

Darwin Debate Sixth Meeting Report

Digital Communications in the Pharmaceutical Industry: Adapt or Die?

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December 2011

The sixth in our series of meetings on how the pharmaceutical industry might move forward in the digital arena focused on industry reputation and trust in social engagement.

During the meeting Stephen Whitehead, CEO of the ABPI, shared his experiences in the pharmaceutical, drinks and finance industries and presented his vision for the future. Attendees also saw a presentation by digital analysts Commetric which explored recent online conversations around a product issue, exploring how the key influencers saw their messages travel through the blogosphere and to what effect.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The pharmaceutical industry needs to prove that its 'shocking' reputation is unfounded, according to the CEO of the ABPI. Companies have to demonstrate which patients their medicines are effective with and which they are not. The relationship between the industry and the NHS has to be seamless. And, perhaps surprisingly, the people the industry needs to convince are healthcare professionals – while patients tend to be loyal to their medicine, it's the industry's more immediate customers who are sceptical. A key vehicle for improving the industry's reputation is digital communications, and to that end the ABPI has just set up a working group to develop guidelines on social media engagement.

Stephen Whitehead left the pharmaceutical industry in 2003 after a successful career at Lilly and GSK. Even though he enjoyed equal success in the drinks and finance industries Stephen told attendees a day doesn't pass without him thinking about the pharmaceutical industry and the bad reputation it didn't deserve.

Now as CEO of the ABPI he is in a position to do something about that and he sees his role as highly participative rather than an umbrella role.

Special Guest:

- **Stephen Whitehead**,
CEO of the Association of British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI)

Attendees:

- **Andrew Burton**,
Digital Lead, AstraZeneca
- **Rob Gallo**,
Head of Corporate Communications, Europe, Takeda
- **Lorna Gresswell-Wilkins**,
Head of Corporate Communications, GE Healthcare
- **David McCormick**,
Digital Lead, Roche UK
- **Andrew Thomas**,
Media Relations Team Leader, Pfizer Europe
- **Kate Tillet**,
Director of External Affairs, MSD
- **Veronique Walsh**,
Business Unit Director, Bristol Myers Squibb
- **Gwenan White**,
Head of COE Product Communications, GSK

Stephen said he has colleagues, friends and family who are only alive as a result of the pharmaceutical industry – yet the industry's reputation is 'pretty shocking'. Part of the reason for this is historical and having lived through an era of developing blockbusters, then experiencing cost constraints, Stephen said the industry is now in a period of having to prove its value. A key route to achieving that is through trust, reputation and transparency.

When it comes to digital communications, Stephen said the ABPI itself had previously been too timid but this is changing. In order to move forward Stephen informed participants that the ABPI is setting up a digital working group to provide guidance for compliance, medical and communications teams as to what is acceptable.

At the moment there are no legal restrictions on corporate digital activity but there can be no product promotion to the public online. Stephen said the challenge for communicating online is that it is a dialogue and once you start a conversation you can't stop it, and more importantly you cannot control it – which is difficult for a highly-regulated industry like ours.

Stephen said the ABPI is extremely aware of the issue and this has led to the decision to set up an ABPI working group to look into social media. Stephen appealed to pharmaceutical companies to tell him what they need (in terms of guidance and support) in order to proceed within the digital arena.

He made it clear that the ABPI does not want to limit commercial freedom and advocates effective self-regulation which is evolutionary and moves with the times. All ABPI members and affiliates are welcome to engage with the ABPI working group.

The bottom line is that the industry has to engage with social media, but at the moment Stephen said 'we're hamstrung and confused'.

Stephen said the ABPI had to take the lead in the digital arena – and it was already getting involved. Last month when leading oncologist Prof Karol Sikora wrote in The Lancet that cancer treatments were too expensive, Stephen posted a blog on the ABPI website tackling the issue. Stephen's response was also promoted on the ABPI's Twitter channel.

One attendee suggested that the ABPI monitor social awareness around its blog posts – such as Stephen's on the cost of cancer treatments – to measure their impact and then share with companies as an example of what can be achieved. If individual companies are reticent about sharing best practice then the ABPI's activities should be held up as an example.

At the moment it was felt that most companies restrict themselves so much that they couldn't engage with social media. Attendees agreed that individual companies need to look at their internal structures to ensure that the right people within their organisations are having the social media conversations and enough had been done to train them in online engagement.

One attendee said that companies' fears about the audience they might reach through online activity and who might see their messages are unfounded. While some activities, such as Twitter, would clearly reach patients and the public, others such as Doctors.net provide a closed forum for healthcare professionals. If a doctor took information posted in a closed forum and shared it in a more public place that was no different to a doctor giving an industry leave-piece to a national newspaper, they argued.

It was agreed that everyone within a pharmaceutical company who is given permission to engage with social media needs access to a speedy approval pathway – however there was some debate about who should be allowed to sign off projects. Individual company

standard operating procedures (SOPs) were sometimes seen as a further hindrance to online activity – adding layers of rules to the guidance put forward by the PMCPA.

However Stephen told the meeting that, at the end of the day, he thought most communication by pharmaceutical companies was a judgment call.

People with responsibility for digital communications in their company need to talk more with contemporaries in other companies about positive experiences and share best practice within the Code. Stephen said that he would like a closed meeting with Chatham House rules at which the ABPI could hear directly from the pharmaceutical companies about what was working well and what needed to happen to encourage more positive work in digital in the future. Again member companies who would like to get involved should contact him.

One attendee referenced how this consultative format had worked successfully in the past when an ABPI group discussed DTC information and worked jointly with the MHRA to help people get access to the work the pharmaceutical industry had done. Sitting down as a group and sharing information, talking honestly about what worked and what didn't, meant that everyone present learnt a lot and came away with a positive attitude to the whole activity, they said.

The problem with national information differences in a worldwide medium was raised, and examples were cited of internal battles between US and UK offices about posting information which applied to patients in one country but not the other.

One company had tackled this conflict by building online reputation within the organisation and using corporate websites and social media activity to help differentiate national approaches and guide audiences to the correct country information.

It was also highlighted that the industry needed to change its mindset when it came to communicating online. Silence was sometimes viewed as suspicious by customers and could therefore be damaging to the company's reputation. Even when companies have something positive to talk about they are nervous that their words could be twisted by online journalists and commentators and so opt to stay silent. This is no longer an option, companies need to be brave and speak out about the positive work they are doing.

There was wide agreement that as an industry pharma needs to be more assertive in its story-telling – it is better that the industry tells its own stories online in a manner which companies feel is fair and accurate, rather than wait for others to give their interpretation with which companies may or may not be happy.

Stephen said industry bodies such as the ABPI could help change public opinion. He cited the drinks industry as an example. Different brands of liquor charge different prices for what, in most cases, is an incredibly similar product. When faced with the threat of price restrictions, the industry association set up social aspect partnerships with different organisations to tackle issues such as drink-driving and under-age access. By working with respected third parties to advocate sensible drinking the industry protected its right to competitive pricing and maintained its freedom – because it was seen as a responsible industry aware of alcohol abuse.

The dilemma for many pharmaceutical companies is that it is the brand which resonates with patients not the manufacturer. It is only when something goes wrong that the patient examines the Patient Information Leaflet to find the company's name and address in order to complain.

Stephen said that the industry is reliant on its relationships with healthcare professionals – this has always been the case and

always will be. Therefore this means that the industry can have conversations with healthcare professionals (on or off line) about industry issues such as access to medicines.

One attendee said that the pharmaceutical industry also has a role as an information provider to the NHS and in the future these relationships could develop into more dynamic communications.

For companies with a variety of products – vaccines, consumer products and prescription medicines – there are a variety of communication options, and for the first two online communications were straightforward. However when it comes to prescription medicines the industry closes down communications because of the regulations, and the public naturally become suspicious.

One attendee said that with pharmacy medicines the PAGB put their kite mark on materials including websites and maybe that is an option for medicines, encouraging pharmaceutical companies to share appropriate information and signalling to the public that the information is trustworthy and without prejudice. Such a kite mark could fulfil a similar role to the Department of Health's Information Standard initiative which indicates easy-to-find, reliable, evidence-based health and social care information from health charities and NHS organisations.

Attendees discussed the competence and confidence of those working within the pharmaceutical industry whose jobs might entitle them to consider digital activities and there was general agreement that companies (and the industry as a whole) could do more to improve education about digital engagement.

Stephen warned that while the industry needed to highlight positive digital activity and provide guidance on what could be done effectively and ethically, companies

need to continue to remain within the regulations regarding DTC activity. Stephen said he believed innovation in digital would come through corporate work and crisis management. One attendee said the problem is that social media is a commitment not a campaign, and the key to getting involved is the internal budget holder.

Another attendee made the broader point that social marketing and media is a core competence for everyone in the pharmaceutical business of the future and it was more about how the industry got there than which department was responsible for its success or failure. The innovators and leaders now would be the enablers of the future, but they need to proceed with care and collaborate rather than be frightened by social media.

At the end of the meeting Stephen left attendees with a pertinent question – asking whether the pharmaceutical industry is over-complicating digital communications. There has always been a traditional method of communicating to patients via healthcare professionals and partnerships with relevant professional and patient organisations. Does that need to change as a result of using online rather than traditional communication routes?

Pharmaceutical Company Action Plan:

- Share examples of best practice in digital communications
- Embrace 'assertive' story-telling to present the pharmaceutical industry's positive work
- Engage with the ABPI's working group on social media
- Do an internal audit of relevant staff's competency and confidence in digital communications and educate/up-skill accordingly