

Reporting Medicine In Australia



Media Attitudes to the Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Industry

The media acts as an important filter through which opinion-shaping information is disseminated to the key stakeholders of the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry.

Senior executives across the sector recognise the importance of the media filter; however they may possess varying levels of insight into what the media really think about their products, their companies and their industry.

What does the media really know about pharmaceutical and healthcare companies and the environment in which they operate? What do journalists concerned with healthcare reporting want from these companies and what do they see as the challenges facing the industry?

For the first time in Australia, quantitative research has examined the attitudes of leading healthcare journalists, news directors and editors towards pharmaceutical and healthcare companies in an effort to identify and quantify the issues that impact and influence their reporting.

Ethical Strategies engaged leading research firm Galaxy Research to establish and measure not just media attitudes to the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry but the factors that influence how, when and why the media reports on the industry, its companies and products.

Almost 65 media representatives from medical trade publications, metropolitan print, radio and television outlets responded to an online questionnaire which sought to establish what members of the media know, what they think and how they view the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry.

The results of this research provide clear insights into how pharmaceutical and healthcare companies can effectively communicate with the media and understand how the industry is perceived by these gatekeepers of public opinion.

Ethical Strategies is pleased to provide an overview of the key research findings with the objective of ensuring pharmaceutical and healthcare companies better understand the issues they face in dealing with journalists.

Should you wish to discuss this important research or have any details further explained please contact John Morton, Managing Director of Ethical Strategies on 02 8904 7300 or jmorton@ethicalstrategies.com.au



Ethical Strategies
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Reporting Medicine In Australia: Key Findings



Sourcing News

The primary sources of information used by reporters to keep abreast of newsworthy developments with medications and healthcare products are 'medical professionals and researchers' (58%); 'media releases by companies' (50%); 'government announcements' (50%); and 'published clinical studies' (48%).

Interestingly almost three-quarters of medical trade reporters list published clinical studies as a primary source of information for reporting in their publications. Also of note was the fact that only 17% of journalists located health stories using international wire services.

Barriers To Reporting

The commercial interest of companies was considered the major barrier to reporting on medications and healthcare products by 84% of reporters. Difficulty sourcing balanced information was also a significant barrier with 64% nominating it as an issue. The need for patient case studies was highlighted as a significant issue by TV reporters, reinforcing the importance of this media relations ingredient.

Media Liaison – The Good, The Bad & The Ugly

Almost 45% of respondents 'always' or 'mostly' find pharmaceutical and healthcare companies easy to deal with in terms of providing information and company spokespeople. A further 34% claim this is 'sometimes' the case. Journalists who regularly report on healthcare issues were most likely to rate the experience positively.

There exists, however, concerning sentiment among nine out of 10 journalists that pharmaceutical companies regularly manipulate or suppress negative news to maximise sales.

Of similar concern is disagreement that information provided by PR agencies on behalf of pharmaceutical and healthcare companies is balanced, factual and newsworthy – almost 40% of reporters believe this is rarely or never the case.

Building Trust

The level of trust journalists believe the pharmaceutical sector has earned in Australia varies greatly, with around a third regarding the industry as trustworthy, a third regarding it to be untrustworthy and a third claiming it is neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy.

The level of trust decreases proportionally with the amount of contact journalists have with pharmaceutical and healthcare companies. The more contact, the less trust.

It comes as a surprise then to find that the pharmaceutical industry was rated second behind the automotive industry and ahead of telecommunications, banking, alcohol manufacturers and real estate sectors according to how trustworthy each industry was perceived to be.

More than 40% of all journalists believe that fewer restrictions on the information provided by pharmaceutical companies would serve to increase trust in the industry as a whole. This increases to 49% among consumer reporters, with 30% unsure of the merit of this suggestion.



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Giving Back

More than 60% of journalists are unaware of any philanthropic undertakings by pharmaceutical companies in Australia. While 82% of medical trade journalists are aware of goodwill initiatives undertaken by companies, the vast majority of consumer reporters are ignorant to the philanthropic efforts of individual companies and the industry as a whole.

Profits vs Patients

As media reporting would suggest, 87% of journalists believe pharmaceutical and healthcare companies are primarily concerned with profits. However, around a third of respondents also agree that pharmaceutical companies are concerned with improving patients' health. These journalists recognise that making money and improving patient outcomes can coexist.

Adding Value

79% of respondents believe Australians receive good value for their medication through the PBS. Furthermore, 76% agree that pharmaceutical and healthcare companies add significant value to the Australian economy through employment and research and development investment.



Pharma Interaction and Sponsorship

The majority of reporters believe pharma-doctor interaction serves to help patients some (61%) or most (27%) of the time, while most agree sponsorship of patient support and advocacy groups helps advance the needs of patients mostly (23%) or sometimes (51%).

Code of Confusion

Only 41% of respondents successfully named Medicines Australia as the body that applies the code of conduct which regulates the marketing and promotion of prescription pharmaceutical products in Australia. More than half identified the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) as the overseer of the industry's code of conduct.


When asked if the code allows companies to make promotional claims about prescription medications in announcements to the consumer media, 31% of respondents said yes, a quarter were unsure and the remainder said no.

Close to half the respondents believe that pharmaceutical companies should have restrictions placed on the information they proactively provide to consumer media. Broadcast journalists were the strongest opponents of these restrictions. As one journalist stated: "I find the system restricting pharma companies to seeking publicity on only two occasions (availability and PBS) to be contrived and an anomaly to the normal news cycle."

Journalistic 'Apartheid' – Consumer vs Trade

The majority of reporters are opposed to differences in the information that is allowed to be provided to trade vs consumer media. It is largely the consumer media (65%) that is opposed to this journalistic 'apartheid', with the vast majority of medical trade journalists (71%) wanting the status quo maintained.





The communications environment surrounding the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry is complex and multifaceted. There are a myriad of restrictions imposed by industry codes of conduct, legal obligations and internal company protocols, not to mention the agendas of media outlets and campaigns of advocacy groups.

It takes skilled communications practitioners to navigate this minefield in order to successfully influence, educate and inform, not just the media filter, but all industry stakeholders.

Ethical Strategies takes pride in its ability to maintain good relationships with journalists, producers, presenters and other media representatives while delivering strong results for its clients.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with individuals who wish to discuss the findings of *Reporting Medicine in Australia* or how Ethical Strategies may assist in achieving their organisation's communications and public relations objectives.

Please contact John Morton, Managing Director of Ethical Strategies to arrange a meeting or to discuss your communications needs.



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