

# Pharma Tapping Into Social Networking Sites

BY ALICIA AULT

WASHINGTON — Pharmaceutical companies are turning to social networking to reach their customers—both physicians and patients—as it's become increasingly difficult to market using traditional approaches.

At a meeting sponsored by a Washington-based public relations company, Waggener Edstrom Worldwide, staffs from drug companies and public relations firms brainstormed on how to maximize opportunities presented by social-networking sites like Facebook and Twitter without running afoul of regulations.

The Food and Drug Administration has not determined where—and exactly how—social networking fits into its regulatory construct. Sanjay J. Koyani, director of FDA Web communications, said that the agency was using social networking tools to advance its own goals—for instance, with a Twitter page devoted to tweets (messages of 140 characters or fewer) about agency recalls—

but that it is still working out how it would regulate messages presented by pharmaceutical companies.

Even so, the FDA tends to apply current regulations to digital communications, according to an analysis by Waggener Edstrom. Companies are required to present a fair balance between benefit and risk, and may not promote off-label uses.

Mark Gaydos, a senior director of regulatory affairs at Sanofi-Aventis, said he is heading an informal task force of representatives from five drug makers seeking to create voluntary guidelines on the industry's use of social media. The companies have talked with the FDA Division of Drug Marketing, Advertising, and Communications about their efforts, Mr. Gaydos said.

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"We're trying to influence the environment [and] shape the policy in some way, because the guidelines aren't out there and it's really preventing a lot of companies from participating, so we're hoping we can move that along," he said.

Drug makers know that their customers are increasingly online, and that's where the drug makers need to be, too, said Mr. Gaydos, who pointed out that he expressed his own opinions, not those of Sanofi-Aventis. "The traditional massive sales force approach is really not doing the job anymore," he said.

Even if the industry figures out how to stay within the confines of eventual FDA rules, it will still face a balancing act when it taps into social media.

Promulgating announcements about

products—even approved therapies—through regular social media messages could end up just annoying recipients. And participating in patient-led chats or "friending" a Parkinson's disease patient group on Facebook, for example, could present perils. Drug makers don't want to be seen as predatory.

"A company has to tread lightly because [it doesn't] want to be perceived as using a social media venue as just another way to promote," Mr. Gaydos said.

Some drug makers—including Astra-Zeneca Pharmaceuticals LP, Boehringer Ingelheim GmbH, Novartis, and Vertex Pharmaceuticals Inc.—have begun using Twitter. Only Boehringer seems to be fairly active; even so, it sent only 33 updates via Twitter since last November.

Companies seem to be using Twitter primarily to follow others on the service, said Jenny Moede, who advises drug companies on digital media for Waggener Edstrom. That said, no one at the meeting expected drug makers to follow passively for too much longer. ■

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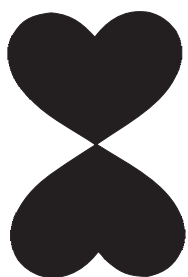
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