Healthcare Has Much to Teach Big Tech About Human Relationships

Michelle Keefe
President, Commercial Solutions,
Syneos Health

Howard Brock
Senior Managing Director, Head of Customer and Digital Engagement | Commercial Advisory Group,
Syneos Health

In July, an artificial intelligence subsidiary of Alphabet, Google's parent, provided the latest glimpse of how Big Tech is changing life sciences. An AI tool called AlphaFold, from Alphabet's Deep Mind unit, predicted the 3D structure of nearly all human proteins and put the information in a public database. Many scientists believe this milestone has the power to transform biology.[i]

Protein analysis is just one showcase for the huge role Big Tech can play in healthcare. Technology-fueled efficiencies and AI-driven insights —the lucky combination that revolutionized order fulfillment, entertainment, retail, and ride-share — are now working the same magic in drug discovery, health data analysis, pharmaceutical marketing, patient diagnosis, and care.

The impact is particularly vivid when we look at the biopharmaceutical commercial model. High-tech tools, including search and social media, have radically altered the behavior of healthcare professionals (HCPs) and patients. To reach these individuals with messages that resonate, marketers need sophisticated analytics, to be sure. But it also requires profound peer knowledge and empathy. Digital approaches, in short, are a relationship extender, not a replacement.

We will examine these impacts more closely in a moment. But first, we should inquire whether there are lessons the tech sector can learn from healthcare. Despite some notorious inefficiencies, our industry knows how to create networks of trust among human experts. The human element ensures that even the most automated transactions keep patients' interests in view. In their ambitions to modernize healthcare, Google, Amazon, and Facebook should strive to preserve this fundamental principle.

Leveraging Intelligence

How do we know Big Tech has anything to learn from healthcare? One indication is tech's long, troubled track record on consumer privacy, obliging them to accept record-breaking settlements with the Federal Trade Commission and other disruptions. Worse, during the pandemic, technology platforms have amplified misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccine safety — with lethal consequences. Among today's globe-dominating search engines and social platforms, we see recurrent failures to place networks of human experts on a par with algorithms.[ii] This is not a problem we see often in our sector — and it must not be permitted as Big Tech maps its next moves.

In healthcare, networks of expertise and trust begin with patients, who speak with unique authority about conditions they experience. From there, networks extend to and encompass HCPs, administrators in integrated health systems and payer organizations, key opinion leaders, and many other stakeholders.

At Syneos Health, human expert networks coordinate and enhance each process in which new technology is integrated. The cascade begins upstream, in research studies where data is paramount. Even in these settings, leveraging human intelligence across both clinical and commercial domains is indispensable. We have found that by equipping experts early in the product development continuum with commercial insights and ensuring the exchange of intelligence through the development process, we can fuel a rich pipeline of innovation, seamless integration, and better return on investment.

The same principle infuses how the customer facing teams Syneos Health outsources to pharma partners are able to segment and target physicians, prioritizing those whose treatment decisions are most likely to influence a group of peers and save patients' lives. Multivariate modeling that uses advanced predictive analytics blended with human insights can augment the traditional commercial model, supported by robust and comprehensive claims data sets that enable clear characterization of prescribing behavior and the patient journey.

Human Relationships

For quite a few years, our industry has been using medical and pharmacy claims data to understand HCP behavior. Today we can integrate additional behavioral information, characterizing physicians based on more than their prescribing volume. What does their patient population look like? What is product and customer access situation in a local ecosystem or an account? What kind of conferences are physicians attending? The answers help us create a more comprehensive picture of the customer landscape.

By modeling professional networks, an-

alysts are able to quantify the strength and reach of each HCP's influence. Prioritizing the most influential among them for customer engagement helps achieve optimal resource allocation and increased uptake velocity. In parallel, we profile the relevant accounts and institutions and apply differential resourcing to each account based on levels of centralized decision making and control over prescribing behavior. Failure to map customer facing team roles and responsibilities to these characteristics will impair performance.

While parts of this model are data-intensive, success without the human factor is unthinkable. In this respect, healthcare is a far cry from automated order fulfillment and peer recommendations on Amazon, or algorithmically optimized news feeds on social media. As many critics have noted, such channels often are architected to trigger intense emotions that increase click volume — sometimes with catastrophic social consequences.[iii] Until very recently, Big Tech's remit had little to do with protecting human life from the ravages of disease. Healthcare is different. We never take human beings out of our calculations.

Human intelligence and interconnection are central features, even where marketing has undergone the most technology-intensive remake. One example is omnichannel engagement, a discipline in which human understanding of behavioral motivators is integrated with therapeutic expertise and data intelligence to deliver information physicians seek. Like the Amazon model, omnichannel offers HCPs more convenience, more relevance and greater efficiency. A combination of integration, personalization and automation allows prescribers and their staffs to see the right message at the right moment.

As the entire proposition turns on content aimed at HCPs, human content strategists are among the most important hires a pharma marketer can make. They help create blocks and packages of content that move the customer along a journey. You need people with deep experience in customer relationship management (CRM) and closed-loop marketing (CLM). On the data side, you need individuals who can run multiple experiments on parallel tracks to learn — as fast as possible — which approaches fail and which succeed. Field leadership must be entrepreneurial, with each rep bringing their whole judgment and experience to bear. The goal, throughout, is to optimize a program both at the customer level and campaign level.

Running what is, essentially, one of the largest salesforces in the industry, Syneos Health has captured data showing that established human-to-human relationships are a key component in all successful digital engagement. To deliver high-quality information to providers, we must enable customer-facing teams to tailor content at each step while staying compliant with regulations that vary by geography and institution.

Learning From Each Other

Today, Big Tech is marching into healthcare with lush cash reserves and plenty of good will from consumers. In just the last 18 months, healthcare deals drew $6.8 billion in funding from Amazon, Google, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft.[iv]

Consumer trends strongly support the bets Big Tech has placed. In surveys going back to 2018, more than 60% of healthcare consumers say they want an Amazon-like experience. And physician expectations mirror those of their patients, according to recent research by Syneos Health.

Healthcare companies recognize our landscape has changed forever. We see the challenges a tech revolution brings — and also the benefits. Raising efficiency while leveraging breakthroughs in AI absolutely will save lives. But the question is this: Has Big Tech, similarly, learned lessons from Healthcare?

There are reasons to believe leading tech companies are listening and learning, especially with regard to scandals over COVID-19 misinformation. Some of the largest players are, indeed, elevating human healthcare insights over profits on algorithm-driven engagement. In a 15-month period starting in February 2020, YouTube removed 900,000 videos for violating COVID-19 rules on misinformation. Then, in July, when the Surgeon General issued an advisory urging tech platforms to increase their vigilance, YouTube responded in a fashion that perfectly reflects the principles discussed above.

YouTube's Dr. Garth Graham, Director of Healthcare and Public Health Partnerships, blogged that the company was taking measures based on advice from trusted experts including National Academy of Medicine, American Public Health Association, Mass General Brigham, and the Stanford Center for Health Education. "We're putting health professionals at the core of our efforts to connect people with helpful content," Dr. Graham wrote.

Trusting human beings with proven expertise is the heart of all successful healthcare strategies, from drug discovery to market access to omnichannel engagement. It has helped biopharma companies chart a steady course as technology rewrites the models for research and development, field force deployment, patient care and so much more. We believe the same principle will support the business strategies of our new neighbors in healthcare: the technology innovators on whose products we all rely. PV

Notes:

[i] Calloway E. DeepMind's AI predicts structures for a vast trove of proteins. Nature.com. Available at https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02025-4>. Accessed Aug 4 2021

[ii] Google and YouTube Will Pay Record $170 Million for Alleged Violations of Children's Privacy Law. 2019. Federal Trade Commission Press Release. FTC.gov. Available at: < https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2019/09/google-youtube-will-pay-record-170-million-alleged-violations>. Accessed July 23, 2021

[iii] See, e.g., The Disinformation Dozen. 2021. The Center for Countering Digital Hate. Counterhate.com. Available at: <https://www.counterhate.com/disinformationdozen>. Accessed July 23, 2021

[vi] Munn L. Angry by design: toxic communication and technical architectures. 2020. Nature.com. Available at: < https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00550-7> Accessed July 23, 2021

[vii] The Big Tech in Healthcare Report, 2021. CBInsights.com. Available at: < https://www.cbinsights.com/reports/CB-Insights_Big-Tech-In-Healthcare-2021.pdf > Accessed July 22, 2021