

# **MEDICAL AFFAIRS CHARLOTTE WRAY**

Originally published in *Communiqué* 14  
© PMGroup Worldwide 2009

# COMM

# UNIQUE



# Riding *the wave*

Can medical affairs professionals serve as the new sales reps in an online world? Changes in market dynamics have provided the perfect opportunity for pharma to ride the Web 2.0 wave

**T**en years ago, who would have thought that we would be buying CDs in Starbucks, our favorite, on-every-corner coffee house? Today's and tomorrow's commerce has become all about selling less of more. In traditional commerce, demand

has always been dictated by high-volume, high-hit sales opportunities; but with the transformation and proliferation of alternative sales channels, one key provider being the internet, consumers are provided with limitless choices of where and how they

can access information and buy from an abundance of options to which they were never before exposed.

The internet has made everything in the world available to everyone. This can mean the combined value of modest-selling

products can equal the same value as the highest selling single product, which of course means huge opportunities now exist for new interactions with the sale of goods and services, as our target audiences are fragmented into thousands of different places, many of them on the web.

This phenomenon, coined 'the long tail' by editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, Chris Anderson, has resulted in major opportunities for the interaction between pharma and its key stakeholders – physicians. And it has arrived just in time.

Pharma and biotech companies are scaling down their manpower in the sales field and traditional one-on-one selling strategies to explore new, multi-dimensional approaches that can prove to be more efficient and effective, and in an over-crowded marketplace, sell less of more.

This tool creates market dynamics that have provided the perfect opportunity for pharma to ride the Web 2.0 wave, whereby the internet is used as a communications platform. Opportunities now exist where healthcare companies can have direct interactions with physicians to better understand and meet their needs. In these social media or networking settings, physicians who have been without peer interaction since their days as medical residents can now find their colleagues in conversational forums to ask and answer clinical questions of each other (eg, drug usage, difficult diagnoses).

However, these interactions can only be of real, objective value if they are conducted in closed peer-to-peer settings where pure scientific and medical consensus can be built around emerging trends, where the wisdom of the crowds can prevail and community-level interactions among physicians can feel like real-life shared clinical experiences among those in the trenches who are actually treating patients on a regular basis.

### Dynamic conversation

There's certainly no shortage of online content available for physicians, from passive interaction sites including the professional societies like the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) to Medscape to the passive and active interactivity of Physicians Interactive, QuantiaMD and Epocrates. There is, however, one online destination that is unique in its category of 'active interaction', the social-networking site Sermo.

Sermo, which means 'conversation' in Latin, is the largest online physician community in the US, with nearly 100,000 qualified physician members. Within Sermo, a nascent set of physician players interacts in a dynamic environment, generating its own content and

peer-review process; and the content isn't limited to improving clinical outcomes, it has been known to be passionate and vocal about a few dominant agendas and causes, particularly healthcare reform.

So why has the creation of this community attracted physicians in droves? Says Daniel Palestrant, MD, founder and CEO of Sermo: "Clearly the opportunities are boundless. While the healthcare business sector is rapidly changing the way it sells drugs, devices and diagnostics to physicians, Sermo has managed to tap into an isolation that physicians feel from their colleagues' thinking and knowledge.

"We are trained that collaborative thinking helps to innovate, improve and solve problems; most of us haven't had that opportunity since we were residents... Our goal at Sermo has been to reconnect those physicians and create a two-sided marketplace where manufacturers can also tap into the insights of thousands of physicians and specialists in 65 therapeutic areas."

### No pushing

The key for pharma companies to understand in these settings is that the physicians are willing to engage with pharma, but on their own schedule. They are no longer interested in 'push' information coming from traditional sales channels. They want 'on-demand' information, and they recognize the role and value of pharma in providing it.

There are also perceived time efficiencies for the physicians who interact "at will"; recent research has shown that over 13 percent of US-based physicians are now choosing to interact with online communities over the traditional pharmaceutical sales interaction.

"It's not so much that it's 'trendy,'" says Palestrant. "MDs won't waste their time or reputations here unless it's a valuable exchange. It's more about the trust that the physicians have in the environment and their colleagues."

The Sermo model authenticates all members of the community and, once in the system, opinions and interactions are ranked by the crowd, driving a model of MD ownership, accountability and participation which results in hearing the voice of the physician community as a whole.

Launched in September 2006, Sermo is gaining, on average, an additional 2,000 to 3,000 US licensed physicians per week. On Sermo, physicians connect with physicians in a whole new way.

Pharma companies are also discovering new and innovative ways to connect with physicians, leveraging this channel as part of their multidimensional professional

interactions. From scientific exchange to promotion (within labelling guidelines) on demand, if the Sermo community demands it, companies now have the opportunity to deliver responses from industry medical representatives.

Through Sermo, medical affairs professionals from pharma companies can have direct interactions with other physicians in the community. "We badge or label the MD entering Sermo from a pharma company and present him or her in an entirely transparent way," says Palestrant.

"The network effect of the community will allow the industry physician to interact with other physicians and provide them with the medical and scientific explanations they may require. The difference with these physicians is that they are required to wear a 'badge' explaining what they can and cannot talk about. So if there's an interaction, much like the interaction with a sales representative, it's all within promotional guidelines."

### A new pace and tone

For physicians from both sides of the fence, an online community provides the chance to have share of voice in peer-to-peer interactions, and this level of influence is large – potentially larger than a traditional detail.

As more physicians participate in online communities, this will become an important channel for these kinds of interactions.

With thousands of physicians joining every week, there are huge opportunities for pharma to leverage this channel to increase reach (eg, getting to 'no sees' indirectly through their peers) and frequency (eg, engaging physicians beyond the hours of nine to five) and, most importantly, to improve perception of pharma by being a valuable member of the community.

There is, however, a faster cycle for response that is required. The 24/7 activity and immediacy of this channel shortens the length of interactions from weeks to hours, and this turnaround time can be challenging for some organizations. However, if utilized effectively and fearlessly, there is a huge upside for pharma in being able to "talk with" its customers rather than "talk to" them and to use a more learned and personal tone through their authorized medical affairs voice, rather than the traditional and "predictable" corporate tone.

 find more practical advice online at [www.communiquelive.com/features](http://www.communiquelive.com/features)

 the author  
**Charlotte Wray**  
president, Medical Dynamics