10 ways...

to harness the power of the pharmacist

A practical guide by Alison Williams and Nick White

More than ever, marketing spend has to provide a clear RoI. Advances in technology bring new opportunities for marketers and fuel the debate as to whether the most effective way to boost and maintain sales is still through the traditional route of the doctor, or more innovative alternatives. Pharmaceutical sales representatives generally target the doctor as the key influencer in drug prescribing, yet research suggests that 80 per cent of patients, particularly those on long-term therapies for chronic diseases, see their pharmacist (not their GP) for repeat prescriptions. Clinical studies show that pharmacist intervention is highly influential and can increase brand performance in some therapy areas by up to 15 per cent, suggesting there is a real opportunity to use the pharmacist as a channel to communicate effectively with the patient. This supplement explores some of the options marketing managers can use to extend the potential of their brands, by capturing a new channel to create brand equity over and above the more traditional route of doctor detailing.
1. ENHANCE BRAND POTENTIAL BY INCREASING PATIENT ADHERENCE

In some therapy areas up to 60 per cent of patients fail to complete their full course of treatment. Encouraging patients to take their medicines correctly is of the utmost benefit to the patient’s health, pharmacist and brand. The pharmacist needs to be encouraged to:

- Be clear about the dosing regimen with the patient
- Make the patient aware of potential side effects or time lapse to therapeutic response. If the patient expects the effects they are more likely to keep taking the medicine.

Ideally, the pharmacist would be able to access electronic prompts and reminders at the time of dispensing the medicine that offer timely, relevant information for the patient about their prescription. Even if computer interaction isn’t available, simply providing the pharmacist with written information that advises how they can support patient adherence will help generate brand loyalty to your product.

In December 2008, the Roula Media Group published results of a survey, sponsored by Aegate, which looked at the relationship between the doctor and the pharmacist. The findings showed that only one in three doctors cooperate with the pharmacist sufficiently to address and promote patient compliance.

Worryingly, in the same survey, 81 per cent of pharmacists stated that the doctor doesn’t inform the patient adequately about potential side effects of the medication they are being prescribed - side effects, of course, are often cited as one of the reasons patients don’t complete their course of treatment.

2. ACHIEVE RAPID UPTAKE POST PRODUCT LAUNCH

When targeting a doctor with new material, it is just as important to consider the impact educating the pharmacist can have on the patient. The more knowledge the pharmacist has about your particular product, the better placed they are to educate the patient. The pharmacy community is often keen to learn more about product developments.

Introducing new learning resources, such as web-based seminars, will offer the chance to educate the pharmacist. Use this activity alongside your sales representative visits who can talk through the latest product changes and industry trends, while answering questions from the pharmacist face to face.

Producing online educational material for your brand means that pharmacists who are unable to attend sales rep visits can still read through, for example, the rep’s slide-deck posted on your website, to continue their education in their own time. Such courses can be accredited by pharmacy associations to provide continuing professional development.

By educating the pharmacist on the launch of your brand, you can help ensure they are able to give patients the correct advice in taking your medicine and return incorrect prescriptions to the prescriber.

3. THE ROLE MEDICINE USE REVIEWS PLAY

Medicine Use Reviews (MURs) can play a key part in the engagement between the patient and the pharmacist. MURs could, for example, highlight where patients have difficulty taking medicines out of their containers, or where they have difficulty fitting the timing of their doses into their daily routine.

Creating information material (e.g. pamphlets) that can be distributed and support the pharmacist when they go through an MUR with a patient can help to address some of these concerns and play a key role in increasing patient adherence. Using MURs and supporting material as part of your marketing strategy will enable the pharmacist to offer a thorough, detailed analysis when discussing MURs with the patient and recommend a suitable course of treatment. Having the pharmacist up to speed on your brand at this critical decision stage will benefit your brand.

In the Roula Media Group survey referenced earlier, an average of 16 per cent of the pharmacists interviewed had received prescriptions from the patient’s doctor for doses that were incorrect. By harnessing the tools available to pharmacists you can help them use their own experience and knowledge to ensure each patient they see is provided with a clear consultation service.

Pharmacists are trained and encouraged to act as a consultant to the patient. Through creating an MUR, the pharmacist can fulfil their role as a consultant and consider if the medication is appropriate for the patient to be taking.

4. TARGETING PRESCRIBING PHARMACIES

With the hectic lifestyle that many of us lead, being able to book time in advance to visit a GP isn’t something we can always do. With a growing number of pharmacists prescribing medication to the patient, are potential patients aware your product is available without an appointment at their surgery? Is this growing segment
of pharmacists being targeted in your marketing campaigns?
Simply identifying this new market segment when planning your marketing campaigns and then working out what information would be useful to them will pay dividends in increasing your brand presence. It will also help develop a long-term relationship with this relatively new and under-used market segment. If your brand stands for speed of recovery from a minor illness what better place to communicate this than at a pharmacy that is equipped to offer the patient a speedy, and effective service, with the pharmacist well versed in product knowledge.

In the same way, make sure that even if your brand is not available at prescribing pharmacists, your marketing efforts ensure that they are as knowledgeable about your product as the doctor, in their interaction with the patient. Look, too, for ways to differentiate your product from the competition.

5. DELIVER ‘VALUE-ADDED SERVICES’ FOR THE PATIENT
Remind yourself to see things from the patient’s perspective. For example, as a patient taking new medication, how well are they likely to understand the consequences if they don’t complete the course of treatment as prescribed?
Providing online support services, such as reminders for patients to take their medicines or to visit their pharmacist to collect a repeat prescription, can greatly improve the level of compliance each patient has with their medication. It can also improve the overall experience they have from using your brand - something that is key in achieving brand loyalty.
It’s not just the medication itself that serves to increase your brand presence and exposure in pharmacies - other value-added services can be created through pharmacist consultancy activity, such as weighing machines, and blood pressure and cholesterol tests provided in store.

6. PROMOTE YOUR CLINICAL WORK TO PHARMACISTS
The latest clinical trial data provides an opportunity to visit key pharmacists while presenting impartial evidence of the benefits your product offers to patients. Pharmacists need to be spoken to in a language they understand, therefore look at ways to present this data so that it resonates with this audience. This may well mean repackaging your data to link it to what interests them. Much like doctors, a pharmacist’s key role is to ensure the continued well-being of a patient, and this includes making sure the patient is receiving the most appropriate medicine available.

If the aim of your campaign is to generate disease awareness (rather than a specific brand), again look at how you can involve the pharmacist. Can educational materials such as wall posters, leaf pieces, etc, help to educate the patient about everyday health problems and the treatments available.

7. INCLUDE PHARMACISTS IN YOUR PRODUCT LAUNCH
It is likely you’ll be providing training opportunities to doctors surrounding your brand, particularly following a new product launch, but make sure that the pharmacist is included in your plans so that they know about your new product too. A series of lunch meetings or early evening gatherings, out of shop hours, will be welcomed by community pharmacy professionals as they look to expand their knowledge base.
Pharmacists are at the heart of the community and, as such, should be included in your marketing strategy as a segment in their own right. Being able to discuss specific treatment issues in a closed environment can often lead to invaluable feedback about how the role of pharmacists is evolving, and some of the tools they regularly use. This will help you define more accurately how your brand can help some of the issues they have.

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Principles that can help your brand across Europe

Although a UK-focused industry body, the ABPI has proven time and time again to be the industry regulator other countries in Europe look to for guidance. Follow the ABPI principles of ‘trust’, ‘innovation’, ‘value’ and ‘access’ in the work you do for your brand.

Trust – Developing trust across the industry and with the patient should be the building block of all your campaigns. The pharmaceutical market is often accused of putting profits before patient safety – and the pharmacy community can be a key place to show the public this isn’t so.

Innovation – Be innovative in your campaigns. What technology is available that allows new, innovative ideas to reach your target audience? Being able to communicate at the critical point of dispensing could be one area you’ve not yet explored in enough detail.

Value – Are patients aware of the full benefits of taking your medication? From a patient adherence aspect, perhaps patients aren’t completing their treatment as they no longer see the value in taking a medication that has seemingly already served its purpose. Again, using the pharmacist as a means to provide this information can provide long-term value in areas of patient compliance.

Access – Are patients getting full access to medication... and more importantly are they getting full access to your medication? If not, you need to explore why not. If your brand is an OTC product, could it be because the pharmacist isn’t aware of the benefits your product can provide and subsequently doesn’t recommend your product above others?
No longer is the pharmacist seen simply as a distributor of medicines; but increasingly as a consultant to the patient who is trusted to offer relevant, timely advice. The earlier you recognise this, the more you can do to ensure your brand is being communicated positively throughout the pharmacy community.
8. ENGAGE WITH PHARMACIST STAKEHOLDERS

It is not just the role local pharmacists play in patient education that provides you with a marketing opportunity. They are increasingly influential in deciding which medications are sold within the pharmacy. Proving your support for the pharmacy community can be achieved through initiatives such as sponsoring regular meetings.

Another way to communicate with these stakeholders may be to develop platforms of debate to discuss where your brand is being used, possibly at these sponsored meetings. What can you tell them about your drug that they didn’t already know?

9. STEM THE IMPACT OF A RECALL

In the event of a recall, having a well-managed response in place quickly and effectively is, of course, essential. Unfortunately the media and general public are often more interested in poorly managed recalls than successful ones.

In the UK when the MHRA issued a recall of four leading medicines due to possible counterfeits, only 40,000 out of 70,000 packs were successfully recalled, leaving potentially 30,000 counterfeit medicines in the supply chain. Being able to identify each unique batch or sub-batch of medicine plays a critical role in the speed and effectiveness of managing recalls – and the subsequent impact on your brand.

When a recall notice is distributed, it only takes a few simple plans to be in place to ensure this process can be dealt with efficiently and protect the patient from receiving any recalled medicine.

The recall notices need to start at the pharmacist – keep them informed about what is going on as often as possible. At the start of this 10 Ways supplement we talked about the evolution of technology and the opportunities this brings; this is one of those opportunities. Use email, SMS and the telephone to communicate the news to the pharmacy community – ultimately it is they, as the last point of contact between the industry and the patient that can ensure only medicine that is fit for purpose reaches the patient.

All across Europe, systems are in place that allow pharmacists – as well as doctors – to be alerted to a recall when that specific batch or sub-batch number is scanned before being dispensed; a service that has proven to be invaluable as countries look to establish a better patient safety network.

10. MEASURE WHAT IS IMPORTANT

The business modeling process should deliver the key performance indicators (KPIs) and expected outcomes, so that you can set the appropriate baselines. Against these you will then be able to measure the progress made.

Measurement allows the monitoring of a campaign on a continual basis, to ensure that its performance is on track to deliver the expected outcome.

An example of a measurable KPI would be a pharmacy audit, which involves speaking to a number of pharmacies, scheduled at particular stages throughout your campaign, to identify whether the pharmacist is aware of the key messages you’re trying to deliver as part of your marketing efforts. This can be repeated at the start, middle and end of the campaign, to identify whether the right message has distilled into the pharmacy community. An audit also provides an opportunity to gather feedback as to the successes/failures of the campaign through the eyes of a pharmacist.

CONCLUSION

Working with pharmacists to provide them with the support they need to provide best practice patient care will ensure your brand becomes synonymous with achieving levels of patient well-being that previously may have been inaccessible.

The aim of this supplement is to leave you thinking of innovative ways in which your brand could benefit from building stronger relationships the pharmacists. Communication is key to a successful campaign and with the advances of digital and mobile technology there has never been a better opportunity to harness the power of the pharmacist and achieve new levels of brand presence and exposure.

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Belgium develops ‘best practice’ initiative at point of sale

Belgium has adopted a ‘best practice’ approach that involves pharmacists receiving point-of-dispensing patient safety communications, delivered in response to scanning the barcode on the medicinal pack. This allows pharma manufacturers to communicate efficiently and effectively, both with pharmacists and indirectly with patients. The system provides relevant information on issues such as patient safety, compliance support and notification of recalls as the pharmacist is interacting with the patient at the point of dispensing.

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