
  - 45% (n=27) did not complete the entire survey

Results
Utilization of Social Media
• The top five social media tools utilized included Facebook (63%), YouTube (63%), Twitter (47%), patient communities (32%), and Semio/other physician communities (24%).

Social Media Utilization and Content
• 79% somewhat agreed or agreed that social media was an effective tool in serving its primary purpose

Evaluation of Survey Respondents
• 33.5% (n=20) responded that they have disabled user posting on all of their social network sites

Future Involvement
• 75% noted that they have disabled user posting on all of their social network sites

Content Monitoring
• 21% noted that sites in which user posting have been disabled, 60% reported that sites were monitored more than once daily

Social Media Content Monitoring
• The primary purpose (67%) was to monitor for adverse drug events

Medical Information Department
• 59.1% believed that the Department should play a greater role in social media initiatives

Discussion
Many respondents - both from companies with and without a current presence in social media - noted that their companies have plans to increase their presence in social media. A majority of those with no current presence were still involved with social media indirectly as 73.7% monitor social media activity in general despite not having their own company social media site (data not shown).

Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were the top three social media tools utilized by pharmaceutical companies. Eighty-five percent reported that of all the social media sites they use, the site with the largest number of followers/subscribers still had less than 5000 people (data not shown). Most company social media sites don’t allow users to post; 70% have disabled the ability for users to post on all of their social network sites. More than half have cited possibility of legal implications as the primary reason for disabling user posting. Further evaluation may be needed after the FDA issues its guidance on social media to assess whether the percentage of companies who have disabled user posting have changed as a result of greater regulatory guidance.

Limitations
• Survey questions were not validated.
• Survey respondents’ knowledge regarding company social media activities was not assessed.
• Difficult to generalize findings across all pharmaceutical companies.

Conclusions
• Many working in industry are aware of the increased popularity of social media and have plans to increase their presence in Web 2.0.
• There are desires to expand further into Web 2.0 but are conflicted by legal implications, which also contribute to the various pharmaceutical companies’ hesitancy to enable user posting on their social media sites.

• The role of the Medical Information Department will likely expand as more people engage in Web 2.0 in the evaluation of their healthcare decisions. Having more Specialists go to the social media sites directly to respond to posted inquiries will be one mechanism in which the Department might become more involved in the future.

References

Presented at the Drug Information Association 22nd Annual Workshop on Medical Communications, March 2011