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PAGB Digital Week, Day 3: Engaging With Consumers Online And Mastering Social Media

by Tom Gallen

Day three of PAGB's Digital Week featured a Q&A panel on how best to engage consumers online, which stressed the importance of authentic product reviews. This was followed by a session on delivering business impact for medical device brands through social media with the help of influencers.

Session 1 – Keeping The Conversation Going: Engaging With Consumers Online

Opening this Q&A session, PAGB's senior advertising policy and operations manager, Laura Kelly, noted how brands having conversations with consumers online was playing a much larger role in marketing. However, for the consumer healthcare industry, this was not always easy, she pointed out, due to regulations governing how companies can promote their brands on social media.

Exploring the opportunities and challenges for OTC brands online, PAGB's panel of experts tackled questions covering a range of subjects from using influencers, to managing online reviews and driving up engagement.

Kicking off the discussion, Ben Moss, a partner at Dirt & Glory Media, addressed the importance of building an online presence. A significant and growing number of consumers were "digital and social media natives," he claimed, with the COVID-19 pandemic having accelerated online use. With people spending more and more time online, the challenge for OTC firms was "to truly engage them with your brand."

Angela Prottey-Jones, brand manager at Galderma UK, pointed out that online was now the starting point of the consumer's purchase journey. "So you've got to be there at that point of need being discovered," she insisted.

Echoing that point, Adriana Shilton of Bazaarvoice Ltd, said it was critical for OTC firms to be part of the shopper journey online by providing information about what makes their products unique and effective. “You want to ensure that you’re where your shoppers are, and you’re educating them,” she suggested.

One way to engage consumers online is by partnering with influencers. However, this was risky ground for OTC firms, Kelly pointed out, as ad regulator ASA has previously said promotions by influencers with large followings is tantamount to celebrity endorsement. (Also see "[Sanofi Warned Over Use Of Social Media Influencer For UK Ad Campaign](#)" - HBW Insight, 9 Jul, 2019.)

On this subject, Prottey-Jones said she hoped that ASA’s position on influencers would evolve as it was important for OTC companies to have a share of voice on social media, otherwise it would lead to less choice for consumers. An alternative to influencers was to use paid advertising on platforms like Twitter, she suggested, however it was crucial that these promotions felt authentic to consumers.

Moss pointed out that a lot of young people got their information from influencers, with many “credible and knowledgeable about their subject.” Dirt & Glory’s work with morning-after pill EllaOne had utilized what he described as “educators,” such as columnists and activists, he explained. Rather than using these educators to push or sell the product, they were invited to talk on an EllaOne branded podcast about themes related to emergency contraception. (Also see "[HRA Pharma ‘Breaks The Stigma’ Of Emergency Contraception With EllaOne Podcast](#)" - HBW Insight, 6 Aug, 2019.)

Moss argued that it was all about intent when it came to using influencers, adding that it was important to work with PAGB to understand the regulatory boundaries.

From influencers, Kelly turned to the subject of online reviews, asking the panel how best OTC firms could utilize them and what pitfalls they should be careful to avoid.

Shilton explained that companies should consider online reviews as part of their marketing strategy, as they influenced consumers’ “consideration, conversion and even loyalty.”

Moderation of reviews to ensure they were posted by real users was key for consumer trust, she noted. “If you’re a brand you don’t want all five star reviews as that’s not going to give the shopper confidence that they are authentic,” Shilton said. Furthermore, one person’s negative opinion of a product could be helpful to someone else. Having a mix of reviews helped to further educate consumers, she added, ensuring that they could make the right purchase decision.

Moving to the subject of driving engagement on social media, Moss said it was crucial for firms to understand the role of their brand in the life of the consumer, and why they should care. In the

case of EllaOne, Dirt & Glory had done a lot of research to understand the consumer, which fed into a strategy to target that specific profile. Once a brand had identified its audience, it was key to be authentic on social media, he explained, stressing that “real stories make an impact.”

Building on this point, Prottey-Jones pointed out that different social media platforms had different audience profiles, so it was key for brands “to be strict about who you are talking to and what you want to tell them.”

When it came to social media, especially relatively new platforms, it was a bit of “trial and error,” she admitted. Galderma had recently been testing TikTok, Prottey-Jones revealed, to understand what content the users liked and what felt right for the platform. TikTok was appealing, she explained, as it was used by a younger audience that did not really engage with other platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

Session 2 – Delivering Business Impact For Medical Device Brands Through Social Media And Influencers

Social media marketing specialists Team Eleven opened the second and final session of the day, with founder Nicholas Gill hoping that attendees were not yet suffering from “Zoom fatigue”. Often clients blame regulatory restrictions for their unsuccessful social media and influencer strategies, Gill reported, based on five years’ experience of working in this area.

The key to success, however, was not “shifting the blame” but getting together the “right approaches and tools to have the right conversations with regulators and work with them to get influencers and social media right,” he explained.

Gill offered a wealth of advice on how companies can put together their social strategies.

The first thing to understand, he advised, was to ask, “why do you want to use social media?” With consumers saturated with information and “taking back control of their screens” through ad blocking tools, social media content needed to be “thumb stopping,” he said.

One of the trends that consumer health companies can tap into is the growth of “organic content,” he continued, particularly scientific and educational content.

Over half of internet media users now use social media to research products, Gill pointed out, with channels like YouTube becoming the new search engine for many people. In the age of “fake news,” therefore, he suggested that consumer health companies could use social media to provide reliable information about conditions and brands.

Consumers are also increasingly turning to online experts to provide “social proof,” he said. Influencer marketing can be a powerful way to provide this.

While influencers can be “really powerful allies for you,” Gill warned that they can also have “power beyond your control.” He pointed to the recent example of Portuguese footballer Cristiano Ronaldo removing Coke bottles from a press conference, urging people watching to “drink water” instead.

When using influencers, it is important to be well prepared, do research on the kinds of conversations people are having around company brands online through “social listening” and be prepared to deal with any negative publicity with a risk mitigation plan, he explained.

When dealing with influencers in the consumer healthcare sector, Gill emphasized the importance of taking the time to talk them through regulations. “Forget email,” he advised. Companies should get used to talking to influencers via the communications channels that they use, for example WhatsApp.

Ultimately, there was no “one size fits all” approach to social media and influencer marketing, Gill concluded. There was, however, great potential for this approach, as “people are always interested in human stories,” he said.



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