

Rome, May 11th 2023

## THE ROLE OF KEY OPINION LEADERS (KOL) IN HEALTHCARE AND PHARMA COMMUNICATION

In healthcare and pharma communication -like in other sectors - Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) are becoming a very important marketing tool.

According to a recent survey by RxVantage, 56% of the surveyed HCPs found that interviews with KOLs had more impact than those with other companies related to Life Science.

### *Key Opinion Leaders: the new healthcare communication influencers*

In the Health sector, **Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) are defined as clinicians, experts, scientific researchers having experience and significant roles acknowledged** by the pharmaceutical industry in specific therapeutic areas, who can influence doctors' and patients' ideas, opinions and behaviors.

As recalled by an article in *Nature Review Rheumatology* ("Key opinion leaders – a critical perspective", 2021), the definition of opinion leaders' role dates back to the **two-step flow of communication theory**, conceived in the 1940s by the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. According to this model, it is precisely opinion leaders who shape the ideas of most individuals, re-processing the messages disseminated by the mass media. A decade later, **the concept of opinion leader has been extended to the field of medicine**, starting from a study commissioned by Pfizer (*Medical innovation: a diffusion study, which later became a book*), identifying the elements that influenced doctors who prescribed a new drug. According to Pharma Marketing Network, today «*drug companies typically engage key opinion leaders early in the drug development process for advocacy and feedback*».

In the field of marketing and communication, alongside the KOL, the DOL (Digital Opinion Leader) and the KOI (Key Online Influencer) are other figures that have emerged: healthcare professionals who are usually particularly active on digital channels, with a consistent online activity and a community of followers made up of insiders, colleagues and interested parties.



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In some cases, the roles of these two figures might converge with that of KOLs: besides being present on portals, medical scientific journals and industry events, **Key Opinion Leaders can be true internet influencers**, central on social networks or other platforms, their influence goes beyond their own circle, reaching the public, patients, stakeholders, professionals from other fields.

### *Influencer marketing with Key Opinion Leaders in Healthcare*

Even in an extremely regulated sector such as healthcare, influencer marketing can be done, in compliance with the [rules of healthcare communication](#). But how can a KOL be involved?

- An influencer marketing strategy for the Key Opinion Leader within a broader content marketing plan may **involve an expert in creating original content targeting HCPs** along three lines:
- **Design, production, and finalization:** in this regard, it is essential to draw up an editorial plan that will map the topics of interest and the most functional formats for the different types of content, with an editorial team supporting the KOL: scientific articles, infographics, commentaries, informative videos, and tutorials. The editorial team will endeavor to optimize the expert's output, adapting it to various formats, and finalizing it so that it has the most effective online visibility.
- **Distribution:** content produced by KOLs or with their support can be distributed on specific channels depending on the topic and target, such as portals dedicated to clinicians, but also newsletters and social networks. For example, from an article or a video interview it is possible to extract useful information for a LinkedIn post, a channel increasingly used by doctors and specialists to keep up to date on professional trends and do networking. In this case, the contents must be in line with the ministerial guidelines on health communication.
- **Monitoring:** the digital environment allows to establish engagement and other KPIs regarding this content to measure the actual effectiveness of the strategy.

**KOLs or DOLs** can also be used for **communication activities targeting patients**, to increase their awareness on specific topics, promoting prevention and appropriate information. When

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the target changes, so do the rules and channels. The most suitable social networks might be Facebook and Instagram, the formats could be live broadcasting with experts for Q&A sessions or informative video pills to promote a new food supplement or raise awareness about risk factors or pathologies.

*Identifying Key Opinion Leaders for healthcare and pharma*

Key Opinion Leaders play a valuable role in the **healthcare communication** of many companies in the Healthcare and Pharma scenario. Their experience guarantees authoritativeness to the message that will be disseminated to the medical community and beyond: scientific medical content, a disease awareness campaign, the launch of a new drug or the dissemination of new therapeutic options.

**Strategies aimed to identify Key Opinion Leaders in the Healthcare and Pharma sector** vary according to the type of professional to be hired.

The main KOL scouting activities include:

- Monitoring medical literature, such as articles and citations on bibliographic databases such as PubMed
- Speaker notes at conferences and events regarding the therapeutic area of interest
- Identifying leaders within scientific associations, bodies and committees

It is also possible to identify Key Opinion Leaders by monitoring the hashtags that are most relevant in terms of interest, online conversations on topics, blogs and platforms specifically for physicians, so as to identify the most active and in target personalities. Additionally, **influencer marketing platforms** allow you to identify, analyze and compare the different profiles.

When KOLs are part of a strategy, they can convert and therefore increase the company's results. This trend creates an alternative to traditional testimonials. Underlying content marketing in pharma and healthcare is the need for useful and valuable content: **the acknowledged expertise of the appropriate KOL will add weight and relevance** to content for professionals who require information to regularly perform their job. Moreover, the



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public can be directly involved in the relationship with the KOL, interacting constructively. Their success is also determined by their ability to relate and involve.

**Polk&Union**, the digital marketing agency specialized in Healthcare and Pharma creates strategies that include activities involving KOLs from the Healthcare scenario to reach different audiences, selecting the most effective integrated plans.

[Contact the Polk&Union Health Division experts to find out more](#)

### *Informations about Polk&Union*

**Polk&Union Digital Communication Agency** was born in San Francisco, California, in 2007 and was named after the crossroads of Polk and Union streets, where its first head office was located. Innovation and internationality are Polk&Union's distinctive traits. With the cross-cultural mindset that is the backbone of its DNA, and the know-how it acquired in the United States – first in San Francisco and then from 2019 in Seattle – in 2011 Polk&Union landed in Rome, Italy, where the agency became an established reference point within the Italian market, supporting companies, organizations and associations in 360-degree digital communications within the B2B and B2C sector. Its main services include: Integrated Marketing Communication, Content, Digital Media and Digital Technology, together with those specific to the **Polk&Union Health Division** for the Healthcare & Pharma.

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