
BUILDING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

How to Engage and Collaborate with KOLs and DOLs in the Digital Space



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How people consume information—including medical and scientific information—has changed dramatically in recent years. The transformation further accelerated with the global COVID-19 pandemic, which moved many communities toward greater digital engagement, across a wider array of channels, with more conversational immediacy, than ever before.

This shift has profound implications for the ways that medical affairs teams should approach communicating relevant and accurate information to healthcare provider (HCP) audiences. Of course, the role of medical affairs is fundamentally educational. But because growing numbers of key participants in scientific exchange—including HCPs, academic researchers and leading scientists—are spending more time engaging, communicating and learning from one another online, it's increasingly important for medical affairs to monitor digital channels to keep up with the conversations. The insights that can be gained are invaluable because they can help medical affairs build and deepen critical relationships.

Many aspects of these relationships are evolving—whom medical affairs teams should engage is different from even a few short years ago, but so is how medical affairs should go about establishing the relationships, fostering trust and creating mutually beneficial opportunities to collaborate. What's more, all of these responsibilities are complicated by a crowded and noisy digital space, making it harder to figure out what's truly relevant.

“The explosive growth in the number of digital channels has changed the requisite skill sets that medical affairs professionals need to keep pace with these communications,” says Robert Matheis, president and chief executive officer of the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP). “It has also opened up a new world of communication possibilities.”

Today, increasing numbers of medical affairs professionals and medical science liaisons are turning to social monitoring tools to help them navigate this new world. With access to a modern social monitoring or digital listening platform, medical affairs can easily see who the most relevant experts are in their field (particularly in terms of digital reach) and what these experts are thinking about and discussing. The tools will enable them to quickly identify conversational trends and patterns, so that they can engage the right experts on the right topics at the right time. This can further their reach while enriching their most important relationships.

This playbook will help medical affairs professionals—especially those making use of digital listening platforms—develop more effective strategies to identify, engage and collaborate with key opinion leaders (KOLs) and digital opinion leaders (DOLs) in today’s digitally enabled world.

Top Three Reasons Medical Affairs Teams Should Engage in Digital Listening:

- 1. Better understand KOLs and DOLs.** Medical affairs professionals will gain deeper insights into the opinions and mindsets of the most relevant experts in their fields. They can leverage these insights to foster deeper, broader engagement.
- 2. Stay current on KOLs’ and DOLs’ interests.** If you follow an expert’s publications, you’ll see what they were interested in a year ago. Listen to their presentations at medical congresses, and you’ll discover what they were thinking about a few months ago. Want to know what’s on their mind today? Check their blog, look at their Twitter feed or read other digital content they’re publishing.
- 3. Uncover insights that can inform medical communications strategy.** Is a particular therapeutic revolutionary because it depends on revising a standard disease definition? Does it require a new understanding of a disease’s mechanism of action? Social monitoring will help pharmaceutical stakeholders understand whether—and to what extent—the top doctors in the world agree with their thinking. Is the foundation of the scientific platform becoming more mainstream? Or does the company still have significantly more educational work to do? Such insights can and should determine medical affairs’ goals as well as the steps taken to reach them.

DISCOVERING DIGITAL INFLUENCERS:

How to Identify the Most Authoritative KOLs and DOLs in a Therapeutic Area

Medical affairs teams have traditionally engaged with KOLs who are influential in their field because they're actively conducting research, publishing their results and presenting their findings at conferences and medical congresses. Not all KOLs are producing their own digital content, but many are quoted in the media or by other digital content creators. It almost goes without saying that these conversations can help inform a medical communications strategy.

However, there's an additional group of experts medical affairs should consider listening to as well. These are DOLs. Like KOLs, they are credentialed medical experts who spend time discussing relevant science. Unlike KOLs, though, they usually don't rely on traditional

channels like publications and congress presentations to share their expertise. Instead, they have significant reach within the digital space. Typically, a large percentage of their followers (often approximately 25%) are other HCPs.

"Let's take the digital opinion leaders who are discussing diabetes as an example," says Scott Thompson, co-chief executive officer at Acceleration Point. "Of the 2,000 DOLs in this area that we're following, 873 contributed something to a discussion of diabetes in the past six months. There were 76,000 total contributions from these 873 people, and they reached a combined audience of 229 million. This audience tends to be well informed and highly engaged, and it's a deeply relevant one."



“Medical affairs is always striving to increase its impact and value, so we are always looking for ways to expand awareness of our scientific message,” explains Melanie Fulton, senior director of medical strategy and operations, Global Medical Affairs, at L-Arena Pharmaceuticals.

“Digital opinion leaders present a unique opportunity for medical affairs to ensure that accurate and meaningful scientific data is being disseminated across multiple digital channels. While DOLs do not typically have the same amount of experience with publications and presentations as KOLs, they are highly influential and are willing to partner with KOLs to share scientific content and provide medical education to a broad range of stakeholders. Many HCPs turn to DOLs for their guidance and expertise, and often evolve within the digital arena.”

In addition, some KOLs have built the same significant influence in the digital space as digital opinion leaders, making them both KOLs and DOLs. Experts in this group may be actively engaged in managing digital content for professional societies or research institutions, or they may have deliberately cultivated their digital presence because they’ve realized that there’s value in doing so. As scientific exchange continues to move online, it’s likely that more KOLs will become members of this emerging hybrid group.

IDENTIFYING DOLS: THE 3 RS

Medical affairs teams will want to look for digital opinion leaders who have the following three traits:

Relevance:

Is the DOL generating or disseminating content that’s important to their organization and its medical strategy?

Reach:

How many people are likely to see the content that’s posted by this DOL? Sheer number of followers is less important than how many of these followers are HCPs, and how deeply engaged they tend to be with the DOL’s content.

Role:

Is this person a credentialed HCP—such as an MD, NP or PA? Some medical affairs teams also look for patients, caregivers and advocates—whatever best aligns with their medical strategy.



KOLs, DOLs and digital KOLs are the relevant contributors medical affairs should be listening to. Still, not everything these experts publish on their blogs or post to Twitter is relevant for purposes of scientific exchange, and not all scientific content is relevant to an individual pharmaceutical company's therapeutic areas. The next challenge is sorting through the enormous amount of information that's posted to the internet every day to determine what's actually important.

A digital listening tool can enable medical affairs to overcome these challenges. Having so much diverse content, published so frequently, means that no one can possibly read it all. With millions of scientific contributions made every day in billions of posts, it can be difficult to figure out where to start. Plus, the number of places to look for potentially valuable information is enormous. Not only are relevant discussions filling Twitter feeds, but they're also taking place on Facebook forums, in the comments section of blogs, on both industry and consumer news sites, in third-party publications and in a plethora of other social and conventional media channels.

These challenges are compounded by the fact that some of the most influential experts post very little of their own content on channels that they own. Instead, their voices may be amplified because they're frequently quoted by other experts in the media or because research institutions or professional societies post their content for them. An example of this sort of expert is [Dr. Emma Guttman-Yassky](#), a professor of dermatology, medicine and clinical immunology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. Dr. Guttman-Yassky is extremely influential on YouTube even though she doesn't have her own channel and doesn't post her own content. Her videos, posted on her behalf by Mount Sinai Hospital and the National Eczema Association, on topics like atopic dermatitis and eczema, generate thousands of views on the platform.

A social listening tool based on best practices will be able to filter this enormous volume of information to find the most relevant scientific content. It can consider an array of sources so broad that it spans the entire internet. And it should be able to track individual profiles and provide updates at least daily. A tool that leverages artificial intelligence to discern contextual clues in scientific conversation will be better able to tell what's truly relevant than a tool that simply searches for text strings.



It's hard to separate the signal from the noise in the digital space because content is published with so much:

Volume

The millions or billions of contributions published every day

Variety

How different a long-form blog article is from a tweet, which, in turn, is radically different from a video or podcast, etc.

Velocity

Content is being produced and shared on an ongoing basis, at a pace that's nearly impossible to keep up with manually

ENGAGING IN THE DIGITAL SPACE:

Building Relationships with KOLs and DOLs

Digital listening can show medical affairs what KOLs and DOLs are thinking about the most relevant scientific topics. But extracting the most value from this information also requires understanding how best to leverage it.

“The biggest mistake we see medical affairs teams making when they start listening is that they forget to go through all the steps that you need to go through to build a relationship with any opinion leader,” says Thompson. “While social listening can help you better understand the expert’s point of view and identify additional opportunities to engage, it doesn’t make it a good idea to short-circuit the process of relationship-building that needs to take place with every KOL.”

What to listen for:

Which information will be most relevant? What’s most likely to add value in a relationship with the DOL/KOL?

Social listening can help with this. Monitor for:

- Product mentions
- Mentions of competitors’ products
- News of attendance at a recent or upcoming medical congress
- Presentations or delivery of medical education programs
- Involvement in a clinical trial
- Published thoughts on a relevant scientific topic
- Collaboration with another expert
- Awards or recognitions

Within these sources, what kinds of insights might medical affairs discover? Opinion leaders could, for instance, be talking about:

- The fact that they’ve identified an unmet medical need
- Their understanding of a product’s mechanism of action
- Their beliefs about or clinical experiences of a product’s efficacy
- Their reaction to a study’s results
- Their opinion of a study’s design



Every relationship with an opinion leader—whether an established KOL or an emerging DOL—should begin with a formal introduction. This is often the responsibility of the medical science liaison.

The next stage in the relationship involves providing value through scientific exchange. Medical affairs can share approved materials such as recent publications, newly released data or educational materials about disease state. In every case, the purpose is an unbiased information exchange, with the goal of sharing key data or scientific

insights and listening, on a peer-to-peer level, to the expert’s perspective on that information.

Finally, once the relationship has been established, medical affairs can begin to bring insights from the KOLs and DOLs whom they’re engaging back into their organization. This can take the form of standard engagements, like asking the KOL or DOL to serve on an advisory board, consult on the creation of materials or speak within a medical education program.

LEVERAGING INSIGHTS:

When to use insights gleaned from digital listening within KOL and DOL relationships

Getting ready for engagement with a KOL. Understanding what opinion leaders are saying, reading and thinking will make it easier to open a conversation, keep it going and ensure a mutually beneficial exchange of relevant information. For instance, if an HCP has questions about product efficacy, medical affairs can prepare for an upcoming meeting by collecting relevant data that will make it easier to answer them.

Seeking out new opportunities to engage. Medical affairs might, for example, see that an important KOL is planning to speak at an upcoming symposium. This can serve as a reason to reach out to them, and it opens the possibility of expanding the conversation.

Gather insights to guide medical strategy. With a broad overview of insights from a large number of key contributors in the field, medical affairs can readily answer questions about trends and patterns in their conversations. What diseases and treatments are experts talking about? How often are these subjects being discussed? How recent are the conversations? Where do experts tend to agree, and where do they disagree?



AMPLIFY YOUR SCIENTIFIC MESSAGE:

Collaborating with KOLs and DOLs in the Digital Space

While digital listening can help medical affairs build mutually beneficial relationships with KOLs and DOLs today, the digital content creation and publishing ecosystem also provides new opportunities for furthering those relationships. Together with KOLs and DOLs, medical affairs teams can contribute content within the digital space that will broaden awareness of the scientific platform.

These new types of contracted and non-contracted engagements bring many benefits for HCPs and medical affairs professionals alike. They enable organizations to reach an exponentially larger audience than they would be able to reach if they were speaking solely on behalf of their company. They allow for immediate message delivery at much lower costs than traditional publications or events. And the results are measurable—it's possible to gain deep and comprehensive insights into how audiences receive a message.

Plus, the communications are non-intrusive. Digital media reach HCP audiences when, where and how they prefer to consume content. That can make them much more receptive to educational messages.

And digital channels lend themselves well to conveying information in ways that are easy to understand.

“Perhaps one of the biggest benefits of digital channels is that they provide the opportunity to translate complex medical information into digestible content,” Matheis says. “This is information that can readily be put to use by HCPs.”

One example of this sort of innovative collaboration is the [four-part podcast](#) series that Janssen Pharmaceuticals created with Dr. Pernessa Seele. Dr. Seele is president and CEO of Balm in Gilead, a nonprofit organization dedicated to building sustainable, integrated systems of public health and faith to improve health outcomes and eliminate health disparities. The podcast series discussed mental health and wellness among African-American adults and promoted Janssen's [Choices in Recovery](#) website providing resources for adults living with schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder. Information about the podcast series was shared more than 800 times on Twitter, and the podcasts received nearly 300 SoundCloud downloads.

Another example is Novartis' ongoing collaboration with the [Sickle Cell Disease Association of America \(SCDAA\)](#). Novartis partnered with this patient advocacy and research foundation to create a worldwide patient story project for World Sickle Cell Awareness Day. The project, "[The Untold Stories of Sickle Cell Disease](#)," offers an intimate perspective on the lives of people touched by sickle cell disease, explaining how it impacts their lives and how they work to overcome it. Through this collaboration, Novartis was able to share a powerful message with the disease association's large global audience. Novartis hosted a Facebook Live event with SCDAA that generated more than 3,500 responses on Facebook, with over 400 attendees. The presentation video subsequently received nearly 9,000 views on YouTube.

In yet another example, Pfizer has teamed up with multiple attendees at major medical and scientific congresses around the world. These experts were invited to tweet their responses to announcements and presentations during the congresses. Their tweets, published on the Pfizer at Congress (@PfizerCongress) Twitter account, have had more than 1.3 million views since the account was created in 2017. Over the past two years, individual tweets from @PfizerCongress have been mentioned by HCPs as many as 28,000 times each.

These three examples barely scratch the surface. When it comes to collaboration with KOLs and DOLs, the possibilities for digital engagement, reach and information sharing with HCPs are nearly endless. Boundless, too, are the possibilities for positively impacting the lives and health of patients.

DIGITAL COLLABORATION OPPORTUNITIES
Here are just a few of the digital content types that KOLs and DOLs can create in collaboration with pharmaceutical companies:

- Podcasts (owned or sponsored)
- Live-streaming events
- Webinars
- Videos
- Bylined articles that you've written together
- Social media content that can reach large third-party networks of digital followers
- Livestreaming the opinion leader's response or reaction to medical congress activities



CONCLUSION

Medical affairs will continue to be responsible for reaching and engaging HCP audiences in the digital space for the foreseeable future. In fact, as reliance upon digital platforms continues to grow, it's likely that more and more scientific exchange will take place online. As a result, it's increasingly imperative that medical affairs leverage effective tools that can help them surface and understand the most valuable and relevant digital content quickly and easily. It's the only way they'll be able to distinguish the most important ideas published by KOLs and DOLs from the otherwise overwhelming hubbub of social media chatter.

Tools like Acceleration Point's [Kwello](#) Digital Listening, Insights & Analytics and KOL Engagement Planning platform give medical affairs professionals a powerful advantage in the battle to separate the signal from the noise. Such solutions make it far easier to determine which experts should be prioritized for engagement, which topics—of strategic and scientific value—should be discussed during engagements, and what trends are most important in your therapeutic area. In today's world, these insights are of enormous benefit. In tomorrow's, they'll be indispensable.



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Acceleration Point helps Medical Affairs teams execute their medical strategies through better processes, simple-to-use tools, and actionable data. Headquartered in Virginia, USA, and with offices in London, Acceleration Point provides strategies for global KOL engagement, insight generation, operational excellence, and now an even stronger approach to KOL social monitoring. For more information visit www.accelerationpoint.com. Follow us on [Twitter](#), or [LinkedIn](#).

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