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GSCF World Congress: Digital, Data & Innovation In Self-Care

by [David Ridley](#)

The healthcare industry is sick and in desperate need of disruption, stated Consumer Healthcare Products Association president Scott Melville at the beginning of the final session of the 2022 GSCF World Congress. Thought leaders from Google, past and present, Haleon, IQVIA Consumer Health and Convert Group offered their views on where this disruption might come from.

“If there were ever an industry ripe for disruption it’s healthcare,” claimed Consumer Healthcare Products Association (CHPA) president Scott Melville at the beginning of the final session of the 2022 Global Self-Care Federation World Congress in Cape Town, South Africa.

“There’s lots of transformation happening in an industry that is quite frankly sick,” Melville continued, pointing to the advances in self-care digitalization that have been accelerated by the pandemic.

For Melville’s panel co-chair and Haleon South and Southern Africa general manager Kimberley Hunt, digital has the potential to “tackle a lot of the barriers we’ve heard about in the conference.”

Digital tools like mobile health apps and wearables also offer new opportunities for consumer empowerment and healthcare professional support, added Hunt, who is also president of the Self-Care Association of South Africa.

Real-World Examples

Kicking off the presentations, Hunt’s Haleon colleague Tamara Rogers highlighted what the recently spun-out standalone company is doing in the area of digital self-care.

Firstly, Haleon has developed a “Seeing AI” app that converts product information into audible speech for visually impaired consumers, as well as those with low levels of literacy. The result of a collaboration with Microsoft, the app will soon be able to scan and narrate over 1,500 Haleon products across the US and UK, Rogers revealed.

Rogers was also proud to unveil another Haleon collaboration, this time with Grace.health, which its eponymous developer describes as the “first women’s health platform for emerging markets.”

“This is a 24/7, no judgement platform,” Rogers said, where women in under-served communities can access affordable health education, advice and services from experts. “Women love to connect with other women,” she added. The app has a chat functionality, through which women can ask self-care questions about birth control, for example, from the safety and privacy of their own home.

Real-World Evidence

Rogers, who is on the GSCF board, also noted the association’s work on health data, captured in the recently published “Future Vision and Guiding Principles” document.

Together, the seven principles – autonomy, privacy and security, transparency, non-discrimination and non-manipulation, accountability and responsibility, quality and data integrity, and accessibility and literacy – are “all about building trust,” Rogers said.

Building on this work, GSCF is now looking at real-world evidence, which Rogers argued presents opportunities for Rx-to-OTC switch, deeper insights into consumer needs and behaviors and also generating new claims. “More to come in 2023,” Rogers suggested.

Following Rogers, IQVIA Consumer Health’s senior vice-president Prasanna Pitale began his presentation with good news: the global OTC market is in “a good place” and predicted to grow by about 6% in 2022.

“Although it is easier to forecast the British government than the OTC market at the moment,” he quipped.

Digital health will play an increasingly large role in driving growth in consumer healthcare, he said, as consumers want more of the personalization that digital tools can provide. (Also see [“Over The Counter 3 May 2022: Which COVID Trends Are Here To Stay? With IQVIA Consumer Health’s Prasanna Pitale”](#) - HBW Insight, 3 May, 2022.)

“They want to be able to manage their lifestyles going forward,” he explained.

Disrupt Or Die

The information that companies are now collecting through apps and wearables are a “win win for the OTC industry,” he continued.

To seize the digital self-care opportunity, Pitale urged companies to “seek out the disruptors to expand their product ecosystem.”

“Business models are changing. If you don’t partner, acquire or develop you will be left behind,” he warned.

Speaking as a self-styled “disruptor,” ex-Google South Africa CEO, Stafford Masie, like CHPA president Scott Melville, painted a grim picture of the healthcare industry.

“Experience in healthcare sucks,” he said. “When you engage it’s a horrific experience. The paperwork is insane.”

In Masie’s view, disruption will come from outside the OTC industry, from what he called “algorithmic marketplaces” like Uber, in which new products are created out of the interactions between technology, people and as yet unconnected digital services.

“The future is the disappearance of consumer healthcare,” he concluded, provocatively.

Actionable Insights

Google’s global healthcare industry lead Sachin Nanavati was less bombastic in his analysis of the future of digital self-care, and instead offered a few “actionable” insights from recent internet search data.

Three themes emerge from this data, he explained: consumer priorities are becoming more dynamic, home is the new hub of self-care and consumer care journeys are increasingly diverse.

With regards to the first theme, consumers are more and more looking for value, Nanavati said. Since the pandemic, there has been an 18% growth in searches for the “generic version” of OTC drugs, and 34% more searches for “cost effective” health solutions.

Consumers are also switching between brands more, Nanavati said, especially members of generation Z, which covers anyone born between 1997 and 2012.

Armchair Activists

Moving on to the second theme, Nanavati pointed out that the pandemic forced us to spend much more time at home, and as a consequence, use online tools to self-care. Searches for at-home remedies for common ailments like ear discomfort have continued to grow over the last couple of years, he reported.

Becoming used to online self-care, consumers are now more frequently using Google and social media sites like YouTube to check out brands before purchasing, he added.

And in the final trend, Google is seeing consumers care more and more about their values and the values of companies. Furthermore, they are willing to “flex their muscles” with regards to what they learn, by actively choosing not to purchase brands that don’t align with their values, or even posting criticisms online.

Time For Action

In the final slot of the session, the Convert Group’s founder and president Panayotis Gezerlis examined the implications of e-commerce for self-care.

It is no wonder that OTC is now the fastest growing segment of e-commerce, he said, as it taps into the drivers of self-care analyzed in the GSCF’s Economic & Social Value of Self-Care Report, presented by J&J’s Manoj Raghunandan in the first full session of congress. (Also see "[GSCF World Congress: The Long Road To Self-Care](#)" - HBW Insight, 20 Oct, 2022.)

E-pharmacies widen access to medicines by offering a more extensive assortment of products, Gezerlis explained, as well as in many cases now delivering products within 30 minutes.

OTCs tend to be more affordable in e-pharmacies than in bricks-and-mortar stores because there is more competition online, driving down prices, he pointed out.

Therefore, with billions of consumers now regularly using e-pharmacies, it is time for manufacturers to take action to educate and encourage their consumers to self-care digitally, responsibly, he concluded.