
The Evolution of Influence in the Life Sciences



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Research has shown that the general population doesn't trust advertising^{1,2} and overt marketing communications, yet our lives are filled with an endless clamour of voices vying for our attention. The life science researcher is an even more sceptical audience and has an equally challenging selling cycle.

Every new technological advance dramatically changes the realm of public relations and marketing communications, with "new approaches" such as social media, mobile, local SEO (search engine optimization), and content and inbound marketing expanding the "must do list" for the marketing communications professional almost daily.

To understand why the business of influence has become so much more complicated, we need to take a quick look at how it has evolved.

In the Beginning

Once upon a time, a company's success or failure was determined by people gathering and talking amongst themselves about product quality, reputation and prices — word-of-mouth advertising at its best.

With the advent of newspapers, journals, magazines, and television, companies suddenly had a way to promote their products without relying on word of mouth. This had the advantage that reputation could be bought with advertising and product placements. The phenomenon of the brand was born.

Specialist agencies grew up to "manage the media-client" relationship and provide creative services that those clients may not have access to in house. Over time the voices of large corporations overpowered the voices of customers and corporations had almost a free hand to create the brand conversations that they desired.

In the scientific arena, scientists stopped relying solely on the peer-reviewed literature to identify equipment and techniques as various laboratory magazines started to provide hints and tips about techniques, cover new research, and showcase (often for a price) new laboratory equipment.

How much those advertisements, product pages, and placements influence purchasing behaviour is open to debate, but if you believe the work of Hamid Ghanadan³, the efficacy will not be high. Ghanadan hypothesizes that the attributes that make researchers excel at the discovery process also make them more challenging to market to.

While Ghanadan's theory states that pushing products (including features and benefits) at scientists is likely to merely engage their sceptical nature, they are far less sceptical about information received from a trusted peer. This makes word of mouth increasingly important in the scientific world, yet even here there is a problem especially for purveyors of expensive niche capital equipment—most universities and research parks are not co-located, so word-of-mouth has limited spread.



¹ Cattaneo, T., HubSpot, <http://bit.ly/2d3j1xP>

² Global Trust in Advertising and Brand Messages, Nielsen, <http://bit.ly/1cb2JcW>

³ Ghanadan, H., Persuading Scientists: Marketing to the World's Most Sceptical Audience. <http://bit.ly/2d3ipZ6>

Back to the Social Future

Back in 1999, the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* asserted that the Internet allows markets to once more revert to the days where markets are defined by people gathering in groups to discuss them. The rise of public discussion forums, blogs and social media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter have given the public back the power to shout as loud as large corporations, and one has to look no further than the “United breaks guitars” PR disaster to see the effect that one man, a guitar and a social media profile can have.

However, these same networks (along with targeted platforms such as Scientist Solutions and Biocompare) also provide a way for companies to target those groups that appear to be a relevant audience. But what is interesting is that even in targeted groups, the majority of the discussions are about the research scientists are undertaking and the methods they are using to generate results, rather than the tools they use to achieve it.

When people do talk about products, they are likely to be by those that the Net Promoter System would consider a promoter or a detractor – not the merely ‘satisfied’ customer.

Even then, in the grand scheme of things only a tiny percentage of social media posts rave about new products or great service, especially in the B2B arena.

Cutting Through the Social Noise

One way many brands are going is to encourage influencers and advocates, to openly discuss and praise products. But in the scientific arena, unlike the consumer world, these influencers are few and far between—and influential bloggers do not tend to be talking about capital equipment. It is perhaps notable that Thermo Fisher Scientific has some 6,000 likes on Facebook and 21,000 Twitter followers, compared with IFLS (I F---ing Love Science) that has more than 6.7 million Facebook likes.

Of course, with people tweeting and blogging about cool science and what they had for lunch, cutting through a swarm of endless updates can be hard. Posts about product updates from commercial sources can be quickly lost (or intentionally ignored) amid the social noise, making getting your message heard harder and harder.

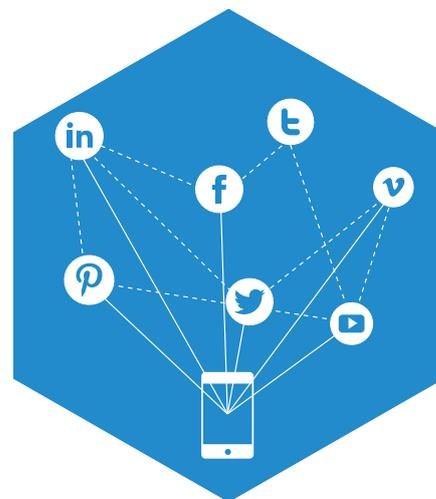
So how with this surplus of noise in the online and print media can you break through and grab the attention of the poor scientists whose lives would be better if only they knew how much time, effort and frustration your latest innovations would save them?

The key is telling a different, more compelling story. A story that resonates with people, that inspires them and gives them something to believe in.

Start with ‘why’

Simon Sinek believes it is not what we do, nor how we do it that captures people’s imagination, inspires them and captures their loyalty. It’s why we do it that matters.

In his book ‘Start with Why’, Sinek talks about people’s needs to believe in something and how the most important message is why you do what you do. By telling people why you are in business, you give those people that are going to care about your products and services a cause to rally behind.



By clearly articulating the 'why', you give your audience a reason to care about it, and if they feel you care about the same things as they do, the audience is likely to trust you to solve their problems. A 'why' then needs to be followed by a 'how' and a 'what', but it is the 'why' that is the centre of the belief.

Few life science companies explicitly state a 'why', but Thermo Fisher's tagline of the 'world leader in serving science' hints at one. For Thermo, a 'why' could be: "We believe in helping scientists make the world a healthier, cleaner and safer place. We do this by serving laboratories all over the world. By the way, we happen to make and sell laboratory equipment and reagents – want to buy some?"

But how do you get heard?

The first challenge is to identify *where* your audience congregates, where do they discuss items of interest, and on what terms. This may be a physical location such as tradeshow, online locations such as Scientist Solutions, Biocompare, LinkedIn groups, Twitter, blogs, forums or the avid readership of a research journal.

The next challenge is to then raise awareness of your 'why' within those congregations of your audience. You wouldn't preach to an empty room, so why broadcast your message to one?

The message has to be clear and compelling, but most importantly it has to resonate with your audience and inspire their creativity to think about the implications of your message.

All too often, people become accustomed to the 'way things are done around here' and even if a new solution presents itself they are so used to doing something in a certain way they tend to overlook the needs they have—or indeed they create work-arounds.

One way to break through our reluctance to change is to identify and focus on hidden needs, which often have an emotional component to them.

Thought leadership articles can provide a great way to discuss issues of importance to your audience. These pieces should uphold your 'why' and provide the pillar upon which everything else sits. If the audience aligns with your point of view, your brand will resonate with them and become more meaningful to them.

Closing the loop

A critical common thread that runs through the evolution of influence via social media is relationship building, which requires a committed communication between you and your audience. Like any cell culture, new connections wither in the absence of consistent care and nurturing.

By linking the outbound marketing communications and public relations efforts described above with a content marketing program that enables you to deliver educational content to your audience and nurture their interest in your 'why', they will soon be asking to purchase your 'what'.





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