

Five industry experts discuss what it's really going to take to integrate patients and best support their healthcare journey

Patient Progress



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Is the pharma industry doing a good job evolving the way it meets consumer expectations? Where do you see the weakest links?

Companies vary greatly in their ability to effectively meet consumer expectations. I always say that you can tell in about five minutes where a company falls on that spectrum based on its questions and willingness to engage in new ideas. Although not always the case, in our experience, small start-ups through midsize pharma companies tend to have an easier time changing their systems and fostering innovative approaches.

Pharma capably applies key learning from other industries when connecting with patients. Doing this is a lot simpler when the customer is ordering a decaf vanilla latte than when deciding upon which heart medication to take for the rest of their life. But the weakest link rests in their ability to develop an emotional connection that will create patients who will be more likely to remain adherent and take their medication as prescribed.

As consumers continue to have a more active role in their healthcare, pharma must forge ahead. The weakest link is that it is not engaging the consumer. Consumers wish nothing more than to be heard, to feel their questions and concerns are of significance—not that they are there to make money for pharmaceutical companies. Go to consumers and ask what their specific needs are. Involving the patient is a surefire way for pharma to instill trust.

The pharma industry is evolving but at a very slow pace. Patients expect clear, balanced and actionable information that is accessible wherever they are. We now know where they are—on their mobile phones, tablets and computers. Instead of expecting a patient to search for our website (containing passive published information), we should be helping that patient find us in the context of his or her daily activities.

A significant problem is the different messages between efficacy and adverse events. Consumers are subjected to a drug ad for a specific condition on TV followed by a lawyer trying to drive a lawsuit around drug side effects. Older consumers are typically more risk averse and may forgo treatments because of messaging conflicts. A more holistic view of the patient state via mHealth and digital health technology may go a long way to help.

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Can technology facilitate stronger connections between patients and the pharma industry and, if so, where are the opportunities for using it to support patient care and quality?

The most obvious opportunity to facilitate stronger connections is through the use of mobile technology. The key to success is creating content that engages in an entertaining and accessible way. Much of the content out there is not very engaging, so there is great opportunity for improvement. Other emerging technologies offer potential, but pharma needs to figure out how to implement this new technology in a compliant manner.

Apps, automatic reminders, electronic records and wearables are just a few examples of the tremendous impact of technology. But they are used at different rates of consistency without a centralized place to connect the dots leading to better patient care. The pharmacy is uniquely qualified to serve as that central hub. There are very few other environments in the healthcare continuum that offer comparable levels of patient interaction.

Pharma can use technology and social media to connect with patients. Facebook chats are a way to involve patients, whether you hope to target a general or specific population. Twitter is a place to spread information. Patients can use apps to get information specific to their disease process and medications. List discount prescription programs and upcoming clinical trials. Patients want information but it has to be easy to find.

Yes, I am a strong believer in the power of technology to forge connections between patients and our industry. The key isn't in providing information but in facilitating a meaningful interaction that enables the patient to take another step in the health journey. Opportunities exist to send reminders to improve compliance for an approved medicine. Patients have a chance to interact with us and in that interaction we learn about how to best serve them.

Technology can and will drive stronger connections between patients and biopharma. In our view, mHealth and digital health technology seem poised to provide biopharma with a more holistic view of the patient state. We believe that a more holistic view of the patient state will allow for more efficacious, safer and better products. Progressive biopharma companies may utilize them for social and gaming aspects to drive better engagement.

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What will happen in the next 12 to 24 months in the way industry empowers the patient-engagement pathway? Do you envision real progress?

I think the most successful companies will be the ones that partner with the FDA to figure out what they can do by pitching innovative approaches that serve the needs of everyone and that involve the patient in the process. Companies need to collaborate to find innovative approaches instead of dismissing ideas out of hand based on past experience. The technology and external environment will continue to evolve, but regulatory and legal issues are the real barriers.

Change within pharma can seem slow. Sensitive medical information and lives are on the line. In this challenging and highly regulated environment, when something new is implemented it has to be done right and done right the first time. Viewed from that perspective, 12 to 24 months can seem like a limited window. But anything that can improve one patient's life is progress, and if it can be scaled up to impact many patients' lives, that would be real progress.

I'm not only a patient with multiple chronic illnesses but I'm also on the healthcare side as a pediatric registered nurse. I realize that progress takes time. It is imperative that the pharma industry continues to strive to empower the patient pathway. Pharma may be surprised to learn the majority of patients aren't demanding or expecting cures. But we deserve to feel better. To reiterate, start with engaging the patient and that will pave the road for a successful engagement pathway.

I envision real progress. So far our industry has waited for channels to be developed and then decided on whether, and how, to use them. This approach can continue to work as long as our industry adopts these technologies quickly enough. However, in a not-so-distant future, I would love to see our industry leading in the creation of the ultimate health channel that integrates the patient with pharma, research, medical providers and other patients to best support his or her health journey.

Patient engagement in biopharma will develop mostly through mHealth and wearables, specifically in terms of clinical trials and product development. Progress will occur in spots rather than across the entire industry. Specifically, companies like Biogen and Merck may be well positioned to drive improvement in patient engagement, whose improvement starts with clinical trials and productization. It then can evolve to the commercialization and monetization stages.