

How to combat medical misinformation with a sound content strategy

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Abstract

In our post-truth era of media and communications, implementing a sound content strategy can help your message reach the right individuals. It is time for experts and healthcare companies to lead the change as ethical and credible sources of knowledge. In this article, we provide insights about the importance of content strategy, and how collectively, we as medical writers must use our expertise to communicate complex concepts and motivate a change of opinion.

Are we doing enough to fight back against widespread medical misinformation?

We live in an age where people are influenced by purposeful misinformation, “alternate facts”, and influencers’ articles across all media and communications. This deluge of “fake news” has delegitimised content for the general population to the point of meaninglessness. We have witnessed the rise and persistence of misinformation by popular social media influencers and celebrities, supported by biased or misappropriated scientific research.

What is content?

Every piece of information and communication is content, and can span multiple forms of media from written articles, social posts, videos, podcasts, infographics, and more.

Using content for marketing purposes is a common practice among companies, telling stories to attract and retain customers. One of the earliest examples of content strategy was pioneered by Johnson & Johnson in 1888.¹ They published a manual that thoroughly explained how to prevent infections using antiseptic methods and provided information on their available products.² This example illustrates the three core principles of content strategy. Through the widespread use of the manual, they raised awareness of the problem, created a desire to address the problem, and more importantly, directed people towards their products as a solution.

Successful marketing campaigns are not limited to selling healthcare related products or devices. Many public health initiatives have their roots in marketing. This is exemplified with the current marketing efforts in support of mental health.³ For many years, society had the erroneous perception that mental health issues could just be “dealt with” or people can “get over it”. In 2001, the Mental Health Foundation sought to challenge those stigmas and launched its first Mental Health Awareness Week in the UK. Breakthroughs made by this marketing campaign includes the recognition and support of mental health in the workplace. The public awareness garnered through the long running campaign has led to a commitment of £2.3 billion a year for mental health services by 2023/24 from the NHS.³

Why does strategy matter?

Content strategy

A guiding definition of content strategy is the planning and management of all



forms of media and communications for a specific project or purpose. The project can span from a single journal article, product ad campaign, public relations for a company, or organisations for chronic disease. The current need for many healthcare companies and organisations, is to establish trust, build awareness, and provide a clear action for the consumer to take.

Having a sound strategy clears a path for your message.

Content strategy includes identification of the problem, defining the communication goals, identifying the audience you need to reach, and planning all of the communications required to achieve the objective. This may seem like a major oversimplification, but these are the core

principles to keep in mind as a medical writer.

The power of information

A medical, scientific, or clinical background and training is essential to content strategy and writing. Medical writers are in a unique position to understand the complexities of the problem at hand and strategise the types of content required to tackle the problem. Our core knowledge and innate ability to think critically are required





to clearly and accurately convey our message. The challenge is that we must hone our skills to tell a compelling story that resonates with our audience and gives them a reason to believe the science.

Some of us might wonder how can people believe things that were proven wrong by science so long ago, or how can certain bad advice be taken as ‘gospel truth’ when scientific research is at our fingertips. There is an abundance of scientific data in the literature, but these are hidden away from the typical lay-person with publisher paywalls and confusing jargon. For all good research out there, most people don’t see anything beyond bad science reporting in news headlines. Another challenge, no matter what our backgrounds are and how rational and logical we think ourselves, is that research shows that people make decisions primarily using emotions, and then use logic to back up those decisions,⁴ in what is referred to as confirmation bias. That is why it is important to emphasise that the role of the medical writer is to bring the crucial information out and make a meaningful connection with your intended audience.

Making a difference as a medical writer

The typical role of a medical writer may vary, but

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at its core, you are an educator to groups of potential decision-makers. The scale of decisions made by your audience is wide-ranging, which could include healthcare professionals like doctors, nurses, and scientists, or those outside of the clinical sector with industry business unit members, patient advocacy members, and the general public. Ultimately, you will be in charge of ensuring the message is clear and understood by each of these individuals. Your work informs everyone, whether it is an individual’s choice to get a vaccine, updating a hospital about the latest best clinical practices, helping venture capitalists invest in start-up healthcare companies, or brief legislative committees that are forming new public health policies.

The guiding principle is to never “dumb it down”. We aim to distil the core meaning of the principles of science to build trust and understanding. It remains crucial that you know your audience and can tailor your message to them, without distorting the facts. If you know your audience has a low degree of literacy or low technical fluency, don’t overcomplicate your message to reach them. No matter how technologically advanced media has become, building trust as a voice of knowledge remains a core tenant of medical writing.

With medical content strategy, we must also

remember to adhere to our ethical code and turn down or steer away from creating more misinformation. When it comes to content development, you may feel pressured to fabricate or exaggerate claims about the efficacy of certain products. Part of medical writing is to stand up for the scientific principles and not editorialise or stylise the data. This challenge has grown as you often must be prepared to fact-check sources and root out any potential agenda-driven biases that are inherent to the study design or source of funding. A good content strategy leverages your judgement on the validity of the scientific information and will screen out poor or deceitful sources.

Another key aspect of content strategy is for the most part, you are working on a two-way communication platform. Be mindful of what many of your audience members are saying and don’t hesitate to devise strategies that open direct engagement. You have the unique opportunity to understand at an individual level of needs and can help bridge any gaps in understanding. These can include accounting for having a respondent in social media posts, direct messages, and how to liaise with medical, legal, and regulatory personnel in the industry.

The future of content strategy in healthcare

People are weary of fake news and perhaps post-truth has its days numbered. There is a growing sentiment out there for the truth and fair representation of facts. We must always strive for

transparency and honesty when developing our content. Content strategy and medical writing are about meaningful, understandable, and compelling messages to inform and persuade the lay audiences.

Overall, it must be stated that: You are a champion of knowledge in the medical field, you can be an advocate for changing practices, and you are an educator of scientific and medical communications for many decision-makers.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and not necessarily shared by his or her employer, or EMWA.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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