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HEALTH
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PHARMA COMMUNICATION IN A COVID-19 WORLD

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THE POWER OF PEOPLE

December 2020



“During a pandemic, vaccines and antivirals can’t simply be sold to the highest bidder. They should be available and affordable for people who are at the heart of the outbreak and in greatest need. Not only is such distribution the right thing to do, it’s also the right strategy for short-circuiting transmission and preventing future pandemics.”¹

Bill Gates

As COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc across the globe, claiming lives, debilitating healthcare systems, and bringing the economy to its knees, the public and private health sectors have had to come together in a race to slow the spread of the virus and find a vaccine.

Both private and public sectors are working together to accelerate timelines, regulatory authorities and institutional review boards are approving research and studies within days and many vaccine trials are underway.

The crisis is far from over and players in the private health sector, particularly pharmaceutical companies, have a unique opportunity to drive positive change and lay the foundation for an entirely different type of healthcare delivery. One of the biggest opportunities lies in accelerating and intensifying collaboration with the public sector.

But as the world becomes less and less globalised, with sealed borders, disrupted commerce and limited human interaction, collaboration between the private and public sectors looks more challenging than ever.

The problem we are now facing is that the effect that COVID-19 is having on globalisation will essentially impact collaboration.

THE COLLABORATION CONUNDRUM

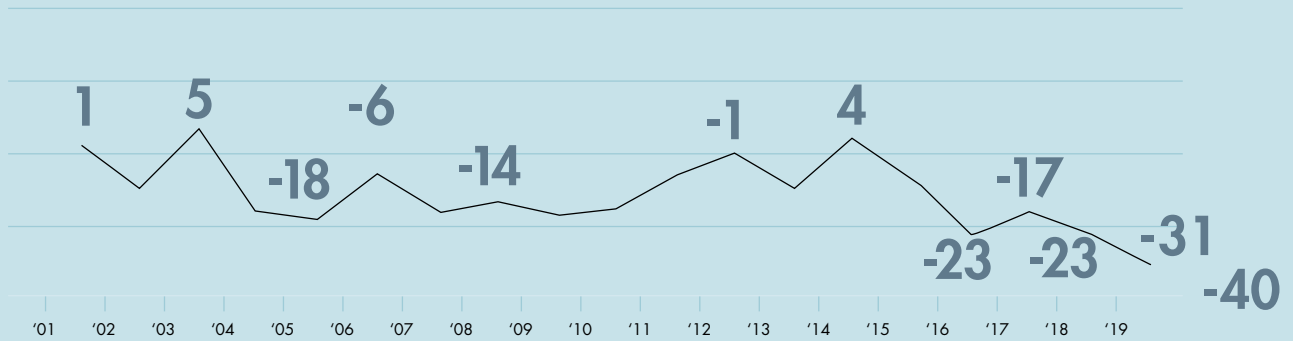
When it comes to the public and the private health sector, we define collaboration as a new way of working together to provide treatments and healthcare delivery at scale and at speed.

The problem we are now facing is that the effect COVID-19 is having on globalisation will essentially impact collaboration. The disruption not only affects supply chains and drug shortages, but also clinical research into investigational drugs. In addition to this, social distancing, lockdowns and draconian quarantine measures across the globe are further disrupting drug trials and public health research.²

In spite of these challenges, what can pharma do to help facilitate greater collaboration during the COVID-19 crisis?

AMERICANS PERCEPTION OF THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY, 2001-2019

Net positive = % holding a positive view of the industry minus % holding a negative view



Source: Big Pharma sinks to the bottom of U.S. industry Ratings. Gallup. 3rd September 2019. (Accessed 4th May 2020 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/266060/big-pharma-sinks-bottom-industry-rankings.aspx>)

In 2019, the pharmaceutical industry was the most poorly regarded industry in the eyes of the American public. This disintegration of trust was a global problem with the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer finding that just 57% of people in the UK had faith in the sector.³

The pandemic has provided the pharma industry with a unique opportunity to restore trust.

1. REVISIT YOUR CORPORATE IDENTITY

Mistrust of the pharmaceutical industry has blossomed over the past few years in the light of what is perceived to be aggressive pricing strategies for medications and vaccines.

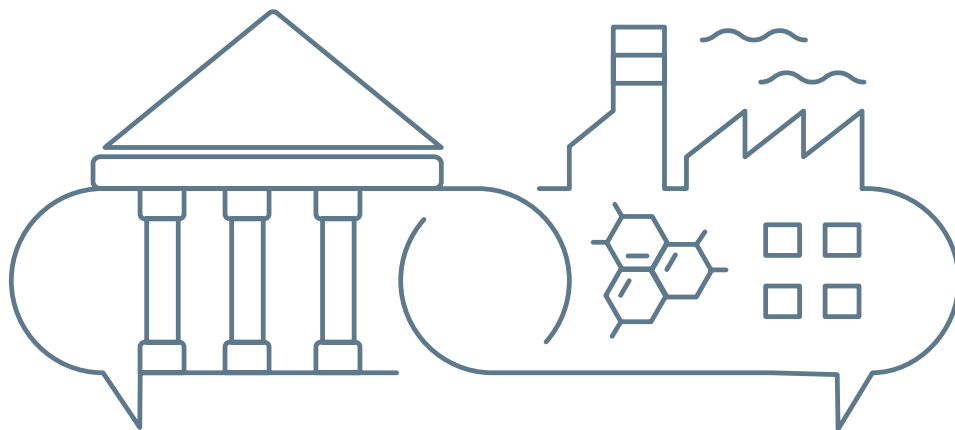
20 years ago, the world's top drug producers teamed up with developed nations – led by the Clinton administration in the US – to limit the low-cost generic production of antiretroviral drugs in South Africa to treat HIV which by then had already claimed over 100,000 lives. After years of global pressure, South Africa was eventually able to access cheaper generic drugs which today cost only \$75 a year per patient.⁴

The pandemic has provided the pharma industry with a unique opportunity to restore trust. More specifically, it has provided individual organisations with the opportunity to review how they could collaborate with the public sector to ensure access to affordable medicines and vaccines for all in the event of a major medical crisis.⁵ And that is no small task.

The first step is to reassess their relationship with the public sector in the future of healthcare delivery and define the role they wish to play in people's lives, including patients, healthcare professionals, government the general public, and last but not least, government institutions. For that to happen successfully, pharmaceutical companies will need to work closely with the public sector on orchestrating a unified marketing and communication strategy across all stakeholders and channels.

Effective partnerships needs to mean more than shifting resources to produce masks, gloves, hand sanitizers, or stand-alone investments in clinical trials.

A bold reimagination of the pharmaceutical company's brand identity is needed – one that involves public sector players such as patient representatives or governmental agencies. Otherwise, the positive but short-lived assistance during the pandemic may be perceived as nothing more than coronawashing – ultimately eroding the industry's collective reputation even further.



2. STRIKE THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN COMMERCIAL AND NON-COMMERCIAL AGENDAS

In the past, pharmaceutical companies have defended high prices and patent ownership on the grounds of costly R&D investments and the subsequent need to protect intellectual property rights. The focus has been on serving the markets that can afford it. In the current global context, this model is insufficient to meet the extraordinary medical demands of a world under a pandemic. The first step is to find places where both parties can play a technical role for public benefit, leading to deeper collaboration between public and private sectors.

LANDMARK ASTRAZENECA & OXFORD PARTNERSHIP

The partnership between AstraZeneca and Oxford University to develop and manufacture a coronavirus vaccine demonstrates a pharmaceutical company's readiness to enter into a long-term collaboration with a research university for the benefit of public health with a specific focus on developing countries.⁶ Under the deal, the Cambridge-based pharmaceuticals group would manufacture and distribute the vaccine, known as ChAdOx1 nCov-19, that is currently being developed at Oxford.⁷ Partnerships such as these, as opposed to being the exception, are starting to become the norm. Another example of public and private institutes working together to find solutions to global health problems is the partnership between biotech company CSL and the University of Queensland. Led by the Australian government, they are working on developing the MF59 adjuvanted SARS-COV-2 Sclamp vaccine.⁸

Another good example of this new way of thinking is the WHO's support for a Costa Rican initiative to gather together IP so that all countries can access treatment and other much needed technologies at a lower cost. Costa Rica's COVID-19 Technology Pool, if fully implemented with the assistance of the Medicines Patent Pool and the cooperation of patent holders, will help increase access to technologies needed to combat the coronavirus.⁴

Marketing and communication budgets in many pharmaceutical companies are clearly linked to driving commercial performance. By far, the most substantial budgets still go to product communication, ultimately aimed at selling products and driving profit.

In the future, pharmaceutical companies may need to make non-branded content a key and vital focus for non-branded content to engage relevant stakeholders without expecting to generate more prescriptions.

Balancing commercial and non-commercial interests as a basis for communicating a trustworthy and meaningful role to multiple stakeholders has to be a strategic choice, not an eventual by-product to a change in market demand. Such an approach will help businesses connect with stakeholders, find common ground and ultimately reach consensus on complex public health issues that neither player can solve alone.

3. ACCELERATE INTEGRATED MULTICHANNEL CAPABILITIES ACROSS ALL PARTS OF THE ORGANISATION

Overnight, COVID-19 exposed many companies' vulnerabilities in engaging with their internal and external stakeholders, at a time when nothing but remote engagement was an option. If ever there was a need to align between digital and business, it is now.

Sales calls and international conferences have become few and far between. Incomplete multichannel engagement platforms have not fully replaced face-to-face interactions. Marketeers and communicators are turning to their digital departments to drive content development and distribution across channels.

To drive businesses successfully during and after COVID-19, is to move away from the idea of a specialist “digital” department in favour of building integrated capabilities across the entire organisation. Marketing and Communication professionals in pharmaceutical companies need to lead this change by appropriating new skills and carving out a new role for themselves.

In some instances, companies have come a long way, but in others, the governance of existing digital efforts is either siloed, unclear or too complicated – so much so that processes are often long and ineffective. What is needed is lean thinking that is executable in simple roadmaps, a simplification of governance models and the infusion of multichannel capabilities in both sectors.

Once there is renewed clarity on integrated multichannel strategy internally in individual pharmaceutical companies, building capabilities and multichannel infrastructure together with the public sector players becomes the next crucial step.



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INCREASE IN DIGITAL TOOLS

Healthcare professionals expect an increase in their use of digital tools and who better to provide the tools than the pharma industry.

WHAT NEXT?

What Next?

COVID-19 has challenged businesses across all sectors to step up and play their part to help alleviate the damage and loss of life. This is especially true for pharma. Never before has the industry been so much in the spotlight, and for such positive reasons.

As we continue to live through this global pandemic, pharmaceutical companies are in a unique position to continue the collaboration with players in the private health sector to deliver treatments to those who need them most. To do that successfully, individual companies will need to:

- **Reassess their corporate identities**
- **Balance their commercial and non-commercial interests through content diversification, development and dissemination**
- **Up their game on multichannel capabilities and channel integration**

Now is the moment to reset, change, adapt and grow.

Pharma matters. Now is the moment to truly demonstrate the tangible impact that the industry has on people's lives, while people are actually listening. Now is the moment to reset, change, adapt and grow. The question, however, remains: will the pharmaceutical industry prioritise this opportunity for growth?

Contact:

Murat Zubcevic

Managing Director

McCann Health Nordic

Email: murat.zubcevic@mccann.dk

Mobile: +45 31 67 20 44

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