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Bayer Execs On Digital Acceleration, Getting The Building Blocks Right

by Anju Ghangurde

Senior executives from Bayer outlined at a recent summit the contours of digital transformation already underway and the vital components of a successful digital team. Firms need to be able to operate technology at the “speed of business” and not “at the speed of a ticketing queue.”

Pharma has traditionally lagged some other sectors in the adoption of digital tools, but COVID-19 has brought a “whole new sense of urgency and support”, turbocharging digitization efforts across the industry, a recent meeting heard.

Top executives of [Bayer AG](#) highlighted the need to take digital transformation beyond the traditional sales organization and outlined some of the critical components of a successful digital unit.

Sebastian Guth, president of Bayer Pharmaceuticals' Americas Region, said in the keynote session of the Indegene Digital Summit 2020 that while pharma's progress in terms of digital transformation just a year ago could be best described as “a race of the turtles”, the coronavirus pandemic has meant the speed with which the industry needs to transform across the value chain has accelerated dramatically.

“We were racing but in the end, in all transparency and honesty, we were - at least in comparison to other industries - still progressing at a very slow pace,” Guth said. The session was moderated by Sanjay Parikh, co-founder and executive vice-president of organizers Indegene, a global provider of healthcare solutions to the industry. (Also see "[Pharma Content Marketing – Is Customer King Yet?](#)" - Scrip, 29 Sep, 2020.)

Guth referred to up-skilling and transforming the field and wider sales organization as “critically

important” and stressed the need to equip personnel with new skills and technology and to give them the confidence they can “test, experiment and learn” and ultimately grow in their profession.

The Bayer executive, who started his career in the pharma industry with Schering AG, expects sales teams to “flex” between in-person and remote interaction with healthcare professionals (HCPs), depending on circumstances.

“What I’m striving for is to essentially create an environment where we are able to get to our customers [HCPs] with the right message, at the right time and in the right format. It may be face-to-face or remote interactions at times or it may be the ability for them to engage with Google Home for example - voice-guided interactions at their leisure without an actual person on the other side.”

Guth also underscored the need to build at the back end, the “technology stack” that allows firms to have seamless customer interactions. Bayer, for instance, has focused recently on that stack, developing that approach in relation to one of its recent launches in prostate cancer. “We’ve seen that it makes a real and tangible difference to our customers,” he said.

Growing Importance Of MSLs

In terms of the pharma industry’s medical affairs organizations, Guth believes medical science liaisons (MSLs) may ultimately become the “tip of the spear” for digital engagement and grow even further in their importance and ability to engage with customers on scientific questions.

“Equipping them with the right technology/tools to have these conversations at any time from anywhere, in settings that are most desired by our customers - because not all customers are the same, they have different needs/demands - that’s what digital transformation is for me and that’s not limited to the traditional sales organization, it goes much beyond that,” he said.

MSLs have played an increasingly important role in providing an expert interface between pharma’s medical function and the external healthcare community on scientific topics, to help HCPs in the appropriate use of specific therapies. Past studies have shown that some key opinion leaders prefer to engage with MSLs compared with regular sales representatives and value such interactions. (Also see “[Pharma’s Medical Liaisons: From KOLs To Outcomes And Virtual Options](#)” -

Content Personalization Scores As Pharma Ups Digital Ante

By [Anju Ghangurde](#)

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Pharma’s digital spend is expected to spurt in the coming years and firms are deploying a range of initiatives to deliver personalized content to physicians via preferred channels. KOL webinars feature among the top three approaches for marketers across the Americas, Europe and Asia, a new survey shows.

[Read the full article here](#)

Scrip, 7 Oct, 2016.)

Brian Cantwell, vice-president, digital strategy and operations at Bayer Pharmaceuticals, US, who shared the virtual podium with Guth at the Indegene summit, maintained that pharma can potentially take “digital to 10x” when digital subject matter experts start to partner closely across functions, including with the R&D, medical and market access organization, and companies start to think not just of marketing tactics.

“And we start to think about digital services and solutions and really changing the business model of the organization and think about how we can harness the power of digital to drive better health outcomes, which in many cases is an R&D, medical or market access challenge more so than a marketing challenge. I think there’s huge opportunities for those functions to partner more closely,” he said.

For its part, Bayer is already driving digital transformation in R&D through external alliances. For instance, recent initiatives include a collaboration with US-based [Recursion Pharmaceuticals, Inc.](#), a digital biology company focusing on drug discovery. The alliance aims to use Recursion’s artificial intelligence-guided discovery platform and Bayer’s small molecule compound library and scientific expertise to discover and develop new treatments for fibrotic diseases of the lung, kidney, heart and more.

‘Digital Does Not Exist In A Silo’

Cantwell also outlined some critical components to a successful digital team. To begin with, a portion of the team needs to be well integrated and embedded with the pharma brand/franchise teams.

Digital subject matter experts, the executive said, need to sit “side-by-side” with marketing/sales, medical and market access leaders as part of the brand team, to translate brand and customer strategies into actual digital engagement solutions that will meet business and customer needs.

Commercial Models Shifting As Pharma Mulls Digital-First Launches

By [Anju Ghangurde](#)

16 Jun 2020

Pharma is assessing digital-first launch strategies amid COVID-19 while a resizing of sales forces and the emergence of “digital orchestrators” may also be in store, the co-founder of healthcare solutions provider Indegene tells *Scrip*.

[Read the full article here](#)

“You really need to have that close business partnership with the P&L [profit and loss]-holding functions of the organization because digital does not exist in a silo or solely for the purpose of 'doing digital'. It exists for the purpose of engaging with customers, driving business results and better education of healthcare professionals/patients/payors and ultimately contributing to health outcomes,” Cantwell stressed.

The executive is tasked with building a dedicated digital team at Bayer to enhance digital capabilities, optimize brands and find new ways to connect with customers, and joined the German multinational from *Biogen, Inc.* earlier this year. At Biogen, as head of its US multichannel excellence, he was responsible for multichannel customer engagement initiatives for all US Biogen brands, with a focus on digital channels, services and solutions.

Right Tactic, Channel

Among the other digital essentials, Cantwell emphasized the need for “insight-driven design” - both for digital campaigns and the overall experience.

“How do you know the 'what, when and how' to engage with a customer on a digital channel? Hence you use insights, data that tells you this is the right tactic/channel to use, the right time to execute the tactic,” he explained, and to make sure it feels like a “really compelling experience” for the customer.

Cantwell noted that too often pharma allows “other third parties and so called experts” to determine what a good experience is, instead of turning to the real experts, which are the customers themselves and all the data about how they interact with companies. “Those are the things that we should let drive what a good experience looks like.”

Then there is the need to operate at “the speed of business” – ensuring that insights are translated into experience executed through the right channel at the right time. “You can’t operate technology at the speed of a ticketing queue,” Cantwell cautioned.

Delivering Value Tomorrow

While such aspects of digital plans are geared to delivering value today, delivering value tomorrow requires a “test and learn mindset” within a digital unit. A portion of the team, Cantwell suggested, ought to be thinking about future customer expectations and start experimenting with ways of engaging with these.

Cantwell noted that over a decade ago, digital experiences were for the most part designed for people interacting via a desktop interface. If you were to continue focusing solely on optimizing this experience, you would have completely missed the 2016 tipping point where mobile traffic became dominant - a shift still continuing.

He recalled that some teams he was part of at the time started to experiment with responsive web design and emerging mobile players, so that “you are following where customer expectations are going and are able to be ahead of that and ready with the right sort of mobile experiences” when most customers started interacting via mobile devices.

The executive also stressed that digital tools should not just be the flavor of the month or “this year’s shiny object to go chase” for the pharma industry, and needs to be a focus area for investment and continuous improvement, backed by organizational commitment.

“The test of our mindset could be embracing failure and learning and then moving forward and doing that quickly. There has to be organizational appetite to not just run at the first failure and not just cut investment at the first failure,” he said, signaling the need to be geared for the long haul.