

# Healthcare leads the way

Pharma marketers can show their consumer peers a thing or two about opinion leaders

Marketing innovation has traditionally originated from the consumer model and subsequently transferred across into healthcare (eg, TV/direct-to-consumer and e-marketing). However, as increased levels of rep calls, mailings and advertising just cause more noise and confusion, the power of mass marketing is decreasing.

As the power drains away, the focus of marketing innovation shifts to an area familiar to healthcare marketers: opinion leadership.

At last, healthcare has a chance to lead the way. We have known the importance of opinion leaders for years but how, as marketers, have we approached the topic?

Which of the following scenarios best summarises our approach to date?

**Scenario 1:** Opinion leaders are the responsibility of the medical function with friction occurring over whether the investment will help achieve commercial goals. Opinion leader selection is a constant source of discussion and head-scratching, often with last minute changes.

**Scenario 2:** Opinion leadership is a top organisational priority. The area is driven by a long-term strategy, devised using the latest marketing science in order to understand who the brand needs and how best to interact with them.

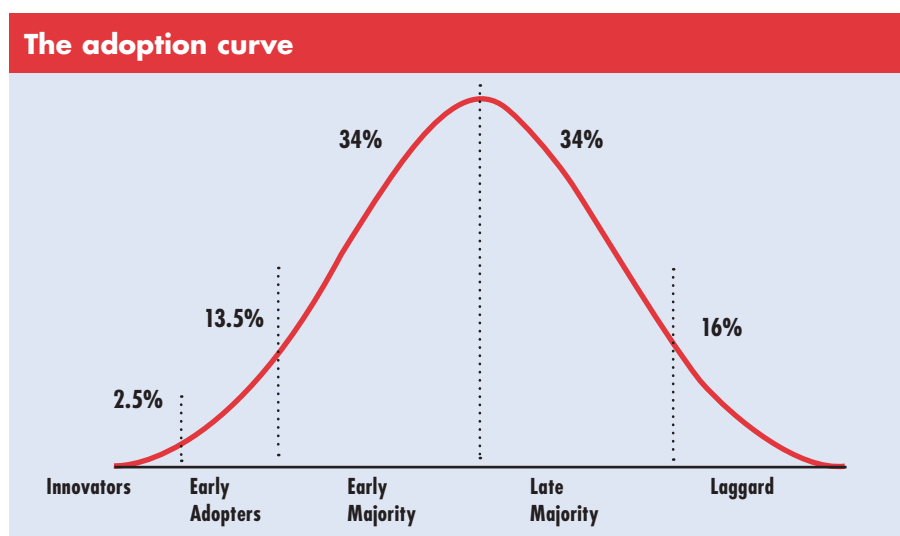
Just imagine the benefits of scenario 2:

- The commercial value of the opinion leadership programme is clear
- Each of your selected opinion leaders knows what they are doing with you over the next 12–24 months allowing you to develop longer term relationships
- The strategic intent of large and expensive medical events is clear, aiding early planning and boosting effectiveness
- Advisory boards with animated and interested opinion leaders help to drive and shape strategy development.

Sounds great doesn't it, but how do we get to this level of strategic opinion leader planning? To me an area where we need to become a lot more sophisticated in opinion leader identification: more specifically, we need to identify how they react to innovation and what (if any) special communication skills they have.

## Reaction to innovation

We all intuitively know that different opinion leaders are drawn to a product at



different stages of its life cycle. We have probably even experienced an opinion leader who's an enthusiastic supporter of a brand at pre-launch only to lose interest when it is launched.

This isn't the behaviour of a 'glory hunter', it's actually an indication of where they sit on the adoption curve. 'Innovators' embrace all things new and are driven by a motivation to be outstanding. However, once a product becomes mainstream it's no longer interesting to them.

Consumer marketers assume all opinion leaders are innovators, but in healthcare they can vary.

Moving from left to right along the adoption curve the level of conservatism and resistance to change increases. This means that approximately 85 per cent of our customers will be resistant to a new product and, therefore, will need to be actively persuaded by their peers to try something new.

Why? Because they are motivated by conforming to best medical practice, which a new product rarely achieves until later in its life cycle.

Understanding that these customers require more 'stick' than 'carrot' allows the appropriate tactics and opinion leaders to be chosen to overcome their resistance.

Guidelines are excellent for overcoming the concerns of conservative customers and achieving a 'tipping point' for the brand. In this instance, early adopters and early majority are the ideal opinion leaders as they can relate to their conservative colleagues, whereas the 'out-there' thinking of an innovator would simply scare them.

## Special communication skills

The communication skills of opinion leaders will also differ. Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point* explains why, and identifies individuals who have rare, special, communication skills. Gladwell categorises these special people as:

- **Persuaders:** natural salesmen who can convince a meeting of their point of view through their charisma and intellectual rigour – ideal for a symposium
- **Mavens:** opinion leaders who seem to know all the data in a given area and relish the opportunity to share this knowledge with others – great in advisory boards
- **Connectors:** those who seem to know everyone and enjoy putting people in touch with others – invaluable for guideline committees.

Not all opinion leaders will have these special skills, which does not mean they are of no use. Yet, identifying those with special communication skills allows you to maximise the impact of your chosen tactic and understand who you need to work with.

In healthcare, we have always known the importance of opinion leadership but have never applied the same strategic rigour to its management as we do to all other communication channels. There is a lot of new and exciting thinking coming through.

Now is the time for healthcare to be at the forefront of marketing innovation and show our consumer counterparts how it's done!

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