HEALTH CARE NEWS

Nader Groups Demand Feds Regulate Drug Industry Use of Social Media

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With the growth of social media, companies and consumers now use sites such as Facebook and Twitter to share information and provide support and service. Now the use of these tools by one category of companies, the pharmaceutical industry, is under attack by a number of groups under the leadership of Ralph Nader.

The Center for Digital Democracy, Consumer Watchdog.org, US PIRG, and the World Privacy Forum have filed a lengthy and contentious complaint to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) accusing pharmaceutical companies of inappropriately using social media and digital marketing to promote their products.

"Consumers now confront a sophisticated and largely stealth interactive medical marketing apparatus that has unleashed an arsenal of techniques designed to promote the use of specific brand drugs and influence consumers about treatments for health conditions," the complaint maintains.

All of the organizations filing the claim, with the exception of the World Privacy Forum, were either started by consumer advocate Ralph Nader or executives who worked for him.

'No Threat to Public Health'

There is nothing wrong with pharmaceutical companies using social media and digital marketing to reach consumers, says John R. Graham, director of health care studies at the Pacific Research Institute. He maintains the most important thing is that the right medicine gets to the right patient at the right time, which requires free and open communication.

"As long as people engage in social media and digital marketing campaigns voluntarily, there is no threat to consumer privacy or public health," says Graham. "There is no law compelling any citizen to use any social media. There's no law compelling anyone to use old media, either. People should be free to decide how they engage social media."

Graham says social media's speed of information distribution can improve the public health, as information travels freely without central control.

"If the FTC or Congress limits all digital marketing by pharmaceutical companies, everyone's rights will be violated. It is absurd to expect research-based pharmaceutical firms to use the most up-to-date technology to invent new drugs and then forbid or limit them from using the most up-to-date technology to communicate the those drugs' benefits," Graham said.

"If someone thinks it is wrong for a drug maker to use social media to communicate, that person is under no obligation to communicate with a drug company via social media," he added.

Regulators Assume the Worst?

According to Joseph Coletti, director of health and fiscal policy studies at the John Locke Foundation, regulators are uneasy about the use of social media as an information resource in part because most social media interaction limits the number of warnings that can easily be communicated.

"Social media is unregulated, and regulators naturally tend to think this is a bad thing. For instance, if you are a patient or a doctor and you talk to a drug company, [the regulators] think that you demand their product from that single contact without having any other knowledge," Coletti said. "If you put 140 characters on a Twitter message, you can't possibly have enough warnings about the consequences or side-effects of using their product."

Coletti maintains Nader and his partner groups don't see marketing on social media as educational.

"But what is this if not educational?" Coletti asks. "How are you supposed to know what drugs are out there or what can help you? Or if you're in a Facebook group because of your condition, why shouldn't a drug manufacturer be able to reach you?"

Europe's Paternalistic Approach

Devon Herrick, a senior fellow at the National Center for Policy Analysis, says limiting risk and patient preference motivates many of the regulators.

"Europe has a much more top-down, paternalistic society, where doctors act as social advocates. They think they should tell you what to do, what medicines to take, and the patient has little say in the matter," said Herrick. "Personal media short-circuit this relationship."

Herrick notes Facebook and other social networks give patients the ability to interact with other patients, doctors, and pharmaceutical companies to learn more about available treatments.

"What better medium than Facebook, where communities can form up around a medicine or treatment, where the company is running the page and moderating it and answering your questions and you're talking to other patients with similar illnesses? Where else are you are going

to bring all the stakeholders together in a transparent manner? If the consumer advocates have their way, all this will be lost," explains Herrick.

Suppressing Dissenting Information

Regardless of the outcome of the Nader-backed complaint, Graham maintains free and open access to information about new therapies is a key to limiting government control over available treatments—something he says will be all the more important once agencies such as the Independent Payment Advisory Board, created by President Obama's health care legislation, inevitably seek to limit people's therapeutic choices.

"President Obama declared that if there is a red pill and a blue pill and one costs more than the other, but the politicians think that they are the same, he'll [only] let you have the cheaper one," Graham explains. "Obviously, the government can only impose such a rule if it controls the communications that the people have about medicines, and allows no dissenting information."