

Like, Like, Like: Harnessing the Power of Social Media Insights



Given the colossal amount of personal and professional information that we share online, social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter are fast becoming treasure troves of big data. As the popularity and diversity of platforms increases, so too does their utility for healthcare market research. Combined with the continuous stream of user-generated content, advances in research technology now allow marketers to tap into social media data to understand more about the healthcare landscape.

Masses of data

Each year creative agency, We Are Social, releases their global compendium of social media statistics. They report that in 2019, the number of social media users will hit 3.5 billion, up 9% year-on-year; and these users are spread over more than 200 major social networking sites worldwide. The most famous of course is Facebook, which is the largest social media platform on the planet, boasting over 2 billion monthly active users (MAUs) – almost a third of the world's total population. On average, 1.56 billion of these users log on daily and, according to a report by The Social Skinny, are posting 510,000 comments, updating 293,000 statuses and uploading 136,000 photos every minute. YouTube, the video sharing platform, has 1.9 billion MAUs – on which they reportedly upload 72 hours of new video content and watch a billion hours every day. Twitter has 335 million MUAS – on which 500 million Tweets are sent every day. That's 6,000 tweets every second. These, of course, are just some of the more popular platforms in the west. In China, where many western-owned platforms are censored, social networking sites, Douyin and Baidu Tieba have 500 million and 300 million MAUS respectively. As you can imagine, this all adds up to a lot of data.

Let's talk healthcare

The role that social media plays in our everyday lives is rapidly evolving. What were once outlets for distracted students to share funny cat memes, are now powerful platforms that are fundamentally shaping the way people consume information. With regard to healthcare, patients are increasingly turning to social networks to seek out and share information related to their health. They are part of a wider, connected ecosystem where social media is a key resource for sharing their experiences and engaging with others facing similar conditions. A study by PwC Health Research

indicates that over 75% of Americans use social media to research their health symptoms and that one-third "are using the social space as a natural habitat for health discussions." Why does this all matter? While they are not always accurate sources of insight, the opinions of others on social media are often trusted. 90% of respondents aged 18-24 said they would trust medical information shared by others on their social media networks and, according to Mediabistro, more than 40% of people said that information found via social media directly affects the way they deal with their health.

Of course, seeking out information on social media presents its own problems – patients are much more likely to self-diagnose themselves with the wrong condition or receive inaccurate medical advice. However, it is not just patients using social media. Physicians and other key stakeholders such as caregivers, payers, providers and advocacy groups have all quickly adapted to using social networks for their personal and professional communications and are using them to actively discuss healthcare issues online and share their opinion. 88% of physicians use networking sites to research pharmaceutical, biotech and medical devices and 60% believe social media actually improves the quality of care delivered to their patients.

Undoubtedly useful for pharma

Using global networks as a market research tool is one of the key benefits social media can offer pharmaceutical companies. As more and more healthcare stakeholders begin to contribute to the overall conversation, it is becoming imperative for manufacturers and other providers to take a more proactive approach to social media by learning how to harness this essential source of big data. For pharmaceutical companies, insights garnered from social media 'listening' can help them to understand their customers better. These vast quantities of data can be used to identify, in near real-time, the healthcare decisions that practitioners, patients, and caregivers make and, more importantly, why they make them, leading to unparalleled insights which will undoubtedly assist them in their aims of becoming more customer-focused and patient centric.

How can this be harnessed?

Social intelligence agencies, such as Convosphere, can 'mine' not only Facebook and Twitter but also other online platforms such as forums, blog posts, and the comment section of online news sites to uncover patients and physicians' sentiments and opinions. Convosphere also offers the ability to incorporate 'gated' online data from private online communities such as the professional network, Sermo, which has over 800,000 physician members.

We recently collaborated with them for a study that aimed to understand the impact that a long-term skin condition has on patient's lives. Our client wanted to explore the journey that patients undertake in order to identify opportunities to improve the patient experience and inform the brand strategy for their product. Before conducting primary market research, we used Convosphere's technology to harvest over 100,000 mentions of this particular skin condition over the previous 12 months. This allowed an uncontaminated view of the thoughts and concerns of patients. By combining this data with the findings from a primary market research phase, we were able to uncover in-depth insights on emotions, perceptions and behaviours as well as identify specific information needs and frequently asked questions. As a result, we

were able to analyse both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the journey stages and impact of the disease to provide our client with the information they needed to inform the brand strategy for their product.

Where do we go from here?

The pharmaceutical industry has, until relatively recently, been hesitant about using social data and there is still some way to go before it becomes a mainstream tool for healthcare market researchers. One reason why many agencies have been reluctant to use social data is adverse event reporting, which is an unavoidable part of social media listening. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean researchers should avoid social media altogether. The risk of an adverse event being posted is comparatively low. A study conducted by US based social intelligence agency, Semantelli, tracked posts relating to a leading type II diabetes drug over a 12-month period. They found that just 1.8% of all posts mentioning the specific drug were reportable adverse events. In addition, technology can help automate the reporting process by quickly and efficiently sifting through the data to identify adverse

events that meet some or all of the regulatory criteria.

Using social media to identify the opinions of patients and physicians may sound complicated to some and an AE nightmare to others, however, the evolution and increasing influence of social media means pharmaceutical companies need to respond dynamically. By partnering with a research agency that knows how to extract the right data and combine it with the more in-depth findings obtained by conducting primary market research, they'll have access to an unrivalled amount of actionable insights.

Harrison Gaiger, Marketing Manager, Research Partnership

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this feature are those of the author and may not reflect the official policy or position of the BHBIA. The BHBIA have not verified any of the information quoted and do not accept any responsibility for its accuracy, or otherwise.



We are the largest independent healthcare market research and consulting agency in the world

We collaborate with clients from the global pharmaceutical, medtech and biotech industries, providing research intelligence and strategic recommendations that elevate healthcare brands and power their success.

Contact us today to find out more:
E: info@researchpartnership.com
T: 020 8069 5000



researchpartnership.com