COMMENTARY

Will Pharma Twitter?

Miriam Reisman

You’re no one if you’re not on Twitter.
And if you aren’t there already
You’ve missed it.

—Ben Walker, composer

The lyrics from this YouTube video cheekily poke fun at the frenzied popularity of the social networking site, Twitter, but a serious debate is taking place over the actual merits of this latest online craze. While some social media bloggers are calling Twitter the next big thing, others dismiss it as a passing fad that most people just don’t get. Meanwhile, millions worldwide are logging on daily to answer Twitter’s eternal question: “What are you doing?”1

Not surprisingly, even a few pharmaceutical companies are starting to take up Twitter, albeit slowly and cautiously. AstraZeneca, Novartis, and Boehringer Ingelheim all have Twitter accounts and have developed small followings of Twitter users who receive daily updates (“tweets”), mostly on news and information about the companies and their products. A recent Novartis tweet reads: “More than 30 govt’s have made #H1N1 vaccine supply requests to Novartis for cell-based and egg-based antigen and MF59®.”

The concept of Twitter is simple enough. The free “microblogging” service allows Twitterers to make text-based posts of 140 characters or less, updating “followers” with what they’re up to at any given moment of the day—via cell phone, Instant Messenger, or the Web. Twitter followers can search the site to see who else is using the service and may subscribe to receive their tweets 24 hours a day.

With many companies and brands now on Twitter, the pressure is on for the pharmaceutical industry to jump on board. Since its launch three years ago, Twitter has become not only a trendy way to stay connected with friends and family but also a serious debate is taking place over the actual merits of this latest online craze. While some social media bloggers are calling Twitter the next big thing, others dismiss it as a passing fad that most people just don’t get. Meanwhile, millions worldwide are logging on daily to answer Twitter’s eternal question: “What are you doing?”1

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AstraZeneca seems to be following such a strategy. According to Laura Woodin, company tweets include information about AstraZeneca’s patient-assistance programs and other patient-support programs. (Recent tweet: “AZ supports NAMI free mental health support group program. Catch radio interviews & learn more: http://tinyurl.com/m338zk.”)

“Our followers on Twitter may know people that could benefit from these resources,” says Ms. Woodin, who reports that more than 1,000 users are currently following AstraZeneca US. She also predicts that other pharmaceutical companies will increasingly engage in online networking because they want to provide accurate and timely information through channels that are useful to employees and patients.

If predictions by Laura Woodin and other social media experts are right, and if Twitter is not just a fad but a potentially serious platform for discourse and discussion, this technology could have a major impact on the delivery and sharing of information among patients, physicians, and other health care stakeholders. Whether more than just a handful of pharmaceutical companies become a part of those discussions remains to be seen. Until then, the online community continues to anxiously await their first tweets.

REFERENCES