

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

OPINION OF PHARMACEUTICAL AND HEALTHCARE PRODUCT INDUSTRY EMPLOYEES IN BULGARIA ON TELEMARKETING AS A COMMUNICATIONAL TOOL FOR PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Rostislav Kurdov¹, Todor Naydenov², Valentina Belcheva¹

¹Medical College, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

²Post-graduate student, Faculty of Pharmacy, Medical University of Varna, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: It is very important to use the communication mix in every initiative, because it leads to success of almost any venture. Usually representatives (medical or trade) are the most powerful tools in the communication between the industry and specialists working in healthcare. The traditional communication model was dramatically changed when the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic was introduced. Telemarketing became a popular way to exchange information worldwide.

AIM: The purpose of the present study is to investigate the opinion of representatives and managers working in pharmaceutical and healthcare products industry about telemarketing, as well as to identify any problems and the possibilities for improving the communication process.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: We conducted in-depth individual online interviews in the month of April 2020.

RESULTS: Telemarketing is considered a cheap option to manage the crisis. At same time telemarketing may be a big trap for the industry. Medical representatives usually conduct the process. We find examples of misunderstanding of promotional tools, mistakes during implementation, and losses of customers. The study points out the main places for improvement.

CONCLUSION: The industry has used telemarketing during the COVID-19 crisis. Not all participants are planning to use it in regular communication and underestimate the need of investment, education, and professional staff.

Keywords: pharmacy, industry, pharmacists, healthcare specialist, communication, marketing

Address for correspondence:

Valentina Belcheva
Medical College
Trakia University
9 Armeyska Str.
6000 Stara Zagora
Bulgaria
e-mail: valentina.belcheva@trakia-uni.bg

Received: September 18 2022

Accepted: December 7, 2022

INTRODUCTION

The communication mix is crucial for the success of any enterprise (1). There is an ongoing discussion about how the industry can communicate with healthcare specialists effectively (2). Although representatives (medical or trade) are the most powerful tools in the communication between the industry and healthcare specialists, digitalization of the process is one of the focuses (3). In 2019 scientist R.



Groebel suggested that to better collaborate with the newer generations of physicians in their preferred communication modes, the industry must become more adapt with an expanded set of technology solutions (4).

According to the American Marketing Association, digital marketing is the use of digital or social channels to promote a brand or reach consumers. This kind of marketing can be executed within social media, search engine, internet, mobile devices, and other channels (5).

Over the past decade, our lifestyles have become more and more reliant on digital tools and human interactions have increasingly been coming under threat (6). It remains to be seen whether the current extraordinary and testing circumstances will push humanity further into virtual space with little hope to go back to where we were before the pandemic struck (7). The traditional communication model was dramatically changed when the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic was introduced. Many companies all over the world, Bulgaria included, were forced to prepare new business plans and scenarios in which their representatives cannot visit healthcare professionals in person. Field sales reps have been sidelined by COVID-19 quarantines, leaving companies to figure out other ways to get the message about new products out (8). Drug makers were following stay-at-home policies with digital sales tools and virtual meetings replacing face-to-face visits. This has accelerated a yearlong trend toward digital sales tools fuelled by the increasing restrictions at doctors' offices and hospitals. And, in the end, the pandemic may shift pharmaceutical sales to digital detailing permanently (9).

Consultants from Bain's Healthcare Practice, in their report: A COVID-19 Action Plan for Pharma Executives (published 2020), reviewed the implications of COVID-19 for pharmaceutical industry. They claimed that most pharmaceutical companies did not face a crisis as they immediately provided recommendations for key actions which can help address the new challenges. One of the short-term actions had to be adjustment of the commercial model due to the limitation of personal interactions between sales representatives and physicians. They recommended that the industry develop activities for

the salesforce that would maintain their productivity and use digital platforms and other channels where it is possible to increase awareness of products and physician engagement (10). At the same time some analysts and decision-makers in the pharmaceutical industry and healthcare specialists have acted very conservatively in the recent years. One recent analysis of AZ Affinity Monitor from 2019 points out that 47.3% of physicians engage well with in-person meetings with pharmaceutical representatives, but just 9.6% of physicians are open to digital tactics. The new environment could provide a chance to level the playing field a bit now that representatives will likely coordinate the customer experience entirely via digital channels. Consultants from AZ note that trying to fill representatives' workdays with tasks that do not include knocking on office doors could help the pharmaceutical industry fulfil its desire to be more tech-minded. At the same time they believe that the frequency and timing of digital messages needs to be carefully weighed against the demands of physicians' unusual case load. Consultants from AZ also think that representatives can continue to effectively reach their customers from a home office if they (11):

- ◆ play a more active role in directing non-personal promotion;
- ◆ help provide support to existing patients;
- ◆ create even more personalized content—now and down the line;
- ◆ sharpen remote detailing offerings;
- ◆ coordinate messaging campaigns across the organization;
- ◆ brush up on skills.

Another report suggests that the pharmaceutical industry could capitalize on the rising use of mobile phones, as 81 percent of respondents said they use their smartphones for professional purposes, with many checking them more than 10 times per day (12). Such approach is in the sphere of e-marketing and telemarketing (13). Telemarketing is a method for direct marketing and selling of products and services by telephone, in which agents call potential customers, on their home or cellular phone, and offer them a product or service (14). Despite the wide use of mobile phones, the industry has to be careful, because this approach is not just the same type of communication only via different channels. In 2009 A.

Mehrotra and R. Agarwal note that customers view telemarketing as an approach used by companies to sell their products “any which way,” with lack of concern for customers’ “choices and comfort” (15).

AIM

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the opinion of representatives and managers of pharmaceutical and healthcare product industries about telemarketing, as well as to identify any problems and the possibilities for improving the communication process.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We applied the method of in-depth interview to cover the purposes of this qualitative research. Such methods provide the possibility to examine the topic in depth and find out the main reasons that form the particular behavior of the participants and to understand better what is behind a particular business decision. Moreover, in-depth interview methods are very useful to discuss sensitive topic such as business practices and business plans, perceptions and feelings concerning company politics and opinions about clients and competitors. We prepared list of 30 open-ended questions and follow-up questions separated into 6 groups. We prepared and validated a protocol for interviews and an interview guide. A group of 25 respondents was determined. All of them were part of the study, which was supposed to cover different points of view and describe possible job positions and the type of company according to its products. We prepared invitations and distributed them. All interviews were individually appointed to ensure conducting them in conditions that were most convenient for the participants and that would not affect the answers to questions concerning sensitive information. All interviews were conducted in April 2020 online using Viber or Skype. We analysed the content of the information collected from the interviews.

Description of the Study Participants

A list of potential stakeholders (executives or representatives of the sales and/or marketing departments of the manufacturers of medicines and healthcare products) was discussed in order to cover the widest range of points of view. As a result, a group of 25 people was formed and interviewed, representing 100% of the pre-planned. The selection of respon-

dents was based on a list of individuals who were personal acquaintances of the authors (Table 1).

RESULTS

The results of the study aim to:

1. Assess whether there are differences in the perception of telemarketing depending on the job position held in the company;
2. Analyze whether there are differences in the perception of telemarketing depending on the type of product or service;
3. Evaluate the barriers and prerequisites for achieving efficiency in promotion by phone;
4. Prepare the representatives of pharmaceutical companies and those with health-related products for the introduction and management of telemarketing as a promotional tool.

Telemarketing in the Promotional Strategies of Pharmaceutical Companies and Companies with Health-Related Products

In this part of the survey, we invited the respondents to share the promotional tools used by their company and other participants in the market. We sorted the received answers according to their number:

- ◆ *Phone calls*: 100% of the respondents indicated telemarketing as a promotional tool applied both by them and by the other companies. Moreover, a predominant number of them (n = 22, 88% of all respondents) noted that during the emergency situation this was the main promotional tool.
- ◆ *Sending emails*: 12 participants (48%) shared that they have already used such activity, and 4 of the others noted that they planned to implement it within the following month.
- ◆ *Webinars*: This tool was part of the future plans of the participants in the study. About 84% (or 20 respondents) believed that it was an activity that would be used by them and competitors in the conditions of an emergency situation. Only 11 of them (44%) have already implemented these plans and conducted a webinar with medical experts.
- ◆ *Short text messages*: 14 respondents (56%) mentioned this tool as part of their strategy.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study participants.

Type of Industry/Position	Participants (n)	Percentage (%)
Generic pharmaceuticals/Bulgarian/Manager at a sales department, over-the-counter medicines	1	4%
Generic pharmaceuticals/Bulgarian/Manager at a marketing department, prescription-only medicines	1	4%
Generic pharmaceuticals/International/Manager at sales department, over-the-counter medicines	1	4%
Generic pharmaceuticals/International/Manager at marketing department, prescription only medicines	1	4%
Research-based pharmaceuticals/International/Manager at sales department, over-the-counter medicines	1	4%
Research-based pharmaceuticals/International/Manager at marketing department, prescription-only medicines	1	4%
Generic pharmaceuticals/Medical representative, prescription-only medicines	1	4%
Generic pharmaceuticals/Medical representative, over-the-counter medicines	1	4%
Research-based pharmaceuticals/Medical representative, prescription-only medicines	1	4%
Generic pharmaceuticals/Sales representative, over-the-counter medicines	1	4%
Cosmetics/Manager at sales a department	1	4%
Cosmetics/Manager at a marketing department	1	4%
Cosmetics/Representative	1	4%
Supplements/Manager at a sales department	1	4%
Supplements/Manager at marketing department	1	4%
Supplements/Medical representative	1	4%
Supplements/Sales representative	1	4%
Medical devices/Manager at a sales department	1	4%
Medical devices/Manager at a marketing department	1	4%
Medical devices/Medical representative	1	4%
Medical devices/Sales representative	1	4%
Medical consumables/Manager at a sales department	1	4%
Medical consumables/Manager at a marketing department	1	4%
Medical consumables/Representative	1	4%

- ◆ *Video conferencing*: 20 respondents (80%) have given examples of videoconferencing, but they were employed by competing companies, with only 2 participants having personal experience with this promotional tool.

In the additional analysis of the answers, it is noteworthy that the examples given by the participants refer to a limited number of market participants in the segment of the research industry.

The study demonstrates the widespread application of telemarketing in various areas of health-care. It is part of the promotional strategies of both companies dealing with medicinal products and those promoting health-related products. The participants were asked to share whether they had used a phone promotion before the announcement of COVID-19 pandemic. Only one respondent had actively used telemarketing before the COVID-19 crisis.

The rest did not have any experience with this tool. One participant shared *“I have never imagined that it would be the main way to communicate with my clients.”* Another one emphasized the fact that he had used the phone only to receive information from his customers when necessary or to congratulate them on a holiday and added: *“...in our job, trust and relationships are key factors. My biggest asset is my acquaintance with the doctors and pharmacists in the area and their attitude towards me. I have their phones and they have mine, but these relationships have not been built with phone visits.”* There was a consensus among the participants about the lack of planning for the introduction of telemarketing in the company's activities. None of the participants in management positions shared any information about the existence of a preliminary plan for the use of telemarketing in the studied year. Introducing telephone communication in the arsenal of marketing tools, according to the majority of participants (n = 24, or 96%) was a result of a change of the environment caused by the state of emergency without thorough conducting a telephone visit, brings up the question about the effectiveness of telemarketing and the return on investment. Although the respondents said that it was difficult to assess the exact effect due to the short period of its application, where the sales fluctuate, it is interesting to analyze the responses.

Effectiveness of Telemarketing

“Far less effective, but much easier” – this answer of one participant in the study explains the understanding of telemarketing by most representatives of the industrial sectors surveyed by us.

In the current emergency situation, telemarketing has proven to be a convenient solution. Its introduction did not require the industry to make additional investments.

Only one participant shared about permanently using the services of an external telemarketing company. The remaining participants mentioned only a total of three occasions when they had resorted to external companies. All participants shared that they have used their own employees to conduct telemarketing. Only 4 respondents indicate that they have made additional investments related to the implementation of telemarketing, which were generally insignificant and were related to the telecommunica-

tion service. None of the respondents indicated investments in staff, hardware, software, or hiring an external training company. Another characteristic is the rapid introduction of telephone visits in the promotional mix of the industry. The most frequently mentioned restricting factor (8 participants, or 32%) was meeting the requirements of GDPR. Fifteen of the respondents (60%) indicated that they have started telephone visits within 5 working days after the introduction of the emergency situation. A total of 24 of the respondents (96%) started this within up to 10 working days after the introduction of the emergency situation.

One of the respondents at a managerial position shared: *“We have a whole army of representatives who stay at home. We pay them a salary, we pay their phones, there was nothing left to do but to tell them the very next Monday to start calling.”* Another participant said: *“It's certainly more efficient to make phone calls than to stay at home and do nothing. So, there will always be some profit. I don't see what we will lose. I am not investing anything, but we can make a profit.”* In the study, we also noted 3 participants (12%) who considered telemarketing to be relatively effective because, after its introduction, they have managed to reduce operating costs. None of them were from a prescription medicines company. The participants at senior management positions were more likely to consider telemarketing effective and use definitions, such as *“necessity, exit from the situation, only possible activity now”*, while representatives tended to define it as ineffective and used definitions such as *“useless, waste of time, meaningless.”* The sales representatives gave a higher rating to the effectiveness of telemarketing than the medical representatives. Within the study we found that in the selected industrial sectors there was a lack of a preliminary strategy for the introduction of telemarketing involving explanation, training, and motivation of staff. Despite the fact that the different companies did not incur additional costs, they spent significant financial and organizational resources for a marketing tool whose potential was not clear. Within the study, we also tracked indicators that were directly related to efficiency. Firstly, this was the training of employees and the related specific trainings, as well as receiving specific instructions. In terms of preparedness, we faced significant differences between the responses of the indi-

vidual participants. Twenty respondents (80%) said that no such training was conducted in their company and 21 respondents (84%) stated that they were not provided with instructions or action protocols. A respondent working as a representative shared: *“Poor preparation; we started with the understanding that it was the same job as before. But it turned out to be quite different.”* Another respondent said: *“It is obvious that we were not prepared, no one expected this to happen. We started using it because all the competitors turned to it. We were learning during the process, there was no other way.”*

To evaluate the effectiveness, we have also sought a comparison with companies that specialize in telephone communication. The participants were invited to give examples of such companies in order to assess their ability to answer the question. All participants gave specific examples of successful companies and determined indicators increasing the effectiveness of this approach. Giving examples of business-to-customer communication, the participants were asked to give examples of business-to-business communication too.

Ten respondents (40%) thought that they were less efficient than these companies. Of those who thought that they had the same or better efficiency, the majority were company representatives. This position was formed under the influence of several factors, as this was mainly due to the individual approach and the acquaintances between both parties in the communication process. Nine participants (36%) shared that the companies they presented as an example did not apply or rarely applied an individual approach. A total of 36% also reported that the companies often tended to repel customers with their assertive working manner. One participant gave the following example: *“One day an unknown number called me eight times until I picked up. When I talked to him, I was so angry that I slammed the phone. I would never do that if I had to call a doctor.”* A representative said: *“I may not have any prior training, but it is better. I don’t want to look like these machines.”* Another one said: *“If I behave like these aggressive and impudent types, when the crisis is over I will not be able to enter any office.”* A third one shared: *“Our work is multifaceted and the approach and purpose of the phone call is multifaceted, too.”*

The lack of actual research that can categorically determine the success factors of telemarketing in the pharmaceutical industry does not give us reason to comment on the accuracy of these positions. At the same time, the rejection of strategies and tactics based on experience and research, giving positive results in various industrial sectors, should be noted.

Despite the fact that the pharmaceutical industry has different characteristics, there are common patterns of impact on the consumers and their attitude to telemarketing, which cannot be ignored so easily.

We also assessed the attitude of the participants when they compared telemarketing to face-to-face visits. All 25 respondents agreed that face-to-face visits were more effective and, if they had a choice between both of them, they would choose them over telemarketing.

One of the factors that can impact the efficiency is the average number of visits made by the industry representative. Therefore, we asked the participants about the number of clients whom they communicated with.

Twenty-four participants (96%) thought that their company and competitors made fewer visits using telemarketing. This may be due to the smaller number of health experts working during the emergency situation and the specifics of the job. A total of 20% of the participants shared that in the beginning most customers were actively involved, but later they started refusing, because many companies started applying it.

It is interesting to note that if the representative was an acquaintance of the customers and had their trust, this had a significant impact on the opportunity to make a telephone visit and its effectiveness. Another effect of having previously known the customer was that the client trusted the information received. A participant shared: *“It is impossible to gain the trust of a medical expert in 2 minutes, it is a long process.”* In addition, this group indicated that the visit duration was longer when it involved doctors with whom the representative had an established business relationship.

A total of 21 respondents (84%) thought that the opportunity to obtain information about the client’s preferences and needs during the telephone visit was

Barriers to Telemarketing

Significant barriers to telemarketing, which respondents pointed out, are:

- ◆ Lack of some clients' desire to participate in such communication;
- ◆ Lack of trust in this communication;
- ◆ Lack of time on the client's side;
- ◆ Lack of profit for the client from such a visit;
- ◆ Lack of interest in the information provided;
- ◆ Lack of interest in the way the information is presented;
- ◆ Compliance with the client's work schedule;
- ◆ Numerous calls from competitors;
- ◆ Short duration and time restriction for a number of the presented products and information;
- ◆ Less confidence in the information provided.

limited. This, in turn, allowed the appropriate positioning of the messages only in face-to-face visits.

When working with health experts performing other functions, such as pharmacists, responsible for the logistics of the pharmacy, the established business relationship factor was also crucial, but the availability of up-to-date information about promotional activities at the beginning of the visit affected the duration.

Regulatory requirements for marketing, promotion, and advertising of medicines in European Union do not address telemarketing (16).

What to Do Next?

We asked the participants whether they would apply telephone visits, if there were no restrictions in visits to health institutions after the end of the emergency situation.

- ◆ 11 respondents said that they would not like to use them;
- ◆ 6 respondents stated that they would not use them in any case;
- ◆ 8 respondents indicated that this type of tool had place and relevant profits, and that it would be a good addition to the standard approaches at work.

One of the respondents stated: *"It is good that the doctors have already gotten used to our work-related phone calls. There used to be a barrier in front of us and in front of them. We have already overcome it and there is no reason not to take advantage"*. Another one said *"I have destinations where it is not worth to travel 100 km through the mountains for one or two clients. I think I'd better call them."*

CONCLUSION

The pharmaceutical industry used telemarketing during the COVID-19 crisis. Managers in this industry saw in telemarketing the easiest solution to overcome the lack of face-to-face visits. Until the pandemic, the pharmaceutical industry had underestimated the power of telemarketing. There were no activities to educate and motivate employees due to need of quick introduction and the lack additional investment.

Some of the industries had their own staff conduct their telemarketing since representatives are responsible to communicate with clients. Representatives strongly believe that common rules in telemarketing must not be applied in healthcare sector. The effect from the communication with healthcare specialists correlated with their previous acquaintance with the person who called them.

Not all participants plan to use it in regular communication with some of them underestimating need of investment, education, and specialized staff. These who plan to use are motivated by its cost-effectiveness.

The attitude toward telemarketing shows that it cannot be an independent marketing tool in regard to the pharmaceutical and healthcare product industry in Bulgaria. At the same time, the industry can take advantage of telemarketing in time of crisis or to enrich communication mix.

If the pharmaceutical industry plans to use telemarketing, it should plan activities to educate and motivate employees, create protocols, establish clear

aims, and use the experts and experience of other industries.

REFERENCES

1. Marušić T. Importance of marketing mix in successful positioning of products and services on the market. *Ekonomika*. 2019;(1):431–46.
2. Aceto G, Persico V, Pescapé A. Industry 4.0 and health: Internet of things, big data, and cloud computing for healthcare 4.0. *J Ind Inf Integr*. 2020;18:100129. doi: 10.1016/j.jii.2020.100129
3. Finn NB, Bria WF. Digital communication in medical practice. Springer Science & Business Media; 2009.
4. Groebel R. Pharma medical affairs: a blueprint for future. *Pharm Exec*. 2019;39(6):24–8.
5. American Marketing Association. Digital Marketing [Internet]. 2020. Available from: <https://www.ama.org/topics/digital-marketing/>
6. Haleem A, Javaid M, Singh RP, Suman R. Telemedicine for healthcare: Capabilities, features, barriers, and applications. *Sensors Int*. 2021;2:100117. doi: 10.1016/j.sintl.2021.100117
7. Gburcik V. Coronavirus pandemic pushes pharma sales reps deeper into virtual space, says GlobalData [Internet]. GlobalData. 20AD. Available from: <https://www.globaldata.com/coronavirus-pandemic-pushes-pharma-sales-reps-deeper-into-virtual-space-says-globaldata>
8. Hagen T. COVID-19 Will Test Digital Marketing of Pharmaceuticals [Internet]. *AJMS*. 2020. Available from: <https://www.centerforbiosimilars.com/news/covid-19-will-test-digital-marketing-of-pharmaceuticals>
9. Bulik BS. Grounded by the pandemic, pharma reps turn to digital tools to reach docs [Internet]. FIERCE Pharma. 2020. Available from: <https://www.fiercepharma.com/marketing/pharma-sales-reps-stay-home-minimize-face-time-physicians-as-covid-19-spread-continues>
10. Plantevin L, Evers J. A Covid-19 Action Plan for Pharma Executives. Bain Healthcare practice. 2020. Available from: <https://www.bain.com/insights/a-covid-19-action-plan-for-pharma/>
11. Jarvis S. How can medical and clinical teams prepare for an uncertain post-pandemic future? [Internet]. ZS. Available from: <https://www.zs.com/insights/how-can-medical-and-clinical-teams-prepare-for-an-uncertain-post-pandemic-future>
12. Balfour H. Digitalising marketing to physicians: what pharma needs to know. *European Pharmaceutical Review* [Internet]. 2020; Available from: <https://www.europeanpharmaceuticalreview.com/article/115336/digitalising-marketing-to-physicians-what-pharma-needs-to-know/>
13. Manolov D, Getov I, Grigorov E. Pharmaceutical e-marketing: present and future trends. *Heal Policy Manag*. 2011;11(6):35–9.
14. Bayer Y. Older Adults, Aggressive Marketing & Unethical Behavior: A Sure Road to Financial Fraud? In: Gringarten H, Fernández-Calienes R, editors. *Ethical branding: cases and lessons*. Routledge Publishing; 2019.
15. Mehrotra A, Agarwal R. Classifying customers on the basis of their attitudes towards telemarketing. *J Targeting Meas Anal Mark*. 2009;17(3):171–93.
16. Vekov T, Kolev J. Study of the promotion regulation and the drug advertising in the European union. *Bulg Med J*. 2014;8(2):66–71.