Pharma’s Digital Media Adoption Curve

The Timing is Right for Innovators to “Hook Up” with Big Pharma

Author: John Mack
Some pharmaceutical companies and brands are digital “dunces” while others are digital “geniuses” according to the “L2 Digital IQ Index” for pharmaceutical brands, a measurement of the digital competence of 51 pharma brands across eight therapeutic categories. Figure 1 (page 3) presents a sampling of scores.

There are many factors that determine whether a brand is a digital dunce or genius. For the Digital IQ Index, each brand was scored against more than one hundred qualitative and quantitative data points, and assigned a Digital IQ ranking of Genius, Gifted, Average, Challenged or Feeble (for details, see “Is Your Brand a Digital Genius or a Feeble-Minded Idiot?”; PMN#108-05; http://bit.ly/pmn10805).

The Pharma Digital Media Adoption Curve
Regardless of how pharma digital assets measure up to the competition, each pharma company faces several “bottlenecks” in its quest to achieve digital success.

According to the 2013 Digital Barometer for life sciences survey by Across Health, the top 4 bottlenecks for digital success in pharma are regulatory and legal issues, lack of digital strategy, ROI concerns, and lack of internal knowledge (see Figure 2, page 3).

According to Across Health:

- Regulatory or legal issues, ROI, and lack of digital strategy remain the main challenges globally. ROI concerns is the only main barrier on the rise... reaching second position in 2013
- In emerging markets, ROI is by far the main concern followed by healthcare compliance, while internal knowledge is much less of an issue versus other regions
- Lack of internal knowledge concerns have risen sharply since the last survey in 2012 while those around headcount have dropped—a sign that companies have finally invested in people and now need to invest in know-how?

Although some pharma marketers may be using legal/regulatory issues as an excuse for not investing more in digital technologies, the industry as a whole is warming up to digital innovation.

The industry seems to be moving along an adoption curve that looks something like the “Gartner Hype Cycle,” which has traditionally been used to understand how emerging technology is adopted—the “Pharma Digital Media Adoption Curve” (see Figure 3 on page 4) illustrates how the drug industry is overcoming the regulatory hurdles to adopting emerging digital technology and especially social media.

Technology Trigger
The “technology trigger” in this case is the rise of blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms in the early years of the 21st century. During this phase, some “early adopters” developed social media projects without much concern about FDA regulations. Two examples of such “early” (pharma) adopter projects are:

1. GlaxoSmithKline’s (GSK’s) Question Everything discussion board: This was the first pharma-based website that included a forum where visitors could ask questions and have an online conversation among themselves and with experts. GSK said the purpose of the site was to offer peer support and professional advice to dieters and to “dispel the many myths about dieting, exercise and fraudulent weight loss products” (see http://bit.ly/17FFlDY).

2. ADHD Moms Facebook page: This first of its kind pharma Facebook page was launched by McNeil Pediatrics—a division of J&J—in June, 2008. “Now to be fair, this Facebook page, still isn’t all that interactive,” said Marc Monseau, a J&J spokesperson at the time. “Though visitors can download podcasts, articles and participate in instant polls, they can’t post comments to the wall on the page. What they can do, though, is use their own Facebook pages to connect with other ADHD Moms fans. It’s a baby step, to be sure, but I understand the team is looking at other steps they can take to make it easier for people to share their insights into caring for kids with ADHD.”

FDA’s 14 Letters Kill One-Click “Rule”
In April, 2009, the FDA sent out its infamous 14 notice of violation letters in April, 2009. These letters were aimed at pharmaceutical search advertising and specifically refuted what the industry up to that point had accepted as common/best practice; namely, if the important safety information (ISI) is one click away, then it is OK to have digital ads (or tweets) that mention the drug name and the approved indication without including the major side effects. This often was referred to as the “one-click rule.” Since ad and tweet space were limited to 140 or less characters, this “rule” was very useful for marketing Rx drugs online. The letters signaled that the FDA now views such ads as illegal.

While the 14 letters had an immediate negative effect on search advertising, pharma marketers continued to experiment with social media. In June, 2009, for example, UCB sponsored an online PatientsLikeMe...
Figure 1. L2 Digital IQ Index. The index evaluated pharmaceutical brands’ digital presence across four criteria: Platform, Off-Platform Messaging, Search Engine Optimization, and Social Media.

Figure 2. Across Health Digital Barometer 2013 Results.
open epilepsy community that captured real-world experiences of people living with epilepsy in the U.S. This was groundbreaking because it was the first time a pharma company "embraced" adverse events in an online community by deploying a pharmacovigilance system for collecting and reporting adverse events to the FDA.

**Peak of Inflated Expectations**
During the phase leading up to the peak of the adoption curve, the FDA announced a public hearing to be held in November, 2009, to discuss many issues regarding FDA regulation of pharma communications via the Internet and social media. The "peak of inflated expectations" coincided with this hearing, which was well attended and reported on.

Many pharmaceutical marketers believed Tom Abrams, the Head of FDA's Division of Drug Marketing, Advertising, and Communications (now the Office of Prescription Drug Promotion, aka OPDP) when he ended the hearing with these words: "FDA has much work to do in this area and one that we are determined to do. It's important and we will do it."

**Trough of Disillusionment**
Almost four years have passed since the hearing and FDA has yet to publish the draft guidance that it promised. The FDA did, however, publish "Guidance for Industry Responding to Unsolicited Requests for Off-Label Information About Prescription Drugs and Medical Devices," which gave the industry guidance for responding to unsolicited off-label information requests received via public forums such as YouTube, blogs, and Twitter.

That guidance did not cover many of the issues discussed at the FDA public hearing and did not prevent the pharma digital adoption cycle from diving straight into the "trough of disillusionment."

To be sure, there were other factors that lead to the trough. Facebook's comment policy change in August 2011, which opened up comments on ALL pharma pages with some exceptions, was a major blow. As a consequence of that policy change, many pharma companies shut down their Facebook pages. Also, Google did not implement special Rx drug ad formats that it highlighted at the FDA hearing. These formats would have allowed the inclusion of some important safety information.

Despite these setbacks, the pharmaceutical industry is overcoming the regulatory issues that have stymied its adoption of emerging media up to this point (see "Pharma is Overcoming Social Media Hurdles"; PMN#1203-02; [http://bit.ly/SMhurdles](http://bit.ly/SMhurdles)). Sanofi-Aventis, for example, didn't give up on social media even after a "disgruntled" patient caused it to shut down a Facebook page that did not have comments turned off (this was before Facebook changed its comments policy).

**Digital Enlightenment**
A sign that the drug industry is on the upward slope of "digital enlightenment" is the proliferation of initiatives to "engage technology entrepreneurs." Several major pharmaceutical companies have active programs to (1) identify, reward, and work with innovative technology companies, and (2) increase the digital "smarts" of their employees via structured educational activities.

Continues...
These programs are helping pharma companies overcome one of the top 4 bottlenecks for digital success identified by Across Health and others; i.e., “not enough internal knowledge” (see Figure 2, page 3).

Sanofi, for example, has reached out to reward digital innovators with its “Data Design Diabetes Innovation Challenge” that had its inaugural run in 2011. This program engages technology entrepreneurs in a competitive framework while providing mentorship and education around “deep patient-centric issues.”

According to Sanofi, “by engaging technology entrepreneurs in a competitive framework while providing mentorship and education around deep patient-centric issues, Sanofi US struck out ahead of the pharma pack with a new methodology and way of thinking.”

**The Roche Digital Academy**

“One of the most common mistakes,” says the Roche Digital team, “is to believe that anyone within a company can take care of digital communication. This is a particularly bad mistake for pharmaceutical companies that operate under specific legal and regulatory restrictions.”

Aware of the strategic role as well as of the delicate processes behind digital marketing, Roche launched the “Digital Academy” in Milan, Italy, in 2013. The Academy aimed to provide the skills needed to “translate the ‘revolutionary logic of network relations into business opportunities,'” said the Roche Team.

The Roche Digital Academy project enrolled over 80 Roche employees who participated in a 6-month master course of study created in collaboration with the School of Communication, IULM University, in Milan, Italy.

The course included more than 100 hours of classroom lessons, project works and case studies. It also provided lessons on the main tools, dynamics of the web and skills needed to manage digital communications and marketing. “Graduation Day” was July 1, 2013.

"The initiative welcomed the presence and experience of various companies, external partners, agencies, and individuals such as Pharmaguy, who shared their expertise and case studies of excellence."

Pharmaguy’s presentation at the Roche Academy was titled “Overcoming Pharma’s Social Media Challenges" In this presentation, Pharmaguy reviewed key pharma social media “milestones” or “firsts” that have paved the way for others to follow and identified the “Pioneers” who have helped the industry navigate through “uncharted” territory lacking regulatory guidance.

The presentation also focused on some “mistakes” made by both leaders and followers. “Only those who learn from the mistakes of their competitors will move forward,” said Pharmaguy. “Those who learn from their OWN mistakes will move forward fastest!,” he added. The presentation concluded with ideas for “best practices” and “guiding principles” that may help pharma marketers avoid regulatory actions. You can download this presentation on SlideShare, here: [http://bit.ly/Rochepreso](http://bit.ly/Rochepreso)

**Training Employees**

Digital/social media training of pharmaceutical executives is critical because digital is the new “bag” that future pharma C-level executives must "carry" to be qualified for the job (see "Pharma C-Suite Social Media Dummies: Senior Execs Must Start 'Carrying the [Digital] Bag'": [http://bit.ly/pmn120501](http://bit.ly/pmn120501)).

“We invest continuously in training our employees" - says Maurizio de Cicco, CEO Roche, Spa. “This should help Roche engage in digital dialogue with their professional stakeholders and in the public opinion arena.”

Continues...
The training program—explained de Cicco—has highlighted and outlined the main characteristics and dynamics of the use of more common tools and digital communication channels such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, as well as forums and blogs. “These are now real bridges to direct relationships with stakeholders,” said de Cicco, “not only with clinicians and institutions but also with the general public.”

**Bayer HealthCare Grants4Apps™**

Bayer HealthCare Grants4Apps™ invites entrepreneurs to submit innovative app ideas that contribute to improving health outcomes or pharmaceutical processes. Bayer HealthCare considers an ‘App’ any software solution based on any platform. Selected projects will be supported with an amount of either 5.000€ or 10.000€, this decision will be made at Bayer’s sole discretion.

Figure 5: Pharmaguy Meets Bayer Grants4Apps™ Team in Berlin, June, 2013. That's Pharmaguy in the Hawaiian shirt. Dr. Jesus del Valle (@yeysus) is on his right and Stefan Flueckiger (@s_flueckiger) is on his left.

Pharmaguy was invited to speak at a Bayer HealthCare Grants4Apps event organized by Dr. Jesus del Valle, project leader. The title of Pharmaguy’s presentation was “Overcoming Pharma’s Social Media & Mobile Challenges.” This presentation was similar to one made at Roche, but emphasized regulations and issues surrounding mobile health apps developed by the pharmaceutical industry. You can download this presentation on SlideShare: [http://bit.ly/bayerpreso](http://bit.ly/bayerpreso)

![Figure 6: A visual recording of Pharmaguy’s Presentation at a Grants4Apps Meeting, June 2013.](image)

**Johnson & Johnson’s Digital Health Masterclass**

Johnson and Johnson/Janssen recently launched a Digital Health Masterclass in Europe. This new “mentoring” program will offer a “springboard for the digital health influencers of tomorrow” and, ultimately, the chance to compete before a panel of experts and investors for a share in a €50,000 prize fund. It will no doubt also benefit J&J through “collaboration and exchange of ideas—working together to share knowledge”; i.e., Open Innovation.

**It’s Good to Be the Innovator!**

This is an exciting time to be a technology innovator in the health sciences. Now that the pharmaceutical industry is seriously pushing the digital agenda WITHIN their organizations, technology innovators should get on the bandwagon and reap the benefits.

Who knows? The influx of money, innovators and new ideas may help propel the drug industry into the “plateau of digital productivity” phase of the adoption curve. But there remains another bottleneck to overcome: proof of return on investment.