How Innovation Can Help Pharma Marketers Improve Medication Adherence and Patient Compliance

By Tyler Pennock, Senior Vice President, Digital Health

Edelman Digital

How Innovation Can Help Pharma Marketers Improve Medication Adherence and Patient Compliance

Medication adherence and patient compliance play a major role in treatment efficacy and recovery times. Medicines work best when taken as prescribed, and doctor-recommended routines only help if they're followed. Beyond the negative effects non-adherence can have for a patient, it's also costing pharmaceutical companies an estimated $637 billion across the globe. Healthcare professionals' hands are relatively tied. They can only do so much to monitor patients on an individual basis.

This is where the opportunity lies for pharma and, most importantly, its marketers. For real, lasting solutions, these companies and medical device manufacturers must tap into their unique blend of patient insights, medical expertise, technical infrastructure, and marketing savvy to improve adherence. Doing so will not only increase the bottom line, it will engage patients for the longer term and provide broader support for the management of chronic illness.

> *Pharma is losing an estimated $637 billion globally due to non-adherence.*

Designing medication adherence solutions requires a collaborative effort across marketing, research, medical/regulatory, R&D, IT, patient advocacy and more, but the multitude of factors contributing to patients' non-adherence make it hard to know where to begin. Some have an inability to cover out-of-pocket drugs costs, others experience mild to moderate side effects, while still others have negative perceptions about taking medicine, fear of injections or swallowing pills, or concerns about developing resistance or addiction. Last but not least, there's the simple inconvenience of adding treatments to their daily routine.

These are complex dynamics that aren't easily addressed by standard marketing tactics like in-office brochures, banner ads, or celebrity spokespeople. Pharma marketers must turn to nascent digital technologies to make a difference. The good news is AI, IoT and wearables are becoming quite adept at navigating complex variables, then distilling all that input into information and actions that can nudge patients in the right way at the right moments. Mobile is at the heart of these interactions, and smartphone ubiquity across demographics means that most patients now have access to a suite of sensors and connected apps that can prompt improvements in adherence.

Let's take a deeper look at the approaches marketers should take in utilizing today's technologies to improve medication adherence:

Quantify the Value

Most pharma and medical device brands are impacted by non-adherence to some extent. To understand what your brand may have to gain by reasonable gains in patient adherence, we suggest setting a moderate goal for improvement and asking the following questions:

- How will you plan to measure?
- Which data sources should be considered?
- What investment may be necessary?
- What's the potential dollar value for the business?
- When should you assess and optimize?

Getting started with these answers (or as many as possible) will ensure that all stakeholders are clear on current benchmarks and intended target ranges.

Identify the Barriers

Once the initial goals are set and tools for measurement are in place, health marketers should focus on identifying the unique barriers that interfere with adherence for a specific therapy. This can be done by:

- Auditing digital and social channels to gauge patient concerns/sentiment
- Surveying patients, caregivers and healthcare professionals about their experiences
- Analyzing refill rates and adverse event reports

Platforms such as SERMO and Treato, along with groups like our own Edelman Intelligence, can field surveys and provide analysis for relevant audiences. Synthesizing these data points with anecdotal feedback will start to paint a picture of what keeps certain patient segments from taking their medication as prescribed.

Understand the Behaviors

A reminder app may seem like the best approach for patients whose non-adherence is caused by pill burden (having to take multiple pills multiple times per day,) but understanding the digital behaviors and touch points of your audience will help you find the solution that may best suit the user and their challenges. Surveys and other market research can provide an in-depth understanding of your audiences' digital day. Even free tools like Google's Consumer Barometer will unearth some good insights related to device ownership, search activity, and overall intent/expectations for users.

If you're able to create custom solutions, you might want to consider a series of "ride-alongs" with patients that allow design teams to become immersed in the patients' daily activities. This type of first-hand research can help your team discover opportunities and gaps for adherence messaging and resources.

Prototype, Pilot, Partner

Developing and supporting adherence-focused platforms could become a pricey and resource-intensive endeavor. To constrain costs and generate learnings for future optimization, there are three steps you should take:

Prototype:

Use initial insights to develop a workable, yet functionally limited application that addresses a key barrier. In the previous example of pill burden, this prototype could simply be an SMS, email, or mobile alert that reminds patients to take their pill, followed by a reply from the user to acknowledge that they've completed the action. The data can then be called up by patients and emailed to a doctor to map against treatment progress. The prototype doesn't have to tackle all the possible issues and variables – focus on one thing and present the simplest solution possible.

Pilot:

Once your prototype is developed, select a group of patients (or a region, health system, etc.) to pilot the initiative. The effort must be structured in a way that puts measurement front and center, matching usage of the tools/features to patient logs and feedback about the user experience, noting any shifts in adherence. Feedback could be solicited via periodic surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one in-depth interviews. GSK is taking a comprehensive approach by conducting clinical trials with a COPD inhaler embedded with sensors to track and report on adherence.

Partner:

IBM, Google, Microsoft, Apple, Samsung and many other tech companies are making big bets in healthcare, working closely with pharma and the FDA on a number of medical research initiatives. These kinds of industry partners can provide the platform access, technical expertise, and audience reach that will go a long way toward the promotion and adoption of new adherence tools. Other stakeholders such as payers or employee wellness programs may also have shared interests in ensuring that their own audiences get healthy and stay on necessary treatments for chronic illnesses. Sanofi and Innovation Health — an insurance company jointly run by Inova and Aetna — are running a pilot program examining the impact of digital health strategies and integrated technologies to improve care for Type 2 diabetes patients. Cost-sharing or value-adds can make these partnerships an important part of any adherence initiative.

Patient Adherence is a Problem and it's *Your* Opportunity

Marketing alone won't solve adherence. Neither will sales reps or R&D. Maybe that's why pharma isn't doing more to address the issue. Our typical swim lanes and siloes are overly-focused on what each group alone can accomplish, and it's unclear who should own these tough, multifaceted challenges including funding, resourcing, accountability, and other factors. Ultimately though, we're all tasked with improving patient outcomes while solving business problems, and this one seems huge. This is an opportunity for communications teams to step up and bring programs to the table that can contribute to those shared successes in real and measurable ways.

About Edelman Digital

Edelman Digital is the world's first and largest global social agency. We are an integrated marketing practice with roots in digital and social at our core. We combine our deep digital and social experience with Edelman's communications expertise to create integrated solutions for our clients. Our holistic approach allows us to create omni-channel strategies that reach the right audiences with the right content. We've assembled the best team in the world who plan, create and deliver stories that matter in order to maximize business impact. Edelman Digital has over one thousand employees globally and we manage over 850 communities that reach over 250 million people.

For more information, visit EdelmanDigital.com