

Digital marketing to play a greater role in the promotion of pharmaceutical companies and products?



"Although some companies are still trying to understand the true value of digital, others have already begun to integrate it into the wider marketing strategy. Johnson and Johnson, for example, were one of the first regulated healthcare companies to launch a YouTube channel and Pfizer are 'proud to be active and responsive on all major social networking platforms' - utilising YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to interact with customers. North East based pharmaceutical companies Quantum Pharmaceuticals and The Specials Lab both offer online ordering of special medicines, showing that using ecommerce is also a viable option for those companies that don't produce prescription drugs.

Although there are some businesses that are truly innovative in terms of digital capability, there is still a lack of good case studies in the pharmaceutical sector of digital working well. The problems facing the industry concerning the restrictions on marketing pharmaceuticals have come into place from government and regulating bodies, such as those that impact traditional field-force activities, in terms of access to physicians.

The Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority (PMCPA), which administers The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry's (ABPI) Code of Practice, has issued guidance to the industry on the use of social media and digital communications. The Code of Practice is concerned with the promotion of certain drugs to healthcare professionals and the level of information about prescription only drugs to the general public. The PMCPA understand the growing need for pharmaceutical companies to use social media, and therefore are encouraging companies to identify ways of utilising digital communications whilst complying with these restrictions.

For many businesses, the digital communication strategy often simply means 'the website' which is used to advertise products and services. For others, however, it increasingly indicates a far more sophisticated set of tools. Traditionally, the pharmaceutical industry has been slow to adopt digital marketing techniques, especially beyond the website. Yet today, more pharmaceutical businesses are starting to use digital marketing tools, such as social media sites or ecommerce sites, to engage with customers and allow them to buy products online.

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empowering our colleagues, those closest to the science, to use social media to talk about the innovative work they are doing".

Digital marketing is certainly a more cost-effective way of communicating with customers than traditional marketing. Digital channels offer a more individualised and personalised type of engagement, ensuring that the correct stakeholders are receiving the correct information at the correct time. Many pharmaceutical professionals agree that digital strategy will play a significant role in the marketing plans of the future, but many companies still lack the capabilities to fully integrate digital marketing into the wider business strategy.

The problem lies in the fact that there is a shortage of digital marketers within the pharmaceutical sector. In particular there is a lack of people with

the necessary skills to drive digital change and leverage the opportunities digital can offer pharmaceutical businesses. Competition to find the right people who understand the industry and regulations and restrictions placed upon it, while at the same time have an intimate understanding of the new digital marketplace, will become prevalent in the pharmaceutical sector over the next few years.

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