

How can pharma re-engage its customers?

Despite a surge of truly exciting new medicines reaching the market, it is clear that medical professionals are giving less and less time to meeting and engaging with pharma. What can the industry do about this, and does new technology hold the key?

The way pharma engages customers and stakeholders through its market access, medical, marketing and sales efforts is one of the most important aspects of the business; companies that can understand the needs of doctors and patients, and meet those needs, will steal a march over less responsive competitors.

Meanwhile, the ongoing evolution of digital communications, and their integration with traditional communications – so called multi-channel marketing – is radically changing marketing practices. The new multi-channel world allows pharma to communicate with its different stakeholder groups, but the rapid developments can be bewildering, and many companies aren't yet clear about how to make the most of these new communication channels.

How to communicate in a new era

Many changes have affected how pharma engages with customers: the shift in pharma portfolios means they are increasingly targeting specialist doctors, not primary care physicians; healthcare professionals are increasingly time-poor, while many refuse to see pharma reps at all. New [European compliance rules](#) are changing the relationships between pharma and healthcare professionals. Reduced sponsorship from pharma for healthcare professionals to attend conferences means there are fewer opportunities for face-to-face interaction.

Tackling these and many other questions about how pharma marketing and sales organisations should evolve, a group of leaders in the field convened at the recent Veeva European Commercial Summit in Barcelona.

Dirk Abeel, global business integration manager (performance development, training, and field force effectiveness) at Nestle Nutrition, addressed the question of doctors refusing pharma access. He said one reason for this is companies continuing the old methods of “regurgitating” marketing messages, rather than listening to what customers want and trying to meet those needs. “We can only change this by really taking healthcare providers seriously. We need to ask: what are they looking for? What do they expect from us? Companies should be thinking of themselves more as solution providers than product providers – but that requires a major shift in marketers’ thinking.”

Michel Baes, vice president of marketing operations, customer orientation and transformation at Janssen in Europe, agreed. Baes pioneered Janssen’s groundbreaking use of digital communication channels to gather new customer insight and deliver more personalised information to HCPs. Janssen’s approach goes back several years to when the company undertook major market research and business reviews to establish what its customers wanted, and determine how the company could reinvent itself to meet those needs in the long term.

Janssen launched its Customer Orientation Programme in Europe over four years ago, with the sole purpose of truly understanding its customers and adjusting its business model to meet customer needs and expectations.

Baes said: “Today there is a huge amount of complexity in going to market and approaching customers. A change management programme is needed to help companies govern this



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complexity and change behaviour, as well as to bring in new competencies and learn to do things differently. The approach we have is setting clear ambition to innovate, build trust, focus on outcomes, and be patient orientated.”

Baes said this is an ongoing, open-ended improvement process and not something the industry can afford to let come to an end, only to go back to doing things the old way.

Multichannel marketing

Recent years have seen companies continuing to cut back on the sizes of their sales forces, and increasingly turning to digital channels to generate larger shares of customer engagement. The term “multichannel marketing” has exploded in the industry, but what this really entails – and how best to practice it – is still very much an evolving field.

Veeva’s VP of commercial strategy for Europe, Jan van den Burg, warned that the industry still has to be mindful of lapsing into old habits. “The transition to multichannel marketing is happening as face-to-face time

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decreases, but I think the industry is at risk of repeating the mistakes of the past, when sales forces grew and grew, and then the model all but broke. There is a big risk that companies will simply focus on that old ‘reach-and-frequency’ model of measuring numbers of digital interactions, rather than thinking about the quality and outcome of those contacts.”

Meetings remain indispensable

Despite the move towards digital channels, there seems to be a consensus that face-to-face contact remains an indispensable tool when used appropriately as part of the overall multichannel strategy.

“I am a firm believer in events,” said Tim White, senior director & head of global customer interaction management at Lundbeck. “We hear a lot about the decline in the number of events and the difficulty of dealing with the new EFPIA guidelines, but a good event is absolutely invaluable. You meet customers whom you would otherwise not have met, and have discussions and build understanding in a way you can’t through other media. We need to think constantly about how we can deliver valuable forums that actually engage our customers with meaningful insight and information.”

Asked about the growing role of social media at large events such as international medical congresses, White agreed that this has been a fascinating development. “The reach of social media at events such as ASCO [American Society of Clinical Oncology congress] last year, for example, was remarkable. The reach ASCO achieved through Twitter was exponentially larger than just through the people who were physically present, listening to the KOLs. That trend is undoubtedly one that has a lot of potential, and is going to be part of a multichannel mix.”

Brand managers move on

Although there are many elements of today’s sales and marketing that have changed, some perennial challenges remain. One of these is the fact that brand managers typically stay in their jobs 12–18 months before being promoted or moving on, which makes it difficult for

companies to achieve continuity and implement long-term strategies.

White believes this is a fact of life, and companies need to make clear what the corporate priorities are in order to maintain a consistent approach. He added that amid all this change, the core job of the marketer remains the same. “It is about focusing on insight, and shaping strategy and then communications. Underneath that, there are now more channels, and different ways to gather insight and do strategic planning, but the need for those core marketing skills hasn’t changed.”

He believes one clear driver for change is that the new “digital native” generation will naturally want to integrate digital approaches into their strategies. “You are starting to see planning change because of this. They’ll say: ‘What do you mean, I can’t do all this stuff? This is what I grew up with.’”

Patients in the mix

The role of patients in discussing and determining their healthcare continues to grow around the world, fuelled by digital communication and social media. Some pharma companies have taken a proactive approach to direct online conversations with patients – especially in the US, where more is permitted – but pharma remains rightly cautious to not overstep the mark. Safer territory is the provision of multimedia information for patients, often mediated through the healthcare professional.

White commented: “Some physicians have close relationships with their patients – if you step into that space, you need to understand what content resources can help the patient. So we have to focus on providing a valuable service, and not just span these different channels for the sake of it.”

Future developments

Digital communication will continue to evolve, and many of the tech giants are looking to launch new products in the next few years. Wearable technologies such as the Apple Watch will record health and wellness data, and tech giants including Apple and Google are trialling complete digital health records for

individuals, which could eventually transform how healthcare is managed.

The latest trends in social media (as pioneered by the younger generations) are instant, direct-chat channels. White said this suggests that organisations will increasingly need to provide rapid responses to queries through these channels – a scary prospect for the industry, particularly in compliance terms. “But it’s the way of the world, and it is what our patients and physicians will come to expect, so we can’t bury our heads in the sand. We have to look at these channels, understand them, and understand what they mean for our industry.”

Analysis of multichannel marketing

How should pharma go about investing in these new channels? And how can it measure its return on investment from such projects?

Raj Wickramasinghe, life sciences lead for software-as-a-service at Accenture, said the sector still hasn’t matured in its measurement and analysis of multichannel marketing. “I think we need much better analysis of what the right mix of channels should be, what the best way to reach the target audience is, and what the optimal return on investment is across channels. Commercial analytics has improved significantly, and we have seen it become more integrated into the commercial strategy, which will drive decisions around the right channel mix based on therapy area, geography, and customer care. However, in life sciences, we still have some catching up to do compared to some other industries.”

Pharma companies are well aware that they must realign their business models to become more customer focused if they are to remain competitive. But companies need to overcome external challenges as well as internal barriers to make sure this happens. Companies that achieve this are likely to find that trust and engagement naturally follow between them and their customers.

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