

How to jump-start your multichannel strategy

A strong vision, well-communicated strategy and clear leadership are all key

Implementing a multichannel strategy isn't easy. A recent survey that looked at the state of multichannel maturity across European pharmaceutical companies found:

- Only 25% felt that they had a strong multichannel vision and leadership team to drive change
- Just 9% felt that they had appropriately skilled staff to make multichannel happen
- 60% rated the pace of change within their organisation as slow or very slow.¹

Though 'multichannel' is not synonymous with 'digital', the rapid rise of digital communication is driving the need for urgent change. By 2020, Gartner predicts the customer will manage 85% of the relationship with an enterprise without interacting with a human. Meanwhile, according to Forrester 42% of service agents are currently unable to efficiently resolve customer issues due to disconnected systems, archaic user interfaces and multiple applications.

"The key is not to create a digital strategy, but to create a strategy for the digital world," says David Moore, group director at Ashfield Healthcare Communications. "Consumers of all types, including healthcare professionals, expect information and interactions with a company to be seamless across multiple channels, regardless of what industry they are in. Pharma needs to work quickly to connect its touchpoints with its audiences - from medical education to events to sales reps and everything in between - to be a viable and credible source of information."

So what are the key components for a successful multichannel communications strategy? A strong vision, a strategy that is well communicated across the organisation, clear leadership in both internal and external marketing and communications, and the staff and agencies with

appropriate skills to implement are all essential. It's quite a list, and one that takes commitment, expertise and perseverance.

An effective approach can be segmented into three key areas:

1. Behaviour

Create a climate for change by:

- understanding internal attitudes and beliefs
- defining and communicating the vision
- putting in place the necessary resources to drive change.

2. Strategy

Establish a plan of action by:

- assessing the external and internal environment
- outlining the required actions to meet objectives and putting in place a measurement plan to assess progress.

3. Implementation

Ensuring execution excellence by:

- ensuring all teams have the necessary skills to put multichannel plans into practice
- supporting affiliates in executing at a local level.

'It is critical to measure effectiveness along the way and not be afraid to change course'

The first stage of **Behaviour** involves understanding the propensity for change, defining the benefits of change for all stakeholders, communicating the aspiration for change and impact on the business and taking advantage of aspiration for change and desire for involvement to maintain momentum.

The second stage of **Strategy** involves conducting an environmental analysis (competitors, marketplace, conversations, social, business analysis [technological, human,

fiscal, content]) and creating a plan (criteria for success, objectives and KPIs, short-term wins, benefits to implementation, impact on business). A good plan will also involve all stakeholders, including representatives from compliance and regulatory teams. Their involvement at the embryonic stages is crucial and can make all the difference between the strategy's success or untimely death.

The third stage of **Implementation** involves thorough training, communication and marketing deliverables, content production, channel selection, utilisation of platforms and technology and changes in working methods.

With so many moving parts, it's critical to be prepared to start with a pilot. An effective one will teach you something about your audience that you don't already know, and will give you sufficient insight to decide whether a widespread roll-out will meet your agreed definition of success. It's also very helpful to consider how to exit gracefully if you don't get the results you want. Consider at what point, and by what set of measures you are going to set the trigger for ending the initiative and the most graceful way to do this. If you have engaged with an audience, how will you transition them to another touchpoint? Your audience will naturally be disappointed if you discontinue an engagement activity that they value; but disappointment can turn to frustration if you cannot offer a viable alternative.

Finally, it is critical to measure effectiveness along the way and not be afraid to change course in light of how your audiences respond. "Concluding a strategy with a definitive end is naive - it is a constantly evolving entity that uses metrics and measurements to refine and improve," advises Andrew Binns, SVP strategy and planning at Ashfield. "You may end up with solutions that are different to what you set out to achieve, but if that's been driven by audience insight rather than a corporate objective, you're likely to



end up with the right outcomes."

Above all, the point of a multichannel strategy is to ensure you are focusing your time, efforts, people and budgets in the right way to reach the right audiences. If it is a box-ticking exercise, or an attempt to keep up with competitors, then multichannel quickly becomes a drain. When embraced correctly, though, it almost always disrupts current thinking and prompts innovation and creativity from within. Most importantly, it'll also take you closer to the ultimate goal of improving lives for patients by getting healthcare professionals the information they need in an increasingly time-pressured and information-saturated digital world.

Ashfield Healthcare Communications 

Lee Wales is multichannel strategy director, Ashfield Healthcare Communications. He can be contacted via Lee.Wales@ashfieldhealthcare.com

¹ Across Health, Multichannel Maturity 2015 research - <http://www.slideshare.net/AcrossHealth/across-health-multichannel-maturity-2015-48950551>