The UK’s pharma industry needs to embrace the new world wide web for all it’s worth. So why are only a handful of companies focusing their effort on targeting doctors through ‘virtual’ communications’ techniques? Particularly at a time when access to doctors via traditional marketing methods is getting harder by the day. Advertising spend in the sector has significantly decreased over recent years and changes to the ABPI Code of Practice are starting to bite into conventional sales and marketing activities.

Although a number of the industry’s early adopters to the new wave of web-based communication options have successfully included e-detailing and sponsorship of online continuing medical education (e-CME) programmes into their e-marketing plans, these activities are just the tip of the iceberg. In reality, the bulk of the pharmaceutical industry remains sitting on the virtual fence, not knowing how to embrace the opportunities offered by recent technology advances. In the US, e-CME is the norm; 90 per cent of doctors use the internet daily. So how do we utilise the web’s strengths as an interactive communications platform by integrating new web-based technologies and options into our future marketing plans?
1. KNOW YOUR E-STUFF – WEB 2.0
The Web 2.0 revolution has undoubtedly arrived but the term can mean radically different things to different people. In comparison to traditional Web 1.0 sites (which act as isolated silos of information) Web 2.0, or second-generation sites, tend to be more like interactive, web-based communities offering hosted services, with their content and functionality designed to serve the end user.

Web 2.0 sites provide for social networking and their existence is driving a social phenomenon globally. They are helping to generate and distribute information through open communication – allowing freedom to share, edit and re-use its content. Users are able to comment on the content and then to ‘market’ the end result – the publication of blogs and videos on YouTube being current favourites with the general public.

There has also been a proliferation of medical social networking sites. In the US a new site for doctors is launched every month. Doctors are talking together online to get guidance from their peers, just as they have done at congresses, educational events and informal meetings.

Doctors are even sharing case study examples of how to treat a particular disease, or how effective a drug has been (or not as the case may be). The ease of sharing information means they are also sharing concerns they may have about a product, which in some instances may adversely influence others, starting a negative trend. Some pharmaceutical companies have raised concerns about the content of such sites, but they are here to stay and the industry has to be aware of them and learn how to deal with them.

On a positive note, medical social networking via the web has given doctors the opportunity to collaborate with each other, sharing best clinical practice, challenging established ideas and even accelerating the uptake of new drugs, or old drugs for new indications.

Currently in the UK, the nearest we have to a medical social network are the discussion forums on www.doctors.org.uk and www.bmjlearning.com. However, the market is primed for change. Web 2.0 technology is also fast becoming a business revolution for those companies and individuals who understand it and are prepared to be proactive. For pharmaceutical companies, keeping up is going to be critical, so their business is not left behind (or worse still, left out of the picture entirely).

2. ‘PULL’ AND ‘PUSH’ E-MARKETING TECHNIQUES
The best known method of searching for information on a website is the use of a search engine such as Google. This method is known as a ‘pull’ system, as it is triggered by the consumer’s request. It is, however, only as effective as the search engine used and indeed the design of the linked website itself. A major downside is that search engines throw up masses of irrelevant information, intermixed with what’s wanted.

‘Push’ systems, on the other hand, provide information to a consumer without them having requested it. Promotional emails that are sent out by companies or individuals containing direct links to their websites are an example, as these encourage the recipient to visit and seek out more detail. However, as each of us knows as recipients, if email promotions are used indiscriminately they arouse negative responses. It’s virtually impossible to know whether your email is going to be a welcome or unwelcome distraction. Nevertheless, email alerts to existing customers can be effective in alerting or reminding them that your new site is up and running. However, just how they respond to your email will depend upon its design and content.

The customised notification alert is a much more worthwhile ‘pull’ alternative. The advantage with this is that the customer is able to decide what information they would like to be alerted about, how often they would like to be alerted, and in what format. Electronic, customised notification alerts are also an excellent way of driving traffic to your site and getting brand messages in front of your customers – and they are a technique that puts the control back into the hands of your customer. The most popular form of notification messages appears in the bottom right-hand side of a desktop computer but others can be sent to mobile phones or to a BlackBerry device.

The ideal situation with any ‘pull’ method is one where the consumer requests and receives regular information from trusted sources. The good news is that the latest web syndication techniques, such as Real Simple Syndication (RSS ), provide just such a system. RSS is a family of web-feed formats used to publish frequently updated content, such as blog entries, news headlines or podcasts. Consumers ‘sign-up’ to regular RSS feeds from favourite websites. These increasingly include personal websites, making it possible for an individual to keep up to date with comments from their trusted sources in an automated manner that’s far easier than checking them manually.

Doctors may choose to be alerted about a number of different items, such as the latest content page of the BMJ or Lancet, or announcements from NICE and the Department of Health. As a sponsor of a customised notification message, your company could include a brand logo or a link to your website, as well as notification of new materials as and when they are put onto your website.

3. CREATE A LINK WITH CUSTOMER HOMEPAGES
Links through independent websites will increasingly prove to be key conduits in e-communication. Working with doctors to customise their hompages to ‘pull’ information from your website is another good way to make them feel they are more in control of the information they receive. You will also be able to get new clinical data out to the medical profession the moment it hits your website. To do this, you simply need a link to your website’s RSS feed on their homepage.

Personal websites are becoming important entry points for information and informed comment, and in the US there has been a significant increase in the number of doctors’ hompages. Translate the use of
this technology into providing a sponsored, personalised homepage for your key doctors, complete with RSS feeds and links to your e-detailing, e-CME and other e-marketing programmes. (The ease of which personalised homepages can be created can be examined by visiting www.igoogle.com.) The potential for getting brand messages in front of your target customers could significantly outstrip the opportunities from normal advertising or sales representative visits.

4. THINK IT THROUGH
Having explained how e-marketing techniques work in principle, it is of course vital to establish in the early stages what you want by way of product information and marketing materials on your site. Whether through ‘push’ or ‘pull’ activities, or ideally both, what do you need to prepare before engaging your contact’s interest?

Many pharma company websites simply include information about a product and the relevant disease area and then use third-party sites to host their e-detailing. But what about establishing a truly integrated site that incorporates your e-detailing and sales materials, medical education and PR activities, all in one place? This way, your sales and marketing materials and activities could then be made available through multiple communication channels.

But, of course, online is available for all to see, so why not prevent competitors and patients seeing your material by using a simple access restriction on the website (eg, asking a doctor to register or to give their GMC number). This will also allow you to identify interested customers.

5. CREATIVE INTERACTION WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS
Marketers need to start thinking differently and creatively about e-marketing. It is not just a case of putting product messages on websites, but how you engage with your customers to ensure that they value and respond to the information, and are encouraged to return for more in the future. In the same way as a pharmaceutical company or its representative engages with a doctor at a meeting, at an exhibition stand or during a sales call, a similar interaction can, and should, take place online.

Options can include links to interactive pages and tools such as interactive medical educational programmes that can be rated by the doctor. Links can be set up to virtual meetings and satellite symposia at international congress, and the facility to ask questions can also be added – the technology already exists to do this. Many companies use computer-generated animation to explain the mode of action of a new product, but why not devise interactive games and other medical knowledge challenges?

Why not host regular webchats with key opinion leaders or webcasts of interviews with them on a range of related topics? These are all engaging activities. What about taking your medical information services online, or ensuring doctors are able to request a sales representative visit? And how often do companies promote online that they will be exhibiting at a particular conference and invite customers to their stand?

6. MAKE IT IMMEDIATE
When key clinical data is to be published, standard marketing activities tend to include revisions to sales materials, media activity and opinion leader presentations at educational events. While these are useful techniques in themselves, they lack the speed and reach that internet-based routes can offer.

Consider arranging for your opinion leaders to be involved in an interactive webcast or a downloadable podcast to discuss the paper and the possible impact it will have on clinical practice. In the same way that downloading the 8.10am interview from the BBC’s Today Programme on Radio 4 as a podcast has become the norm for those working in the corporate and financial world, doctors are being encouraged to use interactive technology to access clinical information. And before the cynics among you say it will never catch on with doctors, the Lancet and the BMJ are pushing interactive technology on their websites to encourage clinical debate and discussion with great success. Over three times as many doctors log on to the BMJ online than receive actual copies of the journal.

7. THEIR NEEDS, NOT YOURS
In the coming year the need for good quality e-CME will intensify, as cuts continue on study leave budgets and pressures increase on doctors’ time in general. Professional societies and associations are already seeing the number of delegates registering for conferences and meetings drop and are looking for alternative ways of meeting their members’ educational needs. Pharma companies need to think about working with faculties of key opinion leaders to produce high-quality, non-promotional, professionally endorsed e-CME programmes on which doctors are invited to evaluate, give comment and make recommendations.

If you provide doctors with what they need, they are likely to recommend your e-CME to other colleagues. Some of the most successful marketing campaigns of recent years have been achieved by listening to doctors and giving them what they say they want, rather than what we think they need. Out-of-the-box thinking around disease management can often be a bigger driver of sales than constant product presentations.
8. INVOLVE YOUR EXISTING SALES TEAM
It is important that you integrate your sales team into your e-sales and marketing activities. Research to analyse the impact of e-detailing has shown that a combination of both online activity and traditional sales representative detailing has the greatest influence on the sales for a particular brand.

Traditional marketing communications can also play a part in increasing traffic to your e-CME, with website information being provided by the sales force, eg, at meetings and exhibitions. Doctors who have attended your satellite symposium could be directed to your e-CME. As sales representatives are constantly battling with ever decreasing time slots with doctors in which to detail a product or to develop a good rapport, some of this valuable time may be better spent being able to direct doctors to your website and online detailing services. This could ultimately encourage them to seek out further information about your brands in their own time.

However, evaluation of the early e-detailing projects that have been implemented has, not too surprisingly, demonstrated once again the importance of getting key messages across early in the material. Your objective should be to keep it short and sweet, and bear in mind that doctors do not necessarily click through all the pages.

Research has shown that combining online activity with normal detailing has greatest influence on sales.

9. GET THE INVESTMENT, AND INTERNAL COMMITMENT
Online sales and marketing activities are not cheap and should not be undertaken unless you have the right level of investment and internal commitment to your plans. That is not to say online marketing needs to blow your budget or that it is not cost effective. An e-detail provided by a third-party supplier is around £17 per detail vs £100+ per sales representative detail.

Marketers once again need to think outside the box. Companies will have many existing materials, such as printed supplements on products and relevant therapeutic areas, slide libraries and presentations, that can be adapted to a web-based format. Existing advisory boards could be realigned to think about e-marketing strategies. Negotiations to purchase clinical paper reprints should include opportunities for doctors to directly download them.

The main cost element of any e-marketing programme relates initially to the design, building and management of your website. You will also need to budget for providing on-going additional content to keep it fresh and interesting, for activities to drive traffic to your site and then evaluating the return on investment.

It may be more cost-effective to use a third-party provider to help undertake your e-detailing and e-CME, especially if you are new to the scope of e-marketing technology and want to trial some initial activities to test the market as well as your approach. However, you need to consider the pros and cons of doing this, as a third-party provider can become so closely associated with creating and managing the service that they, not you, build a reputation with the customer.

10. EVALUATE ITS EFFECT
The great advantage of e-sales and marketing is that you are able to monitor and evaluate a customer’s behaviour, then respond and adapt your materials quite swiftly. As online sales and marketing is still in its infancy it is especially important to show results to warrant further investment and getting your market researchers involved in the early planning stage is essential. Together you will be able to agree the evaluation parameters you can measure and ensure these measures are incorporated into the technology you use.

At a basic level, website traffic, number of visits and time spent online surfing the site can all be evaluated, but companies need to go much further than this. Pharma bosses will be looking at the return on investment and how many more opportunities to prescribe have been generated by your online activities.

The rewards are there for those companies with the confidence to adopt and embrace this new technology and open communication channels to doctors. Now is the time to start developing your e-marketing strategies. The world of e-marketing is growing fast, changing doctors’ perceptions and the way drugs are prescribed. Can your brand afford to be left behind?

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The rewards are there for companies with the confidence to adopt and embrace a technology that is here for good.

Behind our vision is success, and success is highly contagious... as our clients will tell you.