

INDUSTRY FORUM

Hidden Truths

Looking at What Blogs Can Reveal

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Blogging is rapidly developing into mainstream activity for Internet users. With a variety of styles—from de facto news sites to marketing blogs, blogs as learning tools, writers' drafting blogs, corporate blogs and fictional blogs, to name but a few—it can be difficult to imagine how blogs might be used in the context of pharmaceutical market research.

A plethora of blogs exist to promote health information to patients from Government sites, lobby groups and pharmaceutical companies. Some patient advocacy groups have developed a blog style of social networking for their patients through message boards. But what does this mean for us as pharmaceutical market researchers? Can we utilise the blogging culture to harvest more (and truer?) insights into patient behaviour, attitudes and experiences?

Adelphi set out to test this very issue by posting two questions to women with breast cancer on 'The Patients Voice'¹ blog:

- If you could ask your doctor, nurse or health visitor any questions about your breast cancer, what would they be?
- Thinking back on all your experiences since being prescribed treatment for your breast cancer, what advice would you give to doctors, nurses or health visitors in order to better meet the needs of other women starting treatment?

The blog was kept open for two weeks and in that time received 23 posts.

Possibly the most interesting finding is in the linguistic analysis. The raw open emotion with which women wrote their blogs was breathtaking. There appeared to be little or no attempt to conceal the emotional outpouring, allowing a deeper level of understanding of how breast cancer patients truly respond to their diagnosis and the treatment they receive.

In more typical research approaches where similar questions are asked, we will invariably hear of frustrations at the lack of a consistent care provider and of the time provided for consultations. But the inevitable censorship that many women utilise to guard against their vulnerability means that we may not fully understand the implications of these frustrations on a personal level. In contrast, the words written by one blogger express a deeper level of emotion:

“When you see a woman with breast cancer, please, please schedule some extra time. The woman sitting there crying and struggling to get her questions out past the fear and anxiety is not trying to waste your time”

The range of comments posted on the blog were also surprising varied and continued to offer a high level of openness and honesty. Rarely in interviews with breast cancer survivors do we hear of the consequences of therapy on a patients life beyond the difficulties in scheduling appointments around work/home life and how debilitating the sickness from chemo can be. Yet with the anonymity of a virtual space, bloggers started to open up about more personal impacts also:

“I wish someone had warned me about the effects on my sexual function ... the loss of sexual sensation has been devastating”

So, we feel confident that blogs are able to provide researchers with an alternative source of rich emotional insights, but how *useful* are they as a research tool? Well, the answer to that, as ever, is that it depends on the clients objectives and what they want to get out of the research.

If there are some very specific questions that need to be answered, a blog may not be the best way forward. Adelphi posted two specific questions and whilst all the blogs were interesting to read, only 11 out of the 23 posts were directly relevant to the questions asked. The remainder were heart wrenching stories filled with emotional insight, but not technically 'useful' in addressing the two questions.

On the other hand, if the research is looking for broad patient insights and experiences then a blog could possibly offer a wealth of understanding not readily accessible via other more traditional research methods. Of course, timing is invariably an issue in any

¹www.thepatientsvoice.org

research project and with an average of less than 2 posts per day to Adelphi's blog, consideration may need to be given to how to direct relevant, on-line traffic to the blog in order to ensure sufficient entries for meaningful analysis. Recruiting a panel of respondents who would receive an incentive for daily blogging over an agreed time period would seem to be a workable answer. This way, not only do you get the 'traffic' needed but you can also be sure that all bloggers are real patients with real issues.

An extension of this would be to invite a selection of bloggers to participate in a more traditional research interview - thus their blog entries become a virtual pre-placement diary that can be sensitively explored for further insight and understanding within the interview. With their innermost thoughts and feelings already shared in a

virtual space, it's a much smaller step to ask patients to voice them out loud in a research setting, than to arrive at a research discussion and be asked to do this 'cold'.

And what of the patients or caregivers that take part and share their experiences on a blog? Adelphi's brief experiment suggests there is a lot to be gained for patients seeking to establish a social or support network through blogging—19 of the 23 women who posted comments on the blog were evidently looking to use the experience as a forum to seek support and share experiences with other women. It feels good to have been part of something that helped to facilitate this for these women who in turn have opened up and shared so much of themselves with us in the name of market research.