

Myths and Vaccines: Building pharma reputation in the face of misinformation

When COVID-19 hit the world, the pharmaceutical industry was placed at the centre of the global stage. This is a critical time for pharma communicators to respond to issues the sector is facing, not least health misinformation that is compounding vaccine hesitancy and damaging the reputation of pharma. Our latest research provides some food for thought on **what pharma communicators need to do to protect and enhance their companies' reputation at this time.**

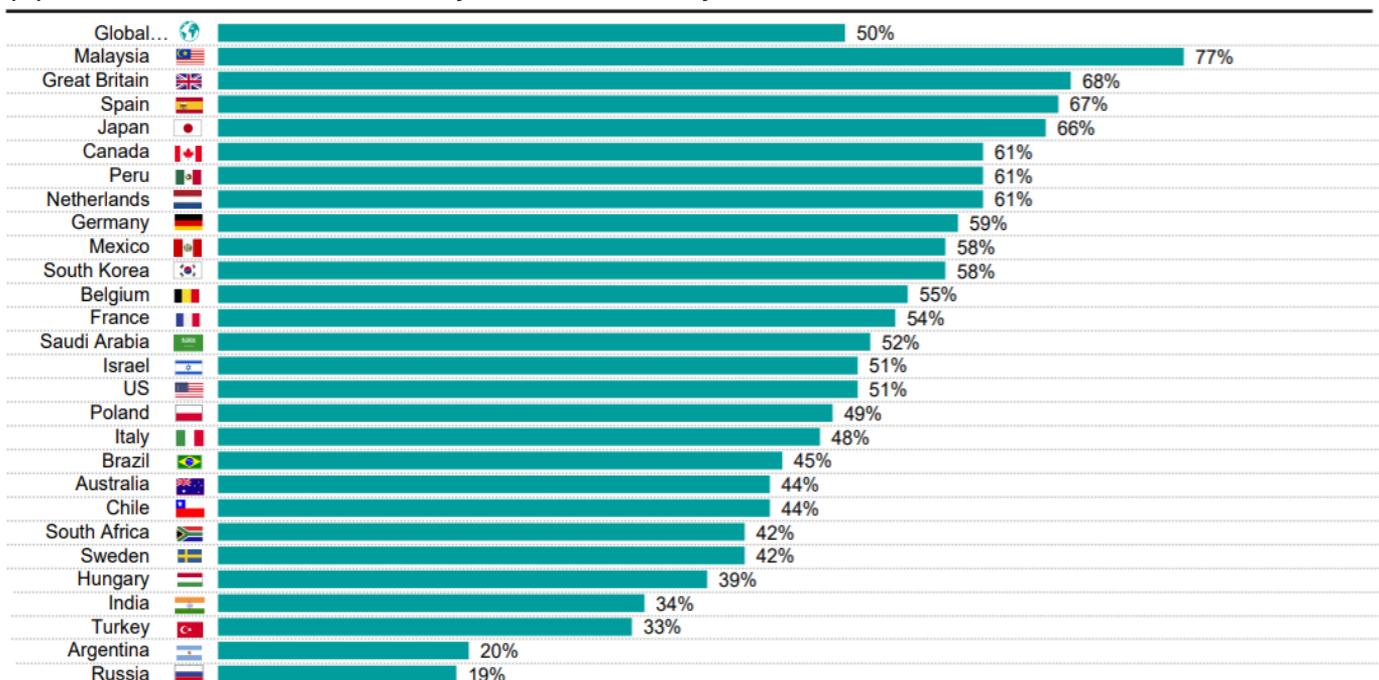
Positive sentiment towards the industry is on the rise. Evidence shows that the industry's response to the pandemic, in particular the speed at which it discovered and developed vaccines for COVID-19, has led to a surge in positivity among the public, the media and politicians.

Recent findings from the Ipsos MORI study for ABPI among 2,000 adults in January 2021 revealed that **over half (56%) of the public say they feel more positive towards pharmaceutical companies** operating in the UK as a result of their actions towards the COVID-19 pandemic (+23ppt vs Oct 2020).

However, as long as COVID-19 remains a top concern globally, the industry will be under scrutiny. Pharma communicators should use this moment to build reputation capital to ensure the company's long-term sustainability.

Indeed, reputation management is a key strategic priority. In our latest [Reputation Council Report](#), **nine out of ten (93%) see corporate reputation as a board-level concern.**

(%) worried about COVID-19 in February 2021 in each country



[Which three of the following topics do you find the most worrying in your country?] [Percentage that chose COVID-19] (n=19520 adults aged 16-74 in 27 participating countries) Source: Ipsos Global Advisor, 18th January – 5th February 2021

ABPI fieldwork dates: 13th January - 26th January 2021

What Worries the World fieldwork dates: 18th January – 5th February 2021

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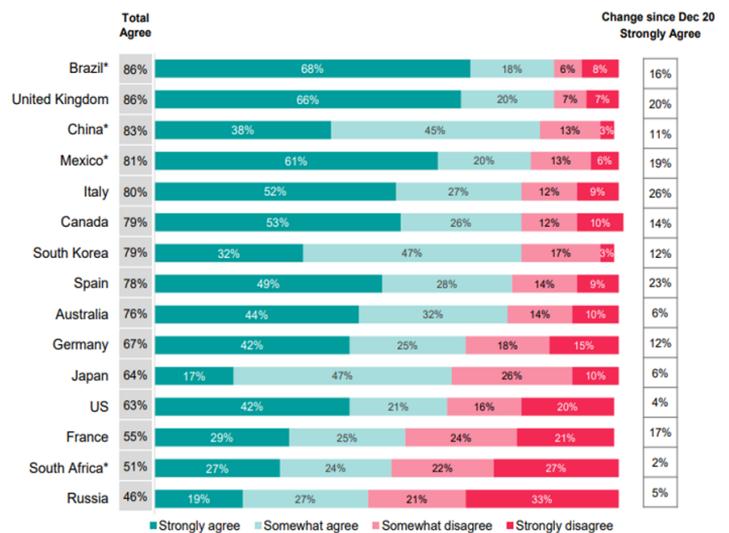


One of the greatest challenges and potential sources of reputation risk that needs to be managed by communicators in the current pandemic lies in the **widespread issue of health misinformation**, demonstrated by the sweep of myths surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines.

These undermine public health efforts and **create a climate of uncertainty and doubt** that damage public perceptions, both in the short and long term. Survey results from [our study with King's College London](#) published in November 2020 indicate four in 10 (42%) say they don't know whether or not a COVID-19 vaccine may cause autism in children and nearly half the population (48%) say they're unsure whether it may cause infertility.

An article by David Robert Grimes* for the Financial Times explores the danger of the health misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines. The article references some staggering examples, such as the Italian Doctors' Association disciplining 10 members for spreading conspiracies and anti-vaccine propaganda and a pharmacist facing criminal charges after being so invested in conspiracy that he sabotaged 570 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. These are just a few examples illustrating how **health misinformation is compounding vaccine hesitancy and damaging perceptions of the sector.**

Looking forward, all eyes are on the ongoing rollout of vaccines. In January 2021, our global ['World View'](#) study, which runs across 15 countries, measured levels of agreement in getting the vaccine and results indicated that the success of the early stages of the vaccine programme has contributed to a decline in vaccine hesitancy. The most positive shifts in vaccine confidence are seen in the UK, Italy and Spain. Whereas, this movement is seen less steeply in Australia, the US, South, Russia and Japan. Among all groups measured, **anxiety surrounding the vaccine nonetheless remains high and a significant minority are still reluctant.**



[If a vaccine for COVID-19 were available, I would get it] (n=12777 online adults aged 16-74 across 15 countries (excludes those who report receiving the vaccine)) Source: Ipsos Global Advisor January 14th – 17th 2021 *Online samples in Brazil, China, Mexico, Russia and South Africa tend to be more urban, educated, and/or affluent than the general population

*Published in February 2021, subscription required to access. World View fieldwork dates: 14th January – 17th January 2021

While it may seem that health misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines is compounded by those with extreme views, according to our analysis from the 'World View' survey, often it is **ordinary people expressing sensible concerns about the risks and long-term implications of the COVID-19 vaccines** being developed and disseminated by the pharmaceutical industry. Simply put, **many feel they do not know what they need to make a confident decision to get vaccinated.**

As discussed by [Amanda Barrell for PHARMAfield](#), the public are often not aware of the level of regulation in industry. However, there is a mismatch between people feeling they do not know enough and the level of genuine interest in the industry, with many stakeholder groups not actively seeking information. Complexity lies in building awareness and engaging an audience in an industry that is technical and difficult to understand. Communicators' aims should **include humanising and simplifying the technical jargon and complexities that surround pharma**, with different approaches for different stakeholder audiences.

While the pharmaceutical sector is in the spotlight, and with positive sentiment increasing, communicators should **use this opportunity to address and redress these issues.** Our findings from the 'World View' survey recommend a behavioural approach towards vaccine messaging that focus on:

- The **safety and efficacy** of the vaccines; compounded by facilitating well-known and trusted people getting the vaccine and sharing information.
- **Creating a norm** by showing vaccinations as part of normal health routines.
- **Addressing personal responsibility**; highlighting what not getting the vaccine could do to others.
- Building **positive social identities** by weaving a sense of personal choice with moral obligation to get the vaccine for the betterment of society.
- Supporting **confidence in decision**; organisations need to align with the community and build trust by creating an environment that supports critical thinking.

The global rollout of COVID-19 vaccines will be the largest, fastest and most challenging vaccination program in history. Communicators of the industry need to **arm themselves with research-backed actions** to tackle the issues of distrust that may underpin these misconceptions and fear of vaccination. By bridging the gaps in public knowledge, aligning expectations and committing to actions and behaviours that highlight their patient focus, pharma can shift their narrative. Ultimately, positioning themselves to thrive and benefitting from **long-term improvement in their reputation and relationships with their stakeholders.**





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Guillermo has over eight years of experience in reputation management. Most of his work has been focussed on advising global corporations on how to maximise their engagement opportunities with key opinion formers such as NGOs, investors, journalists, government and C-suite executives. Guillermo has worked on multi-market quantitative and qualitative studies exploring reputation among groups of interest.

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