10 ways...
to activate
digital opinion
leaders

A practical guide by Daniel Ghinn

Research indicates that a tipping point has been reached for healthcare professionals (HCPs) using public social media channels to discuss clinical and practice matters with their peers.
No longer satisfied with operating solely in closed doctors’ networks online, professionals are now able to learn from a far wider range of international experts by using mainstream channels like Twitter, public forums and doctors’ blogs. The most influential of these HCPs have become what we call ‘Digital Opinion Leaders’.
This presents a new opportunity for pharmaceutical companies: as new insights emerge into the digital behaviour of HCPs, new engagement strategies and tactics will emerge that have not previously been conceived.
Technologies like Creation Pinpoint, which accurately identify HCPs who are influential among their peers in public social media environments, equip pharma to connect with their customers in a more effective manner than ever before.
As with all market research, new insights are only useful if they can be acted upon. The purpose of this guide is to provide you with some ideas about how your engagement strategies may evolve when you discover the Digital Opinion Leaders who are influencing other HCPs in the areas of most interest to you.
1. IDENTIFY EXISTING DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS

Digital Opinion Leaders may be defined broadly as internet users who are seen by their peers as leaders and whose opinion influences the views and actions of others.

In a healthcare context, Digital Opinion Leaders may include patients living with a chronic disease who encourage or advise others via a blog, online network or social media channel. But of special interest to pharmaceutical professionals is the HCP who is actively engaged in social media channels, influencing his or her peers.

Anne-Marie Cunningham is a UK GP and clinical lecturer at Cardiff University in Wales. On her blog she advocates the use of social media for learning and sharing among peers. She actively engages other HCPs via Twitter and encourages her students to develop their own social media experience too.

Dr Cunningham is one of a growing number of HCPs worldwide who actively share experiences in public social media environments to learn from their peers. The BMJ’s ‘doc2doc’ open forum includes lengthy conversations among HCPs from all over the world discussing individual patient cases, treatment options and new drugs.

Figure 1 (below) charts a conversation taking place over four days between HCPs from around the world about a single patient case.

A clinical question asked about a patient by a specialist in the UK resulted in responses from Primary Care and specialist physicians based in New Zealand, India and the UK.

Over the past two years, several global doctors’ Twitter ‘chats’ have developed, providing a mechanism for doctors to discuss professional ideas with peers from around the world. In 2011, Dr Ryan Madanick, a gastroenterologist at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, collaborated with Dr Cunningham in the UK to launch regional weekly Twitter chats for doctors, labelled #meded.

During 2012, the public chat included over 4,600 peers and other stakeholders from over 90 countries.

For pharmaceutical marketers, the most interesting development is the emergence of technology that enables the identification of individual Digital Opinion Leaders in what is otherwise a crowded, noisy social media environment. Previously, attempts by researchers to isolate activity among HCPs was constrained to the use of clinical terms in social media or search analysis tools. This approach was limited however, since patients increasingly use clinical terms themselves online when searching for disease information.

With new technology it is now possible to identify named HCPs discussing a particular therapy area or treatment, to pinpoint their location and to discover the role they play in influencing others.

2. ENGAGE DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS ONLINE – USE CHANNELS THEY ARE FAMILIAR WITH

When Roche Diabetes Care wanted to build rapport with an online community of patients living with diabetes, they started by listening and then engaging online via established social media networks.

According to Rob Müller, associate marketing manager at Roche Diabetes Care, the company used a transparent engagement tactic to build trust among the online community.

“We let everybody know we were there; we went in and told everybody: ‘Hi, I’m Rob, I’m with Roche, I’m here to answer any questions you have’,” says Müller.

Roche’s openness paid off when it hosted a series of annual summits to bring together diabetes bloggers. As trust grew among the digital community, a warmth of relationship also developed.

“When this was the third Roche Summit I’ve attended, I sort of wanted to hug the Roche people,” wrote one diabetes blogger after attending a Roche Blogger Summit.

The same opportunity exists for pharma companies to engage other Digital Opinion Leaders online, using channels where they are already comfortable engaging. There...
are many public social media environments where doctors are actively discussing topics that pharma companies could contribute to in a positive way, building relationships and trust.

A simple starting point would be to ‘listen in’ to a doctors’ public Twitter chat such as the #meded conversation (simply view the latest #meded tweets by visiting http://bit.ly/mededchat). From there it is a small step to taking part, if you already have a Twitter profile. Remain transparent and collaborative, and you could develop a trusted online relationship upon which to build further engagement.

Since every pharma company has reached a different stage in its comfort levels with social media, I would advise that you check your company’s guidelines for staff using Twitter before conducting any direct engagement online.

Twitter is just one channel you might use to engage Digital Opinion Leaders online. An increasing number of doctors are active in other channels including LinkedIn, Facebook and Google+, so these can also make good platforms to explore.

Consider the role of doctors’ blogs too, as channels where you can learn about the views of HCPs or actively engage by adding your own comments.

Finally, open doctors’ forums such as the BMJ’s doc2doc forum provide access to a wealth of dialogue between HCPs covering topics including treatment, patient cases and practice matters.

3. ENGAGE DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS USING TRADITIONAL CHANNELS

There are many circumstances when engaging a Digital Opinion Leader online might not be the most effective approach. Perhaps the idea of open dialogue online sounds like a step too far in the industry’s challenging regulatory environment. Or perhaps your own company’s current policies would make such engagement too restrictive.

Sometimes it is simply not appropriate to discuss content with an HCP in a public social media environment. This is where, having identified the Digital Opinion Leaders you wish to engage, traditional tactics including reaching out through a sales rep or medical science liaison (MSL) may be the most effective approach.

Knowing the views and digital behaviours of individual HCPs will put reps at a distinct advantage when it comes to knowing what the most useful topics of conversation should be when meeting a customer.

Offline engagement may be appropriate also if you discover that a particular HCP is sharing inaccurate information with another online, is being influenced by misinformation, or has concerns about efficacy of a product. In such a situation it would typically make good sense to take the conversation offline, away from public view, and to have a direct conversation with them to correct any misinformation.

Ultimately, insights gained by pinpointing and analysing Digital Opinion Leaders online have the potential to support the offline relationship with those individuals and to build positive online advocacy.

4. IDENTIFY POTENTIAL DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS WHO ARE CURRENTLY OFFLINE

I recently heard a specialist HCP say: “I’m not on Facebook because I’m too old.” While there are many senior HCPs using social media, it is true that the majority of digitally active doctors are younger than many traditional Key Opinion Leaders. There is therefore a temporary gap while the majority of digitally active HCPs gain professional experience and become Key Opinion Leaders, and while those more senior – many of whom are slower to embrace digital innovation – gain the digital skills to start collaborating with their peers online.

That is not to say that there is reluctance among most senior HCPs to embrace digital channels. While training groups of healthcare experts in social media skills, I have found there is a growing interest in how to use digital channels to share ideas, learn, or promote clinical studies.

5. GIVE DIGITAL SKILLS TO TRADITIONAL KEY OPINION LEADERS

The opportunity for pharma companies is therefore to support Key Opinion Leaders in becoming influential online by equipping them with skills for digital engagement. Having identified HCPs who have potential and interest in developing their skills and becoming Digital Opinion Leaders, a digital skills programme may be provided either as a new module in your existing professional development programme, or via a range of channels including social media.

Equipping Key Opinion Leaders to engage more effectively with peers online will open up many additional opportunities to activate them. Some of these opportunities are outlined briefly in the steps that follow.

6. GIVE ENGAGEMENT TOOLS TO DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS

Having identified and engaged Digital Opinion Leaders or equipped traditional Key Opinion Leaders with digital skills, providing your own tools for digital engagement can strengthen the role of key influencers among targeted peers.

Examples of digital engagement tools you might provide include a dedicated, closed digital platform for sharing expertise. Such an environment may be deployed as a website or mobile application, where invited specialists log in to access secure content. Closed platforms such as this can...
succeed with a relatively small number of HCPs focused on a specialist area.

Other digital engagement tools that may strengthen the role of a Digital Opinion Leader include hosting an online meeting, scheduling a secure online ‘chat’, or facilitating a closed discussion among peers.

7. GIVE UNIQUE HIGH-VALUE CONTENT TO DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS
Digital Opinion Leaders value unique content that they can share with peers and form an opinion on. Content may include insights from research into a particular therapy area or patient behaviour. For those Digital Opinion Leaders who are pioneers of new channels, insights into digital behaviours may stimulate further engagement.

The kind of content that you develop for your Digital Opinion Leaders to share will depend on what you know about their channel preferences. Those who are highly active on Twitter, for example, might prefer to link to existing content, while those who write blog posts might respond to stimulating content by writing and sharing a longer viewpoint.

8. CREATE GREAT DIGITAL ASSETS THAT DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS WANT TO SHARE
Among the social media channels used by Digital Opinion Leaders, some channels such as Twitter are frequently used to share links to other published content and assets. So in order to have content shared in this manner, it must first be published.

Publishing great digital assets such as video content, infographics, or relevant research articles makes it very easy for Digital Opinion Leaders to share them. Remember to let your Digital Opinion Leaders know about the assets you create, using whichever approach you know works best for each individual.

As well as sharing via their own social media channels, doctors may also choose to share useful digital content via the channels used by the hospitals or clinics where they practise (Figure 4). According to the Mayo Clinic Center for Social Media, 64 per cent of hospitals in the US have a corporate Twitter profile and 84 per cent actively use Facebook.

9. COLLABORATE WITH DIGITAL OPINION LEADERS
Collaborating with Digital Opinion Leaders ranges from jointly developed research, to co-ordinated digital profile-raising. You might for example support them by sharing some of their own assets or blog posts, or by taking part in their social media dialogue, even where this is not directly associated with your brand or therapy area.

This approach adds credibility to a relationship with a Digital Opinion Leader and ensures that exchanges are two-way, leading to greater trust, which increases the likelihood of long term loyalty.

10. CREATE DIGITAL ADVOCATES
One of the most powerful aspects of social media is the way that it connects people together into virtual communities and creates an environment that can be both collaborative and competitive at the same time. As an increasing number of HCPs embrace digital engagement, your Digital Opinion Leaders will have the potential to become leaders in the adoption of new channels, influencing their peers in this too.

By applying the concepts outlined here, Digital Opinion Leaders can therefore become your greatest allies as you identify, engage and activate new online advocates who influence not only online behaviour but the tangible, real-world actions of many of their peers.

Author
Daniel Ghinn is CEO at Creation Healthcare, the global research and training consultancy dedicated to emerging channels of healthcare engagement and producer of Creation Pinpoint, the Digital Opinion Leader analysis tool.
He may be reached via Twitter: @EngagementStrat, email: daniel.ghinn@creationhealthcare.com or telephone: +44 207 849 3167