



Mining the patient ecosystem to achieve better patient outcomes

| By Dinisha Cherodian

The pharmaceutical industry has recently faced a major shift in focus. Critically and deliberately, it has moved from product-centric to a more holistic approach that aims to put the patient at the heart of business. Companies now dedicate specific resources to patient support, patient advocacy and patient engagement, focused on improving patient outcomes. These initiatives have their own commercial value but it is the value to patients that is most significant.

Marketing research has played a pivotal role in this evolution. Pharma has needed a deeper understanding of the patient beyond the clinic walls – their daily lives, experiences, hopes and goals – to deliver true value to patients. Research techniques are evolving to meet this need and unearth the insight necessary for the task at hand. Yet as we delve deeper into the world of the patient through their eyes, we must be careful not to develop tunnel vision.

The patient ecosystem



There is a broader ecosystem surrounding the patient that is often overlooked. Certainly, the caregiver is part of this (and they are increasingly considered in marketing research), but there is a world of support beyond that one individual. Traditional marketing research skims the surface – picking such insight up anecdotally or via set questioning to reveal the importance of other sources of support.

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A 360-degree approach to patient research is critical. Only with this matrix view can we fully understand how to best support patients to improve specific outcomes. Patient research needs to build in a broader lens that provides the patient with support through sources such as patient advocacy groups, multigenerational family members and online mediums.

Patient advocacy groups

Patient associations and advocacy groups play a critical role in the patient ecosystem. There is no doubt these are powerful and highly respected within the medical community, providing emotional and educational support to the patient. Understandably the relationship between patient advocacy groups and the pharmaceutical company is a sensitive one that needs to be handled carefully. But this is where two key strengths of marketing researchers can be utilized – independence and observation. Independence is why the marketing research industry exists – to protect the customer (the patient in this case). At the beginning of each interview the marketing researcher explains this – they work to have no bias and will always report back findings in aggregate form. Patient permissions are paramount, providing a layer of trust and transparency.

The ability to observe is also a fundamental part of a marketing researcher's skill set. A researcher can attend a patient support group and simply listen and observe the discussion. Hearing and seeing the questions and concerns that patients share with health care providers (HCPs), other patients and advocacy group leaders reveals the depth of concern a patient has and areas that patients need more knowledge. All of this can be unearthed without asking a single direct question.

Multigenerational research

We need to observe and explore the impact a patient's condition has on the family and the impact the family has on the patient. Take for example adult children who will go to consultations with older patients to interpret and provide support. In some cultures, many generations live under one roof or within close proximity, where multiple members of the family share the burden of responsibility, helping the patient administer their injections, taking the patient to hospital appointments and understanding the financial implications of medical care.

Multigenerational research can reveal insights and opportunities that may be missed through talking directly to the patient. Family members are close enough to the patient and their caregiver to understand their needs and aspirations but are also objective enough to explain things that the patient cannot articulate or doesn't want to face.

Online platforms

The Internet provides invaluable support for patients – it is often the first place they turn to when they are diagnosed. Apps, tracking tools and online forums are now mainstays for patient education and management and very useful for practical and functional insights. But the true depth of emotional support that online platforms offer is often overlooked or underestimated.

Patients appreciate the support of their families and HCPs but at the end of the day they are not the ones who are going through the experience and there may be a layer of guilt associated with leaning

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on them for support. Being able to talk to and share their experiences with another patient who has had similar experiences can help a patient through their darkest moments. Through online forums you can see that patients connect and often build deep relationships with each other. This is especially meaningful for those who are unable to get out and meet other patients face-to-face.

Some patients create blogs and Facebook groups to help them deal with their condition, chronicling every moment (good and bad), mapping their journey, their relationships and experiences with HCPs, their families – everything. While patients may start these as a therapeutic outlet they often turn into a community, with other patients reaching out to them and sharing their own experiences.

Online is more than just a platform to connect – it's a place where patients know that they are not alone and are therefore an integral part of their ecosystem. And do not forget the value of the digital patient journey within 360-degree patient research. Exploring search terms, passive tracking on social media, Google Analytics on specific Web pages and reflections on the role digital plays in patients' lives are also very valuable research approaches. Insight from this work can support more targeted, effective and efficient online support for patients.

Widening the lens

There is no doubt that speaking directly with a patient and understanding their experiences through their own words should be the core of patient research. But by adding a wider lens to this work, the lid can be lifted on what really drives the patient experience and outcomes. Insight from across the patient ecosystem must be explored and synthesized in balance, with each element carefully weighed against the other to form a complete and coherent picture. Only with this level of insight and detail can we really unlock the next generation of patient centricity.

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