

# Utilizing social media

CHUCK RUSSO examines the FDA's online balancing act between consumers and the healthcare industry.

Last November's FDA public hearings on promotional use of the internet and social media in Washington, DC, was quite an event. Although the FDA allowed 350 attendees, the 60 plus speakers stole the show over the two long days. Speakers presented a variety of issues and concerns focused around questions posed by the FDA. Many of the speakers were very credible and, at the hearings' conclusion, one could be considered conversant on issues surrounding the use of the internet and social media for healthcare purposes.

The FDA called the hearing to address a number of pertinent communication challenges and gain industry insights from a variety of audience participants. The key area of focus for the hearing revolved around the accountability of pharmaceutical and medical device manufacturers in providing adequate disclosure for fair balance in limited online formats, such as paid search ads and tweets, and other online formats that healthcare companies use across the web.

What are the responsibilities for follow-up and posting of corrective information on sites controlled by third parties? These hearings, presentations and brief discussions represent only the beginning of the debate of what should be acceptable use of social media. Unfortunately, this debate could drag on for some time; from these hearings, it was obvious we must move on these issues now. Social media is a two-way communication process supporting industry needs to safely utilize the media for communications while the public engages the industry in an effort to get the support and information they seek.

Adverse reporting and the posting of side effect information were the two hottest issues presented. It was clear that guidelines do need to be established, and many speakers detailed reasons why they were looking to the FDA to lead this action and demonstrate a true understanding of the issues. Also driving the hearings was the recent FDA action in sending warning letters to pharmaceutical companies regarding the use of internet promotion that resulted in a dramatic reduction in the use of online channels by the industry. Combined with the lack of guidelines, this action has reduced the vital connection between the industry and the general public, thus increasing the chances that patients and their families will seek information from sources that are often unregulated and do not preserve the integrity of the information exchanged.

By defining guidelines the FDA will instantly establish the validity of social media as a viable communication channel, reinforcing patient beliefs that communication standards must be met by the industry. These standards must be created to protect the public interest and instill the confidence to freely exchange information with the healthcare industry. Over the past few years, pharmaceutical and medical device companies have experienced unprecedented negative public perception, and these guidelines could help the industry engage both its customers and its critics.

A major part of the industry – healthcare providers – was noticeably missing at the meeting. Where were the voices of physicians and nurses? There were a few exceptions, including representatives from Sermo, a physician social website who discussed online social media that serves the physicians' need for peer-to-peer interactions. Besides the FDA, providers had the most to learn from these hearings, considering their relationship and regular dialogue with patients. This venue could have reinforced their concerns for patient safety and established a perspective for how patients will seek future health information.

Also missing was the American Medical Association, which could have taken a leadership position and expressed a strong point of view on behalf of its physician members and the managed care organizations that play a critical role in patient/physician communication and management. With the growth of social media and the increased use of the internet, all representatives of the healthcare industry will need to collectively strike a harmonious balance. The growth of social media is not slowing down and will continue to impact how patients, families, industry and healthcare providers will interact with each other. ■

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