

Case Study: A Drug Launch into COVID Headwinds

Lessons to launch by during a pandemic—or otherwise

In February, a small pharma company was poised for the Canadian launch of a drug approved to reduce the risk of cardiovascular (CV) events in high-risk patients. “All dressed up” with what seemed like “nowhere to go,” the team scrapped a meticulous launch plan and improvised. In the eight months since, over a third of target customers have been reached and hundreds of physicians have begun prescribing even without benefit of in-person sales calls. Success was driven by a flywheel of critical factors—namely mindset, agility, customer focus, and a willingness to “unlearn” time-honored principles that didn’t fit the moment. These are lessons to launch by, even in “ordinary” times.

WINNING MINDSET

The courage of conviction is essential to any launch, but to launch in the early days of the pandemic, a double dose was needed. This team was energized by two vital ideas: (1) deep commitment to the product value proposition and (2) confidence in the ability to improvise. A sense of urgency about patients in need inspired a belief that commercial success was achievable, even if the terms of success needed to be redefined. The animating principle for the team was a belief that going forward meant going full-throttle.

AGILITY

For a launch with no pandemic playbook and no option for direct patient engagement through DTC, agility and adaptability were both crucial. Key elements of a retooled launch—leveraging several late-breaking product data in the first-ever virtual ACC, mobilization of thought leadership, and creation of an entirely digital sales plan—all required empowerment and an ability to pivot quickly if something failed. The new launch “plan” emerged ad hoc as a mandate to gather ideas, try multiple approaches, and course-correct rapidly—treating missteps as education, not failure.

GENUINE CUSTOMER FOCUS

Agility also drove a fresh way of thinking about customer centrality. Marketing’s first principle is genuine customer empathy, and failure to earn trust in a launch can have lasting effects on a brand, especially when customers are feeling vulnerable. Hoping

that radical changes in practice logistics might free up physicians’ time for genuinely valuable CME, the company threw itself into development of an impromptu program that addressed urgent COVID-related challenges to CV disease management broadly, rather than focusing myopically on its own drug. In a matter of weeks, the company was holding webinars to present emerging thought leadership on the relationship between the ACE inhibitor pathway and COVID vulnerability, including an important message for concerned physicians to stay the course with ACEs rather than put patients at added risk. The gamble paid off. Instead of dozens of attendees per program, there were hundreds. By tapping into concerns about high-risk patients who could not be closely followed during the pandemic, the company established itself as a customer-focused partner with a holistic view of CV management.

UNLEARNING LESSONS

Once the traditional sales model was upended, routine forecasting assumptions had to be revised and the uptake curve redrawn. A plan that had focused initially on high-value targets was replaced by a strategy that put broad-based digital sales tools to extensive and effective use—upending the classic pyramid and seeding a broader community of prescribers from day-one. As a result, many Rx’s are coming today from physicians who were not on the target list and would never have been actively pursued within the first six to nine months. With the gradual introduction of personal sales back into the marketing mix, the top of the pyramid (high-volume, high-value targets) can now be addressed with renewed energy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Any predictions we make about the post-COVID world are bound to be a little right and a little wrong, but it’s safe to say that nothing will ever be quite as it was—not the way we dispense healthcare, nor the way we launch products. The pandemic simply accelerated an evolution toward mixed models, and creative, technology-intensive resource deployment customized to specific markets. Future brands will need to go to market with a readiness to iterate scenarios because a single launch plan, baked to perfection, will be a luxury of the distant past. **PE**



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