



Spotlight on: **Pharma** PR and Content Marketing



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A new normal for pharma: Changing models of HCP communication

Covid-19 has turned pharmaceutical marketing on its head – the traditional, tried and tested methods of information dissemination and prescribing support are simply not viable in a pandemic.

Information-hungry healthcare professionals (HCPs) have adapted quickly to online communications. In a bid to keep connected and up to date, they have turned to virtual conferences, webinars, and social media.

Many commentators believe there is no going back. While the chance to network is sorely missed, time-poor doctors, nurses, pharmacists and allied health professionals have embraced the chance to learn where and when it suits them.

So, much like last year, 2021 is expected to play out online. Beyond that, the most convincing predictions paint a picture of a hybrid future that blends the convenience of virtual communications with the sociability of face-to-face networking.

The shadow cast by Covid-19 has also transformed how researchers share and receive information, possibly threatening the future of academic journals. And by moving healthcare delivery online, it could even interrupt patterns of prescribing.

The traditionally conservative pharmaceutical industry has been slow to adopt digital communications, but the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 means there is no longer a choice: PRs and marketers must invest in digital. That means creating engaging digital content, matching the right digital channels to the right communication strategies, and moving from a corporate to a more personable use of social media to build relationships.

Of course, much like the virus itself, regulatory concerns around digital communications remain. So the sector also needs to invest in digital processes such as accelerated approval pathways and fit-for-purpose procedures.

Read on to learn about the Covid-driven trends transforming the pharmaceutical industry, and the possible implications for PR and Marketing.

Medical meetings

Conferences bring a disease community together. They are an invaluable opportunity to build and maintain relationships by meeting HCPs, and they provide a forum for the dissemination of crucial data and messages.

But 2020 put paid to all that. Meetings have moved online, and many believe this new model, at least in part, is here to stay.

Online learning is effective, but those informal, face-to-face contacts have been harder to replicate. Organisers have offered industry partners digital exhibition areas, virtual meet-and-greet cafés and more, but, so far, pharma has reported limited engagement.

There is no one way to replace everything medical meetings once offered. It is likely that the annual community get together will become a more intermittent pattern of virtual and face-to-face events.

Pharmaceutical PRs and Marketers will need to adopt communication strategies that include a mix of online symposiums, targeted sponsorship, and new ways of using social media to build and maintain relationships.

Sales and marketing

Much like the vast medical conference, visits and meetings in the traditional sense are likely a thing of the past. Infection control measures and HCP workloads have made rep visits and pre-marketing activities, such as ad boards, unviable during the pandemic.

HCPs are now used to the convenience of virtual, and expect contacts to be remote in the future. Of course, it is perfectly possible to share product information and safety updates or collect expert opinion through email, video chats, and telephone calls.

But the industry must be mindful to preserve the “soft” outcomes of face-to-face interactions. Communication is built on relationships and events such as ad boards provide HCPs an opportunity to network and share ideas. Offering this online can be challenging.

Marketers need to think about how they develop and use innovative content, call on social media, including encrypted channels where appropriate, and employing video platforms in a way that drives engagement.

Journals

Academic journals have always been the mainstay for the dissemination of medical information, and HCPs place great value on a peer-reviewed, published paper. But Covid-19 has also triggered a shift in this most hallowed of places.

In the rush to save lives, some data have been shared ahead of peer-review. Findings are being disseminated before publication, side-lining journals, and prompting some to predict a trend towards “science by press release”.

While the pandemic saw an explosion in SARS-CoV-2 research, it also saw the widespread closure of clinical trials and laboratories. At the same time, the scientists who act as editors and reviewers are under increasing pressure at work and at home, leaving less time for their journal-related duties.

It remains to be seen how these factors will impact on the future of information dissemination, but it is clear that they have the potential to disrupt new product launches and the sharing of critical safety information.

In the face of this challenge, PRs and Marketers need to prepare to adapt existing methods, adopt new models and stand ready to disseminate information in innovative ways to engage with HCPs

Case in point: Product launches

The COVID-19 pandemic could impact every element of the sales funnel, from pre-marketing activities to post-approval market access.

The shift to remote appointments, for example, could have a detrimental impact on product launches. HCPs are often reluctant to initiate or switch treatments without a face-to-face consultation, a trend that will have a disproportionate impact on new products.

In the absence of traditional launch vehicles such as medical meetings, rep visits, and journals, the industry needs to invest in alternative routes, and help HCPs to gain confidence in remote prescribing.

To find out how the Henley Group can support your organisation with strategic consultancy, PR and content marketing contact James Tate on james@henley.co.uk or 01491 570 971

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