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The Impact of Public Relations on the Pharmaceutical Industry: A Case Study of Living Like You Campaign

Virginia Hesenmeyer and Martina Topic

Introduction

Public Relations (PR) has experienced various definitions, opinions, tools and functions over the past decades resulting in a conflicting perception of the term by both scholars and the public. Public Relations activities undertaken in the past have often been viewed by the media as a ‘PR scam’ and ‘just’ PR, etc. (1, p. 4), emphasising the negative connotation that the media portrays to the public. Nevertheless, if Public Relations is strategically practiced with the appropriate tools and ethical considerations, it can benefit both societies and corporations (2).

The essence of Public Relations is of great importance, especially in complex sectors where communication is key to a better public outcome, such as the healthcare sector. Without the right communication tools, stakeholders might not be able to understand necessary information for their health and wellbeing. Unfortunately, the communication practice of the pharmaceutical industry has been strained by past scandals and its overall reputation and trust by the public has decreased (3). The combination of both the PR and pharmaceutical industry having a bad reputation complicates communication strategies further. Hence, the aim of this research is to investigate whether PR should be used in the pharmaceutical industry more, how PR can be used in the healthcare, as well as the impact of one PR campaign to patient’s wellbeing and engagement (i.e. Novartis ‘Living Like You’ campaign).

Without a doubt, health is one of the most important areas of social activity. Just like in any other sector, PR is also needed in healthcare in order to communicate with its stakeholders and agree on mutual interests (4). According to Hetherington et al. (5), healthcare is a unique industry as it pulls a thin line between life, death and recovery. In addition, Willis (6) considers healthcare organisations to be encircled by ‘wicked’ problems, i.e. “those problems that are unstructured and difficult to define, cut across many stakeholders and are relentless” (p. 484). Healthcare as a sector has seen adjustments, as companies are now communicating directly to stakeholders, and as new innovations drive research and success (4). One of the key stakeholders for the healthcare industry is the patient group (PG) (7). Pharmaceutical companies often rely heavily on PGs as they seek to expand their market, to sell in their product, lobbying with governments, regulations or health service policies and lastly to be seen as a carrying and a socially responsible business (7).

For PR professionals working within the healthcare field, the key challenge is communicating the same product to different audiences with different messages, i.e. a HCP will be introduced to a new product differently than a patient (8). Ideally, a strategic PR campaign, would execute both messaging streams in one campaign, preferably targeting special events to generate more media coverage. Experts believe that one of the key attributes of PR professionals working in the healthcare business is the act of listening to the patients rather than just transmitting the message (4). Therefore, using a Novartis case study, *Living Like You (LLY)*, this paper intends

to explore the ways PR is used in the pharmaceutical industry, by exploring the success of the LLY case.

Living Like You

Living Like You is a digital campaign sponsored by Novartis to empower and support patients impacted by multiple sclerosis (MS) to live fuller lives. The content displayed on the website, is from bloggers who are suffering from MS. Novartis wanted to showcase that they were not the ones writing the content but they were actually gathering the necessary resources for patients to really be able to find what they need; Novartis put the patients' needs first. The topics that are addressed on the website range from "sex and parenthood to the benefits of handicapped parking badges, and new developments in the science around MS" (9; 10; 11). The page is focused on engaging patients and communicating with them on social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter. Novartis sponsors the content as they are committed to the MS community, but promise to have unbiased, useful and productive resources.

In order to understand the campaign better, a general understanding of MS is needed. MS is a disease that affects the central nervous system, which includes the brain and spinal cord. These contain cells called neurons, designed to send signals throughout the body (12). These signals are responsible for many functions, including balance, physical coordination, eyesight, and memory (13). MS is mostly diagnosed between the ages of 20-50 and affects mostly female Caucasians (13). The cause of MS is unknown but due to the prevalence it is highly researched and treatment options are available by various pharmaceutical companies. Providing MS patients online access to relevant information is fundamental as people suffering from MS are up to three times more likely to be online compared to people with other diseases and as a result MS is mentioned online every 13 seconds (14). Due to these factors, an online campaign for MS patients is arguably a right choice.

LLY has been awarded multiple times including the Sabre award in 2015 and the Clio Health award in 2016. With smaller campaigns like #MSLifeHacks, Novartis has called the attention of the media, patients and its competition (14). The question remains, why *LLY* is so different to other health awareness campaigns. Pharmaceutical companies are strictly regulated, both internally and by external bodies. The language that has been traditionally used is cold, clinical and lacks engagement and imposes fear. According to Dobrow (15, para. 4) patients have:

“...Found similarly minded people on the Web and established communities in which the discussion, frankly, terrifies you. They talk about their feelings. They talk about self-made tweaks to official treatment regimens. They talk about sex (and do so employing language that might most accurately be described as “salty”). Most unsettlingly, they mock you [pharmaceuticals] and your efforts to educate them.”

Novartis has been able to jump over various internal loops and was able to achieve an educational platform that also provides a sense of community for MS patients through content that is meaningful and needed by patients. As Stacey Bernstein from Weber Shandwick puts it, “Nobody's smarter about MS than a patient living with MS” (15). Healthcare communication campaigns are important in order to raise awareness of disease areas and treatment and to increase the reputation of pharmaceutical companies as whole. The paper aims to analyse *LLY* campaign and discuss the necessity of PR in relation to pharmaceutical companies.

Method

This paper used a qualitative research approach as it wanted to understand the use of public relations in the pharmaceutical sector, using *Living Like You (LLY)* as a case study to gain understanding into the subject. *LLY* is an ideal case study for this paper as it is one of the only campaigns in recent pharmaceutical PR that has used the angle of positive communication to engage the audience and provide them with content that has the prospect to simplify and help their daily lives.

Semi-structured interviews with public relations experts were conducted, explicitly in the field of pharmaceuticals to seek opinions and perspectives on public relations as a general profession, how to use PR in pharmaceutical sector and about importance of PR. Provided that this paper aims to explore reasons for needing PR and gaining common insights into the future of PR for the pharmaceutical industry, it is considered that 10 in-depth interviews will suffice in reaching the data saturation point (16; 17). The participants were all currently working in either a global agency working within the healthcare practice or at one of the top 20 pharmaceutical companies worldwide (18). Each participant was considered an expert, if they had a minimum of five-year work experience in the field, yet the average was 13.5 years. The transcripts were analysed through unitising data, meaning that researcher reviewed all sets of data in order to fit them into the above-mentioned categories. Detailed quotes were used to justify the findings as well as tables showcasing yes and no answers to some of the questions asked.

Findings

The dataset is composed of 10 responses to the semi-structured interviews. 60% (6 respondents) are working in one of the top 10 leading global agencies worldwide (19), specialising in the healthcare practice, while 30% of the participants (3 respondents) are working in the pharmaceutical industry and 10% (1 respondent) is working in the communication department of a patient advocacy group.

The first question that was asked to the participants was to define public relations in their own words. Figure 1 showcases the word cloud, which clearly distinguished that the key words to defining public relations involved communicating, managing, stakeholders, external, and perception, all of which are very relevant, however engagement and digital were not rated high, which corresponds with current trends in the industry as explained above.

Figure 1. Definition of PR using data visualisation



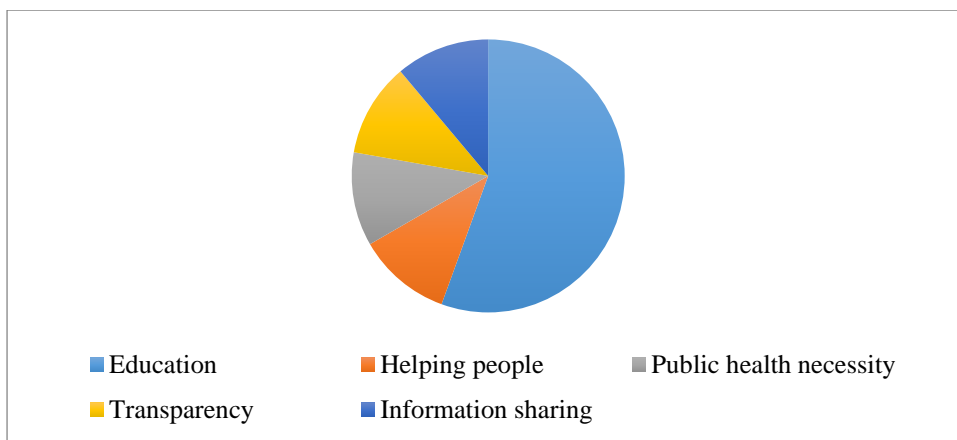
When asking the respondents what they believe the public thinks of public relations and how they perceive it, the majority (70%) thought that the PR has a negative connotation in the public, whereas three participants (30%) believed that it depends on the situation. The 30% that did not have a clear answer believed that if you ask people who know and benefit from PR, they would think it is positive but people who lack knowledge of the term will most likely have a negative perception due to the influence of the media. In fact, 40% of the respondents said that the public had a negative perception of PR due to their lack of understanding of the term PR. In addition, 70% of all respondents believed that the public has a negative perception of PR because it is seen as:

- "...Something trivial or something that manipulates or hides the truth." (Participant 1)
- "...Positioning things instead of saying things as they are." (Participant 2)
- "...Associate public relations with spin." (Participant 3)
- "...The general public...see it as spin...largely because what they see in films and TV, which is not showing reality." (Participant 4)
- "...Perception of being manipulated." (Participant 6)
- "...Sense that is very contrived, that people are controlling the messaging that is given to them..." (Participant 7)
- "...Perceived as to cover up things." (Participant 9)

This is also in line with the research done by Keenan (20), Henderson (21), Bienkov (22), Coombs & Holladay (1) who believed that the media was also largely at fault for the misperception of PR within the public.

When asking the participants whether PR is important for the healthcare system, i.e. not specifying on the pharmaceutical industry alone, 90% of the participants said yes and one participant said that it depended on the circumstances. The participants who said PR was important provided following reasons, which are showcased in the pie chart below, figure 2. The majority said education was the main reason why PR was important for the healthcare industry as it could educate people about diseases, treatment option and how to manage living with a disease. Without the right PR tools, the public would lack the knowledge and be overwhelmed with scientific jargon.

Figure 2. Reasons for PR being important for the healthcare industry

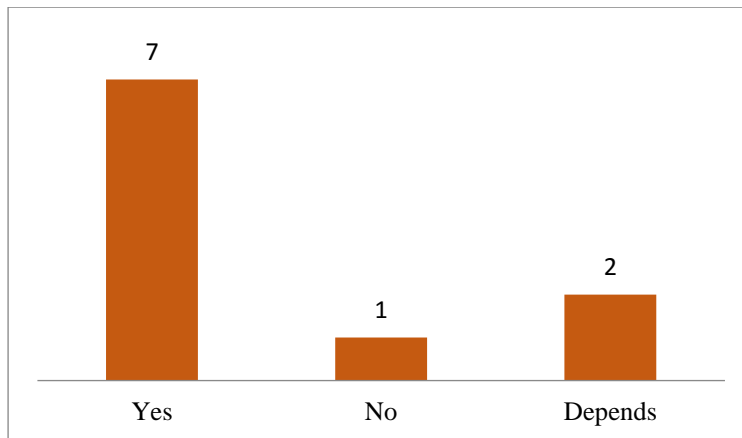


When asked whether PR could directly benefit the pharmaceutical industry, all participants strongly agreed, as participant 2 states, “The healthcare sector...is really under high scrutiny, so therefore PR is critically needed.” Also, participant 1 agrees that PR is key to improving the reputation, “It is really important for pharmaceutical companies to use PR as they have a huge image problem and I think it is important to manage that.” Nevertheless, participant 5 argues, “PR can help in changing the perception, but the behaviour of the industry is more important. PR won’t help if they won’t change their behaviour.” PR is a tool that can help companies communicate to the public and highlight the value and positive attributes it has. Nevertheless, at the end of the day actions say more than words and the pharmaceutical industry, as a whole, needs to change their behaviour.

The expert interviews included questions on the influence of PR on patients. All agreed that a PR campaign could have a long lasting influence on patients. Two of the participants, provided the same example: the HIV campaign. In the 1980s, western countries launched a massive public health campaign to educate people of the consequences of HIV through scare tactics. Despite initial outrage, the campaign would later be known as the most successful. Participant 6 remembers that living in the 1980s meant that you were fully aware of HIV/AIDS and were taken the precautions necessary not to contract the virus. However, the participant argues, that ever since the funding for public health campaigns in HIV/AIDS has decreased, a whole new generation is lacking awareness, most likely resulting in disease statistics increasing again. Participant 9 pointed out similar trends and mentioned that specifically in the UK, public health funding was decreased, which will also affect the healthcare system in the long run. In addition,

when asking participants whether they believed that a PR campaign could have a direct influence on the patients wellbeing the results were more varied as depicted in figure 3.

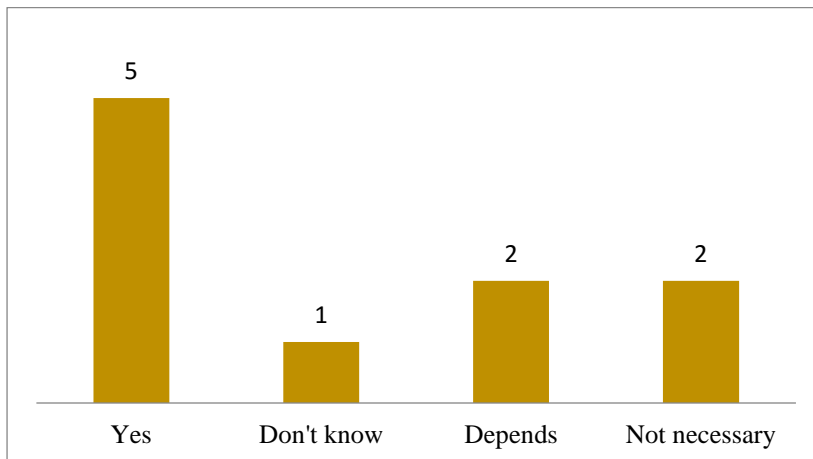
Figure 3. Can PR influence patients' wellbeing



Nevertheless, all participants mentioned that PR can influence patient's wellbeing by providing accurate information, disease and treatment options. Participant 9 argues, that all of the information that is shared directly from pharmaceutical companies can be trusted as it is "heavily regulated and has to be accurate and balanced."

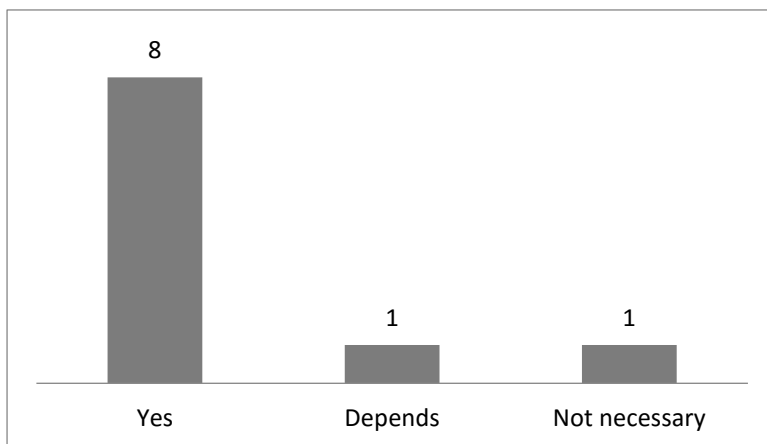
The question that concluded the most differences is whether pharmaceutical companies should invest more in PR. The results are shown in figure 4. There was a larger debate about this topic as trends showcase that not only PR is needed to bring the message across but rather a mix of tools, including advertisement and marketing. Nevertheless, some of the participants believed that PR was the more effective tool to work on the reputation of pharmaceutical companies (participant 7).

Figure 4. Should pharmaceutical companies invest more in PR?



The key question that was asked during the expert interviews was whether PR was a necessity for the pharmaceutical industry. The results are showcased in figure 5 and highlight that the majority believe in the necessity.

Figure 5. Does the pharmaceutical industry need PR?



Participant 6, who argues that PR might not be a necessity points out that no matter what, patients will get sick and will likely turn to the pharmaceutical industry for medication, hence they will always have a mutual dependent relationship. Participant 7, argues that it depends on the circumstances, points out that depending what the goal of the pharmaceutical industry is they might need PR, for example if the goal is reputation then PR is needed. Participant 8, who works in a pharmaceutical company, argues that as soon as a company works with external stakeholders a PR strategy is needed. In addition, both participant 10 and 4 not only point out that PR is definitely needed in the pharmaceutical industry but rather that there should be much more of it, in order to improve their image and communicate the right messages to increase the wellbeing of the public. Participant 6 states,

“Public relations is important to the pharmaceutical industry because we are trying to explain all the amazingly good stuff that pharmaceutical do but pharmaceutical can be their own worst enemy if things come to light about bad practices, because that is already what people are expecting to hear.”

In addition, participant 3 states that, “I don’t think it is just about PR and communications, it is the industry itself, it is being scrutinised and criticised, it has to also start to change and I think PR communications plays an important role.”

Insights into *Living Like You*

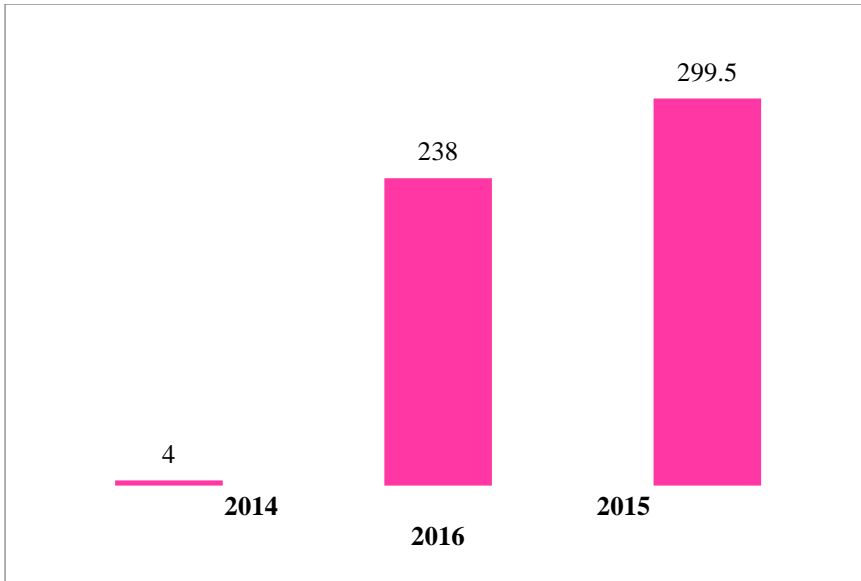
During the interview process, a specific section was dedicated to the case study, *Living Like You (LLY)*. From all ten participants, nine (90%) of them were familiar with the campaign and were able to answer further questions set-forth. One of the participants had not heard of the campaign yet, hence the data moving forward only includes nine respondents. The participant that was unaware of the campaign, choose to explain a campaign that was significant to them, the Pfizer Viagra campaign. Nevertheless, all ten respondents were able to provide important insights into the case study, showcasing their expertise and the need for similar campaigns in the pharmaceutical industry.

Historically, multiple sclerosis (MS) is a disease that affected older people; nevertheless in the last years MS has been diagnosed in younger people, especially women. According to participant 4, “...the treatment landscape of MS has evolved, the online landscape has not.” Furthermore, the interviewees pointed out that when people are diagnosed, the reality is that they will do research online, and this is also in line with the literature review that was conducted, showcasing that 44% of European online consumers use the internet to research health topics (23). Based on these statistics, it is crucial for pharmaceutical industries to use the online space to increase disease awareness, similar to what Novartis did. Understanding the landscape of the disease is fundamental, i.e. Novartis established that the online space was dry and static and not hopeful for newly diagnosed young patients. Patients with a chronic disease, such as MS do not only need information about treatment options, they need to know how they can continue living their lives, the essence of *LLY*. Participant 1 also argued that it is essential for a successful campaign to talk to its audience as “people rather than patients” something that Novartis took into consideration and reflected in *LLY*.

When asking the participants, whether they consider *LLY* a PR campaign, different responses showcased the wide understanding and implication of PR. Participant 4, pointed out that it was more an “engagement campaign” whereas participant 9 and 3 said it was more of a “digital media campaign” or “PR and digital campaign.” A trend that can be analysed through the data set is the trend towards using words such as communication campaign or engagement campaign, rather than PR. The traditional use of the term PR is decreasing, which has also been argued with experts in the field. On the other hand, the act of communicating with stakeholders will always be necessary, specifically for the pharmaceutical sector.

It is difficult to say whether the campaign has changed the lives of patients, but the positive comments and increased online engagement, showcase the potential of the campaign and the need for it. Also, some of the information provided online are difficult to find anywhere else and HCPs often cannot provide information, for example on medical marijuana or sex, making it a needed and useful campaign. Figure 6 shows the increase of median Facebook likes from the starting year (2014) until now (data collected 30.06.2016).

Figure 6 Increase of Facebook Likes for Living Like You campaign



Some of the positive comments that were found on social media can be found below, tackling sensitive topics such as sex (figure 8) and providing life hacks to improve day-to-day activities (figure 7).

Figure 7. Facebook feedback on life hacks post (Living Like You, 2015a)

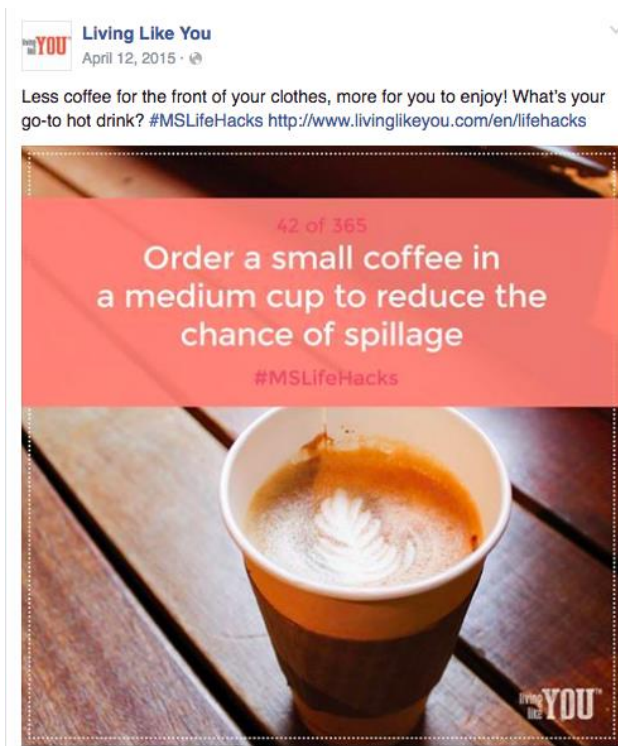




Figure 8 Facebook feedback on post about sex and MS (Living Like You, 2015b)



Nevertheless, there are also some negative comments, an example can be found in below, figure 9, which normally would have been ignored by pharmaceutical companies, but instead *LLY* answers the comments and provides insights and listens to the feedback the patients might have. The answers provided by *LLY* also show a personal, patient-centric approach as

respondents are messaged directly with their first name and feedback is provided by both the users and *LLY*.

Figure 9 Negative Facebook Comments (Living Like You, 2015c)



The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook comment thread. The first comment is from a user with a greyed-out name, stating: "These sites are such a joke , it feels like they are making a joke of MS and what we go thru. So sick of these sites." It is dated November 14, 2015 at 2:20am. A reply from "Living Like You" follows, dated November 16, 2015 at 5:23pm, saying: "Sorry to hear that, [redacted] This site is designed to support the global MS community. While we do our best, it still might not be for everyone. Feel free to message us with any additional feedback." A second comment from the same user is dated November 16, 2015 at 5:47pm and is marked as "Edited". It expresses appreciation for the response but criticizes the content as "wording" and "simple so easy way to fix" MS, mentioning "avacado" and "cure cancer symptoms". A final reply from "Living Like You" is dated November 20, 2015 at 4:18pm, with 1 like. It thanks the user for honesty and explains the site's focus on lifestyle advice and scientific content, stating the intent is never to overpromise.

Whether a similar campaign would work for other pharmaceutical companies depends on the disease area, nevertheless a patient centric approach is the future of disease awareness and communication. According to participant 4 it is important to,

“...listen to what the real needs of the patients are and we are going to deliver against those needs and we are not going to just do what makes us feel comfortable but are going to do what is needed.”

Participant 9 agrees and points out that, “we should be providing what patients want and not what we [pharmaceutical companies] think they want.” In order to break through in a crowded space, no matter the disease area, the campaign has to provide value, a unique platform that provides people content that they cannot find anywhere else and that they need to continue living their lives to the fullest. Pharmaceutical companies need to step out of their comfort zone and traditional PR executions, listen to the patient needs and develop campaigns targeted to their stakeholders needs rather than their own.

Conclusion

PR has and always will play a vital role in relationship building with stakeholders. It remains true, that corporations will have the most power and if they exercise this to benefit themselves, using PR tactics, it can be harmful for a stakeholder or society as a whole. Nevertheless, this is outweighed by the benefit that PR can have on society, especially in the healthcare sector. There is a need for PR to aid communication tactics in order for necessary health and wellbeing information to be shared with the public. It must be considered that without the pharmaceutical industry, the healthcare business would not be thriving like today and diseases that were active 20 years ago possibly have a cure or treatment today. PR should remain to be a need for society, especially in the healthcare sector as it can be productive and addresses societal problems (24). It is crucial for the pharmaceutical sector’s reputation to communicate the good that they are doing for society and to explain to the public how their business is structured, by for example providing reasoning for their pricing structure.

It can be concluded that the public has a negative view towards healthcare PR. The data that was collected throughout the semi-structured interviews revealed that 100% of the respondents agreed that the reputation of the pharmaceutical industry was negative. In addition, 70% of the respondents said that PR as a sector also had a negative connotation, which is line with the research done by Keenan (20), Henderson (21), Bienkov (22), Coombs & Holladay (1) who believed that the media was also largely at fault for the misperception of PR within the public.

The case study *Living Like You* is a prime example how a PR campaign can have a positive influence on healthcare communication. The multi-awarded campaign showed positive and reactive responses towards consumers online. In addition, during the semi-structured interviews, 70% of the respondents agreed that PR could have a possible influence on a patient’s wellbeing. In addition, research and discussions with experts revealed that one of the most famous PR health campaigns remains to be the HIV/AIDS campaign from the 1980s, which used successful scare tactics to ensure safe sexual behaviour. With recent public health budget cuts and a lack of focus on the subject, experts are seeing that the rise of HIV is possible, partially due to the lack of awareness and communication. *Living Like You* can be considered to have accomplished a positive change towards the MS community. The content provided on the website and social media platforms are relevant, unique and patient-focused. When asking the interview respondents about the campaign, the majority believed that it had a positive impact with its community.

Due to the fact that the pharmaceutical industry is a multi-layered landscape, where different and sometimes-competing players manage communication it can lead to a lack of coordination and ineffective communication, which further strains the sector’s reputation. Therefore, it should be advised to the pharmaceutical industry to ensure the following:

- ✓ Ensure transparency and honesty; the pharmaceutical industry needs to be aware

of the previous scandals that shadowed the sector and react by ensuring up-most honesty and transparency during their day-to-day communication

- ✓ Patient centric approach; in the future, pharmaceutical industries should focus more on the patient's needs and listen to what they need in order to provide value driven content
- ✓ Sector wide collaboration; as a whole sector it could be advised that pharmaceutical companies come together to develop a communication strategy to ensure the overall increase in their reputation and communicate the value that they provide to society
- ✓ Walk the talk; ensure that what is being said is also shown in the way that the company acts as a whole
- ✓ Education; it is key for society, the sector and HCPs alike to be continuously educated on the newest treatment developments or general disease awareness
- ✓ Push the limits; despite the regulatory and legal framework that binds the pharmaceutical industry, it is key to push boundaries, get creative and ensure that patient's needs are in the forefront of the business.

As participant 7 pointed out

“It is about collaborating with patients, it is about showing investment in them and showing a real commitment in wanting to change things and helping them rather than just selling a particular drug.”

Furthermore it can be argued, and participant 9 also mentioned this, that the term PR might be interchangeable with general communication. This might be true and should be further researched by scholars, but it can be concluded for this paper that the key to successful communication, similar to the *Living Like You* campaign is for companies to push boundaries, listen to the needs of patients and provide value driven content. Indeed, PR is just a tool, and a tool can be misused, but either way, PR remains to be a necessity to ensure a mutual relationship with stakeholders and to maintain a functioning and healthy society. The majority of interview respondents (80%) believed that PR remains to be a necessity in healthcare communication, especially in the pharmaceutical industry.

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