

## **Multi-Channel Engagement In Pharma Marketing As The New ‘Go-To-Market’ Model During Post Covid-19 Era – An Exploratory Approach With Special Reference To Eastern India**

**Abhra Ghosh**

Research Scholar, ICFAI University Jharkhand

Email: [abhra.phd2021@iujharkhand.edu.in](mailto:abhra.phd2021@iujharkhand.edu.in)

### **Abstract**

*The year of 2020 marked the outbreak of a Bioterrorism like never before. COVID-19 Pandemic resulting in prolonged lockdowns and social-distancing had hit the global economy probably in the worst possible way than it could ever be. There have been serious disruptions to both public and private sectors all across. Governments had to act fast and take preventive measures, while several businesses had to slowdown, or worse, shutdown their activities to avoid further spreading the virus. In many sectors, workforce were pushed to WFH to avoid travelling, crowd and remain contactless as far as possible. However this pandemic has transformed the industries to high rates of digital technologies adoption. Digital transformation has gone from being an option to becoming an urgent priority for several businesses and public service providers, which sheds light on the digital readiness of Governments, companies, and most importantly customers. In this context, the study aims to explore the Digitalization of pharma marketing trends in Post COVID-19 era by highlighting the digital transformation of healthcare sector. Therewith the marketing techniques gets more and more inclined towards Multi Channel Engagement as the new GTM model. As this is an Exploratory study, so qualitative data has been used for conducting the research. A total of 200 Doctors, Medical Reps, and Marketing Managers were selected for the study via judgement sampling technique. Duration of the study was 24 weeks (from Sept 2021 to Feb 2022). Findings of the study reveal that, pharma industry has actively started to adopt the New Normal of advanced digital marketing through e-Detailing CRM, digital inputs, Rep Triggered Emails, innovative promotional behavior, digital CMEs, Webinars, engaging doctors in various digital academies, etc. in order to deliver value proposition to the targeted segment of doctors and expedite prescriptions.*

*Keywords: Pharma Marketing, Digital Marketing, Digital transformation, Multi-Channel Engagement.*

*GTM model*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The outbreak of COVID-19 can be treated as one of the biggest disasters of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Within the very short period of March 2020 to August 2020, COVID-19 affected almost every country around the world as the number of infected people and deaths were increasing day by day. Countries were trying hard to slow the spread of the Virus by implementing appropriate measures. As a global response to the outbreak, many countries were maintaining ‘strict lockdown’ which

means, people were restricted of free movement in their daily lives and maintain social distance in order to slowdown the spread and save countless lives. Markets, institutions, offices, and business were shut down for indefinite period of time (except for essential services like hospitals, drug stores, electricity, water supply, milk, cooking LPG, etc.) which resulted in drastic economic crash throughout the world. Even daily grocery marts and vegetables were closed, and people were pushed to order online direct to home via e-commerce platforms. They got slowly adapted to digital way of tackling things; professionals were pushed to adapt WFH mode of working as the 'New Normal' way of living and social distancing.

While most companies decided to cut down their marketing budget during the global pandemic, the healthcare and pharmaceutical industry decided to gear up things looking at the need of the hour. While other industries failed to survive and stay in business during this time, the healthcare and pharmaceutical industry stepped up and continued to do its best. They tried to digitalize the entire system and found innovative ways of delivering value to all its HCP customers so that the patients continued to get the best treatment and care they needed even during the global crisis. However things started slowly getting back to normal from the later part of 2020 onwards. Industries and organizations resumed their entryways after the first wave of COVID-19 with meticulous planning, to return to workplaces and connect with customers with robust marketing strategies. Historically Medical Sales Reps, i.e., Direct Sales Force (one of the key elements of IMC), have been one of the core channels for delivering messages to HCPs in Pharmaceutical marketing. However due to variety of challenges and restrictions in order to minimize crowd in clinics and public places during the Post COVID era, Sales Reps are finding it increasingly difficult to get face to face access to HCPs to deliver their contents and value propositions. At the same time, HCPs expect the contents to be relevant, trustworthy and engaging.

Pharmaceutical industry encountered the global pandemic in this Post COVID-19 era by bringing changes in their marketing strategies including advanced marketing, digital marketing, etc. to promote their products and communicate value propositions to their HCP customers to expedite prescriptions from the targeted set of HCPs. This era witnessed the prominent emergence of Digital marketing and use of virtual platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, etc. by the Pharmaceutical players in order to create and deliver market value. No study has yet been conducted on 'MCE in Pharma marketing as the new GTM model in Post COVID-19 era', and hence it motivates me to study the impact of MCE on the HCPs' belief and attitude through this study.

## **2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK**

The evolution of mobile devices, applications, high speed data exchange facilities, Machine learning, Artificial intelligence, automations, etc., now allow customers get a thing they want almost exactly at the time they need it. In order to provide customers with a consistent positive experience, organizations are transforming digitally to continuously keep themselves engaged with the customers and live up to their expectations across multiple channels. Understanding our customers' needs and enabling better customer experience are essentials in today's competitive market. Integrated marketing by the combination of various communication channels like website, emails, webinars, banner ads, WhatsApp messages, social media posts, etc. can provide positive customer experiences in the following ways:

- (i) Keeps a constant engagement with customers.
- (ii) Makes it easy for customers to consume information through the channel that is most convenient for them.

- (iii) Helps in need-based solution focused interaction.
- (iv) Helps to maximize customer experience.
- (v) Helps in delivering value to HCPs leading to positive engagement with the patients, and more effective treatment.

This is exactly what we mean by Multi-Channel Engagement. By the use of MCE, pharmaceutical marketers are trying to be more customer-centric by delivering: The Right Message, To the Right Customer, At the Right Time, and Through the Right Channels. Through MCE, organizations are trying to ‘Digitize’ the ‘Go-To-Market Strategy’ versus traditional ways of engagements; and also drive orchestration of channels and messages for better customer experiences and higher customer satisfaction.

The Four components of MCE which must be integrated into a Brand plan are:

1. Content Strategy - Planning, development and management of the brand’s content to best meet customer needs and reach brand objectives.
2. Channel Selection - Selection, assessment, and prioritization of customer preferred channels need to be activated as part of an MCE campaign.
3. Customer journey - The complete sum of experiences that customers go through while interacting with a brand.
4. Measurement – A robust measurement plan must be put in place to help measure, report, and analyze MCE campaigns.

Measurement is NOT the final stage of a campaign, rather an active player during the life cycle of the campaign to help ensure the campaign is performing as expected, so that the Content and the Channel can be adjusted and optimized when necessary. MCE campaigns should be continuously optimized . It is based on a continuous cycle of monitoring and refining based on data and customer insights. MCE constantly evolves, changes and improves based on what messages customers want, and where and when do they want them. Collections of real-time data creates opportunities to improve campaigns and tactics. Data captured reveals more about the customers and how they respond to different contents through different channels. MCE serves to making the shift from Brand-centric to Customer-Centric communication of values.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The basic philosophy of Pharma Marketing is centered around marketing actions and tactics adopted to promote pharmaceutical products with right set of promotional messages and communications to HCPs and Doctors, designed for a specific therapeutic area, and targeted to the needs of the doctors and the patients. The backbone of Pharmaceutical marketing is Direct Sales Force which is one of the key elements of Integrated Marketing communications. This Direct Sales Force in pharma marketing are those whom we commonly call Medical Representatives or Medical Sales Representatives. The Sales Force design in Pharma Marketing is generally a ‘Missionary’ design, where a sales rep is responsible and sufficiently equipped for identifying the right prospects in a particular geographical area, commonly known as ‘territory’(doctors having potential of prescribing the products of the therapeutic area in which he/she is working), prepare a list of the same, visit them in a pre-determined frequency, detail the ‘Features & Benefits’ of his brand and highlight the USPs over the competitor brands, (sometimes support the claims by clinical trials done on the molecules), handle objections of the doctors, give the doctors enough

reasons to prescribe his brands, and demand for new Prescriptions. At times he is also responsible for market survey at the retailers and distributors to check the movement of his brands *vis-à-vis* the competitor brands, and thus take orders and forward it to CFA for distribution. Companies deploy salesforce strategically so that they call on the Right Customers, at the Right Time, at the Right Frequency, and with Right Messages.

Development of lifestyle, economy and health-education have definitely influenced the medical services frameworks creating critical changes and forcing Pharmaceutical products promotion as a necessity. Modern Pharma marketing provides a framework that acknowledges the challenges of the industry's shifting reality and prepares organizations to meet unpredictability with agility. Pharma marketing includes a perplexing connection among different industries, associations, and persons engaged with medical care, pharmacies, device marketing, paramedic staff, hospital management and private polyclinics.

Pharmaceutical companies are trying to encounter the global pandemic in this Post COVID-19 era by bringing changes in their marketing strategies including advanced marketing, digital marketing, etc. to promote their products and communicate value propositions to their HCP customers to expedite prescriptions from the targeted set of HCPs. This era witnessed the prominent emergence of Digital marketing and use of virtual platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, Indigene Omnipresence, etc. by the Pharmaceutical players in order to create and deliver market value.

#### **4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study aims to measure the qualitative impact of Multi-Channel engagement of HCPs in Pharma marketing as the new GTM model in Post COVID-19 era.

It also studies the 'Belief and Attitude' of the HCPs in response to the MCE adopted by the Pharma marketers to create and deliver value for the patients.

#### **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This being an Exploratory study and Qualitative in nature, Qualitative data has been used for conducting the research. No study has yet been conducted till date on 'MCE in Pharma marketing as the new GTM model in Post COVID-19 era', and hence it becomes imperative for a researcher to dive deep into the subject, explore and contribute with new insights, and study the 'Belief and Attitude' of the HCPs in response to the MCE adopted by the Pharma marketers to create and deliver value for the patients.

Primary Data are collected through formal in-depth structured interviews. A set of semi-structured questionnaires was installed and formal interviews were conducted through One-to-One Face-to-Face meetings, Phone calls, and WhatsApp. Also informal qualitative approaches such as casual discussions and informal interviews with HCPs, Medical Reps and the mid-level management of a few reputed pharmaceutical companies were done from time to time.

#### **6. OBSERVATIONAL DESIGN:**

The entire research study is conducted under a simulated environment, where the respondents are completely aware of the study.

#### **7. TARGET POPULATION:**

Doctors, Medical Reps and Marketing managers of selected Pharmaceutical MNCs.

**Sample size: 200**

## 8. RESEARCH DESIGN:

From the target population, the Sampling frame for this study was the list of top-level consultants (mainly KOLs & KBLs) from different therapeutic areas, who are tech-savvy, and between 35-50 years of age, Medical-Reps of top MNCs promoting high-end drugs/ molecules, and the Marketing Managers of the same, all of these sampling units were chosen by means of Purposive and Deliberate Sampling; and subsequently Simple Random Sampling was applied to randomly pick 200 respondents from this Sampling frame. Hence, every single sampling unit in the sampling frame stood an equal chance to get picked, so that whatever be the end results, we could attribute them to have happened purely by chance, and there was Zero bias involved.

The design planned for this particular study was **Random Replication Design**.

Following the Principle of this design, the entire sample of 200 respondents was randomly divided into 2 groups, of 100 each, i.e., **Group-A= 100 & Group-B= 100**; each respondent was assigned to one of these 2 groups on a Random basis.

Group-A containing 100 respondents was further subdivided into 4 sub-groups randomly, each such sub-group consisting of 25 respondents each. Similarly, Group-B containing 100 respondents was further subdivided into 4 sub-groups randomly, each such sub-group consisting of 25 respondents each. Then each sub-group would be clubbed to contain 50 respondents each (25 coming from Group-A, and 25 coming from Group-B).

GROUPS	A	B	TOTAL
G1	25	25	<b>50</b>
G2	25	25	<b>50</b>
G3	25	25	<b>50</b>
G4	25	25	<b>50</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

The first 2 groups namely G1, G2 are designated as the **EXPERIMENTAL** groups.

The next 2 groups namely G3, G4 are designated as the **CONTROL** groups.

The entire sample of **200** respondents are thus broadly assigned into 2 groups- **Experimental** group and **Control** group, both consisting of 100 participants each.

The Independent Variable, **Multi-Channel Engagement** was then manipulated by engaging the Experimental group in a virtual conference on "Remodelling Future Prospects of Pharma Marketing- Engaging with doctors: What's new, and what's the impact", (generally referred to as **Treatment**), and then subsequently interviewed. The objective of this event was to highlight how pharmaceutical brands can leverage the latest digital trends and technologies to engage better with doctors, and how doctors in turn, can leverage this engagement for offering better treatment and treatment satisfaction to the patients.

The other group, i.e., the Control group was being interviewed under normal conditions.

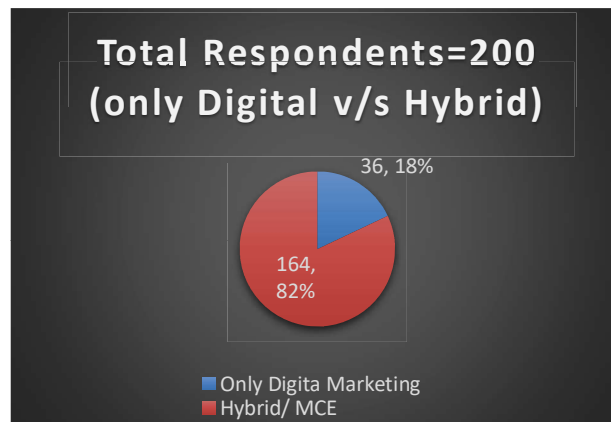
All the 3 Basic Principles of Experimental Design, i.e. (i) Principle of Randomization, (ii) Principle of Replication and (iii) Principle of Local Control are being satisfied in this design. This design is important in the sense that it serves 2 vital purposes. Firstly it provides controls for the differential effects of the Extraneous variables like **Geographical area of practice of HCPs and Ease of access to data connection/ Health of data connectivity in a given area or location**; and Secondly, it brings in randomization so many times that whatsoever be the

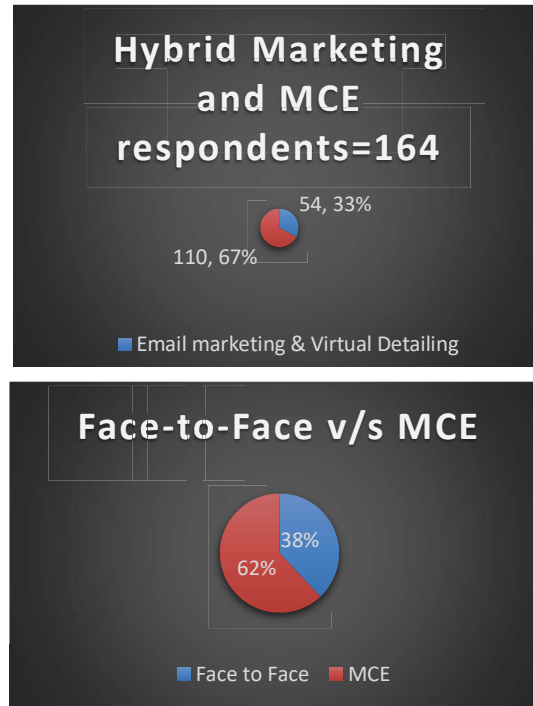
end results, we can attribute to purely by chance, and there is no element of bias involved in the study. So, while doing the study, I have accounted for all these extraneous variables and made them vary so much so that the effects of the extraneous variables gets minimized.

## 9. STUDY RESULTS

- 18% of the respondents think that in Post-COVID era, Digital Marketing alone would be the ideal choice for pharma marketers in order to avoid crowd in clinics and minimize spread of the virus, whereas remaining 82% think that Multi-Channel Engagement of an HCP is going to be the need of the hour.
- Out of this 82% population, 33% of the respondents believe that Email marketing and Detailing over virtual platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, etc would be sufficient to add values, while the remaining 67% think that apart from Email marketing and virtual detailing, it is very important for a marketer to constantly add value by engaging a doctor in Webinars, Digital Learning Platforms and e-CMEs.
- Nearly 38% of the respondents have to say that, COVID is something we have to live with for the rest of our life, and Face-to-Face interactions is the only way in Pharma Marketing to build interpersonal equity with a customer, which will further add value to Relationship Management.
- 62% of the respondents have agreed to the fact that Multi-Channel engagement should be the New Normal in Pharma Marketing for Positive, Need-based, and Solution-focused engagement of customers, and that is the only way to deliver value proposition, while 38% still think that Face to Face mode of (traditional) Direct Marketing between Sales Rep and Doctor should continue in pharma industry.

## 10. CHARTS AND FIGURES





## 11. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY AND CONCLUSION

The present study focuses on the changes in pharmaceutical marketing strategies and intervention of the modern technologies necessary to combat the challenges posed by COVID pandemic crisis. Diversification in digitalization leads to development of healthcare services by maintaining social distancing and minimizing crowd. This study aims the extension of the pharma marketing to create cost effective newer opportunities and overshadow the economic limitations. The conventional mode of pharma marketing, which is Personal selling through direct Sales Force, is quite difficult for maintaining social distance, whereas the Hybrid (Physical + Digital) mode as the new *Go-to-Market* model open up many more avenues for targeting customers, promoting products, and a platform for direct communications. As Pharma market targets HCPs and organizations, so it creates new dimension in the healthcare sector. This exploratory study aims to the innovative approaches that companies should adopt to overcome the pandemic challenges. The findings justify the diversification of pharmaceutical marketing over the digital platforms during the pandemic, and even during post COVID era. The deductive approach shows that shifts in pharma market due to COVID-19 pandemic created new opportunities in the digital marketing. These qualitative findings are useful for the assessment of the shifting strategies in pharma marketing which expands different routes for research studies. Significant changes indicate that there are still further possibilities in terms of developments and optimization of entire pharma marketing value chain. Managerial Implication: Multi-Channel engagement helps marketers to understand the need of the customer, and customize the communication accordingly, deliver the Right Messages, through the Right Channel, for the Right Customers in a multi-dimensional way through multiple channels, whichever and whenever is convenient for the customer. It is a blend of Face-to-Face visits, Rep triggered Email, WhatsApp video, Zoom Meeting, live Webinar, Digital Learning Platform, etc. Hence it becomes prudent for all the Pharmaceutical organizations to adopt digital marketing at the earliest, formulate and deploy Multi-Channel engagement as the new Go-to-Market model in order to optimize 'Return on investment'.

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