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Plotting The Path For Pharma To Maintain New-Found Trust

Drugmakers Have A Key Role To Combat Disinformation

by **Kevin Grogan**

Trustworthiness in the pharmaceutical industry has settled since its peaks during the COVID-19 pandemic but it can move upwards again if companies assume responsibility to inform on wider issues, according to experts at Edelman.

Having (briefly) enjoyed a surge in reputation during the pandemic, the public's view of big pharma has slipped a little but there are encouraging signs that it is unlikely to fall back to the bad old days when trust seemed to be in very short supply, according to the latest Edelman Trust Barometer report.

Well qualified to discuss the industry's reputation are Carolyn Paul, who heads up Edelman's health and life sciences business in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and Courtney Gray Haupt, her counterpart in the US. They have decades of pharma experience between them and been analyzing surveys for the annual report since 2015.

Back then, Paul told *Scrip*, "trust in pharma was around the low 50% mark, which I used to find deeply depressing, because it would be in the middle of the

Key Takeaways

- The latest Edelman report shows trust in pharma at 62% on average globally, around 10% higher than in January 2021 and second now to technology in terms of trusted sector
- The public wants pharma companies to address issues such as climate change and pollution, not just healthcare

pack of all of the industry sectors. It would be nowhere near as trusted as tech, and while not quite as bad as some of the others, pharma would be below the likes of the automotive industry and food and beverages."

- With misinformation seen as factor in the erosion of life expectancy in the US, onus is on drugmakers to educate

Then, "the pandemic landed on our laps and we had this amazing surge up to 71%," as lockdowns started, Paul pointed *out*. However, by the January 2021 Barometer report, it had plunged back down to 52%, "but that data was actually fielded in the October and November of 2020 just before the first vaccines started to be delivered."

Reputation 'Way Better' Now

She said: "There was this huge rise of expectation where everybody was looking to pharma to solve the problem, and then came the plunge, but gradually, it's risen over the last two years." The latest report shows trust in pharma at 62% on average globally, "which is way better than it was and second now to technology in terms of trusted sector."

Gray Haupt noted that "it wasn't too many years ago that healthcare was second from the bottom, only above the financial sector when they were going through all sorts of challenges." She added that it was useful to look at "microshifts in trust" when considering pharma, where the industry was "suddenly having to deal with all kinds of things outside of innovation, it was supply chain, manufacturing, all of the government processes and all of the different players involved that led into that public perception of why the vaccines were not coming faster."

In terms of country findings from the Barometer report covering the year ended March 2023, the UK trust score for pharma of 60% "was not too bad as we're generally quite cynical," Paul quipped. In the US, the figure dipped by 1% to 54% and Gray Haupt stated that "there was this decline over the past year for trust in everything. It's just really where the American psyche is right now."

Still, pharma is more trusted than the government and media across the Atlantic, she said, and it is on a level with non-governmental organizations. The situation is "much better than several years ago [and] we should see a move from neutral to trusted territory if the pharma companies continue to take these trust-making actions on board."

This took the discussion into the area of what used to be known as corporate social responsibility, although environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) is now *de rigueur*, Paul smiled. "I think most pharmas are doing some of those things but I think clearly what the data shows is that people want to see more, they want healthcare companies to address things

like climate change and pollution."

She noted that "it's not their main business at the moment, of course, but my take would be that pharma needs to do more and probably needs to communicate a lot more about it. Pharma tends to be quite conservative in talking about itself, understandably given that it's a highly regulated industry, but there is perhaps an argument for doing more."

Gray Haupt said that it links to "this widening definition from the public of what they're considering is health now. It goes beyond the traditional R&D and access conversation, people are looking at more of those societal issues." While noting that "partnering has become an overused expression in the past few years, it was a key lesson of the pandemic," and she pointed out that while pharma was now working more closely with governments, NGOs and indeed with each other, "for these actions going forward, it has to become more of constant muscle memory. Nobody can solve these issues on their own, and I think there's an acceptance of that, but it is important to show that the bigger plays are not pilots but consistent programming."

Paul pointed out that "there's a data point showing people want to see healthcare companies helping to rebuild trust in the ecosystem writ large. They are basically asking pharma to get more involved and while pharma companies maybe slightly hesitant, it's come through loud and clear that the general public wants them to take a role."

While pharma had been happy to take a back seat for a myriad of reasons, the profile of the industry has ballooned and the general public is well aware of these companies. The vaccine rollout in particular turned [AstraZeneca PLC](#), [Pfizer Inc.](#) and [Moderna, Inc.](#) into household names.

Familiarity Breeds Trust

Paul said: "People say familiarity breeds contempt but actually it doesn't. Familiarity breeds trust and year after year, our data shows that people trust the institutions they know and are familiar with. Pharma up until a few years ago was largely unknown and everybody now knows what AstraZeneca is and what it does."

She agreed with *Scrip* that "in the UK, there is a certain fondness for AstraZeneca. It is based here and there is a feeling that the company did the right thing, the majority of people in this country were vaccinated with the AstraZeneca vaccine at least once. We don't have any data on that but I would imagine that was probably purely COVID-related. How that carries over and how that affects other companies, we'll have to wait and see."

It was a similar scenario in the US, Gray Haupt agreed. "Who'd heard of Moderna outside of our little world before? I'd be walking to the mailbox and my neighbor would start talking to me about Phase III clinical trials. It still blows my mind a little bit but this is a great thing."

Pharma needs to move up from its participation in local community projects, " something that everybody does," and present its position clearly on the bigger picture, she said. "We have a data point where people were asked about barriers to healthcare and the lack of information and cost were on a par."

Only last month, US Food and Drug Administration commissioner Robert Califf repeated his concerns that misinformation was a major factor in the erosion of life expectancy in the country. Gray Haupt noted: "That's a huge statement and we have to be making sure the right information is getting through to everybody and how receptive people will be to who they are hearing it from," she said. "That's going to be a game changer, not just on vaccination but on all kinds of preventive care going forward, and that's where pharma companies with all of their partners cannot just educate but serve up and delivering all kinds of information with even more transparency."

On transparency, Paul spoke with approval on the openness with which companies talked about their vaccine development programs but the Barometer noted that with the majority of people nowadays only engaging with health information "once or twice," more is needed. "We've just come out of a pandemic and you have people saying 'that's done now, we don't have to worry about that anymore'," so there's a lot more engagement to be had. The doors were opened and I don't want to see them start to close again."

Trusted Source

Edelman's data indicates that restrictions enacted to combat the pandemic are, to this day, perceived to be affecting people's health. Paul noted that "globally, only inflation is seen to be having a more negative impact." Another interesting element from the report suggested that pharma should not overlook its role as an employer, Paul said. "People trust the people close to them and 'my employer' came through as the most trusted source of health information. Pharma employs huge numbers of people, so there's also that role as well," she claimed, adding that media and government "are both not just distrusted, but seen as divisive as well."

A finding from the report that "I was slightly depressed by," Paul added, was the high percentage of people who said they'd lost confidence in their own ability to make decisions about healthcare for themselves and their family. "I thought that was really sad and surprising at a time when people were deluged with information about health, maybe it's because of all the disinformation."

On a positive note, Gray Haupt highlighted a section of the report which showed that for lower income groups who reported having high levels of trust in the health system, "it neutralized economic disparities and they had the same levels of preventive care and vaccination rates as the higher income individuals. If we can work with all stakeholders, that's a gap we can actually close."

For more on the report, click here <http://www.edelman.com/trust/trust-barometer>