



It's Go Time

The sales reps are game, the HCPs are receptive and the mobile technology is ready. Rebecca Mayer Knutsen reports on the circumstances that have converged to provide pharma with its most promising mobile selling moment to date

THE IN-THE-MOMENT MOBILE ENGAGEMENT TREND—DESIGNED to take advantage of the technology in our pockets, purses and briefcases—requires a brand-new thought process and reinvention of information. Slower to adopt and invest in innovative approaches than other industries, is pharma finally ready to take a seat at the table?

Most observers say yes, even as pharma companies have only scratched the surface with mobile marketing efforts to reach and engage physicians and compile data. Industry reports indicate that despite fewer face-to-face interactions with physicians in recent years, sales reps continue to be viewed as valuable sources of information. And reps must play a critical role in coordinating various messages to make sure docs get what they need, and when.

“Mobile is not just an app or responsive Web design. Mobile is everything,” says Intouch Solutions EVP David Windhausen. “Information needs to be reachable no matter what device the doctor is holding in her hand.”

The challenge lies in gaining an understanding of how healthcare professionals prefer to receive information and then sculpting the marketing efforts accordingly.

The poly-screen sales approach is designed to provide the HCP with the same experience whether in the hallway of the hospital or

sitting at a desk. Many hope this will solve the disparity between pharma’s current view of innovation and that of the customer.

“Marketers who don’t live and breathe mobile aren’t current,” shrugs Tim Moore, VP of life sciences strategy for Capgemini Consulting. “Pharma needs to follow the path of other industries by merging digital and marketing to provide a seamless customer experience.”

For most global industries, investments in mobile strategies account for 60% of the media budget, Moore reports. For pharma, it’s a mere 10% of the pot.

The goal hasn’t changed but the platform needs to, says Tommy Barlow, director of sales for CRM firm EtherDCP.com. The focus continues to be on giving sales reps the tools and knowledge to do what they do best: Sell products.

Redefining the rep’s role

According to Jeff Gaus, CEO of software firm Prolifiq, more pharma marketers recognize sales reps as a critical marketing channel. “The move is intelligent and long overdue,” he says. “If you look at dollars, the sales force is the biggest expense for companies and marketing wasn’t leveraging it.” In an ideal world, the field rep would be well versed in company events; given access to real-time, around-the-clock information and clinical data; and armed with the most up-to-date technology to view, download and share with the HCP in a personalized manner.

Of course, it is doctors who hold the power to influence the success rate of a brand and, therefore, the pharma company behind the product. In 2014 the number of HCPs who consider themselves so-called digital natives shot ahead of those who are digital immigrants. Gaus, a self-professed digital immigrant, believes that information should find people where they are. His company’s software helps sales reps instantly access and distribute information—including videos, podcasts and brochures—via mobile devices, responsively and compliantly.

To have better outcomes, companies need a more informed picture of what the HCP is faced with and what influences his or her decision. “Companies can then loop the information gathered into the internal sales operating systems for the reps,” Windhausen explains.

Reps need to feel in control of the information they choose to share with each physician. “It’s crucial that reps see the effects of the tools,” Windhausen continues. “Did the doctor view the material? Prescribe the medication? The device doesn’t matter—as long as it’s supported—but the value of the content does.”

Adds Moore, “Sales reps know what doctors want and need better than the pharma companies. They’re practically begging their companies to be put in charge of pulling the levers to push information to their customers.”

To that end, the rep shouldn’t be bothered with the administrative aftermath of a field call. Life-sci CRM should integrate with Salesforce.com and other CRMs behind the scenes so the rep can focus on the encounter. “With the information we track, the rep knows when to call on the HCP and precisely what to talk about,” Barlow explains.

In a collaboration with Salesforce.com, Accenture Life Sciences is leveraging cloud, social and mobile technologies to increase physician and patient engagement. With the Accenture Connected Physician Solution, physicians can access disease, treatment and product information anytime and on any device and collaborate in real time with fellow doctors and medically trained pharmaceutical experts.

While the physician is digesting information, the life sciences company is gathering critical insight into his preferences, needs and prescribing habits. Take Intouch Solutions’ cloud-based platform Allora, a tool designed to enable companies to understand and improve the effectiveness of brand strategies based on information pushed to physicians.

A mere 20% of the content created by marketing departments is currently being used in the field. The folks at EtherDCP.com are helping companies automate the content value loop.

Prioritizing mobile strategies

To connect the dots between digital and physical experiences, pharma companies ought to take a page out of another industry’s book. The example most often pointed to is how Uber, the pioneer of digital disruption, has transformed the transportation sector by connecting consumers to drivers with a location-based app.

“Emerging markets are receptive to ‘mobile first’ approaches because mobile is the primary channel,” says Accenture Life Sciences managing director Shawn Roman. He points to pharma sales reps in China who engage HCPs via collaboration platforms like WeChat, a mobile text and voice-messaging communication service developed in 2011.

Roman believes that the capabilities of digital marketing solutions/technologies are outpacing his pharma clients’ ability to evolve operating models to take advantage of this new way of thinking. Further, budget constraints, regulatory concerns, resistance to change and insufficient technical capabilities often bog down mobile strategies.

“Pharma companies are playing and testing in the space, but they are being cautious,” Moore says. “They will soon realize, ‘I’m only reaching 20% of my customers when I could reach 80%,’ and that will change everything.”

Accenture Life Sciences’ clients have progressed beyond the iPad to adopt a mobile-first approach to marketing with differentiated content, apps and messages leveraging the uniqueness that mobile offers, such as location-based services, Roman reports. Windhausen, for his part, notes a downturn in iPad usage to engage HCPs. “The iPad was once thought to be revolutionary, but the newness has worn off,” he says. “The focus has to be on enabling reps to deliver customized and value-added content, not the device itself.”

From Barlow’s vantage point, the iPad—used by 85% of the market, it should be noted—is the most effective tool currently available. “When the tablet PC came out, pharma jumped on the bandwagon and invested a lot of money but it didn’t pan out,” he recalls. “They were hesitant with the iPad trend but we’ve seen a massive adoption in the last two years, which has redefined the marketplace.”

According to Gaus, companies that implement mobile engagement strategies successfully during the next one to three years will be at a competitive advantage. Will it work? “It depends,” he responds. “Some companies are further along in the process than others, but movement is inevitable.”

Building a mobile strategy never reaches an endpoint, it must be remembered. It’s a fluid journey that requires regular revamping and flexibility. Sales reps are being tasked with an influential role in the mobile endeavor.

“When will we see the end of the field-based rep? Never,” Barlow says. “We will always need people in the field because there is no better way to reach that audience. But technology is adding substantiated data and a more intelligent approach to the experience.” ■