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The rise of the digital opinion leader

Are you harnessing the power
of pharma's new educators?



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By Gregory Imber

Who influences your brand today? All of us in the pharma and biotech industry have been trying to answer that question for years.

Who are the Healthcare Professionals (HCPs) in my brand's space who speak at conferences, who write in journals, who lead clinical trials, who lead professional societies, who chair guidelines committees, who've earned the respect of their peers, whose words could change market perception of my brand on a large scale.

We call them *key opinion leaders* (KOLs), and we go to great lengths to find them, build relationships with them. Identifying and connecting with KOLs has become an indispensable part of any successful pharma brand's marketing strategy. An entire industry of analysts and technologists has emerged over the past few decades for the sole purpose of helping pharma brands identify.

More recently, though, a new breed of KOL has arisen, one that's not necessarily found within that original conference and journal and clinical trial paradigm – and the impact of the COVID pandemic just magnified this new breed's significance and influence. Just as social media influencers have quickly become a staple of consumer brands in general, the HCP community has seen the rise of its own digital influencers, HCPs who use social media and other digital channels to invite their peers, patients, and others into their daily professional lives. There's no peer review committee, no delay; just take a photo, send it out with some commentary, and thousands of other HCPs are reviewing and commenting and responding. It's as if these influencers are bringing their fellow HCPs along on their daily rounds and letting them all listen in. When new information becomes available, these influencers are the first to communicate it, they are leading digital and social conversations and serving as a trusted voice to their peers, even those who aren't frequently attending conferences. ▶

And what they say matters. It may well affect HCP behavior as much or more than traditional KOLs do, especially now that HCPs are more limited in their in-person activities by COVID. If they are being bombarded with too much information from too many sources every day, if they lack the time to devote to keeping up with the conference and journal rush, if they are restricted from seeing brand sales reps, if they can't even leave the house or office and are dealing with changes in clinical practice due to COVID ... well, they might just lean hard on these sorts of trustworthy online experts and educators to cut through the noise and keep abreast of developments in their field.

At Healthcare Consultancy Group we call them *digital opinion leaders*, or DOLs.

Is there some crossover between the traditional KOL and the DOL? Of course. But that shouldn't distract from the fact that a DOL is a substantively different species than a traditional KOL. DOLs have a different reach, use different channels and speak in very different voices. From more than two decades of partnering with both KOLs and DOLs, we've learned that the latter are a unique group, and so we have to treat them that way. And while DOLs were a thing long before COVID, the pandemic has magnified their importance and thus the importance of brands interfacing with them. Think we're kidding? One DOL website we've worked with, RheumNow.com by Dr Jack Cush, a prominent DOL, went from 51,500 page view in February 2020 to 103,300 two months later, and other DOL channels have performed similarly.

So where to begin as a brand? DOLs are out there communicating with and educating your brand's prescribers in real time, most likely without any substantive interaction with your brand team. The very least you can do as a brand manager is to be listening and learning how all those social media

conversations are impacting your brand and the market at large. So step one for making DOLs part of your brand communication plan is ...

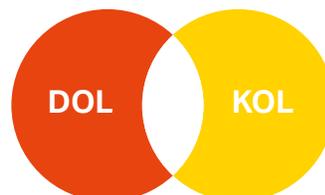
Identification, profiling, and monitoring

Who are the DOLs that are respected by their peers in your therapeutic area, those who are actively communicating with and educating other HCPs? What are they saying? How are they influencing perceptions? What is each DOL's area of expertise and why do their colleagues respect them so much?

Easy questions to ask. Not so easy to answer. Developing a reasonably comprehensive map of your brand's DOLs require a team effort – an *integrated* team. The right agency team should have social media experts interfacing with medical directors and strategists that know your content and brand. Only then can you get the full picture. Together such an integrated team can build the guard rails - digest the flow of conversations from out in the wild, work out what keywords are worth looking for, decide what's relevant and what's not and what it all means to the brand.

Once all that has been determined, your team needs to go through what amounts to a giant sorting and question-asking exercise. Who is sharing content relevant to our brand? ▶

There is overlap between DOLs and KOLs, **but each group is unique**



DOLs have a **different reach, different channels and a unique voice**

Who is creating content? Who is adding personal perspective to that content? Among that group of content sharers and creators, what is each individual's focus, specialty, subspecialty? What is their reach? What's the relevance of their content to your brand's strategic focus? And what about quality of content? How frequently are they posting? Are they really *engaging* with their audience, having a back-and-forth, or just tossing material out for their audience to read? The answers to all those questions will drive step two in DOL relationships ...

Engagement

Because if we're going to properly educate HCPs about our brands and the diseases they treat, we can't just let folks talk out there in the wild without participating ourselves. Based on the answers to all those questions above, your team will be able to craft a ranked list of DOLs – individuals who are constantly sharing content relevant to your brand and its strategic focus, who are adding their perspective to that content, who are actively engaging with your brand's key audience, who have substantial reach. Once you know who those individuals are, *proactively communicate with them*. You'd be amazed at how many brand teams com up with lists of influential DOLs and just *watch* them, and then all of a sudden the team's first interaction with a key individual is to correct a data point or an accidental misrepresentation of a study, which is just about the worst first contact imaginable for someone who may have a significant impact on the success or failure of your brand.

So make the first move. Have someone on your team reach out and chat, just like you probably already do with traditional KOLs. Start a dialogue and build a two-way connection, so they feel comfortable coming to your team or your medical team for information, and you feel comfortable asking for their views. Once that

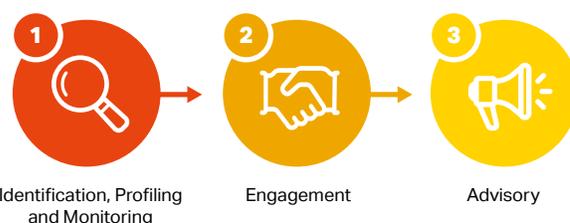
connection is in place, invite them to join communications advisory boards. These individuals have established that they are expert in the use of social channels and the needs of their audiences, and their audiences are your brand's audiences too. Who better to ask for advice?

Advocacy

You've identified key DOLs for your brand. You've learned how they interact with their audiences and the scope of their influence. You've built relationships with them. You've asked for their advice, and maybe they've asked for yours. The logical next question is, can this or that DOL actually partner with us and/or be an advocate for our brand? If so, what would such a partnership look like?

One potential first step in partnering with DOLs is content co-creation. Work directly with you DOLs, take advantage of their expertise and knowledge of their audiences to create content

Integrating DOLs into your Brand Communication Plan



that will resonate with those audiences. In the med ed space brands are always co-creating content with KOLs, but now you'll be working with folks who can provide a perspective that traditional KOLs just can't. Every DOL will be different, so the content you might create with each will be different; let *their* perspective and knowledge of the audience drive the partnership. ▶

And then, one step beyond content co-creation is content *distribution*, taking advantage of each DOL's unique reach and pushing out content through their connections to their audiences.

As these relationships become more substantive, they'll have to be formalized, contracted, sometimes compensated, just as KOL relationships are, and most of all they must be completely transparent.

Next up, the gold standard of the brand-DOL relationship, is co-creating and distributing sponsored educational content. Make no mistake, this is a big, big step for a DOL. Advising on content is all very well, but now you are asking DOLs to formally associate themselves with your brand, on camera, forever (everything on the web is forever), in the eyes of that audience whose trust they have earned over years. If the content doesn't fit with the voice and personality of the DOL, if it feels out of place, then the DOL won't want to use it and the audience won't react favorably to it. So you have to take the word *partner* as literally as possible, beginning with the content outline and discussion of goals all the way through to the finished product. You've got to be proud of it ... and the DOL has to be proud of it and feel ownership of it too.

What might advocacy look like?

One DOL activity we recently coordinated was a virtual oncology brand launch. We worked together with several high-profile DOLs and ran Twitter livestreams with them, each focused on a unique angle, their own sweet spot, over the course of five nights. We ended up with 62,900 live views and a total of more than 1.8 million live and on-demand views to date – with much of that originating through the existing networks of “fans” that the DOLs already had. This was not a Hollywood- or prime-time commercial-style production, just well-respected DOLs

presenting live online night after night. And it wasn't what you might call “promotional” content – just expert HCPs educating audiences about the ins and outs of the condition and the drug and the MOA. But ...1.8 million people saw this content in one form or another. Even we, who've been proselytizing about the DOL approach for years, were blown away. HCPs out there in the world are clearly looking for exactly this kind of engagement, and looking for it from their DOL peers.

This may be an extreme example, and not everyone always has an important new oncology drug to launch. But our own experience offers plenty of other options. We've done educational video series with multiple DOL faculty members, pushing them out through the DOL's networks. We've done surveys. We've done MOA overviews. We've done short-form and long-form and everything in between. Basically, we've done anything that serves both the DOL's passion and the brand's educational needs, sometimes without even calling out the brand.

That passion, as much as anything, is the point. A brand's success in working with DOLs will come exactly in proportion to that brand's willingness to engage the passion of the DOL and allow that passion to drive the bus. Any DOL worth their name had a loyal audience before your brand showed up, and they'll likely have that same loyal audience after your brand is gone – you need them more than they need you. So find the DOL's that matter to your brand, let their passion guide your relationship and the content you create together, and you may just find your brand speaking with a louder, more powerful, and more authoritative voice than it ever has before.

Gregory Imber is chief engagement officer for Healthcare Consultancy Group. For more information about HCG's approach to DOLs, email jwilliams@hcg-int.com ●



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Healthcare Consultancy Group (HCG) is a global leader in medical communications – 8 agencies united in a common vision. To accelerate product understanding and acceptance, bringing clients' medicines closer to the patients who need them.

With global offices approaching 1,000 staff spanning North America, Europe and Asia, HCG is an incubator for the relentlessly curious. Our appetite for creating strategies that lead to better patient outcomes is never satisfied.

HCG's agencies include Chameleon, Health Science Communications, Lumen Value & Access, ProEd Communications, ProEd Regulatory, Synergy, The Scienomics Group with industry-leading digital and creative strategy from the HCG Engagement Group.

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