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**POV: ROCKETS ON THE LAUNCH PAD:
THE ROLE OF DIGITAL IN LAUNCHING A
NEW PHARMA BRAND**

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ROCKETS ON THE LAUNCH PAD: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL IN LAUNCHING A NEW PHARMA BRAND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When an investigational medicine moves from being a research project and a liability into an approved, moneymaking product, many things must go right. The brand's introductions to payers, to healthcare professionals, to patients, to the media and to the public must all be carefully planned and flawlessly executed. Like a rocket aiming for space, innumerable details make a powerful effort succeed. The product lifecycle is a countdown — but sometimes, it can feel more like a time bomb than a rocket launch. In today's reality, digital marketing and communications have an increasingly vital role.

"I don't think we should be asking ourselves, 'Are we ready?,' because it implies that digital transformation is still in front of us and that we have time to get ready. ... we're in the middle of significant structural change," said Nancy Phelan, head of Bristol-Myers Squibb's customer-engagement center, worldwide customer operations, at a recent industry [event](#).

Pharma companies launch 400 products and indications each year, and only about a third of them meet expectations. That's a lot of disappointing [takeoffs](#). And with decades of work and tens of thousands of failed compounds behind each launch, that's [a lot](#) at stake. Gone are the 1990s and their (literal) rock-star product launches. Launches today are more than [50%](#) [smaller](#) than a decade ago.



A generation ago, digital media was a marketing afterthought, but today, it's the power getting us there. And so, in the 17 years that Intouch has been in business as a digital-centric agency, our launch role has increased dramatically. Far from the days of building brochure websites, we take a lead role early to help smart brands consider the entire customer experience: their behaviors, their journeys, their day-to-day lives.

Here's some of what we've learned along the way.



BASICS

Digital elements make it possible to work faster, cheaper, smarter and more effectively. They're not just "launch accelerators" or [nice add-ons](#). In today's environment, digital elements are, as Marc Iskowitz of MM&M [said](#), base functions, or table stakes.

Internally, the speed and knowledge that digital tools provide mean it's impossible to compete without them. They funnel data insights and tactical agility to the brand at speeds marketers couldn't wish for in previous generations.

And from outside, they're *de rigeur*. A 21st-century brand debut deserves 21st-century communications and technology behind it. Customers (professional and patient alike) assume that a brand will have a wealth of online information available, complete social presences and digital tools on offer. They seek brand engagement in ways that are only possible through digital means. And they expect it all to be mobile-friendly.

As *PharmExec* [warned](#) recently, " ... numerous launch teams continue to rely on lengthy product positioning statements, product messages, and sales aids. However, in today's text-heavy, six-second video world, these protracted approaches are tuned out."

A company that chooses to eschew social media for faxed press releases or dismisses prescription-level data for self-reported surveys wouldn't just be conservative or eccentric — they'd be insane, locking themselves out of success. An ever-increasing number of digital elements are joining the list of required channel and media considerations.

DATA

[Big data](#) is transforming not only drug discovery and development, but launches, too. It gives us knowledge unlike anything we've ever had — incredibly detailed understanding of how patients and professionals interact with our marketing materials, with each other and with the real world.

Launch plans can be prototyped, pressure-tested and tweaked in real time. The data gathered, the analysis of that data and the action in response to it can all take place in a human timeframe, not one reliant



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upon data lags. There no longer needs to be a plodding, versioned “launch plan”; rather, it’s a living, evolving organism that reacts and morphs in response to the real world.

And while this back-end data bonanza is phenomenal, an external digital-centric approach to customers is just as important, making it possible to engage effectively with the right people at the right time. We’ve left the world in which big and broadcast was tops, and now live where hyper-personalized and perfectly timed matters most.

MOBILE

As the Pew Research Center [notes](#), “ ... the cell phone is the most quickly adopted consumer technology in the history of the world.” In the United States, more than 90% of adults own a cell phone and 64% own a smartphone. And [nearly 20%](#) of Americans rely to some degree on their smartphone for Internet access. In fact, last year, [more digital media](#) was consumed via mobile devices than via desktops.

“...the cell phone is the most quickly adopted consumer technology in the history of the world.”

It’s hard to overstate the importance of mobile technology on the world. From [wearable devices](#) to handheld tablets, smartphones to home assistants like the [Amazon Echo](#), mobile is, increasingly, where we get our information. And this includes, of course, both patients seeking health information, as well as healthcare professionals.

Where once we sought to reach audiences where they are with tactics that lived in those places — from doctor’s office pamphlets to magazine inserts — we can now literally follow along in our targets’ pockets. The question is whether we provide enough utility for them to let us stay.



SALES

The importance of digital doesn't mean that human elements are irrelevant. Often, in a discussion like this, reps are dismissed as outdated. That's not the case.

Bristol-Myers Squibb's Phelan agrees, [saying](#), "[Reps aren't] being disintermediated. They need to be integrated. They're more relevant than ever before."

They must be "bionic," [says](#) Cadient's Jim Walker, " ... re-imagined ... [so] there is a true, meaningful interaction."

But it can be a bumpy transition. As Intouch executive vice president Wendy Blackburn [noted](#) in *Fierce Pharma Marketing* recently, "Despite pharma's efforts to provide appropriate and robust sets of tools like outfitting sales reps with iPads, closed loop marketing and big CRM platforms, and pouring a lot of money into them, reps tend to still do the face-to-face traditional things they're used to doing. You'd be surprised how many sales reps are not using digital tools."

With digital tools, reps can offer more to physicians than ever before. We've learned through [our own research](#) that doctors want to feel like their needs matter and that reps who meet with them understand the intricacies of their practices and patient populations. With this in mind, Intouch has deployed apps that make each interaction unique and valuable. Reps can control the flow of information and build a call based on what they know interests and influences their audience. They can also tailor calls to a specific physician's or segment's attitude and/or behavior, make quick updates to address market dynamics, and extend conversations with email and e-details.

RECOMMENDATION: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PHARMA MARKETER

While the concept of a digital drug launch isn't novel, the specifics of a truly digital rollout are still new to many in pharma. In a recent [MM&M roundtable](#), participants spoke about the industry's risk-averse slowness in varying degrees of frustration of hopefulness:

- *"There are just things ... we need to start applying, like marketing automation, testing and targeting, A/B and multivariate testing."*



- *“I’m still jealous of what they can do in other industries that we are incapable of or regulated out of doing.”*
- *“We see folks trialing things and starting to learn. And there’s definitely this sense of urgency that’s come across the industry that we have to change.”*

Regulations exist, and the bodies that create them do, in many ways, still operate in an anachronistically analogue way. But doctors, patients, payers, the media and the public live the same digitally soaked lives that all of us do, and they expect brands to be there. And digital done right can allow us to manage compliance even better, making it possible to be constantly aware of issues and instantly adjust to ensure adherence to all industry regulations and guidelines.

Digital tools make it possible to connect every facet of a launch plan seamlessly and instantly, making scenario plans and contingency plans more effective and fully interweaving all efforts to ensure consistent messaging throughout sales training, KOL outreach, internal communications and more.

As adept pharma marketers, it’s our role to understand all of these facets and delicately bring them together. As Blackburn [noted](#), pharma customers simply expect digital sophistication now, in part because they have it in the rest of their lives. It’s our job to bring it to them and to bring it to them from the inception of a brand’s lifecycle.

“Pharma customers simply expect digital sophistication now, in part because they have it in the rest of their lives.”

The spaces and places where people seek and find information are, increasingly, in the digital realm. Search engine marketing, content marketing, digital (and, yes, print) advertising, social media, relationship marketing, direct marketing, and all of the other components of a brand’s introduction must work together, like a well-oiled machine, to reach the right people at precisely the right time at launch.

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The utility of digital ripples outward, as longitudinal and cross-brand analyses unlock insights that were never accessible before. Because so much collaboration is required to fully “wire” the brand team, marketers can be key from the beginning as standard-bearers, helping the entire organization understand the need, the urgency and the potential of digital implementation. Marketers can also do more than facilitate a successful launch. Each new product launch is essentially a clean slate, and marketers can use their expertise to set up the multichannel systems, the data-driven decision points and the digital infrastructure that will help make a brand successful in today's market.

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