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A New Kind of Coupling Arrives on the Scene

Some partnerships are matches made in heaven; other unions make the partners feel they were better off alone. A recent collaboration between the physician social networking site, Sermo (Cambridge, MA), and Pfizer Inc (New York City) has everyone wondering which it will be for this unique pairing that is attempting to redesign the relationship between pharmaceutical manufacturers and health care providers. Sermo began as a way for physicians to share information and gain insight from each other. Pfizer has since tapped into the community to provide physicians with information about medications and clinical data. Daniel Palestrant, MD, CEO of Sermo, said in a press release, "Our physician community has asked Sermo to find new ways to work closer with industry." Michael Schubert, Chief Creative Officer of Ruder Finn, Inc. (New York City) believes online social networking sites can indeed act as places of beneficial interchange. He told Product Management Today, "The key to this opportunity is creating a positive online experience for the user, consistent with his or her reasons for using a social network in the first place, which is to feel connected to other people and their real-life experiences." Mr. Schubert believes the ethical issues that are raised by online social networking collaborations can easily be avoided if companies follow certain guidelines. "The simple answer to avoiding ethical issues is to display transparency and offer unique value to the user. Companies have failed in this space when they have tried to manipulate the system by creating fictitious

profiles, false or biased testimonials, etc. Transparency creates trust; thus, companies should use the system as intended, communicate above board, and be open for real dialogue with real people," he stated. BioWizard (Wayne, PA), a similar social networking site designed for clinical researchers, chose an alternate route by allowing advertisers on its site from the very beginning, as well as offering open membership. According to BioWizard's CEO, Jeff Boily, the company has not received feedback from members that this affects the site's credibility or quality of information. He noted that the structure of the site prevents undue influence from taking place. These structural checks, in theory, will also prevent manufacturers who enter into future partnerships with Sermo from trying to unduly influence the community, which could assuage fears from critics who see the site as a playground for questionable sales and marketing tactics. Others, however, believe that despite Sermo and Pfizer's efforts at transparency, there may still be negative consequences. "If you look at the data, even disclosing relationships and funding sources does not eliminate the fact that direct exposure has spheres of influence, that frankly, as human as we all are, are often subtle and subconscious," commented Matthew Fitz, MD, MS, Assistant Chairman of Undergraduate Medical Education at the Department of Medicine, Loyola University Medical Center, Maywood, Illinois, who has researched and written about the pharmaceutical-physician relationship. "When you allow for outside involvement, the conversation is no longer among physicians, which was the primary purpose of the dialogue," he stated to the Journal. The American Medical Association (AMA), Chicago, has also partnered with Sermo. Bob Musacchio, PhD, Senior Vice President, Publishing and Business Services, at the AMA said the organization has been working with Sermo to gain insight into the physician community and has found a positive effect of working with them. "We have been using Sermo effectively by posting research questions and getting instant feedback from physicians. Not all of this feedback is positive, but the majority of it is supportive of what we are doing. Through Sermo, we have been able to open a dialogue between the AMA and the physicians on the site. They see us in a different light," he concluded.

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