Going beyond the doc-rep comfort zone

Because of intense competition, pharma companies are exploring newer ways of engaging with the physicians, finds ***Ashish Dutt***

Marketing to physicians has been central to any pharmaceutical's sales. However, taking into consideration the intense competition and spectacular growth in market size, pharmaceutical marketers need to seriously look at other more innovative options to corner a larger share of the market.

A careful analysis and then categorization of the engagement opportunities with the physicians has come up with three-pronged marketing strategy.

Physician – Representative Engagement Opportunity

This one is the most obvious. All pharmaceutical companies spend a handsome portion of their budgets on this method. It did not come as a surprise to me when I learnt that quite a few of them, including some of the top pharma companies spend their whole budget on this, almost oblivious to the other options.

This method represents all the communication between the representative and the physician about the drug, the therapy, its USP, its comparative advantages, etc. Most of it is in-clinic or in-hospital settings and is usually for "top of the mind recall". Here, 98% of the times, the communication is a one-sided spiel from the representative.

The products/activities (booklets, CDs, newsletters, etc) left behind with the doctors are a share of voice (read noise) that cannot be avoided. Being here does not earn you much over the competitors, but not being here is a disaster.

The return on investment in this approach is exceptionally low though it is critical for the company to spend a portion of their budget to remain in the race of 'medical marketing'.

Physician - Patient Engagement Opportunity

Though the product management professionals from pharma companies will not like to come on record, during my several conversations with them over this topic, they have stated that this opportunity is yet to be explored properly. Less than 50 percent of even the biggest pharmaceuticals have seriously looked into tapping this opportunity.

Since the noise level is almost half as compared to the first, the return on investment is almost double. In other words, the money spent here has much higher chances of making an impact and thus serving the pharmaceutical well in building the relationship with physicians. And, to close the loop, it is a well-known fact that 'relationship' is one of the main drivers of prescriptions.

Unlike the first approach, which is mostly a one-sided communication since the involvement of the decision maker or the physician is very low, here the involvement of the physician increases many folds since there is help in supporting him on what is very essential to him - his patients.

The initiatives that fall into this category are patient retention and support programs especially for high value chronic therapies, patient education initiatives like desktops, camps, PR Campaigns that provoke patients to see a physician for normally ignored ailments, physician websites giving out patient information, etc.

Physician Practice Enhancement Engagement Opportunity

Though this approach existed from the beginning, the importance has only been realized lately, especially when the marketers started to scramble for better ways to bring about the impact in this 'over crowded' market.

The initiatives in this bucket have the highest possible returns of the spent marketing budgets given its impact on the physicians.

If we were to understand this in greater detail then we have to understand that physicians are also individuals who have families and want to provide the best to them. They too want to earn more money, live life to the fullest and also save for their retired lives. If we acknowledge this, we will also accept that earning more money for them comes from their practice and mostly practice alone.

And as the name of the approach is 'practice enhancement' suggests, this is basically any which way through which they could enhance their practice which essentially means helping them with either one or both the following:

- More number of patients
- More value per patient

From our experiences, we can easily connect to cases where the physician's practice has not picked up as well as the physician would have liked it to. So either she/he has a lot of idle time with less number of patients visiting or is able to charge only a paltry sum compared to what she/he would like to. It is just like any other business that would like to grow but has its limitations.

If the problem is so pronounced and mars almost any physician baring extremely few, (that too I seriously doubt) then any attempt in helping the physicians in this regard will lead to results that will be unparalleled to any other initiative. The relationship built on these initiatives will not just be truly long lasting but also extremely rewarding. And that is the reason why the ROI here is so high.

A pharmaceutical marketing manager could solve this immense problem for his A-list of customers at least, given the limited resources, by improving their "TL (Thought Leader) Degree of Influence" that is a proprietary exercise that allows a TL or a number of TLs to be compared with another TL or another set of TLs. It has several factors that come together in measuring the degree of Influence of a TL such as his academics, experience, associations with hospitals, regulatory and non-regulatory studies, conducting workshops, publications in international journals, speaking at international conferences, papers presented and some other parameters that also measure the geographical influence exhibited, league that he represents, etc.

These could be some of the initiatives that can convert a 3-minute call of a representative into a 30-minute discussion.

There are thin lines distinguishing the three approaches and there are initiatives that can fall in at least two of these. Overlaps are bound to happen and it is the job of the pharmaceutical manager to identify them and reclassify the activity for the understanding of the management, thus helping them to take decisions.

The managements of pharmaceutical companies could analyze the past spending under these approaches to see what has yielded and what has not yielded the desired results.

In these times of expiring patents, dying pipelines, high costs, and many more challenges, drug companies need to evaluate critically how they have been allocating budgets and their ROIs.

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