



Health Activists to FDA: Let Companies into Social Media, Require Them to Follow Updated Regulations

WEGO Health survey finds health social media's most active consumers value pharmaceutical and medical device company participation, but demand online vigilance of safety and misinformation.

BOSTON – November 10, 2009 – In advance of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)'s November 12 and 13 hearings on Health Care Companies' use of the Internet and social media tools, WEGO Health Activists – social media power users involved daily in multiple online health communities – spoke out on the power of health social media, and the valuable role of transparent company participation.

“WEGO Health Activists told us that social media is an important tool for health communication, and pharmaceutical and device company participation provides value to the community,” said Jack Barrette, CEO of WEGO Health, “but our community of consumer opinion leaders also feels Health Care Companies have an obligation to correct misinformation about their products, and to follow regulations.

They acknowledge regulation of Health Care Companies in social media is challenging, and look to the FDA to tailor regulations to the practical realities of social media.”

The Value of Health Social Media

In an online survey of 162 Health Activists conducted by [WEGO Health](#) in October 2009, over 74% of Health Activists saw online webinars, discussion groups, and specialized health social networks as very or extremely useful. **Over 79% agreed that Health Care Companies' use of social media tools provides their communities with important updates on products or services.**

“I kind of see (company participation) as a little biased, but I do like it when you have a forum going on - and actual drug facts; what it's used for, what the side effects are - when a company brings that into the picture, that's excellent,” commented David, a WEGO Health Activist who contributes daily to multiple health sites.

The Need for Regulation

A strong majority of online Health Activists support regulation of Companies' social media participation:

- 90% of Health Activists agreed Companies should monitor and correct misinformation when the information may be harmful to people using the product
- 73% called for regulation when bloggers are paid to create content
- 64% agreed Health Care Companies should be responsible for policing any unauthorized versions of their content
- 51% feel Health Care Companies should actively monitor online conversations to identify possible adverse (product safety) events

At the same time, **WEGO Health’s online leaders acknowledge the challenge of monitoring and engaging the ocean of ever-changing social media content; 60% agree Health Care Companies cannot reasonably keep up with the monitoring of all mentions of their content.**

“It’s paradoxical, really,” notes WEGO Health Activist Debra, “it’s a good thing if (companies) could do it, but I can’t imagine how they could be everywhere. It’s sort of unreasonable. I would tell them to hire people for that purpose. It’s important, it’s just important.”

New Regulations Required

The application of existing FDA regulations for fair balance presentation of risk information and detailed labeling requirements add to Companies’ challenges in the critical health social media world. WEGO Health Activists strongly supported new options to link FDA-required information “one click” from social media conversation:

- 72% agreed Companies should be required to make all regulatory-required information available one click away from their social media communications
- 71% agreed Companies participating in social media should include a link to their product website in every communication

Above all, Health Activists believe regulations need to be updated and realistic to allow open, productive conversation online. **74% agree regulation of Health Care Companies’ social media participation needs to be tailored to the unique attributes of the Internet and social media - 64% said open Internet and social media conversation between Health Care Companies and people online is valuable, and regulations should not prevent those open conversations.**

“It’s not like somebody has the upper hand, as it is in the case of TV advertising, where only companies with lots and lots of money get their voice heard on TV,” said WEGO Health Activist Megan, “people don’t have to have money and that kind of influence to become a voice that is listened to in social media and the online world.

Which means there are a lot more voices and things are going to get debated, which hasn’t been the case in the kinds of media that the FDA is used to.”

The Bottom Line

“Pharmaceutical and device companies have an obligation to consumers to bring accurate, credible information into the millions of health social media conversations going on every day,” Barrette noted, “while even the most active and passionate consumers welcome them, they want Companies and the FDA to define a set of real-world rules of engagement.”

More information about the survey is available at <http://www.wegohealth.com/socialmediasurvey>, or by emailing info@wegohealth.com.

Survey Methodology

The survey of Health Activists was taken by 162 members of Boston-based WEGO Health’s network of health social media power users. The maximum sampling error of this survey is +7.1 percentage points at the 96% level of confidence.

About WEGO Health

WEGO Health (www.wegohealth.com) is the first online home for consumer Health Activists, social media’s most active 10 percent, passionate about helping others lead healthier lives. Health Activists -- organizers, connectors, leaders and contributors -- meet at WEGO Health, then carry knowledge, content and relationships back to the health social web. In addition, WEGO Health’s Activist Social Network is the trusted community liaison to pharmaceutical and health marketers, who engage the Activist Social Network through innovative sponsorships, industry advisory panels, collaborative content development, widget distribution and more. Founded in 2007 and led by online health pioneers Jack Barrette and Bob Brooks, WEGO Health gives consumer health activists a voice to industry, and helps the world’s top health brands support, navigate, and participate in the evolving world of health social media.

For more information about the WEGO Health Activist audience and survey, please contact Gradon Tripp at gradont@wegohealth.com or 617-649-1507.