

Sales Professionals' Perspective on Digital Marketing in Indian Pharmaceutical Industry

Manoj Kumar^{1*} and Bhausahab Londhe²

¹Research Scholar, ²Professor, ^{1&2}Department of Management Studies
Amity University, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

*Corresponding Author

E-Mail: manoj.phd2019@gmail.com

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Abstract - Indian pharmaceutical industry is one amongst the leading players of pharmaceutical industry around the world. In present digital times, every aspect of the society has been digitalized. There are major transitions noted in pharmaceutical industry as well. Digital technology, has changed the working methods and emerged, as a cost effective means, with impressive target reach around the world. Yet, this platform, is not being utilized to its complete potential, due to the lack of awareness, acceptability and the deficient training of the working personnel. The marketing and sales professionals had a major impact of the digitalization on their working methods. It has changed the traditional marketing methods of industry, resulting in the urgent need of up-gradation of the skills of sales professionals. Hence, the views, trainings, awareness and acceptability of sales professionals regarding the digital technology is essential and must be kept into consideration for success of the industry. This is an indispensable component for any pharmaceutical company to attain growth and stand at par with the other pharmaceutical giants around the world. In this study, data of 303 sales professionals was collected and analyzed, recording their perspectives on digital marketing. We found that these professionals were aware and had good acceptability for the same. Most commonly used tools were website promotions, social media advertising, awareness campaigns, creation and management of subject related blogs. These professionals used it extensively on a day-to-day basis, for the maximal benefit of the company with providing the comfort of digitalization to their customers and other users.

Keywords: Indian Pharmaceutical Industry, Sales Professionals, Digital Marketing, Sales Team

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing in present times, is utmost required to survive in the modern industrial world, with pharmaceutical industry as no exception. Digital marketing is being used in many aspects in the pharmaceutical industry, which is one amongst the highly growing industries around the world. Indian pharmaceutical market, has been reported as one amongst the top five pharmaceutical markets of the world. [1] In the past few years, digital platform has provided a huge growth to this industry, with the creation of mass awareness regarding health and allied sectors. Digital marketing has clearly simplified advertising methods, organization and execution of awareness campaigns, with a benefit of mass reach at lower costs with efficiency. [1,2] Pharmaceutical digital marketing might be executed across

the verticals i.e. doctors, hospitals, patients, sales team and health care professionals simultaneously fulfilling different needs at various levels. It also includes the management of digital customer data and electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) systems. [3] Also, there are many studies reporting, utilization of digital marketing by pharmaceutical companies for its promotions widely. In the recent years, use of digital marketing has permitted companies to adopt a different approach in order to reach the patients, physicians and caregivers. [4] The sales team plays a very important part in the success of any industry. In these digital times, every process is going digital. So, these are the marketing methods of the pharmaceutical industry. Sales professionals have been affected by and large due to this change of marketing techniques from traditional ways to digital ones. These professionals need to be trained and updated in terms of their working skills from time to time. Digital presence on social and professional media sites is essential requirement, for everyone for some or the other reason. This digital presence gives, an added opportunity to the industry to reach their target users by digital promotions and campaigns. Sales professionals are the base pillars of success for these digital promotions and campaigns. It includes sales professionals working from ground-level to the senior most positions.

Hence, this study attempts to gain an understanding and utility of digital marketing tools from the perspective of sales professionals in relation to their work profile and day-to-day applicability. We also analyzed the problems faced by the sales personnel and wanted to develop an understanding by an insight into their field of work, which would be useful for our country to catch up with other pharmaceutical companies from different parts of the world.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A total 303 sales professionals from all levels were included in the study. A detailed questionnaire was used to assess the views of sales professionals from pharmaceutical industry on perspective of digital marketing usability problems faced and applicability in their field of work. The questionnaire was developed inclusive of type of digital platform usage, digital tools being used, time allocated to online and offline marketing, with a special emphasis to its utilization and

applicability for generation of sales and interaction with the end-users by these sales professionals.

III. RESULTS

Digital platform is amongst the most widely used platform these days. The details of usage of digital platform by sales professionals have been mentioned in Table I. There was

only one participant with rare usage of digital media platform. Majority of the participants were frequent and very frequent users. Mobile was found to be most preferred digital medium by the sales persons followed by e-mail and social networking sites. Connectivity with colleagues and other professionals was the most opted reason for usage of the digital media platform. Other reasons of usage have been listed in Table I.

TABLE I PREFERENCE AND USAGE OF THE DIGITAL MEDIA PLATFORM BY SALES PROFESSIONAL

		Freq.	%
How often do you use digital media?	Rarely	1	0.33
	Occasionally	14	4.62
	Frequently	157	51.82
	Very Frequently	131	43.23
Which digital media do you prefer the most?	E-mail	187	61.72
	Mobile	292	96.37
	Others	10	3.3
	Social network	170	56.11
	Webinar	31	10.23
Why do you use digital media?	To connect with colleagues and professionals	246	81.19
	To connect with family and friends	228	75.25
	To connect with Healthcare Professionals	172	56.77
	To connect with Patients & Caregivers	86	28.38
	To stay entertained	100	33
	To stay updated	195	64.36

Type of the digital platforms used by sales professionals have been mentioned in Fig.1. Whatsapp and Facebook were most commonly used social media platform.

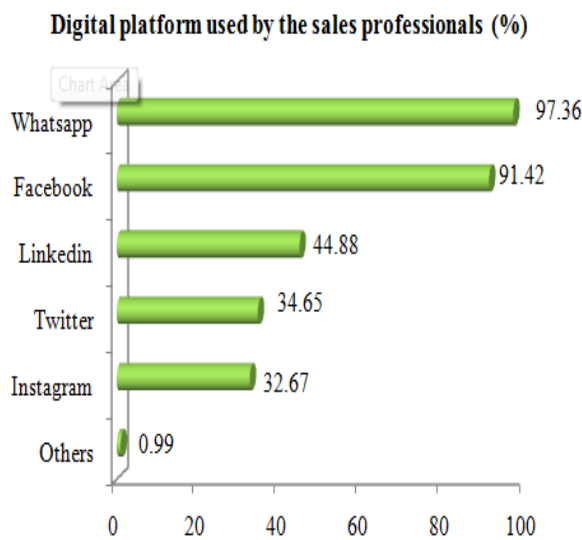


Fig. 1 Digital platform used by sales professionals

The role of digital media or social media in increasing sales was described in Fig.2. Relationship management and better detailing were the top most reasons mentioned by participants of the study closely followed by brand building.

Benefits of digital platform for pharmaceutical companies (%)

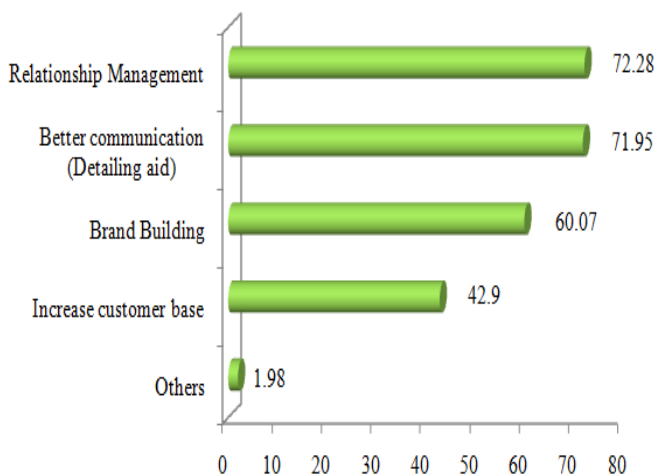


Fig. 2 Benefits of digital platform for pharmaceutical companies

Majority of the sales professional had a weekly visit with customers, and most of them spent 5- 10 minutes with a customer, but the ideal time asked by professionals was 10 - 20 minutes. Clinical information on the drugs, drug pricing, free drugs provided by the company were the major information shared with the customers on visit. Other details regarding the same have been provided in Table II.

TABLE II DETAILS OF THE CUSTOMER INTERACTION WITH SALES PROFESSIONALS

		Frequency	%
Frequency of visit/interaction with the customers	Never (I would prefer a digital route)	2	0.66
	Once in a week	201	66.34
	Once in two weeks	70	23.1
	Once in a month	23	7.59
	Once in 3-4 months	7	2.31
Time usually spent with each customer	Not at a defined frequency, only on need basis	34	11.22
	Less than 2 minutes	6	1.98
	2-5 minutes	62	20.46
	5-10 minutes	137	45.21
	10-20 minutes	47	15.51
	20-30 minutes	17	5.61
Ideal time sales persons willing to spend with customers	Not at a defined frequency, only on need basis	39	12.87
	Less than 2 minutes	1	0.33
	2-5 minutes	20	6.6
	5-10 minutes	83	27.39
	10-20 minutes	119	39.27
	20-30 minutes	41	13.53
Information/ Value addition provided customers	Clinical information on the drugs such as latest trials etc.	265	87.46
	Information on pricing, company support on free drugs, availability etc.	259	85.48
	Information / leaflet, brochure on drugs, dosing for the patients	231	76.24
	Do's & don'ts for patients	94	31.02
	Diets, nutrition & exercise information for the patients	48	15.84
	Others	11	3.63

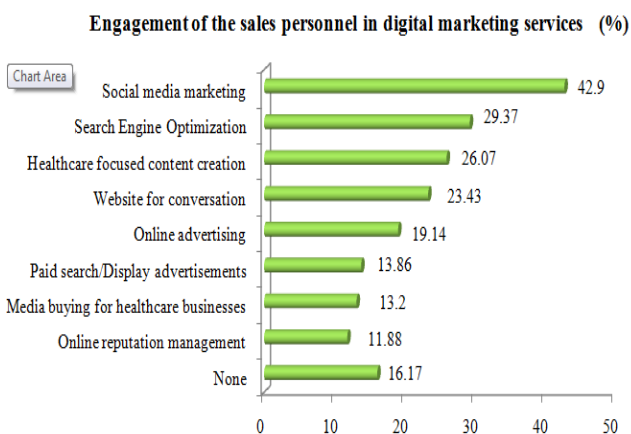


Fig. 3 Engagement of the sales personnel in digital marketing services

Fig. 3 explained the level of engagement of sales professionals in different digital marketing tools. Social media marketing was the most utilised tool of digital platform with 42.9% of sales professionals working on it. Most of higher level professionals had to use social media for marketing along with the traditional marketing methods for the synergistic effect to increase sales. Other

involvements of the participants of the study at the digital platform have been mentioned in the Fig. 3.

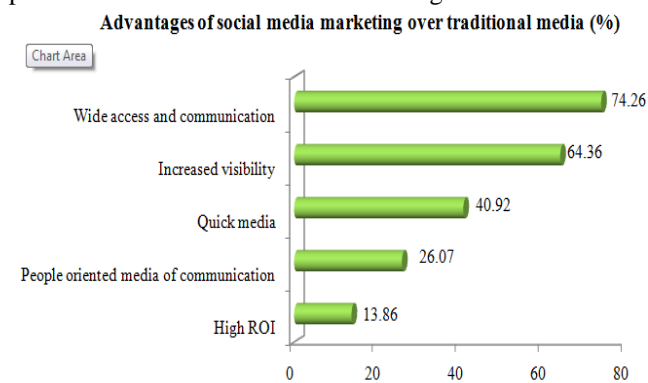


Fig. 4 Advantages of digital media marketing over traditional media

Advantages of digital platform over the traditional methods of marketing have been shown in Fig. 4. Wide access and communication was major advantage of digital platform marketing as mentioned by 74.26 participants over the traditional methods. The second advantage of marketing via digital medium was remarked as increased visibility by 64.36% of the sales professionals.

Role and uses of digital platform as per the views of the study participants have been mentioned elaborately in table III. Majority of the sales professionals agreed in unison to the usability of this platform in work with most of them using social media platform for varied professional activities. Most of the professionals mentioned that there was 30-60 minutes of online presence of customers per day. Frequently most of the customers spent almost an hour

every day on these social networking sites, which helped majority (~70%) of sales persons to reach their customers, share information and maintain their relationship with ease. Apart from the benefits of social media, there were some disadvantages of reported by the sales professionals. The most agreed was, the lack of privacy followed by misuse of 24 x 7 availability on the digital platform.

TABLE III ROLE AND USE OF DIGITAL PLATFORM IN FORM OF SOCIAL MEDIA: VIEWS OF SALES PROFESSIONALS

		Frequency	%
Role of digital platform usage in work place	No	9	2.97
	Yes	294	97.03
Use of any form of Social Media	No	6	1.98
	Yes	297	98.02
Frequency of iPad usage and other similar based interactions	<25%- Rarely, as customers prefer human interaction	24	7.92
	> 25%-When information is unique and requires iPad based discussions	92	30.36
	>50%- Quite Frequently	106	34.98
	>80-100%- Almost in every call	75	24.75
	Others	6	1.98
Customers usage of digital platform to disseminate knowledge, interact with & schedule appointments etc.	Frequently	146	48.18
	Occasionally	94	31.02
	Rarely	24	7.92
	Very Frequently	29	9.57
	Very Rarely	10	3.3
Average time spent on social networking sites per day	15 mins or less	21	6.93
	15-30 mins	96	31.68
	30-60 mins	127	41.91
	60-120 Minutes	40	13.2
	more than 120 mins	19	6.27
Reasons to prefer use of social media in work	Increase customer base	89	29.37
	Relationship Management	214	70.63
	Share Information with customers	218	71.95
	Take Appointments	98	32.34
	To stay updated	256	84.49
% of your customer base are a part of your social media list/ group	0-20%	24	7.92
	20-40%	59	19.47
	40-60%	84	27.72
	60-80%	89	29.37
	80-100%	44	14.52
Downsides of social media	No customers are part of my social media	3	0.99
	Authenticity and privacy problems	213	70.3
	Constant updating is required	80	26.4
	Misuse of the media for communication	179	59.08
	Problem of reach and connectivity	54	17.82

IV. DISCUSSION

In present digital times, it is important for every business to mark its digital presence, with pharmaceutical industry as no exception. Pharmaceutical industries have changed its marketing methods drastically to survive in this digitalized

world. [2] There are many tools which are being used widely to increase reach to the target population. Some of them are having company's websites, mobile applications, blogs and forums. [3,4] Apart these, companies are using both the social and professional networking sites to gain extension to newer territories. Sales professionals are most

important to achieve these targets and need to be trained extensively as per the current emerging demands of the industry. So, pharmaceutical companies keep a regular check and train these professionals as per the market demands. Sales professionals, on the other hand, are actively participating and inculcating digital skills. There are making a visible impression by social and professional media platforms. The most popular amongst all these connectivity platforms are whatsapp and facebook. These are most used due to the availability of customers on these sites, in huge numbers. These social media platforms provide direct connectivity and help develop a better relationship with the customers with a one on one access, which is another main reason for choosing these social media platforms. [5] Social media undoubtedly offers clear connectivity resulting in linear proportionality with the amount of sales. Sales team can acquire a large amount of information about their customers with the help of social media and can design their marketing and sales strategies as per the needs of the customers. Research reports have mentioned that many of the sales professionals are continuously polishing their skills and have increased the use of the digital marketing methods along with the traditional methods. [6] As per the views of the sales professionals digital connectivity not only offers better connectivity but also helps in brand creation and increase the customer base. The same has been reported in other such studies too. [7] Also, digital and social media marketing have been proclaimed by most of the participants in our study to have positive effects on the company's growth. [6,8] Researchers from different parts of the world have recorded the same. [9,10,11] The digital platform have been under utilized in terms of sales professionals. A report mentioned that Indian pharma companies would have to develop a digital culture and allocate different resources for the same. [12] Social media marketing was used the most by the companies, with majority of the professionals assigned to the same. The mode of advertising, have changed drastically from print media to social media in this digital world. Thus, social media marketing has taken over and transformed the traditional marketing methods in to the current digital ones. [13,14] Apart all the mentioned benefits of the digital platform as mentioned by the sales professionals there were a few disadvantages noted too. The top most of them was the lack of privacy. Due to the availability on the digital platform, there has been a significant lack of privacy as one could be contacted any time any place, as availability on one or the other site is there. This communication methods or availability on social or professional media, was also largely reported being misused by the sales professionals, as many of the sales professionals were connected to their customers ranging from a few to all of them on one or more digital platform. Digital connectivity where simplified the business and working methods on one side, has disturbed the work-life balance on the other hand.

V. CONCLUSION

In Indian marketing industry, digitalization has made its way amidst the traditional approach. Marketing methods have gone digital, with sales professionals being confronted the most on various digital platforms. Sales professionals are a very important part of the industry. In this digitalised world, it is mandatory to update the skills of the sales professionals to compete with the modern peers from all around the world. Hence, the sales professionals notion and understanding for the digital platform is exigent and can not be over looked by the management.

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