

# The social dilemma: is it time for pharma to join the party?

Chris Ross explores why social media still isn't trending for pharma – and asks what needs to be done to join in the fun

**T**here's a party going on next door, but our industry is too scared to go in. We're worried that, if we do, we won't know what to say, how to say it or what we should do with the information we hear. So we ultimately conclude that we're better off keeping the door shut."

Welcome to the world of social media in pharma, 2019-style. The words of Dennis O'Brien, CEO at Lucid Group, provide a mischievous metaphor to which we can all relate: on a global scale, there's a health conversation happening online, but pharma has yet to join the party. If it's waiting for the invite it should think again: it won't arrive. The industry must be brave and turn up on its own, bringing something of value to excite the crowd. That's within its gift – but if it doesn't rock up soon, it won't be long before disruptors from outside pharma swagger in and take over the dance floor.

Pharma's widespread absence from social media continues to defy modern logic. At the consumer level, use of social media continues to grow; the number of active social media users, worldwide, reached almost 3.5 billion in January 2019 – that's 45% of the global population. And many are using it a lot. The average user spends around 2 hours and 22 minutes every day on social networking and messaging platforms, with millennials spending even more. It's fair to say that social media has, for the majority of consumers, become the default mode of communication. And guess what? HCPs are consumers too – and they're using social channels just as much as the rest of us.

## The digital doctor

Research shows that HCPs are spending an increasing amount of time online. For example, physicians spend on average 180 minutes a week watching online video content for educational purposes, while two-thirds of doctors with mobile devices use them to source and share information more than ten times every working day. In terms of social media, evidence overwhelmingly shows that HCPs are engaged and talking via social channels during major medical congresses;

for example, research into HCPs' online engagement reported over 30,000 mentions directly relating to ASCO during 2017, while more than 2,000 posts from ESMO 2016 linked to HCP authors at the congress. Clearly, just as in wider society, HCP use of social media is growing.

In fact, medical congress trends are a good indicator of HCPs' growing comfort with digital media. International congresses are still regarded – by both the medical community and pharma – as a valuable source of education and engagement. However, as the demands on doctors' time intensify, HCP attendances are falling, forcing medics to seek alternative means of accessing clinical and scientific information.

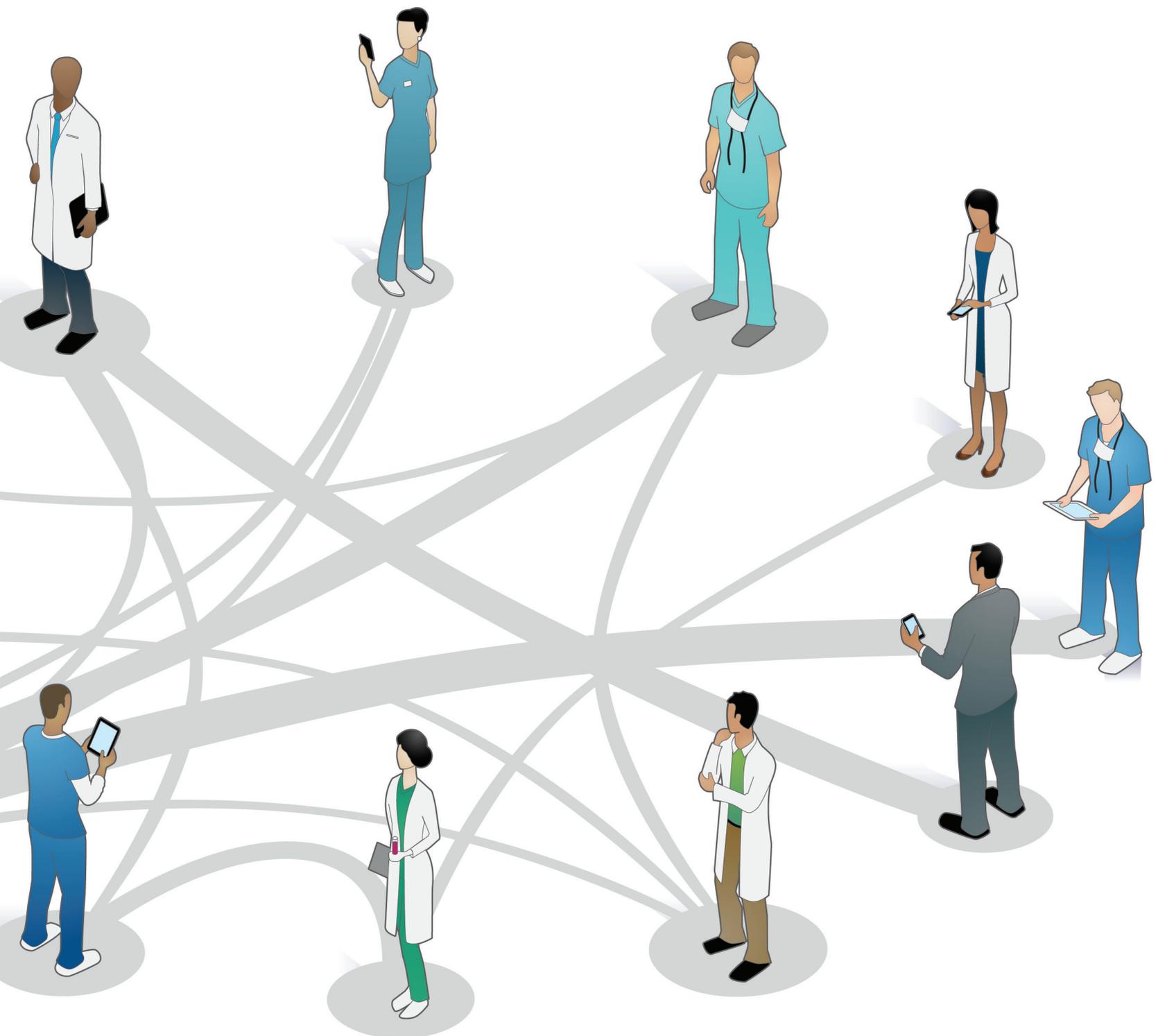
## 'Digital gives HCPs the opportunity to 'be there' at congresses virtually and provides a bridge to education that they may otherwise miss'

"Time and budgetary constraints have meant that physicians are becoming less able to attend international congresses, but digital is giving them the opportunity to 'be there' virtually and provide a bridge to education that they may otherwise miss," said Houda Kamoun Follot, Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer at Aptus Health. "What's more, for busy HCPs, online media is a gateway not only to valuable 'snackable' content that they can easily consume and share, but also to comment streams and social channels that enable peer-to-peer conversation and help them put clinical information in a real-world context."

However, although HCPs' use of digital channels has grown considerably in recent years, there's evidence that pharma is not keeping pace with customer expectations. "There's a delta between what physicians want from pharma and the communications they actually receive," said Houda.

"Recent research from DT Associates and Aptus Health revealed a wide variation in content and channel preferences among HCPs, depending on their country and specialism. However, our data also showed that pharma companies don't always address those variations, leading to suboptimal customer experiences and communications. One key finding was that, while physicians prefer a mix of communications, pharma companies typically underutilise digital channels and rely too much on face-to-face engagement. It also showed that while HCPs generally are most interested in medical education, patient support materials or content that informs clinical practice, pharma communications are too often tactical or promotional, focusing predominantly on drug-related information."





The 2019 report – *The State of Customer Experience in the Pharmaceutical Industry, 2018: HCP Interactions* – listed 17 interaction types that pharma companies typically deploy. These cover a wide range from face-to-face rep meetings and congress booths to direct mail, email, mobile apps and eNewsletters. Significantly, less than 0.5% of industry interactions during the survey period occurred via social channels. In a world where health is increasingly debated over social media, pharma's voice is absent from the conversation. The question is: why?

#### Pay to party

"Pharma isn't yet configured to embrace social media or fully exploit the new digital world," said Dennis O'Brien. "Companies know they need to think 'mobile first' and that paid digital channels are becoming increasingly valuable, but the structures they work within are the same today as they were 15 years ago. Unfortunately, in the real world, the way the world communicates is now radically different; what worked for pharma in the past just isn't going to cut it in the future."

"When it comes to engaging customers, HCPs are normal human beings – and they connect with the world in the same ways as everyone else. But our industry isn't yet designed to do that. Other industries have got Social Media Directors, social strategies and planning to leverage what's become an enormous channel – yet pharma's still reliant on traditional routes. We're concerned about the regulations and the level of investment it might take to safely contribute to the social conversation. We're scared to go to the party. We must move from being scared to being real."

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So how can they do that? "Companies have got to be confident," said Dennis. "They must be prepared and empowered to communicate in this whole new world of communication. That requires infrastructure and investment to ensure the conversations they have are ethical, professional and productive. It's an organisational shift. In the past decade, medical affairs has evolved into a proactive, customer-facing resource that's transformed the nature of HCP engagement. We need a similar evolution in communication. Tomorrow's leaders will likely be those that invest in a similar level of infrastructure for communications as they historically did in the salesforce. Certainly, current levels of spending on traditional activities are unsustainable when there's this enormous digital powerhouse that companies are barely touching. Reconfiguration will undoubtedly take time. Getting there may require a 'whole industry' approach to work out how organisations can evolve to play in a brave new world. If we don't, disruptors who aren't weighed down by legacy will, at some point, gate-crash the party and find a way of connecting that leaves pharma behind."

### Reframing KOLs

Pharma's communications challenges are far broader than a failure to trend on social media; there's an argument that the industry needs to think differently right across the board and rethink old ways of working. One potential area is Key Opinion Leader (KOL) development. Pharma builds much of its engagement model around KOLs. It's a tried-and-tested, successful and – ultimately – sensible approach; innovation always needs a champion, and who better than an eminent expert? But is the industry's emphasis on KOLs dictating – and perhaps even restricting – modern HCP engagement? It might be time to change tack. "Pharma places great weight on finding KOLs to champion innovation and science – and it's completely understandable," said Tapas Mukherjee, Associate Medical Director, Havas Lynx.

"However, there's always a risk that KOLs talk among themselves. It's not easy to determine quite how many 'real-world' HCPs – the ones at the front line of clinical practice – actually engage with this elite circle of KOLs. When you're a doctor working in a hospital, you don't see a 'KOL', you see your boss; the person that you go to when there's a real-world problem or you need practical advice. Pharma's reliance on KOLs is a worthwhile bridge to academia, but does it connect them to the 'shop-floor' clinicians or the diverse community of medical professionals who engage patients every day? Possibly not. Social media can be a gateway to the younger generation of doctors, or demographics that are rarely represented in KOL communities."

In fact, said Tapas, pharma's reliance on KOLs inevitably hugely influences the style and nature of their communications. "Materials are often data-rich, scientific and academic, but this doesn't translate well into social media or use language that captures the broader audience. If industry wants to engage a new cohort of customers across social channels, it may make sense to reframe the approach around 'influencers' rather than simply KOLs. The real influencers may not be elite academics but millennial doctors. How do they connect? They use WhatsApp, Instagram and social media. If we're to capture the full range of today's influencers, that's where we need to go. We have to meet our customers where they live."

### The landmark moment?

Pharma companies will undoubtedly continue using traditional routes – not least the major medical congresses – but they may need to step out of their comfort zones in terms of channel and tone if they're to connect with tomorrow's medical workforce. "There's no doubt that pharma is an evidence-based industry where trust and credibility relies on science and data," said Tapas. "However, the health industry as a whole needs to recognise that there are things of value that aren't always presented in an academic way.

Education and information need to be compelling, engaging or (at times) entertaining if they are to connect with their target audience. It's all about storytelling – it's rarely data that captures the heart and soul. Pharma needs to recognise that there are ways of communicating beyond a medical poster or journal article – and explore new routes to customers that engage and excite. Fundamentally, those 'new' routes must include social media. The prospect raises an interesting question: pharma companies can often tell you when a landmark paper came out or when breakthrough science transformed the treatment of a particular disease... but what's going to be the landmark tweet that changes the course of pharma engagement? And when will that moment arise when pharma can say 'we've cracked it' and begin communicating with people in ways that befit the new normal?"

### Personalisation driving the future

The future of HCP engagement will ultimately depend on pharma harnessing the opportunity of digital channels, not least social media. "It's all about personalisation, relevance and value," said Houda Kamoun Follot. "Medical communications is moving from face-to-face engagement and large-scale international congresses to being able to offer value at the individual level through a wide variety of content formats and channels.

## 'Medical affairs has evolved into a proactive, customer-facing resource that's transformed the nature of HCP engagement – we need a similar evolution in communication'

Education is becoming more personal, matching learning needs with individual preferences to deliver the right content for the right person at the right time. Digital and data is helping us to get that right. It's creating powerful opportunities for personalised engagement and giving industry the chance to become part of an ongoing conversation. Fundamentally, these opportunities have the potential to create better experiences and better relationships with HCPs."

As communications becomes increasingly personalised, the industry's use of digital channels will need to flex in line with customer preferences. Social media won't always be the best option. But as 3.5 billion people – including a whole wave of millennial doctors – use social media as their routine channel of communication, it won't be long before pharma's absence from the conversation has more damaging commercial repercussions. It's time to join the party.

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