

04 Sep 2020 | Interviews

Pharmacy Key To Driving Post-COVID OTC Growth In The UK

by [David Ridley](#)

HBW Insight speaks exclusively to health communications agency Verve's managing director, Dominic Murdoch, about how consumer health companies in the UK can reconnect with pharmacy, build consumer confidence in OTC products and drive sales.

Pharmacy has always played a crucial role in consumer health in the UK, not just because many OTC products require pharmacy dispensing or consultation, but because a recommendation from a qualified respected healthcare professional can make or break a sale.

And we all know that pharmacists can make or break an innovative Rx-to-OTC switch as well. It's fine and good having a fantastic new OTC product, but if pharmacists don't believe in it, a switch can fall at the final hurdle.

However, pharmacy has been significantly affected by the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdown. Even though UK pharmacies have remained open – being an essential frontline health service – consumers were for a time reluctant to put themselves or pharmacy teams at risk for the sake of an OTC purchase.

“When the coronavirus lockdown first happened, pharmacy saw an initial spike of demand from consumers who wanted to get new and repeat prescriptions filled and purchase some OTC staples like paracetamol,” health communications agency Verve's managing director, Dominic Murdoch, told HBW Insight.

VERVE MANAGING DIRECTOR DOMINIC MURDOCH

“After this period of a couple of weeks, many consumers with minor ailments were giving



pharmacies a wide berth. They didn't trust going anywhere," he said, in an exclusive interview. "People are going back into pharmacies now. But even then, they are going in and out as quickly as possible."

"We do know however, that consumer appreciation of pharmacy may never have been higher due to them continuing to remain open, being easily accessible and a trusted source of health advice," he added.

Opportunity

While this is a difficult time for pharmacy, Murdoch suggested this could also be a great opportunity for consumer health companies to reconnect with

pharmacy and drive their OTC sales.

"We see this as an opportunity to communicate with pharmacists and rebuild their confidence in OTC, which will in turn build consumer confidence in brands," Murdoch explained.

"If a product has a pharmacy-only classification – "P" in the UK, for example – it requires intervention from a pharmacist," he continued. "So that interaction is still key for OTC companies."

"But the consumer health industry in general needs to celebrate the role of pharmacy," he maintained. "Not just for the sake of P brands, but also general sales list (GSL) products, because most pharmacists or pharmacy assistants, if they think a brand is right for their customer, will recommend it."

Strategically, now is a good time to invest in pharmacy communications, Murdoch suggested, especially as they are a far more cost-efficient form of marketing, compared with consumer TV or outdoor advertising.

"There's an opportunity here," he said. "When other firms might be pausing their multimillion-pound advertisement budgets, companies could do some targeted marketing with pharmacists, creating interactions which will lead to increased recommendations in pharmacy."

"I totally understand companies feeling nervous about their marketing spend during these times," Murdoch added, "but we've seen companies that have continued to communicate see positive effects. Getting creative with communication doesn't have to cost lots of money."

Dr Google

One concerning result of the “new normal,” Murdoch said, is that consumers could turn even more than before to “Dr Google.” This means that when consumers do walk into their pharmacy, they often already have the information they think they need about an ailment and what product they should be purchasing.

“Nowadays it’s not just about what the pharmacist knows but also what the consumer knows before they walk into pharmacy,” he pointed out.

It’s crucial, therefore, that brand websites are kept up to date, he insisted, and to make sure that brand information is correct and presented in an appealing and easily understandable way.

“It’s about effective communication,” Murdoch said. “At Verve, we’ve tried to look at the whole consumer journey, including websites, rewriting the text, removing the jargon and still keeping it scientific. And it’s been really successful.”

It is also important that firms understand how Google algorithms work, and adapt their websites accordingly, he continued. “What we want is for the algorithms to pick up certain brands, so that consumers will go to brand websites and get the correct information,” he said.

Once consumers are in pharmacies, a significant threat to driving OTC brand sales in pharmacies, however, is the number of generics available and their price differentiation, he noted.

For consumer health firms, the key to getting a pharmacist to recommend brands over generics, Murdoch said, is “getting the right info into pharmacists’ heads.” “Precise communication that gives relevant information, that’s the key,” he added.

Getting Creative

While communication between consumer health firms and pharmacists is currently strained, given the restrictions on social interaction and even entering physical stores, Murdoch insisted that there are still a variety of ways to get brand information across.

“Sales teams are getting back on the road, but pharmacists are reluctant to let them in,” he explained. “I can’t see that changing for quite a few months. So, we are also looking at ways of speaking to pharmacy teams other than face-to-face.”

Webinars, virtual meetings, e-learning are all ways that Verve has tried to innovate with company-pharmacist communication since the coronavirus pandemic. “It’s all about understanding the best ways to communicate right now,” he pointed out.

For example, Verve has looked at changing point-of-sale material production, because this means more things to touch and clean and neither pharmacists nor consumers want to use them, he said.

“Point of sale material plays an important role in recommendation and brand awareness,” Murdoch pointed out. “We have worked with printers to add an anti-microbial coating to all materials created in the last few months. It has been really positively received by pharmacy.”

Consultation rooms are another example, he continued. “These rooms can be very small. Understandably, people are hesitant and wary of going into a confined room.”

“We’ve looked for alternative ways customers and pharmacy teams can still interact while maintaining social distancing,” he noted. “One method is using near-field communication (NFC) chips placed on pharmacy counters where customers can use their own phone to access online consultation tools and brand information to then discuss with the pharmacist.”



PHARMACISTS CAN USE NFC CHIPS TO PROVIDE INFO ABOUT OTCS

While branded products might be more expensive, and consumers will be becoming more price conscious as we enter the post-pandemic recession, Murdoch maintained these new ways of interacting help consumers “understand why it’s worth the extra investment” and pharmacy team members “appreciate the support from manufacturers.”

“We should all want to try and get consumers going back into pharmacy,” he concluded. “The question is, what and how do we want to communicate? What’s the best way of getting in front of pharmacy teams to explain the point of difference of your product?”