

## OPINIONS PLUS

# Making pharma's post-Covid-19 future faster and smarter

By Saul Helman and David Weiss

There's nothing like a global pandemic to force a reimagining of one's business. What it means for the pharmaceutical industry is that it can't keep doing what it's been doing for years.

Covid-19 has exposed the industry's antiquated sales model and revealed the limitations and opportunities of remote commerce. And the speed with which Covid-19 vaccines have been developed taught us that bringing therapies to market needn't be a 10-year slog if you're working in concert with government for the betterment of public health.

For all of its horrors, the pandemic has made clear that the pharmaceutical industry can be smarter, faster, and more efficient. Here are three changes we expect to see carried forward into a post-Covid-19 world.

**The remote sales model is here to stay.** It's no secret that the sales strategies of pharmaceutical companies were fossilized, designed for a world that no longer exists. Though doctors are now gathering more information online, reps are still calling or showing up (at least they were before the pandemic) with canned messages that don't require personal delivery. It's hard to think of another industry so reliant on large field forces and face-to-face visits.

Yet wholesale restructuring across the pharmaceutical industry has been slow to come, amid worries that revenue would tank with new models.

The pandemic forced the industry's hand. It's hard to imagine a future in which sales staff are granted ready entry to hospitals and physician practices. Much of this work is going remote and digital, whether the industry is ready or not.

This isn't to say the old model will be entirely replaced. Post-pandemic, reps will continue to show up in person with samples and information, but on a more limited scale, and with a different look and feel.

Agility and responsiveness — instead of therapeutic expertise — will define the coming sales force. This may not hold true when dealing with product launches or highly complex therapies and delivery mechanisms, but broadly speaking for small-molecule and more traditional biologics, the field force will need to be nimble and quick to react to customer requests. Drug reps of the future must be able to learn quickly and speak intelligently on multiple therapeutic areas, as well as show knowledge about a diverse basket of products and services offered by the manufacturer. They will need to get even better at helping health care providers and patients access these products and related support services.

Predictive analytics and machine learning will drive further changes. Successful biopharma companies will need to provide user-friendly online platforms for health care providers, then react to their questions and concerns with multifaceted and speedy responses.

**A quicker path to market.** Operation Warp Speed showed how technology could swiftly pivot. By focusing attention on developing Covid-19 vaccines, it exhibited how the development of other lifesaving drugs could follow a similar path.

Government help was key. That included a data and safety monitoring board and emergency use authorization, not to mention significant funding. But perhaps most important was how the industry proactively engaged the

Food and Drug Administration, seeking guidance and aligning expectations related to an early-to-market opportunity. With this kind of public/private partnership, remarkable product-to-market opportunities exist.

The rapid deployment of Covid-19 vaccines highlights the importance of real-time post-approval monitoring, as compared with controlled, clinical-studies environments. We still have much to learn about the benefits and drawbacks of the speed of the approval process. Yet the Warp Speed experiment shows us that getting essential medicines to patients can be safely expedited when needed.

**Simplifying supply chains.** Covid-19 sounded an alarm about far-flung supply chains which was even louder than the alarm prompted by natural disasters induced by climate change. For health and national security, repatriating the supply chain and bringing more drug manufacturing back to the U.S. is a noble idea. Yet there are a host of issues complicating efforts to do that. One of the biggest is sourcing active pharmaceutical ingredients and other drug-making ingredients, such as bulking agents, in an efficient, quality-assured, and cost-effective way. And it's impossible to ignore that the current supply chain structure has cost and efficiency advantages that could be undermined by a one-dimensional push to repatriate production.

Addressing this issue will require a proactive pharmaceutical industry. As it now stands, our new national commitment doesn't take into account the complexity of the U.S. drug manufacturing ecosystem, relying on sweeping statements that do not fully account for the challenges it faces.

### A FASTER, SMARTER INDUSTRY

The Covid-19 pandemic is pushing pharma to make some major changes that are perhaps long overdue. After the crisis, a new sales force will likely emerge. Knowledgeable reps will be better at providing their clients with highly tailored and specific information, as well as inform both health care providers and patients about accessing products.

Operation Warp Speed's approach to vaccine development has demonstrated how industry and government can work together to bring life-saving treatments to market faster — perhaps becoming a model for other products. And in the post-Covid-19 era, we will have a better understanding of the complexities and drawbacks of simplifying supply chains, bringing new focus to the debate.

These three issues are forcing the pharmaceutical industry to evolve and grow. But now is no time to pause. As vaccines roll out, as the economy opens, as the crisis ebbs, the industry must build on its momentum and challenge old practices. Only in this way can it become even faster and smarter.

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