

This is Getting Personal

Why shifting opinion on digital means best practice omni-channel communication with rheumatologists is a lesson in listening

Executive summary

The fast-tracked lean into digital communication and conferencing technology to supplement the decrease in face-to-face contact during the COVID-19 pandemic has universally transformed how healthcare professionals (HCPs) seek information. However, new research conducted by Lumanity has uncovered important regional differences between the way rheumatologists envisage how pharma and sales reps can better deliver gold-standard engagement.

The comprehensive study of 350 rheumatologists across EU5 (France, Germany, Italy, Spain and UK) and the United States shows an evolution in outreach is needed as the pendulum swings towards mixed-channel, cross-market communications in today's post-pandemic landscape.

Geographic divide

Pre-pandemic, US-based HCPs were generally showing a growing preference for online communication versus the traditional sales rep model.

Progress in digital outreach – and high uptake of technology amongst clinicians – ensured even complex therapeutic advancements could be effectively explained online, freeing up time for clinical practice and administration. As the country moves away from COVID-19 restrictions, the data suggests this trend will continue, despite many other US industry sectors eschewing the likes of Zoom and getting back to increased in-person meetings.

That US rheumatologists continue to favor online medical journals and health and medical websites over face-to-face is likely because they are highly familiar with long-term digital channel use. Many advocate a best-of-both approach featuring a higher ratio of virtual to in-person engagement, with a preference for timely webinars covering single diagnostic or therapeutic entities. As one US-based consultant explains, “[Pre-COVID], I already received curated rheumatology literature specific to my interests and I listen to podcasts from respected rheumatologists, keeping me up to date.”

Across the pond, the trend for greater openness to in-person interaction as a primary information source continues amongst EU5 rheumatologists. Around 50 percent are looking to increase face-to-face engagement with reps over the next six months as restrictions relax, with one UK-based clinician stating meeting in-person facilitates “discussing medicine as it should be.” Yet, the tide is turning and when it comes to digital, opinion on what constitutes the ideal mix with face-to-face is divided, differing from market to market.

Although EU5 rheumatologists continue to value in-person interaction, the steep rise, and success, of virtual campaigns during the pandemic means many favor a continued focus on digital – to some degree. As one Italy-based HCP puts it, “After the COVID-19 pandemic, I’m more comfortable with virtual sources and know how to access information more effectively online.” The personable touch that comes with in-person meetings now needs to go above and beyond ‘just being there’, the focus should not be a repeat of what they can receive elsewhere but be tailored to specific requirements.

Striking a balance

While there’s no replacement for in-person contact, especially when it comes to global symposiums and events, the two-year shift to virtual has made rheumatologists more tech savvy than ever, attuned to having content at their fingertips.

The challenge for pharma is how to successfully deliver and add value with every touch point, a starting point being giving rheumatologists access to the information they need in the format they prefer. Preference means tailoring not only to market nuances but to individual’s needs, with digital and human interactions complementing and in sync.

Pharma communications channels continue to evolve but, in every market, there remains an undeniable need for personable, quality engagement – whatever the format. That’s why careful analysis of the experience and frequency of contact with often time-strapped rheumatology customers is essential across EU5 and the US, as is creating a channel mix that works.

One size fits all is not the goal, but by working on a market-by-market basis, with the focus being on listening to customers, adapting as their needs evolve and closely tracking the effectiveness of new and experimental ways of working with its customers, pharma can get the balance right.

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