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Digital marketing should continue post-COVID-19: Experts

It reduces expenditure, provides targeted better returns



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In a recent webinar organised by the IDMA Marketing Committee on New Normal -Post COVID-19, experts discussed challenges faced by pharma marketing departments during the nationwide lockdown period. In fact, its impact continues during the unlock process as well. During the webinar speakers have highlighted the difficulties faced by medical representatives during COVID-19, and also stressed on giving considerable focus to digital pharma marketing, which is less expensive with better return prospects.

Mahesh Doshi, President, IDMA said, "In the new normal, pharma company's leaders, who are best able to diversify product lines, update labelling to regulatory requirements, and get new products to market and patients more quickly than ever before, will lead the race. The current economic disruption will make those leaders who have a strong balance sheet, will be able to manage cash flows in this situation, and then procure supplies at a lower cost."

"Every business will now see the need to build a robust, digital-driven delivery capability which will accelerate digital transformation. Every CEO will now see the merit in making these investments. Executives from the management department in the pharma industry, who understand and act on this new normal will have ample opportunities for growth. From now on, pharma companies must be mindful that they may have to diversify from mainstay revenue streams at short notice," added Doshi.

Indicating the changes which have taken place even at the government level, Doshi informed, "It gave all of us a pleasant surprise to note the alacrity with which the Government was functioning and responding to requests for support in getting the factories running. Earlier, we had to seek appointments in advance and then go as a delegation with an agenda. Now, all departments, DoP, DCG(I), CDSCO, Commerce, Finance etc., have been responding to a phone call, addressing and resolving issues immediately. We surely hope this continues as the new normal post-COVID-19 too."

Highlighting the need of technology adoption in pharma marketing, SV Veeramani, CMD, and Former, National President -IDMA said, "COVID-19 is teaching us on how to carry on business without much human interaction and the great need for digital marketing. There is a need for rethinking promotional ideas and new styles in marketing and sales. There is also a need to combine both physical and digital marketing."

He stressed, "The COVID-19 time is also acting as an opportunity for consolidation and brand building and there is also a need for better key account management. With respect to digital marketing, there are more webinars than ever before in the pharma industry. One advantage of this is that we are able to reach a higher number of doctors at lower costs. COVID-19 has opened up the opportunity to tap the potential of retailers and apart from retail chemists, now there is also a resurgence of E-pharmacies and that opportunity needs to be explored."

Explaining the opportunities which have opened up due to COVID-19, Sudarshan Jain, Secretary-General, IPA said, "Every crisis is an opportunity, and the pharma industry too has leveraged it. India is considered as the "Pharmacy of the world", and it is notable that every third tablet sold in the US is supplied by the Indian pharma industry. It is the industry that exports to nearly 205 countries across the globe."

Jain continued, "Due to the COVID-19 situation, besides repurposed drugs and boost to clinical trials, the health textile industry (PPE kits, masks etc.) has emerged significantly, which has given new business avenues with a sustainable focus. And due to COVID-19 situation, there is a lot to come with diversified innovation in pharma marketing as well. Therefore, we need to have constant focus and differentiation is a point of change, which is happening and should be continued," he added.

Stressing how data-driven science can give better business insights, KG Ananthkrishnan, Director General, OPPI, opined, "COVID-19 has emerged as new opportunities and post COVID-19 there will be certainly behaviour shift, therefore the industry needs to gear up accordingly."

Commenting on tech adoption in the pharma industry, he pointed out that, as against other industries, the pharma sector has been a late adopter of technology. And, while adopting technology, the industry needs to bring in lots of efficacy and effectiveness in data analytics, data science. He further said that data should be coupled with analytics which can give good business insights and play a major role in transforming the industry in the new normal. "A tech tonic shift is happening and we should be adopting and getting benefitted from it," he advised.

Vinay Pinto, Executive Director – Wallace Pharma, Chairman of Marketing Committee IDMA and Member CII National Committee for Pharmaceuticals expressed, "One fringe benefit of increased digitalisation of marketing processes thanks to COVID-19 is the constant creation of all kinds of data. As the data pours in, organisational capabilities to manage it and transform it into actionable insights is going to be a key capability."

Since pharma industry is adopting tech-enabled activities for pharma marketing, they also need to understand doctors' preferences in terms of content.

Pronto Consulting's research analysis with HCPs in June 2020 highlighted that 33 per cent of doctors wanted to reduce webinars and 41 per cent of doctors felt that webinars have no relevance or significance. Hence, what needs to be understood by pharma companies to navigate the new normal?

Sanjay Bhatia, Partner, NextPlan explained, "In the new normal, pharma companies should find out doctors' digital preferences as to what digital medium he/she prefers and based on doctor feedback they should be finalising the contents. The content could be scientific or whether he/ she prefers non-scientific content based on his hobbies and interest areas. Meaningful content will make active engagement with the doctor more impactful."

He continued, "In the new normal, profiling of doctors on their personal and professional behaviour is important. On the professional front, a doctor's preference for the type of digital channels he prefers needs to be identified. Whereas, on the personal front, we need to find out if the doctor prefers scientific content or non-scientific content digitally. If the doctor prefers non-scientific content then we need to find out about his personal hobbies, likes and preferences. For example, if the doctor like old Bollywood music, then the digital content for that doctor should be the music of his choice downloaded and sent to him as a link."

Veeramani suggested that companies should minimise expenditure and restrict investment expansion plans for some time and should be taking the tech route even post COVID-19.

Thus digital transformation has provided considerable opportunities for pharma marketing activities with focused business strategies and a good return on investments. Therefore, experts indicate that there is a need to build robust, digital-driven delivery capabilities to leverage business opportunities.

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