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Home » In the era of Coronavirus Indian Pharmaceutical industry is "Making Lemonade out of Lemons" by relying on Digital Marketing!

INTERVIEW

In the era of Coronavirus Indian Pharmaceutical industry is "Making Lemonade out of Lemons" by relying on Digital Marketing!

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We are all witnessing the strange images of the world that seems to have come to a standstill with deserted roads, empty airports, closed restaurants, and quite cities. This unprecedented event has changed the working lives of those at the forefront; mainly doctors and nurses. The precipitous ascent of the virus has forced doctors and nurses to learn to practice the art and science of medicine differently - altering the way they perform procedures, use resources, utilize technology, deal with patients, and work with the scientific communities for a mutual objective.

As lives continue to be at stake owing to the novel coronavirus outbreak, another concerning outcome is the postponement or cancellation of medical conferences around the world. Having said that, as time is passing by, some of the medical experts and entrepreneurs are exploring and embracing the idea of conducting conferences online. Apart from that a recent study also showed that the Doctor's visits had dropped to below 5% during March-April 20 period. The use of Tele Consultation and Online consultation is increasing steadily and almost around 42% of patients are taking prescriptions by Tele Consultation.

The biggest challenge for Pharma industry has been the restriction in conducting face-to-face interactions between physicians and the medical reps which have for the longest, been a strong tool for building brand awareness and gaining attention for new product launches in competitive drug categories. The companies that had premeditated ambitious launches of drug products and biosimilars this year have had to take a different route by moving their activities online. The pharma companies are seeing "unprecedented acceleration" to digital and non-personal communication around the world. Online Video Applications have allowed rep engagement to continue, and digital rep interactions are up by 10%.

Most of the pharma companies have already asked their employees to work remotely and reduce or avoid external interactions. Other pharmacies, with time, are taking similar actions to pull back on their sales representative activities and stop in-person meetings.

The firsts among many equals to highlight the challenge of not being able to meet the medical experts, and thus, opting for the digital route was Sahajanand Medical Technologies - a developer and manufacturer of stents, balloon catheters, and other cardiovascular accessories. Its CEO, Mr. Ganesh S Sabat, was quick to present the company's changing approach to performing activities - starting with the core functional department - the sales team.

"As times have changed, there wasn't much of an option to experiment other than embracing digital channels. It's been over a month since our employees have been working remotely through virtual meetings, internet calls, and other supporting tools. To spread awareness and to educate clinicians, hospitals, and our employees to some level, we are conducting webinars on a large scale. In fact, out of the total marketing budget, we have dedicated about 5% to 10% towards planning, strategizing, building, and conducting webinars. So far, the response has been very positive," commented Mr. Sabat.

The nation's business consultants and leaders are largely advising pharma companies to make use of social media platforms; mainly LinkedIn, Facebook, and YouTube for engagement & communication purposes and new brand launches as well as relaunches that were otherwise lined-up. And with this one can see for instance, 45% increase in digital content for websites, emails, and mobile apps, and there is a demand for more omnichannel marketing and medical education campaigns.

This approach resonates well to one of the recent surveys conducted by C Com Digital agency on the whole of Indian pharmaceutical industry, where it was found and reported that at least 35% of the operations of the companies need to be shifted to digital, however, considering the industry's heavy emphasis on ROI, it seems difficult to monitor the outcomes. Having participated in this study, Ms. Jyoti Shiralee, an independent Marketing Strategist and Consultant, shared, "Every crisis brings with itself an opportunity to do better than before. This is the right time for pharma companies to grow their client base and end-users through the means of personalized emails, newsletters, WhatsApp texts, blogs, and videos. In my opinion, leaders of the companies can utilize this time to reassess their business models, streamline existing processes, and pave way for all things new. A lot of this shift and progress depends on the mindset of those at the driver's seat."

But keeping aside the relatively-favorable circumstances stemmed from the pharma industry due to digital marketing, the cost of the downside of the pandemic is being paid by the healthcare and pharma workers in this battle. The classic case being when hydroxychloroquine was declared as a possible game-changer for treating COVID-19 and the fact that global leaders like Mr. Trump thanked India for the delivery of these tablets reflects on its power and need.

But the question remains - why's there an absence of the Indian pharmaceutical companies manufacturing this drug in the search list leading to hydroxychloroquine producers? Evidently, it's an opportunity lost for getting international business and driving brand business due to a lack of faith in digital marketing; in other words, the credibility of Google rankings. But amidst this all, a lot of positive business doers, mainly digital agencies, are reaching out to healthcare and pharma companies to help them get through this especially due to the evident time crunch. A great example of an agency with an excellent track record of marketing excellence initiating assistance would be C Com Digital. Digital agencies like C Com digital who have an excellent track records are now helping many pharma companies to enable a digital engagement offering that presents a personalized roadmap for going completely digital in weeks. That involves best practices for implementing virtual events, remote meetings, social media marketing, and email marketing among many others.

More than ever before, pharma brand's websites are being considered of vital importance as a source to reach modern HCPs. Besides, bearing in mind the fact that medical experts are spending most of their time on computers, laptops, and mobile phones, as contrasting to printed publications and medical journals, digital marketers are being advised to do all that they can to ensure HCPs land into their brand's website when browsing.

In fact, some of the large-scale companies are even turning to brand campaigns to deliver a unique perspective in the time of crisis. One of the best examples of a brand initiating a purpose-driven campaign would be Mankind Pharma. In a bid to appreciate the efforts of all the doctors, nurses, and hospital staff, this pharmaceutical brand launched a film that was not only relevant to the situation around but also sensitive to its portrayal.

If looked closely, this digital spike - both upwards and onwards - in recent times, highlights the fact that even though the pandemic has brought the world to a standstill, but it has also triggered the whole of the pharma industry to comprehend the value of content marketing, omnichannel investments, and advanced technology deployment. The early birds of the industry who were mindful of the changing trends and demands on the part of the consumers are now the ones to hold a dominance not just offline but online as well, through their digital marketing practices.

Key Takeaway

Although the sudden push for digital marketing in the pharma industry seems like a new wave, the advisors know it was long pending. It all boils down to one thing - the companies that will align with changing times, and use digital mediums, will be the ones reaping the benefits in the near future. The few of the many brands that took the risk and launched campaigns in the midst of the lockdown in the country are now the ones witnessing big rewards. This goes on to prove that now is the time for pharma companies to indulge in the modern-day influencer activities for category awareness, patient education video on social media and conducting digital Events and Direct video marketing on popular messaging apps for doctors as well as patients.

One cannot deny that digital marketing is going to be the next frontier for revolution in the Indian pharmaceutical industry and leveraging the countless opportunities that the digital landscape will present will here to the way for growth, success, and innovation among all stakeholders. Indeed, the pandemic is here to reform the way businesses are conducted and to drive leaders to ponder over the perks of going digital - one step at a time!

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