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Insight versus Science – a Culture Clash for Pharma?



This article by Ceri James, Marketing Capability Director at BRAND LEARNING, explores the reasons why customer insight generation may be an uncomfortable partner to the scientific process within the Pharmaceutical industry, and proposes some potential solutions.

Since the original “Eureka” moment when Archimedes took inspiration from his bath tub, scientists have had many inspired moments of insight. However, when it comes to the generation and application of *customer* insight, our experience is that a strong scientific culture can act as a barrier to effective change. Nowhere is this more of a challenge than in the Pharmaceutical industry.

Key challenges facing Pharmaceutical companies

Building a more customer-focused organisation has become a key strategic priority for Pharmaceutical businesses in recent years. Commercial pressures have been building up, with less productive R&D departments, patent issues, increased competition across therapy areas, and longer, more expensive development schedules to name just a few. As a result, understanding the inter-related needs of patients, prescribers, payers, as well as other customer groups has become an increasingly important driver of competitive advantage. Yet looking through the brand communication in any medical trade journal, a distinct lack of insightful marketing is still evident.

More Insightful ways of working

So what is holding some Pharmaceutical marketers back? As in many businesses, and the Pharmaceutical sector is not alone here, the core processes and skills needed to ensure that systematic insight generation and application are at the heart of business activity are often missing. Let’s look at some examples:

- The term insight itself may be overused and is often misunderstood, becoming an ill-defined panacea for all the company’s problems.
- Insight generation involves a difficult balance between being the role of everybody all the time and specific teams at specific times. Getting clarity around this balance of roles is often a source of confusion.
- Through a lack of integration with other processes, insight generation sometimes lacks a clear sense of purpose or direction, such as driving a new brand positioning or generating customer-focused solutions to a key business issue.
- A clear, simple and practical process for consistently and systematically turning voluminous customer data into relevant, practical insights is often missing - insights only rarely come like “bolts from the blue”.

All the above plays a part, but in our experience, the fundamental issue in the Pharmaceutical sector may be one of culture - the attitudes, beliefs and values that drive what people think and how they work on a day to day basis.



A culture challenge

Pharma marketing has traditionally attracted people with a strong scientific background, with focus on the product and the science. For a long time, competitive differentiation in pharmaceuticals has relied on using scientific data relating to product efficacy, safety and tolerability to address obvious unmet medical needs. The priority has been to find proof of scientific hypotheses using data produced in clinical trials, designed to identify statistical differences between carefully designed populations of patients.

In this context, it's easy to appreciate why companies tend to rely heavily on quantitative market research data and don't fully address some of the more qualitative questions that really matter to patients: "What is it like to suffer from this problem? How does it affect your ability to communicate, your relationships with friends and loved ones, your hobbies, working life and aspirations?". This more emotional territory where the needs and decisions of both patients and medical health professionals will often be grounded, is where core insights may be found yet it's not where product scientists may be used to operating. The root issue here is one of mindset and the key challenge is to balance scientific and analytical perspectives with more creative and emotional capabilities.

Towards a solution

In order to put the customer at the heart of any business, the single most important factor is that the senior business leaders truly believe that superior insight, well implemented, will drive competitive advantage. It is their role to champion customer focus within the business and to ensure the appropriate organisational capabilities and culture is established and embedded.

There are some essential building blocks. An insight is not the same as a research finding, neither can it always be found in an obvious place. Clarity on what insight really means is crucial, distinguishing between different aspects such as customer data, segmentation, specific customer insights and general 'insightfulness'. Developing practical insight generation tools and a common language that everyone can understand and use is also critical, as is making sure insight application is hard-wired into other business processes, such as strategic planning and communication development.

For the Pharmaceutical industry in particular, our experience would suggest some further ways to help address some of the cultural obstacles:

Set a Customer-focused Agenda

- Create a clear and inspiring vision for the organization, which explains why focusing on customers is important and how insights can drive competitive advantage.
- Challenge the perception that insight is something you do at the start of a strategic project. It's a way of thinking, working and behaving at all times.
- Shift the role of market researchers from simply running Market Research projects and supplying data for the marketing department and build their capability to facilitate greater customer orientation, understanding and connection throughout the entire business.

Engage Creative Energy

- Ensure that any capability development initiative strikes a balance between establishing new processes/ Tools and a new mindset that embraces imagination and intuition (see diagram).
- Explore with teams what it means to develop an insightful culture where people naturally exhibit a curiosity to understand customers at a deeper level.
- Recruit marketers from other industry sectors to provide fresh perspectives and different experience and personality profiles.



Insist that cross-functional team members have regular direct contact with customers, ideally in their natural environment, rather than with the inherent limitations of a focus group or an interview.

- Make the most of the myriad of new on-line opportunities to connect with customers using social networks and innovative market research techniques.

Realism about Change

- Accept that becoming more customer focused is a significant change management challenge, in terms of employee engagement, stakeholder management and embedding mechanisms. This requires dedicated resource and takes time.

What we can say with absolute confidence is that, in an industry as dynamic as Pharmaceuticals, the companies that invest to establish competitive advantage through their customer insight capabilities stand to be the future winners within the sector.



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