10 ways... to be part of the conversation

A practical guide by Matt Hunt

So many brands are pretty poor at maintaining a conversation - and that’s not just in the healthcare sector, either.

We’ve all shaken our fists at websites that promise to reply to our emails and never do so, or ads that ask us to text in response to a call to action only then to forget to respond and ask for our details again, or worse still get our requirements plain wrong.

Then there’s the increasing trend of brands imploring you to make friends with them on Facebook - only for you to receive little of any value. Meanwhile, the marketing manager will crow about how their brand now has 3,706 ‘likes’. For all the good it does.

But that’s just the point: we get annoyed because the brand is being deaf, stupid or boastful. While we don’t necessarily want to marry a brand, we’d like it at least to behave like a civilised human being. To do this, brands need to adhere to some of the basic rules of conversation.

Moreover, getting the conversational basics ‘right’ provides us with a whole Debrett’s chapter of socially beneficial opportunities. Not only do we avoid looking inept and stupid, but - with just a little effort - we can earn brownie points for being kind, caring and grandmotherly as we remember to ask after Jane’s health, or kudos and desirability for a useful tip-off resulting in an invitation to a weekend’s shooting at Rupert’s country estate, both metaphorically and, in some cases, literally.
Consumer brands may enjoy such freedom, yet the words ‘healthcare brands have a tougher time of it’ is often a common cry. While our reps may talk more freely, those of us at a corporate marketing level – who are preparing physical materials and using public communication channels – are forced to move in a series of tiny tailspins dictated by our legal guys.

As frustrating as this might be, is it really such a bad thing in an era where parading prowess really isn’t the done thing?

Here are some fairly widely applicable ideas you can use across media digital and physical, local or global. All it takes is the ideas you can use across media digital and physical, local or global. All it takes is the

1. TEACH THE ART OF CONVERSATION
This is an idea that one of our group agencies had, and used to immediately palpable effect very recently. It trained a group of healthcare professionals (HCPs) in how to set up Twitter accounts, and showed them how much fun it can be to tweet. All this was done just before a congress where they knew that some excellent data was about to be released.

There was no harm in this as no one was asked to – nor did they – say anything promotional about the brand.

As people like to tweet about stuff that’s vaguely interesting (okay, not all, but an increasing number), it was no real surprise then when those in attendance spontaneously mentioned the brand and the data in question in their tweets; fuelling a swathe of positive conversations started by those who were free to discuss the brand.

2. START CONVERSATIONS CLOSE TO HOME
Are you worried about using social media externally? Then start internally with a restricted access Twitter account that enables you to keep in contact with your team, staff or markets.

Not only is it useful for tracking down the more difficult to reach executive (although even they can get bored in taxis and hotels, and increasingly like to broadcast themselves), but it gives everyone a safe environment in which to get to grips with what can be a medium fraught with, er, potential.

3. WHAT ABOUT THE BIG GUY IN THE CORNER WHO NEVER SAYS ANYTHING?
At a corporate brand level, you can safely start conversations in a variety of places.

What’s more, this is the level at which conversations will become more important as product brands stand out less and less. As blockbusters are less able to define their corporate brands, so it’s time for savvy corporations to establish a position.

Whether it’s online or offline, it’s now the ideal time to engage your wider audiences in the more human side of your big brand that, to date, has just occasionally shouted something predictable and shareholder-friendly like ‘being committed to innovation and being nice to patients’.

But, what’s stopping your corporate brand from standing clearly for a particular method of enquiry, a therapy area, or a specific (and meaningfully differentiated) commitment? While it might initially feel constrained, it may actually serve to guide future investment decisions and garner respect from many audiences that have hitherto been, at best, indifferent to you at a corporate level.

4. CONVERSATIONS ARE OFTEN STARTED BY OTHER PEOPLE
You won’t know which conversations to be a part of unless you’re listening to them in the first place. There are plenty of ‘social listening’ tools available to do this, but our stumbling block has been that of knowing what to do with what we hear.

Realistically, most comments tend to fall into just a few categories and it’s entirely possible to prepare responses that are MLR approved in advance. With a community manager of sufficient seniority, he/she can then apply these responses when and where they are relevant – showing that you have your finger on the pulse and are concerned enough about your audiences to have the decency to respond is crucial.

There are two great examples of this. The first took place just over two years ago and concerned a major UK financial institution – also operating in a highly regulated sector. It was trying to protect its stock value at a time of more-intense-than-usual rumour and speculation in the financial markets. So it decided to start replying to the rumourmongers on forums and networks in order to correct some common misconceptions and associate its brand with more positive themes.

Many of the pre-approved statements were simple in nature, but they nonetheless served to show that it was listening to and participating in this fast-moving market.

The second happened to a former colleague of mine who was complaining on Twitter that a major utility company had failed to replace her boiler on two occasions. Amazingly, said company was listening and replied to her complaint with an apology and, as the conversation ensued (because there was a human at the other end in this case), a date was finally set and the expectations of my colleague were actually exceeded.

5. SOME CONVERSATIONS ARE ALREADY TAKING PLACE WITHOUT YOU
Pfizer and UCB Pharma both deserve gold stars for getting in early with Sermo and Patientslikeme, respectively.

Plenty of physician networks have category sponsorship opportunities that are not being taken up – even though they afford you the ability to listen and sometimes respond to conversations concerning your brands. You can do it by therapy...
area and, very often, post questions that you’d like to have discussed or answered within existing conversations, or indeed start conversation threads yourself. And because you’re in a walled environment, these discussions can be a lot more open. However, the degree to which you wish to impose your brand on people is entirely up to you, so it’s worth bearing in mind that sometimes a lighter touch can result in more frequent and frank discussions.

6. CHOOSE THE CONVERSATION YOU WANT TO BE PART OF
It’s not all about listening and being reactive – powerful patient/consumer sites like Mumsnet make it easy to pinpoint discussions about the health of everyone in the family.

You don’t need to go in and talk about your particular brand, but if you were to offer advice about the category, you’re entirely free to state where you’re from. If it’s good, fair and balanced advice, not only will it be appreciated, it doesn’t take a huge leap of imagination on the part of the reader to guess that your corporate brand might have a product brand available in the same area.

But what about the spectre of adverse events? Well, I guess there are two ways of looking at these: you could take the view that: “I don’t want to know what’s discussed just in case I have to report it.” Alternatively, you might want to adopt the approach that: “I think the benefits of acknowledging reality outweigh the occasional issues we are duty-bound to deal with.”

To help make the second option more palatable, it may interest you to know that in 2008, Nielsen analysed online healthcare discussions to quantify the number of adverse events and found that just four of 500 messages contained adverse event information, and only one of those messages contained all of the criteria that are required for AE reporting. (Source: blog.nielsen.com)

7. NOBODY LIKES A BRAGGER – BUT MOST OF US LIKE TO BE ENTERTAINED
It’s all about tone: we’re used to being promotional in our messages, and so from a regulatory point of view this stops us talking about our brands in the majority of circumstances. While we can’t be shocking, we can sometimes be humorous, we can always be interesting and we should certainly be useful.

As I mentioned in the last point, just because you’re not hammering home a brand value proposition, doesn’t mean you can’t be effective. Be imaginative instead. Create an experience that encourages people make the effort to ask: “Wow, who did this, and where can I find out more?”

Let’s face it, most of us like to be wooed over time rather than immediately implored to do something in the face of a blatant proposition. Persuasion rather than didacticism. Is there a more interesting way of saying: “Talk to your doctor today?” Please say there is.

8. CONVERSATIONS ARE TWO-WAY – AND TEND TO TAKE PLACE OVER TIME
Don’t always expect an immediate reaction from a single dip into a forum or advertising space. You’ll be disappointed.

There’s a reason why other industries, such as the charity sector, ask questions in order to draw you into deeper contemplation about what could be, in an ideal world.

I’d love to know which pharma brands, when planning direct channel activity, have thought not just about what

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This is how, way too often, we try to have conversations.
questions they would ask to elicit a more thoughtful response – but what response they might actually get – and, then, how they might respond to it.

It’s all possible in interactive channels but we tend to fail to create a conversation – instead resorting to monologue. However, Facebook has just announced that it will be removing the ability to ‘turn off’ comments and interactions on branded pages. So, in effect, we’ll be forced to open up conversations with our customers if we want to play in this space. I reckon this is a clever move, and one where fortune will favour the brave.

9. CONVERSATIONS CAN LEAD TO RELATIONSHIPS

A colleague and I have just come back from a couple of days with one of our clients’ reps. Although the conversations between her and her customers weren’t the easiest to follow (they’re Italian and we don’t speak much Italian), it is clear that there are places in her customers’ offices, hospitals and on their right-hand devices that we are not a part of, but that our competitors are.

Sure, Italy is one of the more highly regulated markets when it comes to brand involvement, but we are still missing a few tricks. For instance, every one of the doctors we spoke to (nine in one-and-half days) had an iPhone (those stylish Italians, eh?). When they found out we were English, one of them (the oldest one we met) reached for his phone and tapped on a voice translation app. Immediately we found out what the Italian for ‘garbage’ was (which was bizarrely pertinent to the conversation).

At the top of our rep’s wishlist of tools was a way for doctors to compare the attributes of their own product range. Surely there’s an opportunity here? By having a conversation in the real, physical world, we established a need for a branded app in the digital world – one which would make the life of both rep and doctor easier, now and in the future.

In the physical space, both in waiting rooms and in doctors’ offices, it was clear that the communications materials that are appreciated and genuinely used are the ones that aid the conversation between doctor and patient. They aid doctors in helping patients to visualise a procedure that could be difficult to explain, or give patients a way of explaining to friends and family what they had been through.

It was evident that if the materials weren’t fulfilling a need they wouldn’t be used – regardless of how beautifully crafted the brand messages may be.

10. TALK MAY BE CHEAP, BUT SILENCE CAN BE THREATENING

We all love something to chat about. Some psychologists, sociologists and jumped-up ad agency planners call it ‘social currency’, namely something that we can use as conversational fodder in social situations. “Did you hear what so-and-so got up to last Saturday night after a few too many wines at the conference” is a jump-off point into one particular strain of conversation.

But, equally we can provide strains of conversation that are more salubrious. Being part of conversations you’ve not been a part of so far often involves coming to the party with something newsworthy: whether it’s a relevant new way of reframing an old condition that has long been stigmatised (think men’s sexual health brands, for instance), or telling an interesting story about the psychology of female beauty (think aesthetic medecine).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although there are many physical and digital places where pharma and wider healthcare brands can and should be starting and joining conversations, it’s also entirely possible to have your presence appreciated in existing ‘places’ by modulating the language that you use.

If you are prepared to be useful over time rather than blatantly (and predictably) promotional in the short-term, you may be pleasantly surprised that your presence is actively appreciated – and that others will start to convey positive messages on your behalf.

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**Author**

Matt Hunt is SVP European Head of Planning at Grey Healthcare Group. He can be contacted at matthew.hunt@ghgroup.com or on +44 (0)20 3037 3636