POV

Oncology at SXSW:

Revolutionizing Care with Innovation, Empathy and AI

Executive Summary

SXSW 2025 offered a wealth of insights in the field of oncology and patient cancer care. Across the board, the intersection of innovation and urgency was made crystal clear. As scientific advancements rapidly evolve, oncology marketers face the challenge of communicating complex developments with clarity, humanity and speed. This year's key takeaways emphasize transforming sophisticated science 'talk' into compelling narratives, understanding the deep emotional and physical needs of patients at every stage of their journey, and leveraging AI technologies to elevate patient care. The following POV explores how oncology marketing can evolve to meet these demands.

LANDSCAPE OF ONCOLOGY MARKETING

Where Science, Empathy and Urgency Collide

The urgency of innovation echoed across every session at SXSW 2025, and nowhere is it more critical than in oncology. In a space where science moves faster than communication, we must do more than keep up. We must lead with clarity, empathy and conviction.

As Nicole Paulk, CEO of Siren Biotechnology, shared: "Viruses have claimed more lives than all wars combined, now we're using them to save lives." Her pioneering work in viral gene therapy, its origins rooted in oncology for aggressive brain cancers, reminds us: we are no longer creating medicines just for rare, well-studied mutations; we are engineering platforms for the world's most underserved diseases.

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Marketers must rise to this challenge, shaping complex science into credible, human stories — stories that must be told long before the science hits the clinic.

Credibility is not just about simplification of complex stories – it is about trust. In Moderna's session on restoring faith in science, one theme stood out: "We're not just in a health crisis, we're in a credibility crisis."

Oncology marketers must navigate the double burden of high science and growing public skepticism. This means activating expert voices, investing in education and bringing healthcare professionals (HCPs) and patients along with transparency, not just tactics. Too often the patient is reduced to a diagnosis, while a big piece of their battle is navigating isolation, digital fatigue and uncertainty.

In oncology, where the road is long, and often lonely, we must remember the human experience is not just clinical. It is emotional, spiritual and social. Brands that win will be those that listen deeply, acknowledge the toll of treatment, and foster community – not just compliance.

SXSW reminded us: *science alone won't save us. But science, when paired with storytelling that is empathetic, equitable and bold will make a bigger impact.*

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CONTENT CREATION INSIGHTS

Shifting Focus from Volume to Value: Building Meaningful Content Connections

While content creation is easier than ever, using new AI tools that quickly generate and distribute content using these new tools simply to shout more messages at our audiences across the ecosystem misses a critical opportunity. These tools can lead to generic, disconnected messaging that fails to engage audiences meaningfully. Those marketers with a "more is more" mentality around building content will miss the key ingredient: value and connection with your audience. For pharmaceutical marketers in today's healthcare landscape, it is critical to remain thoughtful about the role each asset plays across the treatment journey.

The case studies and winning ideas at SXSW in 2025 came from marketers who were willing to build campaigns that played the long game of brand affinity; they chose to create campaigns that they believed would connect with their audience and shape a wider conversation instead of trying to convince their audiences to hit the "buy" button.

Meaningfully connecting with content is even more vital in oncology marketing, when the communications to patients and their caregivers occur at one of the most critical moments in their lives. Time is of the essence for the HCPs to make life-saving treatment decisions.

Oncology marketers should, therefore, work to widen the aperture of their communication foci, and consider how to facilitate more ongoing engagement with their audiences. Listening to patients and HCPs, amplifying their voices and fostering trust through empathy are keys to long-term success.

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Beyond the Exam Room: A Continuous Conversation

Pharmaceutical marketers often focus narrowly on the mythical "doctor discussion" moment for both HCPs and patients: a point in time when a treatment decision must be made, and your endpoint, comparative trial or unique targeting mechanism of action becomes top of mind.

Of course, properly conveying your clinical story is vital – but modern oncology marketing is about more than a singular decision-making point; it is about ensuring you are listening for what your audience needs throughout the treatment journey. This means if you are only focused on "patient starts" as the business metric to measure marketing success, you are only solving one corner of a much larger puzzle.

In the session "Unleashing Brand Fandom: Turning Fans into Advocates," Alanna Fernandes, VP of Marketing Strategy and Analysis at Peacock, notes a formula she uses to drive better audience engagement:

- **Brand Values –** What are the "north stars" for what your brand stands for that audiences can believe?
- **Emotional Connection and Payoff** – What do you hope audiences feel by engaging with your brand?
- **Access and Attention** – Are you showing up where your audiences are, and offering multiple points of entry and engagement?

For Fernandes and her fellow panelists, marketing is no longer about just "making your case" to customers. It is about providing meaningful value, listening to your audience's needs and wants and always looking for new ways to engage.

Questions to Consider

What information do HCPs in your target audience need to make a confident treatment decision? What do they want from your marketing communications to help improve their overall approach and treatment experience? For patients, how can you build ongoing adherence resources that show you can do more than just help them get started? How can you show that you can demonstrate an understanding of their ongoing needs and challenges?

These are harder questions than simply communicating why your overall response data is superior to a competitor, but they are critical when considering the problems your content can help solve for patients and HCPs.



Cultural Sensitivity in Cancer Treatment is Vital

The panel "The Big C in Cancer Care: Culture" explored how personalized treatments must consider patients' cultural backgrounds to be truly effective. Experts stressed that integrating cultural awareness with cutting-edge science enhances patient trust and adherence to treatment plans, ultimately leading to better health outcomes. As the field of oncology continues to evolve, a holistic approach that combines AI, personalization, early intervention and cultural understanding will be essential in transforming cancer care for the future.

CAMPAIGN INNOVATION: BEYOND THE BRAND VOICE

Influencers and the Power of Amplification

Think about who the best megaphone for your message is (hint: it may not be you).

Influencer marketing was everywhere at SXSW, with almost every industry noting that the biggest impact came from meaningful partnerships with influencers and trusted voices in culture. Pharma, too, is embracing this trend, and often leading the way.

In the "Pop Culture Rx: Health Meets Tech + Creativity" panel, speakers noted that today, audiences are sniffing out brands, making influencer marketing not just a way to reach a more targeted audience, but also a better vehicle for messaging.

Chris Lieber, EVP at starpower llc, discussed the overwhelming success of working with *Broad City's* Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson to develop the "Gut Gap" campaign for MiraLAX. While having Glazer and Jacobson involved at all would have been a win, Lieber noted what made it successful was that the brand did not dictate anything about the ad beyond the regulatory requirements.

Everything was written by the stars themselves as a scene that felt ripped right out of a *Broad City* episode.

This tactic gave the MiraLAX brand an authentic voice that audiences would respond to more readily, one that contextualized the brand benefits of the pharma drug within a hilarious, laugh-a-minute conversation on gender inequity and the stresses placed on modern women.

Similarly, Novartis' showstopping breast cancer awareness ad at the Super Bowl this year, featuring celebrity cameos from the likes of Hailee Steinfeld and Wanda Sykes. In his session: "Crisis to Credibility: Restoring Trust in Modern Science," creative consultant Jonathan Isaacs noted that while it did feature celebrity appearances, this winning idea was designed to do more than sell. It was the voice that facilitated a discussion to lead to more women to seek and obtain prevention care.

In both the MiraLAX and Novartis examples, the brand made a messaging impact by not worrying about squeezing all their reasons-to-believe into a perfectly manicured brand voice, but instead focused on how to capture attention and shape the conversation, rather than dominate it.

Even on a smaller scale, consider how much more impactful Key Opinion Leader (KOL) content may be if you allowed an HCP to educate on relevant treatment trends and broader considerations, versus just communicating study information that is two clicks away on your website. Consider what a series of patient stories could do if they were more focused on helpful ways to manage the day-to-day while going through treatment therapy, versus just a "what this brand meant to my treatment journey" video.

When we let go of needing to own the narrative as brands, we tend to find more interesting stories to tell.

AI and Empathy: Enhancing the Human Side of Cancer Care

As oncology marketing evolves, it's crucial to consider the technological advancements – particularly AI – that are transforming patient care, personalization and early intervention.

Pfizer's Lydia Fonseca highlighted how AI-driven tools like Health Answers are reshaping patient engagement by providing credible, culturally appropriate health information right to patients' own unique needs. AI also optimizes manufacturing, enabling faster, more efficient production of life-saving medications, while bridging gaps in healthcare accessibility and education.

Experts like Dr. Debra Patt stressed the importance of personalized cancer care, tailoring treatments to individual genetic and medical profiles. Investments in AI-driven diagnostics and clinical decision support systems help providers deliver timely, precise interventions, improving outcomes while making care more affordable and accessible.

Early intervention remains key to effective cancer treatment. SXSW discussions emphasized the need for collaboration among patients, oncologists, tech innovators and community leaders to advance early detection and streamline treatment. By fostering cross-sector partnerships, the healthcare industry can build proactive cancer care models that prioritize prevention and timely diagnosis.

Oncology marketers must embrace these advancements by integrating AI-driven tools and personalized care strategies to engage patients, HCPs and caregivers effectively throughout the treatment journey.

Conclusion

SXSW 2025 demonstrated the power of collaboration in oncology care. Whether it is between patients, healthcare providers, technology innovators or community leaders, partnerships are essential for transforming cancer care. For oncology marketers, the focus is shifting from just communicating scientific data to creating valuable, empathetic content that listens, connects and builds trust. By embracing empathy, advanced technology, transparency and a deep understanding of patient needs, oncology brands can drive meaningful change in the fight against cancer.

At EVERSANA INTOUCH, we are uniquely positioned to help brands navigate this transformation. As the only global agency network connected to an end-to-end commercialization platform, we provide an integrated, innovative and data-driven approach to oncology brand commercialization. Our expertise ensures not only successful market entry but also sustained growth through the complexities of the oncology space.

Our team is ready to learn how we can help your brand thrive in this rapidly evolving landscape. Let's connect!

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