

Within3



Digital Opinion Leaders: Where, Who, and How

How life science teams can achieve their targets through improved digital opinion leader selection.

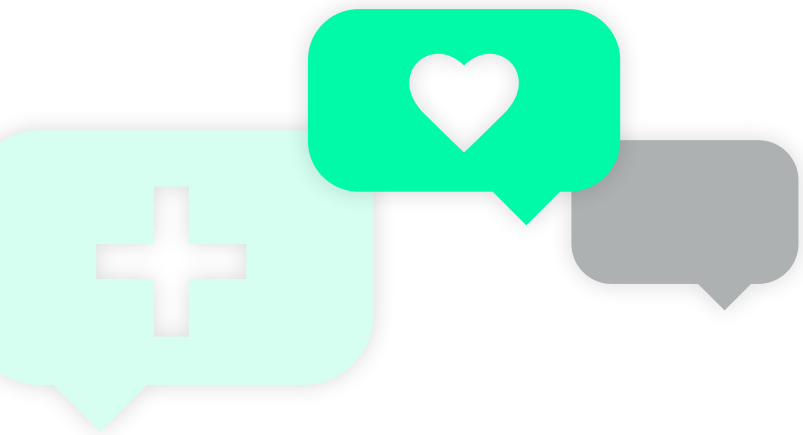
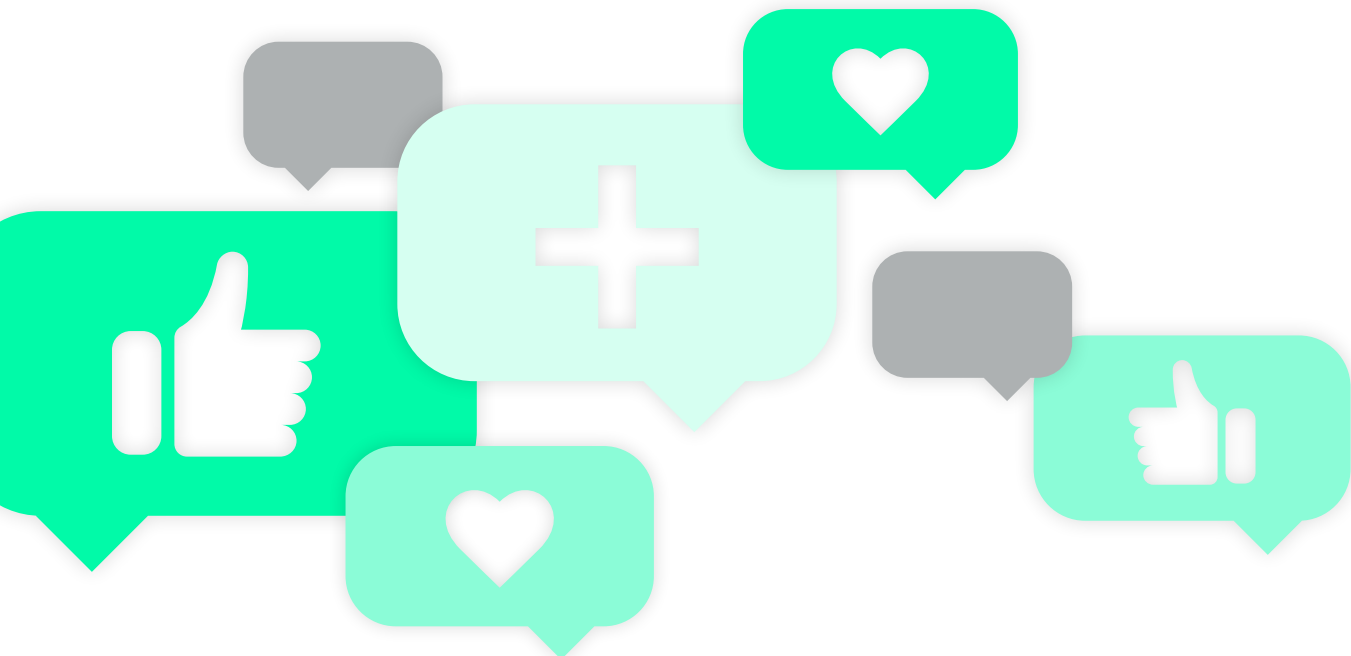


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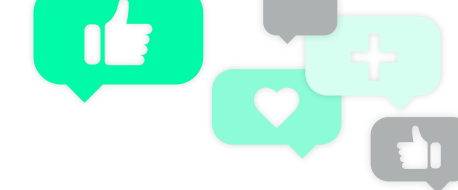
Introduction

Life science and pharma companies have long looked to key opinion leaders (KOLs) for insights and advice. KOLs are highly respected and highly influential within their often large networks of peers. They are usually researchers, physicians, or other healthcare providers (HCPs) and extremely knowledgeable about their particular areas of expertise – it's not surprising that the industry has recognized and embraced their value as strategic partners.



83%

of HCPs are likely to prescribe a new drug if it's endorsed by an opinion leader. - [MMM ONLINE](#)



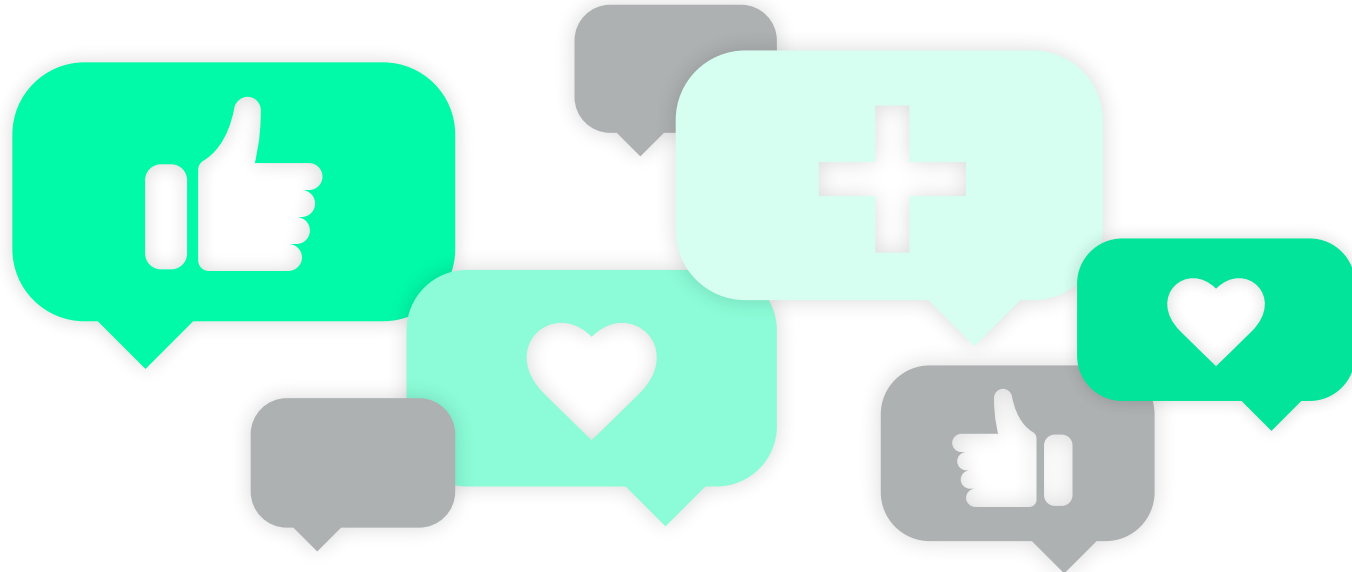
KOLs are generally easy enough to identify – they're speaking at conferences, publishing their research in medical journals and serving on boards. But over the last few years, the pharma industry has increasingly moved to occupy virtual spaces, and the thought leaders have set up shop here, too. This new breed of influencers are known as digital opinion leaders (DOLs), and they aren't quite as easy to recognize as their traditional forebears.

Let's explore the phenomenon of the digital opinion leader: who they are, how they came about, where to find them and how to work with them.




What is a digital opinion leader?

There is a lot of overlap between traditional KOLs and DOLs. In fact, DOLs have been described as '[KOLs on a digital platform](#)' – you're most likely to find them on sites such as LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter and Tik Tok, creating content including blogs, webcasts and podcasts. Like KOLs, DOLs have strong scientific knowledge and an engaged, dedicated following. They're respected and influential – when they talk, their peers tend to listen. And like KOLs, they're thought leaders with a diverse range of roles, skills and backgrounds.



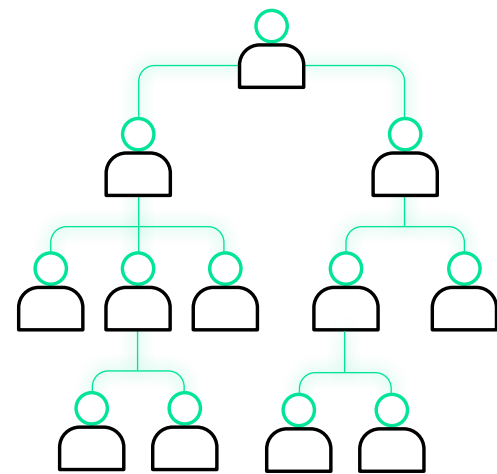
But to think of DOLs as simply 'KOLs on a digital platform' is to oversimplify slightly. Unlike KOLs, you're unlikely to find digital opinion leaders frequenting the usual conference and publication circuits. Instead they maintain an active digital presence – creating and sharing content, engaging with their audience, and disseminating information. They're like social media influencers in many respects, but they aren't motivated by self-promotion. Instead, their goal is to evolve the science, contribute to the discussion and inform and educate their peers. They're true thought leaders, and that's why their opinions are so widely sought and trusted.



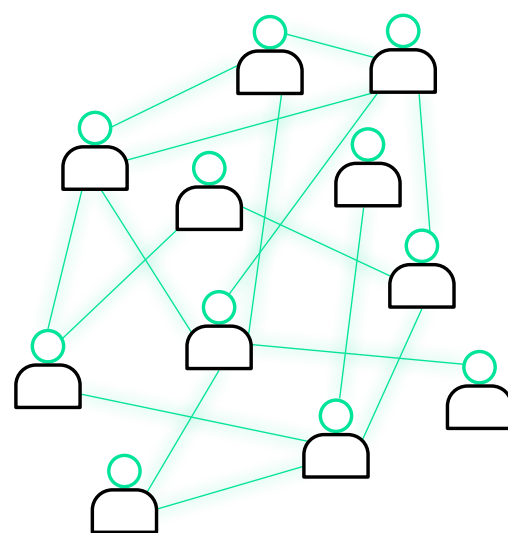
DOLs aren't necessarily always healthcare professionals. Instead, they might be **researchers** or **patient advocates** whose opinions are just as valued by the community.

The identity of a DOL might surprise you – due to their personal investment in a condition or clinical area, some non-HCP patient advocates are better-versed in the latest research than even physicians and clinicians.

KOL Network Model



DOL Network Model



There's one final but crucial differentiator between KOLs and DOLs. Where KOLs might have a sphere of influence that extends to a core group of conference attendees or journal subscribers, DOLs have truly global reach. Social media and other digital platforms have democratized information to such an extent that DOLs can have followers across multiple continents and numerous countries, with a community that extends to many thousands of people. They say that every healthcare professional is within three degrees of separation from one another, and because of their mastery of digital channels, DOLs are perfectly positioned to tap into those vast peer networks. It's that powerful outreach that makes partnering with DOLs so desirable.



DOLs and diversity

Digital media has democratized content, putting the tools to create and disseminate information into the hands of the masses. The result has been the promotion of more diverse voices – a trend we've seen among DOLs, too.

Where traditional KOLs generally came from similar backgrounds and had largely similar life experiences, DOLs can be from anywhere – any nation, any background, and from a diverse range of fields and specialisms. As a result, the industry can benefit from the innovative points of view of a diverse range of voices, and unlock insights from sources they perhaps hadn't considered or even noticed before.



COVID-19 and the move to virtual spaces

The pharma industry has been in the process of migrating to virtual spaces for some time, but this process has been rapidly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost overnight, in-person contact – be it via clinical visits, conferences, board meetings or otherwise – posed a risk to patients and HCPs alike. The industry had to pivot quickly, and virtual engagement platforms became a crucial lifeline to keep trials, studies and meetings going.

Suddenly, almost everything was happening in the virtual space – and that included the way patients and HCPs engaged with the wider industry. In 2020, Facebook engagement with biopharma brands doubled, while on Twitter the growth was even greater. According to [Socialbakers](#), Twitter interactions for top biopharma brands increased by 255% in 2020.

As COVID-19 drove us all indoors, the world turned to screens for information, community and collaboration. Digital opinion leaders were ready to step into the limelight, and they had a captive audience waiting for them when they did. And it's worth remembering that this isn't a trend that will disappear as soon as the pandemic recedes. The life sciences – like the world in general – has been embracing digital revolution for a long time. The pandemic merely accelerated things.

97% of executives say the pandemic accelerated digital transformation. - [FORBES](#)

DOLs and the invisible college

In the 1600s, a group of disenfranchised scientists created the 'Invisible College' as a means of sharing knowledge and bringing a measure of rigor to the scientific disciplines. In effect, they created the peer review process we still rely on today.

The idea of the invisible college is alive and well amongst DOLs. They're the net-works behind the networks – a community of supportive, like-minded peers and experts who aren't affiliated with any one organization or authority, motivated by the search for knowledge and scientific discovery. They're the hidden decision-makers and influencers whose connections have a huge impact on the industry – and it's all happening behind the scenes.

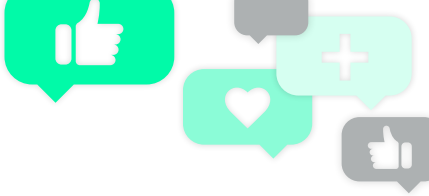
How to identify digital opinion leaders



You won't necessarily find the names of digital opinion leaders in the indexes of medical journals or on the speaker panels of national conferences. Even a significant proportion of traditional KOLs don't publish, so if you're looking for opinion leaders in the same old places again and again, you're going to be drawing on the same small pool of information as your competitors.

So how can you find these elusive thought leaders? Social platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube have algorithms designed to connect people with their interests. So if you're interested in a particular therapeutic area or research topic, and follow accounts related to that topic and interact with related posts, the algorithm will suggest other accounts to follow. Often, these will be the accounts with the most followers, the most engagement, and the most frequent posts.

However, many companies in the pharma space are playing catch-up when it comes to social media. A historical reticence to engage in conversation via social channels – coupled with the fear of falling afoul of internal compliance teams – has meant social media uptake has been slow. Furthermore, social media algorithms are imperfect. They're good at revealing how often an account is engaged with, how many followers it has, or how often it posts, but not how reliable its posts are or how trusted it is by followers.



There’s a variety of digital channels where your ideal DOLs might operate, each with a different audience, reach, and style of content. Teams are starting to overcome their historical reticence and use social listening, with comprehensive [network analytics platforms](#) helping to identify the hidden influencers within a research sphere or disease community. With the right tools in place, you can build a map of an entire community and learn who has the relevant expertise and knowledge to suit your needs.



Often, the search for digital opinion leaders begins with building an engagement list of likely candidates, sometimes informed with the help of external data providers. But the last thing medical affairs and commercial teams need is to be sifting through a list of names without knowing whether the individuals whose impact really matters are actually there. The true DOLs within a particular disease community are usually small in number but big in influence. The trick is to look at all of the myriad relationships within a different community – how people interact, how the community is structured, who speaks and who listens. This way, you’re letting the community tell you who the influencers are, without prematurely excluding those who might have a previously [unexpected level of influence](#).

Risks to be mindful of when identifying DOLs

True digital opinion leaders build their reputations on scientific rigor and reliability, but not every influencer in the healthcare space is necessarily to be trusted. Here are some risk factors to be mindful of when looking to identify DOLs.

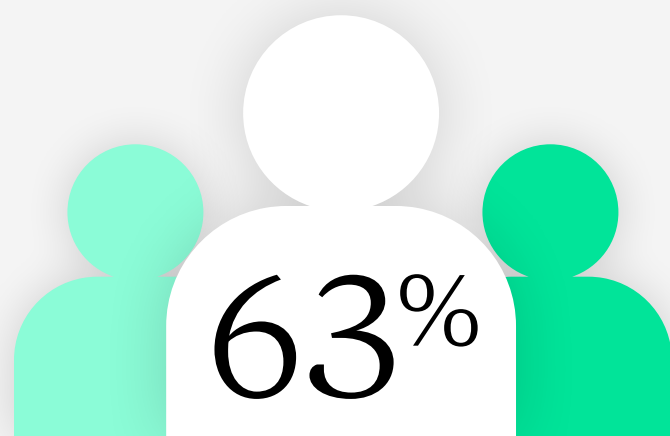
- 1 The digital world is largely unregulated. People can take to digital platforms and make claims without the usual checks and balances associated with the healthcare industry – particularly as not all DOLs necessarily have a scientific background.
- 2 The most influential people aren’t always the most trustworthy. Misinformation can spread quickly and gain a lot of traction in the digital space – we’ve seen this time and again throughout the COVID pandemic – and even bad actors can accumulate large, enthusiastic followings.
- 3 Influencers can step outside their specialisms. Without regulation, influencers who are experts in one particular field may begin commenting in areas where they have no expertise or training.

Before moving to engage a DOL, you need to be sure they’re a true digital opinion leader and not an unreliable source with a disproportionate sphere of influence.

How to engage digital opinion leaders

As mentioned earlier, DOLs are not generally motivated by self-promotion or self-aggrandizement. Some – like patient advocates – will be highly motivated to engage with pharma teams to raise awareness around their chosen field. Others might feel that working with certain companies doesn't necessarily sit well with their principles. In either case their abilities cannot be bought, so instead pharma companies that want to work with DOLs must first earn their trust.

To begin any kind of relationship with DOLs, you need to consolidate your own social media presence – or build one from scratch if you don't have one already. Most brands have their own social media accounts these days, but if you want to demonstrate your value to potential DOL partners then you need to be posting regularly, sharing thoughtful, relevant content and engaging with others within your community. By building an engaged, enthusiastic audience on your own channels, you're showing DOLs that you can offer them something in return. The relationship needs to be mutually beneficial.



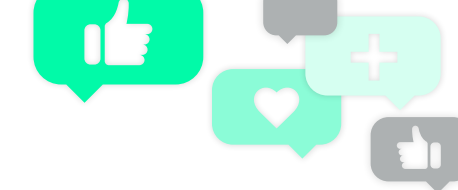
of patients choose one provider over another based on a strong online presence.- [DOCTOR.COM](https://www.doctor.com)



But social media is not the place to begin those initial conversations. Once you've identified your DOLs, the next step is to bring them into a [secure, compliant environment](#) where you can talk with complete confidentiality. Find out more about your DOLs and let them find out more about you – what's their particular area of specialization or how open are they to working with pharma companies. You might find that engaging digital opinion leaders is a more collaborative process than with traditional KOLs. By joining the discussion, you can earn their trust and cement your seat at the table. Opening and maintaining a dialogue with DOLs is a great way to build potentially lucrative relationships and to address misinformation.

Another big motivating factor for DOLs is the opportunity to collaborate and network with their peers – that's why they're active on digital platforms in the first place. So if they see your project as an opportunity to share information with like-minded peers, develop insights together and build new virtual networks, they're much more likely to want to engage.

It's also important to consider the kind of projects that are best suited for collaboration with DOLs. Brand-building projects are unlikely to be of interest to them. Instead, patient support or disease education projects and clinical trials are more likely to pique their interest. Remember what motivates them: furthering the science, ensuring better patient outcomes, getting the best new information to as many people as possible.



How to use digital opinion leaders

Once you've identified the DOLs in your disease community, earned their trust and engaged them in conversation, it's time to put their valuable knowledge and skills to good use. Here are just some of the ways DOLs can add value to your organization.



DOLs as moderators

DOLs make ideal moderators for asynchronous virtual work sessions. They're already plugged into the community and the conversation, and they're on top of the latest news and scientific trends. They can bring both the scientific credibility and the digital nous to maximize session engagement, and bring out unique insights from advisors.



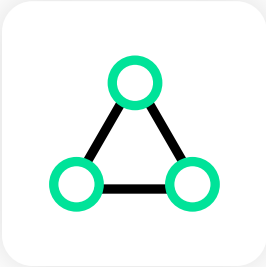
DOLs as panelists

Consider creating a panel of DOLs to engage through asynchronous sessions. You can use them as a way to monitor online sentiment from HCPs and patients about your brand, as a steering committee on best practice in online interactions, or as a sounding board for new digital initiatives and technologies. Having their knowledge and expertise on hand is extremely valuable for any organization in the process of digital transformation.



DOLs as content creators

Partnering with DOLs to create co-branded content is an ideal way to give your digital interactions additional reach and credibility. DOLs are expert content creators, so it pays to lean in to their expertise as a means of boosting your own content creation efforts – as well as plugging into their network of engaged followers.



DOLs as recruiters

DOLs can also use their influence and status to help you recruit patients for clinical trials or engagement programs. Their opinions carry a lot of weight, their networks spread far, and their followers trust them – helping you meet your clinical trial enrollment targets.



DOLs as experts

DOLs can unlock the kind of insights that manufacturers or pharma companies would seldom think of alone. In one recent example, a company was producing glucometers for use by children, but the product was proving unpopular. Insights provided by DOLs suggested that by painting the products bright blue and bright pink, they'd prove more popular with the target audience. Sometimes, a game-changing insight can be that simple.

Conclusion

Digital opinion leaders are not here to replace KOLs. In some instances, your traditional KOLs will already be transitioning to a more digital presence, while some DOLs will be similarly influential across more traditional media. Nonetheless, in an increasingly digital life science landscape, DOLs are here to stay and their impact on healthcare is only likely to increase. Savvy pharma and medical device companies should develop marketing and strategic plans that factor in digital opinion leaders now, or risk being left behind their competitors.



ABOUT WITHIN3

Within3 invented a better way for life science companies to get deeper insights and make faster decisions across the product development lifecycle. With the power to identify the right experts, effectively engage them, and quickly obtain actionable information, life science teams can close the insight gap and drive projects forward with confidence. Our insights management platform gives stakeholders the freedom to collaborate anytime, anywhere, on any device, plus practical tools to foster meaningful discussions, co-create and edit documentation, and rely on the power of AI to achieve faster and more accurate decision-making. With a dedicated client success team on every implementation, most Within3 projects achieve 100% stakeholder participation. To learn more and request a needs assessment and demo, visit www.within3.com.