Build Your Pharmaceutical Advertising Strategy in 7 Steps

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Introduction

The rapid growth of online advertising has created exciting possibilities for pharmaceutical brands.

Once confined to placements in magazines, television, and billboards by strict (and at times ambiguous) regulations, pharmaceutical ads can now reach patients and healthcare providers as they seek answers online.

And perhaps most powerfully, we can now use precise data to create intentional, well-timed ads that fit seamlessly and helpfully into a person's health journey. Ideally, these ads integrate with their other experiences on search engines, websites, and social media platforms.

Patients today expect ads to provide value at every stage of the healthcare journey – from answering basic queries about symptoms and diagnoses to empowering them with resources, and finally helping them build a community of people who are on a similar journey. And the standards are high: precise ad targeting, while a sensitive subject for some and often a turn-off if used in an invasive or overzealous way, has taught users to ignore irrelevant ads.

Online advertising, when done well, helps us maximize our value to patients by creating ads that speak directly to their needs. However, if you use these new platforms without a cohesive plan, your advertising campaign may fall short of your expectations. To take full advantage of the avenues available to us, we need a strategy.

Why Create a Digital Advertising Strategy?

Your pharmaceutical brand's digital advertising strategy is your roadmap for reaching patients, caregivers, and/or healthcare providers (HCPs), and, depending on your goals, generating awareness, influencing consideration or persuading them to take an intended action.

As your team develops an advertising plan, your strategy will provide direction on how you'll measure your goals, how to reach your target audience, and how to allocate your budget.

In short, an advertising strategy will help your team launch an informed, intentional, and well-organized campaign. Moreover, it will help your pharma brand accurately measure campaign performance and identify opportunities to improve your brand positioning.

That said, your advertising strategy doesn't exist in isolation — it should align with your overall marketing strategy and business goals.

Basics of Advertising Pharmaceutical Products

Of course, you need to understand the laws and regulations around pharmaceutical advertising before you plan out your advertising campaign. Since the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) is responsible for regulations concerning pharmaceuticals, the legal aspects are covered comprehensively on their website. However, here are a few answers to common questions:

What countries allow pharmaceutical advertising?

Pharmaceutical advertising is heavily restricted in most countries. Currently, direct-to-consumer (DTC) pharmaceutical products can only be advertised in Brazil, Hong Kong, the United States, and New Zealand.

Who regulates drug advertising in the U.S.?

In the United States, the FDA regulates DTC pharmaceutical advertising for prescription drugs. The FTC regulates advertisements for other types of drugs, including over-the-counter medicines, and specific kinds of advertisements called help-seeking advertisements.

What types of pharmaceutical advertisements are allowed?

According to the FDA, types of prescription drug advertisements include product claim advertisements, reminder advertisements, and help-seeking advertisements.

What are product claim advertisements?

In prescription drug advertising, product claim advertisements name a drug, the condition it is approved to treat, and the potential benefits and risks of taking the medication.

What are reminder advertisements?

Reminder advertisements in prescription drug advertising name the drug but not the condition it treats. Pharmaceuticals that require boxed warnings are prohibited from using reminder ads.

Help-seeking advertisements describe a condition or disease but do not recommend a specific drug to treat it. The FTC rather than the FDA regulates Help-seeking advertisements. Although help-seeking ads can't name a particular drug, they can name the company who is sponsoring the ad and include a website or phone number.

How Can You Advertise a Pharmaceutical Product Online?

When advertising online, pharmaceutical manufacturers need to follow the same FDA and FTC regulations that apply to other types of drug advertising. For more information review the regulations on the FDA's website.

What Digital Platforms Can Pharmaceutical Brands Advertise on?

Pharmaceutical brands can use nearly every platform available to other industries for online advertising. Options include:

- Google Ads   (both text-based and image-based)

- YouTube Ads

- Facebook Ads

- Instagram Ads

- Twitter Ads

- Snapchat Ads

- Reddit Ads

- Tumblr Ads

Each platform has its own demographics, targeting abilities, and rules for advertising pharmaceuticals, yet each can be used in pharmaceutical advertising.

Note: Pinterest and LinkedIn are exceptions when it comes to pharmaceutical advertising.

LinkedIn's advertising policies state, "Even if legal in the applicable jurisdiction, LinkedIn does not allow ads related to prescription pharmaceuticals, drugs or any related products or services. Ads that promote illegal drugs, highs, herbal medicines and treatments, psychoactive effects of substances, or aids to pass drug tests are all prohibited."

Pinterest explicitly prohibits pharmaceutical advertising, both branded and unbranded, whether the treatment is designed for humans or pets.

Once you've reviewed this information, here are the steps to follow as you create your strategy.

Step 1: Define Your Pharma Brand's Goals, Objectives, and KPIs

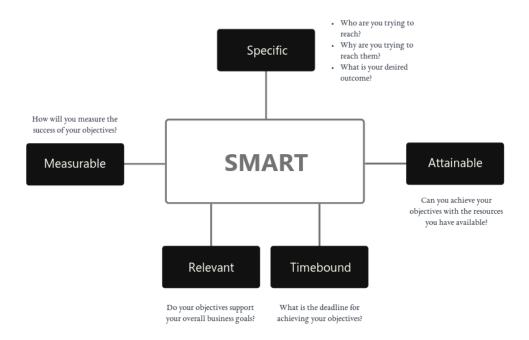Before launching any advertising campaign, you should have clear goals and objectives in mind.

While your objectives should be measurable and specific, your overarching goals can be general and non-tangible. Example goals for a pharma brand's advertising campaign include:

- To be seen as a trustworthy resource for information on managing XYZ disease

- For healthcare providers who treat XYZ disease to prescribe our medication

- To build a sense of community for patients and caregivers impacted by XYZ disease

Once you have a broad set of goals established, you can refine your goals into objectives. A commonly used acronym for well-planned objectives is SMART, which stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant (or Realistic, depending on whom you ask), and Timebound. SMART goals should be tied to specific key performance indicators (KPIs).

Mapping Out SMART Objectives

Create SMART objectives for your pharmaceutical brand's advertising campaign

Examples of SMART objectives

- To increase the number of visitors who spend at least 3 minutes on our website by 10% year-over-year

- To receive 3% more sample requests for ABC prescription in any dosage through our online form month-over-month

- To increase the number of followers on our unbranded Facebook page by 5% MoM

- To increase the number of marketing qualified leads by 50% YoY

Once you determine your objectives, you'll be ready to develop an analytics plan for measuring your campaign's success.

Step 2: Develop an Analytics Plan (Measurement Model)

Unfortunately, 31% of healthcare companies still rely on qualitative data to determine the short-term impact their marketing spend has on their organization, rather than using quantitative data. However, to build an effective advertising strategy, you need an analytics plan that accurately measures your KPIs quantitatively in the context of big-picture business goals.

Your analytics plan should be based on what user actions and metrics *must be recorded and measured* during the course of your advertising campaign.

For example, if your campaign goal is to build favorable sentiment toward your pharmaceutical brand, you might focus on measuring public opinion. This may require:

- Social media monitoring (quantifying likes, angry reacts, heart reacts, etc.)

- Analyzing blog post sentiment

- Analyzing product review sentiment

Outlining your analytics requirements will help your team or outside ad agency determine which analytics tools will best measure your ad campaign's performance.

Which Analytics Platforms Should You Use?

When considering web analytics platforms, most marketers immediately think of Google. While Google Analytics and Analytics 360 offers useful tools for data measurement (mainly clickstream data), Google Analytics is just one of many ways marketers analyze the success of advertising campaigns.

Instead of looking to one platform as the single source of truth, it's crucial to adopt and embrace a multipronged approach to web analytics – what Avinash Kaushik (Google's former Digital Marketing Evangelist) refers to as the Multiplicity Strategy.

By collecting, analyzing, and reporting on data from multiple sources, you and your team will be able to understand your ad campaign's performance and how it contributes to your overall business goals.

What might a multipronged approach look like? It could include:

- Clickstream data from tools like Google Analytics and Heap.io

- Customer experience management data from tools like iPerceptions

- Experimentation and testing using tools like Google Optimize, SiteSpect, and Optimizely

- Voice of customer insights using tools like Quantum Metric and Crimson Hexagon, and surveys and customer feedback

- Competitive intelligence data using tools like Google Trends and HitWise

TYING TOGETHER OBJECTIVES, KPI'S, AND ANALYTICS

Here is an example of how a company might measure an advertising campaign's success using a variety of analytics tools.

Goal: For healthcare providers who treat XYZ disease to prescribe our medication

Objective: To receive 3% more sample requests for ABC prescription in any dosage through our online form MoM

KPIs: 3% increase in sample request form submissions from qualified health-care providers

Analytics Tools:

- Google Analytics to measure landing page traffic and form submissions
- iPerception to understand why HCPs leave the website without ordering a sample
- SiteSpect to test variables and their impact on form submissions

Ideally, you'll want to work with your internal analytics team or partner with an external agency who can collate your reporting into an actionable dashboard, providing guidance and support on the data you've collected, as well as keeping you abreast of any updates in your analytics framework.

By starting with analytics, you'll have the tools in place to understand your campaign's performance. In addition, analytics will help you gather data about your audience's behavior, geography, interests, and demographics. You can then use this data to uncover hidden insights about your target demographic, enabling you to create campaigns that resonate with patients and HCPs, and ultimately perform better long term.

With a robust measurement model, you'll be ready to proceed to Step 3 — creating your audience persona.

Step 3: Create Your Audience Persona

An audience persona is a working hypothesis of who your ideal customer is and how your pharma brand's offering supports their goals. While a persona is a fictional representation of your perfect customer, it typically includes a combination of real demographic and psychographic data, to paint a realistic view of their lives and emotional state during the patient journey.

Basic components of an audience persona with examples

1. Name – Caregiver Chris

2. Age – 35-55

3. Sex – Male or Female

1. Location – United States

4. Employment/Industry – Caregiver or at-home parent

5. Motivators – To feel empowered and connect with a community with other caregivers

6. Goals – To find treatment options and to learn from others who are in a similar role

7. Frustrations – Lack of information available for specific illness, lots of questions and limited patient resources available

8. Key Personality Traits – Inquisitive, determined, optimistic

With an audience persona, your marketing team can craft campaigns that resonate with your target customer, build affinity with your brand, and inspire customers to take action.

For example, let's say you're looking to build a targeted list of potential patients for a new drug or therapy that hasn't received FDA approval, but has passed phase 2 and is currently moving toward phase 3. Your next step may be to build a patient education website that educates patients, caregivers and health care professionals about the science and potential of treatment, and encourages them to sign up for updates.

Based on your learnings from the persona you've created, your advertising message to *Caregiver Chris* might focus on the idea of hope, empowerment, and community.

However, this stage in the customer journey is just one portion of *Caregiver Chris'* experience searching for solutions. How might you reach him before he is aware that he wants educational materials? How will you keep in touch with him after he has received the materials?

To create an effective advertising strategy, you need to understand the journey of your buyer.

Step 4: Map Out the Patient, HCP, or Caregiver Journey

Patients, healthcare providers, and caregivers have separate goals when it comes to interacting with pharmaceutical brands. And those goals evolve over time, as a direct reflection of where they are in their healthcare journey.

Patient Journey Map

	PRE-DIAGNOSIS	DIAGNOSIS	TREATMENT	LIVING
Think	What do these symptoms mean?	What can I do to control these symptoms?	What is the best treatment option moving forward?	I'm not alone. I've found my community.
Feel	Curious	Worried	Hopeful	Empowered
Do	Research	Research	Convert	Connect

Take the time to map out the process (thoughts, emotions, and actions) that your target audience will go through on the way to becoming a customer, including the touch points where you want them to interact with your content, and the properties you'll want to draw them to.

Here's an example of what the patient buyer journey might look like and how you might connect with your audience at each stage of their journey:

Phase 1:   Early Education & Awareness

- Researching symptoms

- Reading about potentially applicable conditions and disease states

- Looking for others who share their condition or experiences

- Trying to find the latest news on an applicable disease state

Advertisement Type: Help-seeking

Key Touch Points: Search ads (display, video, and text-based), social ads

Properties: Unbranded education sites, newsletters, online communities

Phase 2: Medical Diagnosis & Confirmation

- Consultation with medical professional

- Preliminary diagnosis

- Confirmation and/or second opinion

- Specialist referral

- Formal testing, if applicable

- Early research into prognosis and potential treatment options

Advertisement Type: Help-seeking/product claim

Key Touch Points: Search ads (display, video, and text-based), social ads

Properties: Education site, treatment information, existing relationships with HCPs

Phase 3: Seeking Treatment

- Formal research into available treatments

- Plan for long-term treatment

- Living & caregiving options

Advertisement Type: Product claim/reminder ads

Key Touch Points: Search ads (display, video, and text-based), social ads

Properties: Education site, branded sites, newsletter for those with the condition, social properties for updates and community engagement

- Doctor's appointments

- Support from community

- Ongoing education

Advertisement Type: Help-seeking

Key Touch Points: Social ads

Properties: Education site, newsletter for those with the condition, social properties for updates and community engagement

As you map out this journey, create objectives for what you want to accomplish at each stage and touch point. Consider the content and tactics you'll need to successfully engage with your audience at each of these phases.

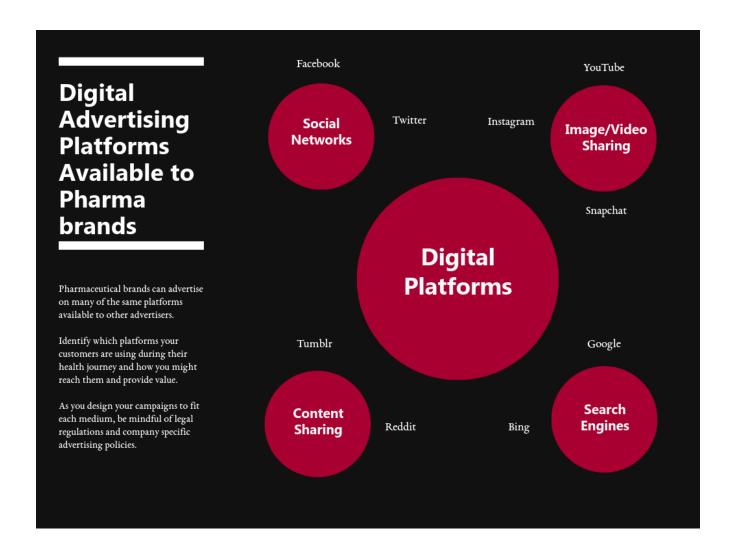Be sure that you are following this process for all of your possible audiences — primary, secondary, and tertiary, if applicable. It will guide (and in many cases streamline) the campaign build phase by assigning explicit intention to every tactic you use and each piece of content you create.

Step 5: Choose Advertising Platforms that Match Your Persona's Habits And Journey

Once you map out your persona's buyer journey, you'll be able to determine where they are online. You can then provide education and opportunities to connect, using the platform that's most appropriate to your audience.

Digital Advertising Platforms Available to Pharma brands

Pharmaceutical brands can advertise on many of the same platforms available to other advertisers.

Identify which platforms your customers are using during their health journey and how you might reach them and provide value.

As you design your campaigns to fit each medium, be mindful of legal regulations and company specific advertising policies.

Facebook

Twitter   Instagram

YouTube

Social Networks

Image/Video Sharing

Snapchat

Digital Platforms

Tumblr

Google

Content Sharing

Reddit   Bing

Search Engines

Research Your Options

Investigate the search platforms and social networks available to identify which ones your persona would use: Is your target audience among the half of all 25-44 year olds who use the professional networking website LinkedIn? Or are they part of the 78 percent of 18-24 year olds who use SnapChat? Why does your demographic gravitate towards these platforms, and how might your brand seamlessly blend in with their digital experience?

Think Holistically

Consider both your persona's demographics and what the platform has to offer you as an advertiser. For example, the news aggregate and discussion community Reddit has hundreds of smaller pages called subreddits, which are forums dedicated to discussing specific topics. The subreddit r/AskDocs is a place where people can anonymously ask doctors medical questions, and the subreddit r/Ehlersdanlos is a 9,800 member community for Ehlers-Danlos Syndromes. While your target persona might not fit the demographic for Reddit, they might land on Reddit while searching for answers to their questions. You can place your ads on specific subreddits to reach these users.

Understand User Expectations

Each advertising platform has its own formatting requirements, so consider what media you'll need to develop or outsource. The visual-based platform Instagram, for example, requires photos, graphics, and/or short video clips. While Google text ads require no visuals, you will need compelling headlines, descriptions, and a landing page that dovetails with your ad creative.

Step 6: Determine Your Advertising Campaign Spend

Once you've determined which platforms to advertise on, and what types of resources you'll need to create, you are ready to estimate your campaign's budget. Your budget will also depend on the goals of your campaign (awareness, consideration, decision), the platforms you're advertising on, and your potential audience reach.

Based on a recent Gartner CMO Survey, marketing expense budgets have remained steady over the past several years, with most companies allocating around 11% of company revenues to marketing.

You can determine an estimated advertising budget by making sure your budget is similar to averages reported by CMOs:

- Paid media makes up 23% of marketing expense budgets

- Another 23% of the budget goes toward agencies

- Nearly a quarter (24%) goes towards labor

- The remaining budget is spent on marketing technology

What does this budget look like in practice?

Put simply, If your pharmaceutical brand's revenues are $100 million, your marketing budget would be $11 million.

Of your $11 million marketing budget, $2.53 million would go toward paid advertising, and another $2.53 million would go toward agency work. The rest would go toward your employees and toward marketing technology.

While averages are a useful starting point for calculating your marketing and advertising budget, if you're a growth-oriented pharmaceutical brand, your marketing budget may well exceed the average 11% and reach upwards of 15% or beyond.

Step 7: Set a Project Timeline

Having a project timeline up front gives you, your team, and any outside agencies a baseline to begin scoping the project. Your schedule should cover research and planning, account creation, analytics implementation, creative development, legal review, quality assurance, ad performance assessments, and campaign reporting and analysis.

Timelines can take the form of a detailed Gantt chart in Excel or can be created using a tool like SmartSheets. Alternatively, you can include a rough timeline in a basic project brief to initially scope out a project in the early stages.

Conclusion

A well-rounded, data-driven and intentional digital advertising strategy empower your team to effectively develop, execute, and measure the success of your pharmaceutical brand's advertising campaigns.

By aligning your strategy with your broader marketing strategy and overall business objectives, your organization will be able to see how it fits into the bigger picture, and how it will contribute to future growth. Moreover, the process of developing this strategy may well lead to new insights about the organization's goals, tactics, and methods – perhaps extending the value even beyond your online efforts.

Resources for Further Reading

Prescription Drug Advertising: Questions and Answers

Frequently asked questions about pharmaceutical advertising, answered by the FDA.

https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/PrescriptionDrugAdvertising/ucm076768.htm

Basic Rules for Pharma Advertising on Google

What you need to know when planning a pharma advertising campaign on Google.

https://www.ethoseo.com/blog/pharmaceutical-advertising-with-google-ads

How Pharmaceutical Companies Can Leverage Impressions With TrueView for Action

Find out how you can use YouTube's calls to action for greater ad engagement.

https://www.ethoseo.com/blog/how-pharmaceutical-companies-can-leverage-impressions-with-trueview-for-action

The Power of Facebook Advertising for Pharmaceutical Brands

Learn how pharmaceutical brands can use Facebook to reach their target audience.

https://www.ethoseo.com/blog/facebook-advertising-for-pharmaceutical-brands

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