

Novartis: evolving business practices to better educate the medical community

Seeking to evolve the way it educates and engages with healthcare professionals, Novartis is using digital technology to enhance the quality, transparency and reach of its interactions with the medical community.

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Society's expectations of global healthcare companies are changing.

Committed to staying in step with those expectations, Novartis is evolving its approach to customer interactions. Using innovative digital technology, and creating new forums through which to engage with its stakeholders, the company is improving the quality of its medical education and significantly increasing the number of healthcare professionals that can access it.

"We are changing our relationship with the medical community and extending global access to high-quality information and education that will benefit doctors and patients worldwide for years to come," says Shannon Thyme Klinger, Chief Ethics and Compliance Officer and Head of Litigation at Novartis.

Medical education: a global need

It has always been an important responsibility for companies in the healthcare industry to educate doctors, nurses, and other clinicians about how medicines and devices work. Practices such as sponsoring doctors to attend conferences, inviting clinicians to speak about products, and providing promotional aids have long been used by pharmaceutical companies as a means of reaching the medical community with information about the use of medicines and services in their portfolio.

But while these practices are valued by clinicians, as they offer the opportunity to learn about advances in science that impact on daily practice, they also have limitations.

Conference attendance is by nature restricted to only a small proportion of doctors worldwide, and Novartis is keen to find better and more inclusive ways of reaching a broader cross-section of the medical community. Moreover, social expectations are changing fast and educational and promotional practices which for a long time have been widely used by industry need to be further developed. Now the company is taking steps to ensure its actions meet with the evolving views of the public and regulators.

We operate in a highly regulated industry and the need for transparency in our business activities is greater than ever. Society's expectations of global healthcare companies are changing. People want to know that companies like Novartis are acting with integrity by helping physicians make the best decisions for patients with evidence-based information about their products and services. We continue to focus on earning this trust and are committed to reinforcing our culture of integrity, while ensuring our business practices meet the highest standards, consistently across our entire organization.

Joe Jimenez, CEO, Novartis

A new approach to education

To start, Novartis is changing its approach to medical education, including congress attendance. From January 2017, the company will offer doctors support to attend medical conferences based on their active participation in the event. They will also sponsor speakers to represent the company in clearly-defined instances, for example, when a new product becomes available, a new indication is added to an existing product, or significant new clinical data are released. On these occasions, doctors are best equipped to brief their peers on how a drug can be used safely and effectively – a crucial step in ensuring that the right patients can benefit from advances in treatment.

At the same time, Novartis is investing more than ever before in developing and adopting innovative digital communication tools that will provide a growing number of doctors around the world with important information about the safety and efficacy of its products.

Roll out has already begun. Using virtual meetings and web-based customer interaction platforms, a far broader group of doctors is now starting to access the evidence-based data and product information they need to make informed choices and deliver the best possible care for patients.

In June 2016, using the company's new virtual conference platform, Vivinda TV, on-demand delivery of content from the world's largest cancer conference, the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), drew more than 4 600 registrations from virtual delegates in 103 countries. That's five times more than were engaged the previous year using traditional sponsorship methods.

Delegates registering for the European School for Advanced Studies in Ophthalmology (ESASO) congress were similarly receptive. Through Vivinda TV, almost 1 800 virtual delegates from 75 different countries accessed the meeting content online, compared to the 500 to 600 ophthalmologists that would normally attend in person. The response underscores the value of a globally accessible platform for medical education. It also indicates the medical community's ready acceptance of virtual technology as a way of accessing current, relevant and unbiased content to support their medical practice. For Novartis, it is a signal to do more of the same in future.

But there also remains a requirement for face-to-face interaction, particularly where the use of innovative, hi-tech medical devices requires practical training and education. Customer service centers can facilitate important personalized training for medical practitioners. For instance, at the headquarters of Alcon, the Novartis eye care division in Texas, a state-of-the art education complex, the Alcon Experience Center, offers hands-on eye health training for customers and company employees. It includes facilities such as a fully-equipped optometric training area, labs for training in the ophthalmic surgical environment, and a variety of interactive and innovative cataract and laser eye surgery technologies to create a world-class training environment.

Extending access through innovation

Evolving the promotional practices that have underpinned the relationship between industry and the healthcare profession for so long will take time. But reaching doctors dealing with significant unmet medical need, especially those in remote locations, has to be a priority as the company seeks to better serve and educate healthcare professionals.

Klinger believes that a continued focus on innovation will not just reshape the way the company works with the medical community, but improve on it. She comments:

“Doctors have told us that they expect industry to deliver scientific content – independent of products – in a transparent and unbiased way,” says Klinger. “Drawing on our long history of innovation, we have already begun to develop the creative and adaptive learning solutions that will reinvent the way we interact with healthcare professionals, extending global access to high-quality information and education that will benefit doctors and patients worldwide for years to come.”

Transparency measures

Continued collaboration and information sharing between industry, healthcare professionals and healthcare organizations has clear benefits for patients.

Sharing information between the industry and healthcare practitioners is a vital tool to ensure clinicians stay up-to-date with the latest developments.

From June 2016, companies belonging to the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA) will publicly disclose all payments and other transfers of value to health professionals and healthcare organizations for prescription pharmaceuticals. Novartis will extend this disclosure to include all product segments and in EFPIA countries where we have activities in Europe by 2017, even for those parts of our business that are not covered by the [EFPIA Code](#).

Transfers of value include sponsorship to individuals to attend meetings, speaker fees, consultancy and advisory boards and also cover activities such as research and educational grants to healthcare organizations. Novartis disclosure reports for EFPIA member countries can be found on the [Healthcare Professionals Payment Transparency](#) portal.

Bringing greater transparency to this vital relationship builds understanding, and addresses questions the public has about interactions between the medical community and the healthcare industry.

In addition to complying with European measures, Novartis also complies with transparency codes and regulations in the US, Japan and Australia.

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