

TAKING A LEAF FROM THEIR BOOK

Can it be right, ask Neil and Tom Kendle, that online bookseller Amazon knows more about the interests of each of its 100 million customers than the average drug company knows about most key opinion leaders?



Amazon will frequently email those of us who are customers making suggestions for books or goods we might want to buy because it knows what we're interested in. Not only does this improve Amazon's sales but the customers feel they are more valued.

So, how can pharma use available information to find opinion leaders better suited to its needs and ensure that KOLs are invited to do things that they want to do - making the relationship more effective and rewarding for both?

Is it enough simply to ask if an opinion leader has published three or more papers in major journals in the last three years? Or whether they have ever participated in a major trial? To make their relationship with opinion leaders more effective and rewarding for both parties, pharma should be asking what KOLs' research interests are, what journals do they publish in and how often are the different aspects of their work cited? After all, pharma wants doctors with a range of expertise and opinion leaders want to engage in activities most suited to them.

Increasingly, academics use standard mathematical methods to evaluate an individual's or organisation's work - known as bibliometrics or scientometrics. By making use of these methods we can more accurately measure the impact of someone's work using a system that is academically justifiable and is familiar to opinion leaders themselves.

Most of the information about opinion leaders collected on behalf of clients relates to them as individuals, but using mapping techniques largely derived from social science research, we can provide information about the relationships between opinion leaders and their peers: which individuals like to work together; who is well regarded by two rival research groups and could chair a meeting involving both?

Is there anything else we can learn from the sophisticated customer relationship management (CRM) systems of organisations like Amazon? As the name suggests, it is customer-centric. Many pharma firms seem to think only about what they want from opinion leader activities without ever having asked them what their interests are - are they willing to travel as a speaker, like talking to the media, want to participate in advisory boards - or what their motivation is - do they want to raise their academic profile; or simply enjoy the variety of pharma-related activities? Opinion leaders tell us that firms seem reluctant to ask them such questions, but when it does happen they feel the relationship is appreciated and well-managed - that it is becoming a genuine partnership.

This approach implies that we are going to keep more detailed records on the opinion leaders than we currently do. Not everyone is comfortable with that. We must pay due regard to data protection of course but there is a tendency to be overly concerned about the ethics and perils of collating information on doctors. Just as we don't regard Amazon's records about us as some dark, Machiavellian repository of secrets, opinion leaders who know what intelligence a company keeps and understand how it is used, generally see this as eminently sensible and as an opportunity to ensure that they have a worthwhile relationship with that company.

This type of relationship pre-supposes a high level of transparency between the company and opinion leaders. By doing this companies can promote a mutually beneficial relationship, where opinion leaders want to keep them informed because they know it is in their own interests to do so.

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