

# 10 Best Practices Pharma Should Follow When Engaging In Social Media

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## Overview

Engaging in social media activities is a challenging endeavor for any organization. Social media in the pharmaceutical industry, however, can be significantly more complex than other industries due to the added communication restrictions imposed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Division of Drug Marketing, Advertising and Communications (DDMAC). For pharma companies to participate, they are required to have an advanced understanding of social media, the tools that are available, the limitations placed on their content and how to control the message that is shared by end users.

As a result, any professional challenged with implementing a social media initiative in the pharma space might be tempted to run for the hills rather than risk communicating in an improper manner and suffering the wrath of a warning letter from the FDA. Although social media in pharma may be challenging it's not impossible, and it's certainly not advisable to ignore it as a communication channel where you can connect with customers and key thought leaders.

Follow these 10 social media best practices and in no time you'll be on your way to tweeting, friending and sharing in a way that allows you to contribute to social sites, while meeting the regulations of the FDA.

## 10 Social Media Best Practices for Pharma

**1. Establish Objectives.** Social media offers a lot of opportunities, and it's tempting to try to engage every channel all at once. Unfortunately, most organizations have limited budget and resources, so trying to manage conversations across too many channels can spread your efforts too thin, and the quality of the conversation suffers. Before selecting the appropriate social media channel, be sure to clearly define objectives that have measurable results. These objectives can be as simple as "monitor the channel for opportunities for dialogue and respond within 24 hours" or "identify opportunities to impact positive and negative sentiment by educating the community about our customer service options." Start small and keep revisiting the objectives you have defined to determine whether they have been met or are still in progress.

**2. Learn to Listen.** Online conversations are no different from face-to-face ones. Each requires that the participants both speak *and* listen. Social monitoring tools like Radian6 and Spiral16 can provide you with the ability to monitor conversations about your brand, determine the influence of those engaged in the dialogue, and respond appropriately. When someone does mention your brand or engages you directly, be sure to acknowledge that you have heard them, even if you aren't able to answer their question immediately.

Also, keep in mind that while monitoring tools are an important element to social listening, the human analysis of the conversations is just as critical. Monitoring tools can certainly help you understand the frequency of the conversation and locate where the dialogue is occurring, however they haven't evolved enough to provide an accurate assessment of the sentiment of the conversation. Complex speech patterns such as slang, jargon and sarcasm are beyond the capabilities of most existing tools and require human analysis. Simple terms, like the following, demonstrate situations where a listening tool might not understand the sentiment of the statements:

- [Drugname] is helping me manage my migraines better. NOT!
- [Drugname] seems to be making my symptoms better, but I'm not sure if it's the drug or the fact that I'm sleeping better.
- I feel terrible today, but at least my [Drugname] is helping my [condition].

**3. Understand How Social Media Tools Work.** The first step toward successfully engaging in social media is to take time to research the available tools and understand how they are used. Tools like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn have their own differing features so failing to understand how they work may spell doom for your social media activities.

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For instance, while YouTube and Facebook offer users the ability to add comments to a video or post, it's important to

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analyze whether comments added by end users could put your content in jeopardy of violating FDA regulations. For each social site where you intend to participate, it's critical that you understand how content is added, whether it can be pre-moderated, and what situations might cause you to violate FDA restrictions. Knowing the functionality of each site where you intend to participate will help you anticipate potential problems and avoid compliance issues.

**4. Don't Treat Social Media Initiatives Like Marketing Campaigns.** Campaigns have a start and an end, and when they are over, you move on to the next campaign. Engaging in social media, on the other hand, means building long-term relationships with your customers and industry influencers. You can, of course, still have social media campaigns within your overall strategy, but your primary focus should be on building long-term relationships and engaging in ongoing conversations. By viewing social media as a long-term investment in your customers, your chances for success increase.

**5. Find Your Audience.** Social media is growing beyond its infancy, and there are a lot of different sites where you can engage your target audience. Before starting your social media initiative, however, you'll need to determine which of the various sites your target audience is using. In addition, before jumping into the middle of a conversation, be sure you also understand the rules of engagement on the target sites and whether the community is open to dialogue with representatives from a pharmaceutical company. In those situations where a corporate presence isn't permitted, consider continuing to monitor the dialogue (if allowed). This will help you understand the sentiment around your brand and perhaps locate a different channel where your target audience also participates that might be more pharma-friendly.

**6. Know the Value of Your Content.** One of the biggest benefits of social media is the sharing of valuable information. Every day, millions of tweets, videos and status updates convey useful information by both educating and engaging users. When analyzing the existing content you want to share, keep in mind that boring print content will likely be boring digital content.

Take a look at your existing digital assets and determine the following:

- Is this content educating my audience?
- Is this content engaging my audience?
- Would my audience find this content interesting enough to share with others?

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Also, keep in mind that "one and done" does not work for social media. Your audience is going to expect new content on an ongoing basis, so be prepared to continually develop content that is of use to your community. The content can be in the form of engaging conversation, research materials or white papers, instructional videos, or dialogues with industry thought leaders.

**7. Know the Limitations and Regulations.** Although the FDA hasn't provided specific direction on the use of social media in the pharmaceutical industry, they have provided direction on the use of digital communications in the pharma space. Just as with any e-mail communication, website or online advertising campaign, your social media presence must follow the restrictions applied to product promotion. In some cases, you might find that a particular social media site might not offer you the capabilities to meet these requirements (e.g., including important safety information with every mention of a black box drug). In the interest of precaution, it might be best to forgo participating on these channels and look to utilize other spaces that offer more control for branded promotion.

**8. Define Workflows and Transition/Exit Strategies.** While your social media initiative shouldn't be treated like a traditional marketing campaign, there are strategic similarities between the two. As mentioned previously, knowing the rules of engagement for the social sites and understanding the limitations placed on communications by the FDA are key initial activities. In the course of defining your strategy, you should take time to develop thorough

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communication workflows that analyze each message directed at your brand and define the steps to provide an appropriate response. Additionally, you'll want to develop a transition and exit strategy that clearly defines how to best communicate your brand's changes to the community members. By communicating early with your audience about upcoming changes, you'll provide them with enough time to adjust their social media activities, and you'll avoid the backlash that can sometimes occur if your activities cease suddenly without warning.

**9. Act Like a Human, Not a Faceless Corporation.** Social media is about people connecting with people. It's about sharing information and making connections. It's about building a network of people who share resources around common topics of interest. Your audience is looking to you to be a resource for them, so share like a human being would share by having a common voice and responding to requests for information. While corporate press releases might be good for your website, they won't work in the world of social

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media. Instead, interact with your audience on a one-on-one basis and share content that will have meaning to them. Don't just announce the corporate news.

**10. Dedicate Time and Resources.** Contrary to popular belief, social media is not free. Social sites may not charge to create an account on their site and post content, but the investment in time it takes to succeed in social media can be significant. A successful social initiative can require copywriters, community managers, business analysts and regulatory personnel so be sure to understand the investment required and allocate the appropriate resources.

## Conclusion

Engaging in pharma conversations via social media does require a bit more planning than would be required by other industries. The good news is that by following the rules set forth by the FDA and the best practices established above, it is possible to create and manage a successful social media initiative and benefit from building one-on-one relationships with your customers and industry thought leaders.

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