

# KOL ENGAGEMENT: AUTHORITY AND INFLUENCE IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Key opinion leaders have traditionally been the most prestigious names in medicine, valued for their input into a drug's development, for their validation of the scientific approach, and for their influence among prescribers. While this expertise is still sought by pharma, the tightening of conflict-of-interest rules within academia, coupled with new transparency requirements revealing what physicians are paid by industry, are changing the rules of engagement. Meanwhile, a new kind of influencer, the digital opinion leader (DOL), is entering the fray. These are people who may or may not be KOLs in the accepted sense of the word. They could be any of a number of stakeholders who have built up large followings in networks of influence that can make or break a drug in the market place.

This report is written to help pharma discern how best to work with the increasingly complex web of influencers that now surrounds all pharmaceutical products. It does this by first examining the effect of transparency on traditional KOL engagement, and then by looking at the power of social media to disrupt established medical hierarchies and forge entirely new pathways of influence.

## Executive Summary

Pharma key opinion leaders (KOLs) are taking new forms as social media becomes a more ubiquitous presence in medicine. Physician conversations that may have started in closed and secure physician-only communities are moving into the public space and embracing a wide range of stakeholders, such as patients, nurses, educators, journalists, anyone in fact with an interest in healthcare.

These new influencers are enthusiastic bloggers, tweeters and commentators who have found a platform to amplify their voice in social media. This rapidly changing communications environment is forcing pharma to reconsider how it engages with not only physicians but people from across the entire healthcare spectrum who have an influence in the clinical and political conversations surrounding medicine. Moreover, this rethink comes at a time when pharma companies are compelled, for the first time, to disclose what they pay physicians to speak, advise or conduct research on their behalf.

This report hones in on the changing relationship between authority and influence in medicine and the effect this has on the role of the traditional KOL: physicians valued for their support of pharma's products and scientific thinking, their research credentials and standing within the medical community.

It considers how their authority can be bolstered in a world awash with opinion while, at the same time, their influence can diminish. Some pharma interviewees suggest the very notion of an opinion leader is a misnomer in an evidence-based world. Others take the view that opinion cannot be ignored because it creates perceptions that, true or not, are a reality that affect pharma sales.

The reality is that these new networks of influence are changing not only perceptions of medicine but how it is practised, even what it means to be ill. Pharma companies need to be aware of how these networks operate and what their competitors are doing to create opportunities for engagement with the new influencers, the so-called digital opinion leaders (DOLs).

The report opens with an analysis of how new transparency requirements under the Sunshine provisions of the Affordable Care Act might impact engagement with traditional KOLs.

It moves on to present a picture of the new DOLs, stakeholders of influence as evidenced by their impressive online followings that have typically been amassed by a passionate involvement in medical affairs representing constituents who have hitherto been ignored. Connected community oncologists, for example, are challenging the assumption that academics who become expert in one tumour type are the only kind of expert. "[Pharma] are now also looking at where most people are treated in the community setting and asking those people for their opinions, especially for common tumour types that are often treated in the community," says Dr Mike Thompson, one of the new DOLs who also happens to be a leading physician.

Several other case studies illustrate how the new influencers are opening new avenues in medicine and how they are identified by being at the centre of the most engaged web conversations. The report goes on to examine how their influence varies by therapeutic area and how they can be nurtured via innovative initiatives such as blogging summits, tweetchats, content curation and generally disseminating information from medical conferences and new education formats.

The creation of great digital advocates does not mean abandoning the traditional KOL. It means working with a broader selection of people and helping the real experts expand their influence.

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# INTERVIEWEES, FIGURES AND TABLES

## INTERVIEWEES

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**Daniel Ghinn**, founder, Creation Healthcare

**Greg Matthews**, managing director, MDigitalLife

**Dr Partha Kar**, clinical director, diabetes and endocrinology, Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust

**Dr Tim Ringrose**, CEO, M3 Europe

**Dr Mike Thompson**, community haematologist/oncologist and medical director of Early Cancer Research at Aurora Health Care

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### Channel offerings

Through pharmaphorum.com and associated social media, we publish thought leadership media from industry experts, healthcare providers and patient organisations to better inform the pharma industry and drive engagement.

Collectively, these channels provide pharma with:

- ◆ Essential news, opinions and insights
- ◆ Training / career development
- ◆ Curated external media, including jobs, events and press releases
- ◆ Visibility and connectivity with other healthcare stakeholders

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We support pharma, service providers and broader healthcare organisations to communicate with key stakeholders through high-quality content and truly engaging social media strategies. Clients benefit from our strong networks, first-hand industry experience and access to publication partners. We understand the importance of content and social media engagement as we live and breathe it every day.

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- ◆ Content production / facilitation
- ◆ Healthcare / pharma social media
- ◆ Meetings / round table discussions
- ◆ Content dissemination

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