Is Social Intelligence Creating a Paradigm Shift?

Ipsos' Stefan Maas highlights why using online patient-generated conversations can help develop your communication strategy

Ipsos

CASE STUDY

Is Social Intelligence Creating a Paradigm Shift?

Abstract: *In order to inform the development of a communications strategy for the launch of a new medication in Germany, a pharmaceutical client elected to use Ipsos' Social Intelligence offering as its primary research methodology. Social Intelligence explores and analyzes organic consumer conversations online to uncover business insights. In this case it was used to reconstruct patient experiences around a severe dermatological disease and identify opportunities for messaging about therapeutic options and support. Based on the research, the client has launched a patient website with the goal of accelerating the often prolonged process of diagnosis.*

1. Background and Objectives

Pharmaceutical companies must fully understand patient needs and expectations regarding their disease in its various stages in order to effectively provide information, advice and support throughout.

In this case, our research focused on a skin disease that is little known to the public but is often serious. Some 1% of the German population are estimated to have the condition, but are often not properly diagnosed. Potentially progressive, painful and often visually disfiguring symptoms can lead to physical and mental strain and frequently result in social isolation.

Until recently, there had not been an adequate medicinal therapy option for this disease. In August 2015, our client was granted marketing authorization for a therapy. The aim of our study was to provide the basis for developing a communication strategy.

The study focused specifically on the following objectives:

- Mapping out a detailed 'patient journey' on the basis of predefined disease phases

- Determining definitions and descriptions of patient typologies and their respective handling of the disease

- Identifying commonly used keywords for targeted search engine optimization

2. Methodology

Due to the low incidence of diagnosed cases of the disease and the major inhibiting factor of patients not wishing to disclose information about themselves to market researchers, it soon became clear that traditional research approaches would not yield optimal results. Ipsos therefore employed two non-reactive digital methodologies. For the patient journey and typology components, researcher-based content analyses were carried out on patient-generated online conversations. A keyword analysis using Google's keyword planner served as input for the search engine optimization phase of the study.

The advantages of these approaches over traditional qualitative approaches included avoiding lapses in respondent's memory, exclusion of shame-related or false response **behavior,** and the possibility of long-term or progression analyses. At the same time, online forum discussions provided so much detail that even unconscious communication structures could be included in the analysis. Aspects such as cost effectiveness and speed of this particular methodology were also important considerations.

2.1 Data Collection

Public dialogue on this particular disease was largely confined to one specific self-help forum, so we were able to capture the necessary data through software-assisted "full crawling," which enabled us to collect all the publicly accessible content on the forum. In total, there were 29,992 posts available including relevant metadata (e.g. *forum title, thread title, URL, date).* We ensured all collection, storage and analysis processes complied with current German data protection legislation as well as the professional ethics of ADM and ESOMAR.
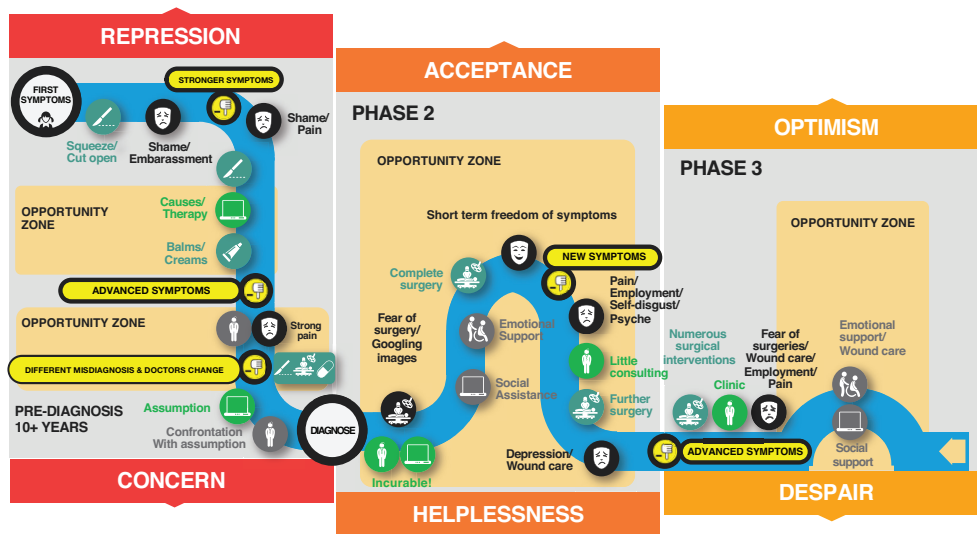
2.2 Patient Journey Analysis

We started with a qualitative exploration of the collected posts in order to identify overarching issues, while considering our client's key areas of interest. These included "openness to new treatment options," "information seeking behaviour" and "disease burden." We then developed a code frame based on the qualitative assessment, which was divided into predefined disease phases. Before the analysis began, the entire Ipsos project team was given in-depth training on staging by the client's medical manager.

Four qualified pharmaceutical market researchers worked on the analysis. Each was allocated random user profiles whose posts were examined in ascending chronological order. This allowed individual disease histories to be traced. New observations, which had not previously been considered, were discussed with a supervisor and, if necessary, added to the code frame. In total, 550 posts from 120 diagnosed patients were analyzed. Relevant observations to exemplify respondents' experience were recorded simultaneously.

The analysis consisted of tabulating quantitative metrics using SPSS as well as identifying qualitative insights. In Figure 1 below, each phase of the disease is represented using a box. Initially, four phases were observed. In reality, however, phase 1 was largely theoretical and often skipped due to the prolonged diagnosis process. The solid blue line indicates the typical disease progression. Coloured bubbles on the edge of the line show the most common treatments at particular points in time, the dominant disease burden, information sources, and influencers. Areas of psychological tension experienced by the patients are listed above and below each phase. The yellow areas represent windows of opportunity for treatment options, and recommendations on how to align messaging and communications.

Figure 1: Patient Journey

2.3 Patient Typologies

In parallel with the patient journey analysis, an in-depth qualitative analysis of individual patient typologies was also conducted. For this component, Ipsos researchers selected specific user profiles that were suitable for in-depth analysis. Essential selection criteria included the regularity of entries over time, as well as a high level of detail (e.g. descriptions of handling conflicts, emotions and attitudes in relation to the disease). A qualitative sample of 30 subjects proved sufficient to complete a functional representative evaluation of possible patient types.

Based on a model known as volition psychology, specific disease types were identified and described in detail by the expert research team. For each type, a unique patient profile was created which, among other things, described the patient's attitude to their disease and what position they took regarding doctors and their openness to therapies. In this case, five patient types were differentiated along a position and action-oriented axis.

Figure 2: Patient Typologies

The torn capitulator · The desperate actionist · The comforting helper · The hopeful activist · The motivational messenger

STATE ORIENTED · ACTION ORIENTED

2.4 Keyword Detection for Search Engine Optimization

Using the Google keyword planner, we determined search volumes and alternative keyword ideas for frequently used terms and phrases in regards to symptoms and misdiagnoses. All resulting exports (number of search queries and resulting keyword ideas per search term) were then merged into a single database and sorted in descending order according to frequency. Finally, relevant and irrelevant terms were marked in the database so that individual filtering was possible for the client and its SEM (search engine marketing) agency.

Figure 3: Keyword Database

Keyword	Search Volume	skin	lump	treatment	spot	infect
skin disorders	4400	1	0	0	0	0
hard lump under skin	3600	1	0	0	0	0
remove skin tags	3600	1	0	0	0	0
lumps under skin	3600	1	0	0	0	1
skin blemishes	3600	1	0	0	0	0
small red spots on skin	2900	1	0	0	1	0
skin fungal infection	2900	1	0	0	0	1
rashes on skin	2400	1	0	0	0	0
brown patches on skin	2400	1	0	0	0	0
red marks on skin	1900	1	0	0	0	0
skin rashes in adults	1900	1	0	0	0	0
red patches on skin	1900	1	0	0	0	0
skin tag remover	1600	1	0	0	0	0
laser skin resurfacing	1600	1	0	0	0	0
sore skin	1600	1	0	0	0	0
red blood spots on skin	1600	1	0	0	1	0
brown spots on skin	1600	1	0	0	0	0
skin disease	1300	1	0	0	0	0
lump under skin	1300	1	0	0	0	0
itchy skin all over	1300	1	0	0	0	0
dry itchy skin	1300	1	0	0	0	0
skin rashes in children	1300	1	0	0	0	0
causes of itchy skin	1300	1	0	0	0	0
skin allergy	1000	1	0	0	0	0
itchy red bumps on skin	1000	1	0	0	0	0
bumps on skin	1000	1	0	0	0	0
skin rash pictures	1000	1	0	0	0	1
skin growths	1000	1	0	0	0	0
removal of skin tags	1000	1	1	0	0	0

3. Key Results and Derived Measures

A key result of the study was the identification of an overarching issue, namely that the majority of those affected had suffered for over ten years from what were sometimes severe symptoms, without receiving any conclusive information. The main reasons for this were shame-induced postponement of doctor visits as well as difficulty in obtaining an unequivocal diagnosis. This long phase of uncertainty was very stressful to many patients—many performed research on their own, mostly online, and only then talked to a doctor in order to get the suspected diagnosis confirmed.

Our client was ultimately able to use the findings as an opportunity to support patients in obtaining a faster diagnosis. Following the study, they developed a dedicated website with a questionnaire to help patients prepare for a visit to a dermatologist—allowing patients to give detailed information about their symptoms to help the doctor facilitate diagnosis and treatment.

Additionally, keyword analysis was successfully used for search engine optimization of the new website. The original aim was to identify disease-related search terms to allow patients to find the website, but results showed that patients often chose non-medical terminology or terminology that reflected a wrong diagnosis (e.g. terms such as "bubonic plague" or classic misdiagnoses such as "ingrown hair"). These findings were incorporated into search engine marketing, and the growing number of visitors to the website since its launch has in fact exceeded our client's expectations.

In regards to content, the patient journey analysis was able to identify issues of primary importance to patients, which are now used to update the website every month. For example, tips on wound management have been incorporated, as patients are often confronted with this issue as a result of the disease and frequent surgical procedures.

Finally, the communication style of the new website takes into account Ipsos' recommendations on how to optimally address the different patient types. The website also contains information about psychological support as it was found that for some patients the disease is accompanied by social isolation and negative consequences for mental health.

4. Conclusions

The study shows a paradigm shift on many levels. Patients—particularly those with a serious or rare condition—no longer depend solely on their doctor or on support from their social and familial networks when it comes to obtaining information. In addition to general online research, the dialogue on social media has become a particularly valuable source of information and a mental prop for many sufferers. When well informed and supported by a community of peers, patients are increasingly able to meet their doctors on equal footing, thereby gaining influence when it comes to diagnosis and treatment decisions.

At the same time, the technological possibilities of social analytics research and our collective experience in the collection and analysis of online user-generated data have reached a degree of maturity that also constitutes a methodological paradigm shift in pharmaceutical market research. It is becoming increasingly clear how rich the pool of authentic and unbiased conversations on indication-specific questions can be, and what added value analyzing this data compared to traditional methods can provide.

For pharmaceutical companies who consistently tailor messaging to resonate with patients, these two findings signal a necessary paradigm shift in the overall approach to communications. Information about knowledgeable patients, their lives, and how they live day-to-day with medical conditions can now be obtained easily, whereas just a few years ago this data was either not available at all, or could only be collected with a disproportionate amount of time and effort. Patient needs can now be brought into clearer focus and can be met using more focused and state-of-the-art communications than ever before.

Author

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Stefan is a business psychologist with many years of international experience in the fields of web and social media research. At Ipsos, he is a lead on the Social Intelligence team and was instrumental in developing the patient journey model. Stefan is a member of the advisory board of the Digital Media Excellence Academy, guest lecturer at the Universities of Lueneburg and Bremen, and speaks regularly at conferences.

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