

Life Sciences

Re-thinking Customer Engagement for Life Sciences Companies in the post-COVID-19 Era

By Mark Stevens, Nisha Ninan and Bill Woywod

After a volatile 2020, the pharmaceutical industry is beginning to show signs of stabilization. Due to the pandemic, mail-order prescriptions soared, diagnosis rates decreased, new-to-brand prescriptions struggled, and more than 1,000 clinical trials, particularly in the oncology and central nervous system areas, were delayed. COVID-19 also disrupted traditional field force activity globally, forcing a rapid shift to remote engagement.

While most of these trends are reversing and the pharmaceutical industry is rebounding, customer engagement will never revert fully to the traditional in-person engagement model. That's because, while it's well documented that behavior change is among the hardest adoption obstacles to overcome in any case, the pandemic already has changed the behaviors and preferences of providers and patients.

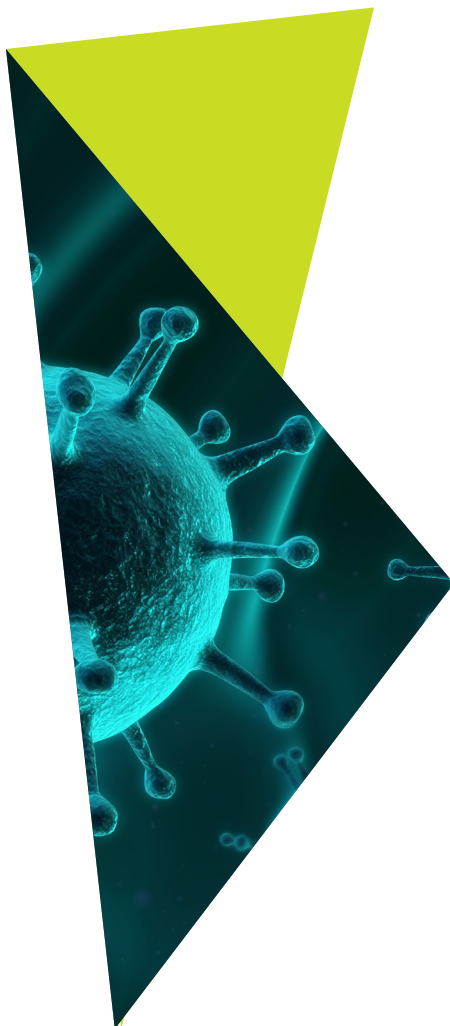
Now, life sciences companies need to adapt to the changing landscape and in many cases play catch up. This article shares insights on how to use advanced data analytics and technology to understand the unique needs, preferences, and capabilities of healthcare providers to personalize offerings, recalibrate field teams, and successfully engage customers.

Changing field landscape

In the United States alone, access restrictions at institutions and private practices grounded roughly 94% of all field forces. Today, overall detailing has reached about 90% of pre-pandemic levels (as of late October), but only about 47% of that is in person, with significantly lower figures for specialty areas like oncology, which only at about 19% of in-person details. In some cases, regional restrictions have eased, only to be reinstated as COVID-19 cases spike again. As a result, many healthcare providers have adopted and grown accustomed to virtual platforms, such as telehealth and remote engagement, as a means to interact with both patients and pharmaceutical representatives.

Even after the public health emergency resolves, use of these channels will persist, with remote communications remaining a dominant component of the pharma omni-channel engagement mix. Remote interactions offer many advantages, including facilitating reaching previously inaccessible or "no-see" healthcare providers. Pharmaceutical companies and their field forces must adapt to meet the needs and preferences of their customers and further personalize their approach. Delivering content through virtual platforms and digital channels also is critical to commercial success.

As a result, companies need to offer a customized, coordinated, and versatile response by training representatives to respond both in-person and remotely, catering to local preferences with enhanced support services based on customer medical, reimbursement, or other capability needs. Customizing the approach requires understanding the customer



through the lens of COVID-19 and how needs can change through the pandemic. This involves understanding how location and practice setting may impact engagement logistics, expected access level, degree of tech savviness, willingness to engage remotely, and most valued pharmaceutical offerings, among other factors.

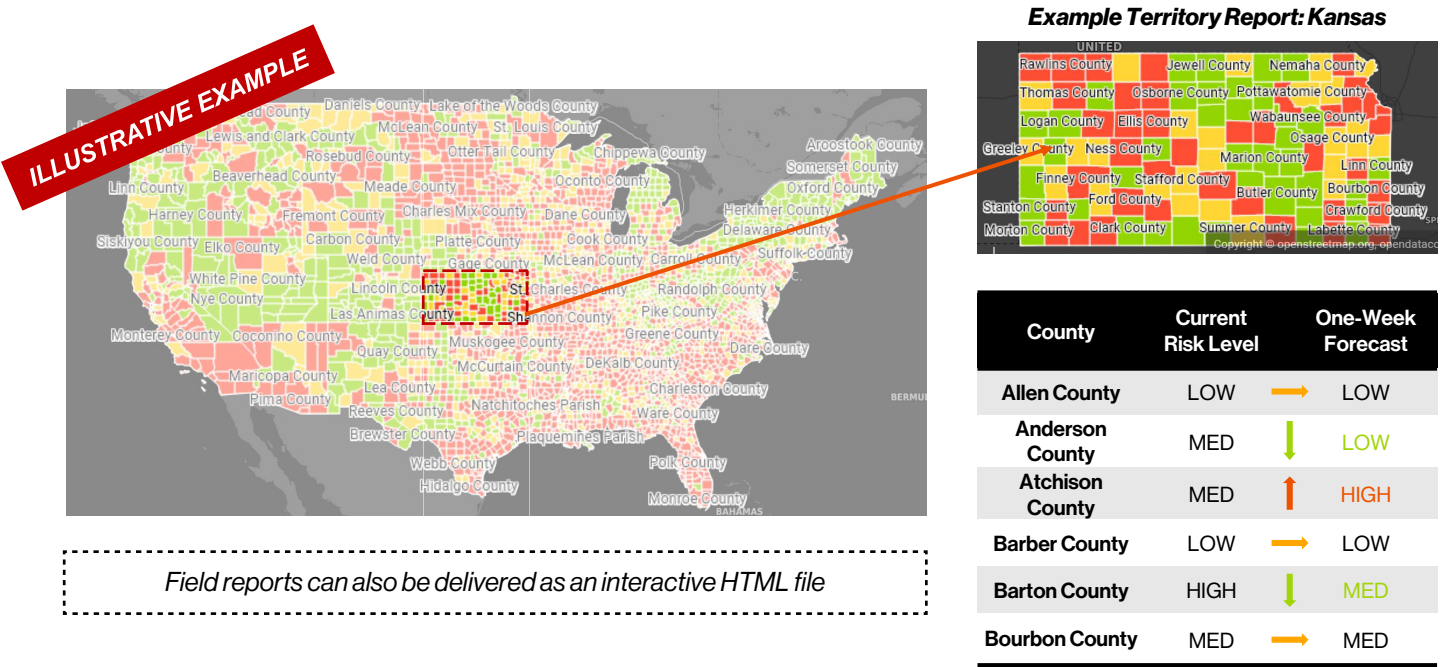
To do this successfully, coordination is vital among key account managers, reimbursement specialists, and sales representatives in addition to a carefully orchestrated digital and omnichannel approach. Field forces must be versatile and agile to be able to adapt solutions to times of critical need, such as new product launches, and depending on the current phase of pandemic recovery. To understand whether cases are waning, spiking, or leveled, field forces can review infection rates, knowing state and regional regulations, and understanding area provider dynamics.

Leveraging data analytics and machine learning for forecasting and targeting

For the best available knowledge of the pandemic, companies can get granular information mapped to and forecasted for their targeted territories to make critical deployment decisions with geographical precision and lead time.

A current solution is to use the COVID Field Engagement Decision Support (FEDS) platform and machine learning to monitor and forecast the pandemic's regional fluctuations. It continuously assesses a county's COVID-19 risk using cases and deaths, captures and monitors real-time data to provide risk assessments, which are updated daily and displayed on a dynamic dashboard, and provides weekly forecasts of risk scores looking forward one month to enable planning efforts. In addition, the FEDS tool has the capability to customize the risk assessment to each field team's specific territory structure. This enables companies to assess the risk for specific targeted territories to inform and enable county-by-county scheduling and efficient, predictable execution of engagement activities.

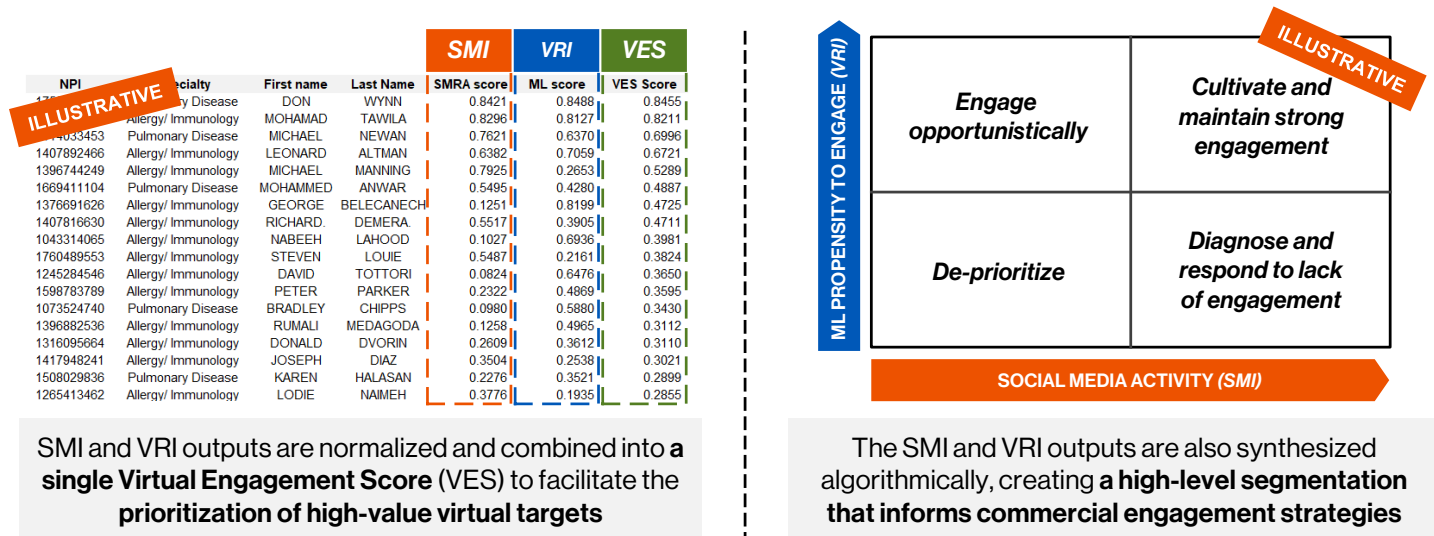
Geographically specific reports (e.g. Region, District, Territory) can be automatically generated on a weekly basis



Based on the results, field team strategists might decide to rely more heavily on virtual engagement with targeted customers in greater COVID risk areas.

Data analytics and machine learning can also provide another layer of insights to help determine the proportion of engagement efforts that are targeted toward existing vs. prospective customers. Currently, target lists typically are built on prescription volumes and/or analog competitor volumes. However, post-COVID, a clear advantage can be gained by also understanding which of those targets are most likely to engage through digital platforms. An optimized virtual engagement targeting plan provides insights as to which providers are most tech savvy by evaluating participation in social media platforms as well as by assessing about the characteristics that are predictive of virtual engagement. This can be accomplished through machine learning and data analytics using private and open source data sets.

The SMI and VRI are synthesized to produce a comprehensive Virtual Engagement Score and segmentation framework



Combining regional pandemic insights and the preferred engagement practices of customers enables companies to develop a more informed, agile, and effective commercialization strategy. It also makes it possible to optimize field force efforts to address the needs and wants of their customers at each stage of recovery.

Best practices for engaging customers

Even before the pandemic disrupted the industry, brands began moving away from the traditional high-cost model of hosting national launch meetings to a more cost-effective broadcast model. Similarly, peer-to-peer education was moving to webinars and simultaneous broadcast to continue to engage health care providers. Digital promotions and campaigns also were on the rise. However, the pandemic shifted these from optional “nice-to-have” considerations to critical ones. Moving forward, these behavior transitions and shifts allow life sciences companies to rethink and reconfigure their resource management based on territory needs and revenue growth realities. For example, with less need for time- and cost-intensive travel, field teams can be restructured to work remotely at least part of the time, which will enable individual representatives to cover more territory and save resources.

Beyond the field teams, companies can also deploy new outreach strategies to get in front of customers and stay top of mind. For example, amplifying share of scientific voice will help companies create value through science, such as by increasing investment in conference presentations (abstracts), brand/therapeutic area treatment guidelines, or clinical trials, grants, etc.

Similarly, investing in developing digital and emerging tech solution capabilities will help companies broaden their footprint. These could entail improving user experience design to align products, services, and systems with core customer needs, leveraging customer research and engagement to improve service delivery to address, or designing and executing social, mobile, and digital strategies to transform the delivery of services, engage customers, and promote programs, among other strategies. This could also help biopharma companies help architect a new “digital ecosystem” for engaging with their customers leveraging their exiting CRMs.

In addition, HUB services present an opportunity for companies to expand and build on an existing platform to expand their efforts to engage the full spectrum of the continuum of care, including patients, providers, and payers.

These are just some of the way pharma companies can adapt to the COVID-era. The key is, to address dynamic customer needs, companies must adapt to meet the behaviors and preferences of their customers. Companies must be able to respond in real time to the changing environment. They also must be agile by continuing to learn and adapt as the pandemic continues to change the industry.

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