

Five Powerful Ideas on KOL Network Management

Marc Pesse proposes five ideas for managing key opinion leader management networks.

"Everyone is part of a community. People want to know what's going on in their community," Mark Zuckerberg, Founder and CEO of Facebook.

There seems to be an unwritten rule that what applies in everyday society doesn't apply in healthcare. We live in a world of networks and communities, which form naturally around shared interests, skills and contacts. But to the pharmaceutical industry, open communities mean one thing: an alarming lack of control.

Many pharmaceutical companies still prefer to deal with their stakeholders one-by-one in a controlled way. They are often at their most comfortable dealing with clinical opinion leaders, talking about the benefits of their products. But are they missing a trick? Zuckerberg is right — everyone is part of a community, even in healthcare. And there is a tremendous opportunity available to the industry which can be realized through a change in mindset.

Rather than spend all its energy and resources on a handful of top-tier

clinicians, the pharmaceutical industry should focus on 'KOL networks' — broadly defined as a set of connections between those senior level stakeholders who, through their role, have a direct or indirect influence on the provision of care.

KOL Networks — the New KOL?

The fact that healthcare is more regulated and complex makes KOL networks even more important. A whole range of stakeholders — including payers, health economists, patient groups, experts in politics and economics — now have an influence on prescribing decisions and should be considered KOLs. The top-tier clinicians are still important, but they are only one piece of the jigsaw.

Think of it this way. When we bring up our children, we know that, whether we like it or not, they

will be exposed to influences everywhere. As parents, we may like to think that traditional figures of authority — teachers, family — can be relied upon entirely to steer them in the right direction, but the truth is they are only one part of the picture. All we can do is take an active

interest in the groups in which our children move to try and ensure all the various factors combine to give them the best chance to reach their potential.

And so it is with products the pharmaceutical industry launches into the marketplace. The word of industry,



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and the word of a few hand-picked clinicians, is no longer enough to steer their product where they would like it to go. They must understand, interpret and act upon the complex KOL networks which their products are released into.

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Here we present five powerful ways in which understanding and incorporating KOL networks into strategic planning may help pharmaceutical companies optimize the product environment.

1: You can use KOL networks to target accurately

Understanding how KOL networks are structured and interconnected can allow for a much more targeted approach. Instead of having a diluted, blanket approach across a wide range of similar stakeholders, or an approach based purely on the reputation and eminence of individuals, assessing KOL networks can allow companies to target a few to reach many.

For example, some networks may revolve entirely around one or two clusters of individuals, in which case targeting anyone other than the central influencers, no matter how eminent, may be wasted resource. Or conversely, your analysis may tell you that in order to transform a network, the optimal approach would be to target those on the periphery. Other KOL networks may be relatively decentralized in terms of influence, but your analysis can help you to avoid duplicating effort in terms of who you target. Whatever the shape of the KOL networks, your analysis should help you to focus and thus save resources.

You can start to analyse networks by undertaking a combination of primary and secondary research, understanding who your KOLs are, gathering qualitative and quantitative information about how they interact with each other and where the lines of influence lie. There are recognized methods and tools available that can facilitate the incorporation of KOL networks into strategic planning.

2: You can actively shape KOL networks

When considering networks it is always worthwhile to reflect on the value of

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such an exercise for the company. Of course it's all very well analysing the networks that currently exist, but what if you don't have dedicated resources to target them effectively?

Part of the required fundamental mindset shift for pharmaceutical companies is to realize that they are — or at least should be — major players within networks. Currently, the industry is very much on the sidelines, occasionally releasing products or ideas or consulting stakeholder groups one at a time. But companies must remember they bring a huge amount to the table, and it goes way beyond the products themselves. The pharmaceutical industry is packed full with clinical expertise, inventors and innovators, invaluable experience and — of course — resource.

This provides opportunities to become one of the network formers or shapers. Even without innovative products in the pipeline, the pharmaceutical industry has opportunities available to take a leading role in forming and integrating health KOL networks.

3: You can use KOL networks to help overcome roadblocks

Of course, not every stakeholder in every network is going to want to

form a relationship with industry and others will be sceptical, critical and even actively obstructive. That is simply a fact of life for pharmaceutical companies.

Pharmaceutical companies should play a central role as network facilitators and contributors. Understanding and initiating KOL network management initiatives will take them a step closer to fulfilling this role

But analysing KOL networks allows you to identify these potential roadblocks and help circumnavigate or even challenge them if required. For example, if within a network there is a prominent KOL who is negative towards a particular product or company, the best approach may be to engage the cluster of stakeholders around that particular individual within the network, rather than trying to address them directly. It may sound as a logical thing to do, however companies often put effort into trying to change the KOL's view by directly working with the person. This approach may require more resource with less likelihood of success as opposed to engaging with the network around the KOL.

People respond to a combination of strength (e.g. the importance of the influencing group to the individual), immediacy (e.g. physical and/or temporal proximity of the influencing group to the individual at the time of the influence attempt) and number (e.g. the number of people in the group). You should bear all three in mind when strategizing on how to reach challenging stakeholders.

4: You should recognize how KOL networks evolve

A lot can change over the period a drug is marketed. So when we consider KOL networks we must do so in the knowledge that they are constantly evolving and could easily dissolve or change beyond recognition in a very short time, as indeed can the requirements for a pharmaceutical company and its products. So what does this mean for industry? First that fairly consistent research is required to understand how the environment is changing. Traditionally, companies have hand-picked partners, spokespeople and product 'champions' at a time suited to them in a product's lifecycle — a very 'inside-out' approach. But now the thinking must be 'outside-in' too, i.e.

where do we sit in the environment as it stands today and what is the role of our product and company in that wider context?

Second, and rather paradoxically, it reinforces the need for some consistency in key relationships. It is impossible to foresee everything that's around the corner, but it is possible to find key relationship holders that link different networks together. These are the relationships that really matter. When the environment changes, these are the stakeholders who can help you to segue into the KOL network you need to be in, rather than starting the relationship building process from scratch.

5: You should mirror KOL networks internally

Of course it is one thing to know KOL networks and completely another to do anything about them. KOL networks may go across several functions and departments within pharmaceutical companies. Even though dedicated teams may exist within companies for the most important KOLs (e.g. for physicians, hospitals and payers), those departments often work in isolation. As a consequence, these KOL groups are often targeted and managed separately.



Pharmaceutical companies should consider what business model will work best to manage KOL networks. At the very least, real cross-functional working is required. The ideal situation may be a network of dedicated managers who are assigned to KOL networks at the global, regional and national levels.

Most importantly internal communications should be constant and transparent. Remember, staff at all levels and in all functions will probably, at some point, communicate directly with KOL networks. It is important they can accurately represent the company while doing so.

Conclusions

The pharmaceutical industry should not be limited to supplying drugs and information; companies should play a central role as network facilitators and contributors. Understanding and initiating KOL network management initiatives will take them a step closer to fulfilling this role.

KOL networks represent a relatively untapped resource for the pharmaceutical industry and as a result present a great opportunity. With a change in mindset, companies can start to focus on KOL networks instead

of seeing all stakeholders as distinct individuals.

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