

Post-Pandemic Expectations of the Healthcare Industry: A Critical Opportunity for Public Affairs

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Over the last 18 months, there isn't a system, economy or society anywhere in the world that hasn't changed in myriad ways. Overnight, being "healthy" has taken on an entirely new meaning. No longer limited to its more classic definition of "lack of disease or ailment," health has become synonymous with the human experience, simultaneously social, economic, political, medical and emotional in nature.

As COVID-19 quickly spread, 2020 reiterated just how globalized and interconnected we are. And while it has, in many ways, been a great divider as it exacerbated longstanding disparities and injustices, it also leveled the field as it ravaged communities and systems, regardless of GDP. It has reiterated the core of global health security: that none of us is healthy, until all of us are healthy.

While communities retreated into quarantine and lockdown, the healthcare industry leapt to action, uniting in unprecedented ways to bring diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccine candidates to market in record time.

COVID-19 forever changed the expectations of biopharmaceutical companies.

Public affairs professionals now, more than ever before, find themselves on the frontlines, with bigger responsibilities to maintain corporate reputation under a brighter spotlight. And it's become clear that the historical place we find ourselves in is only significant if we can sustain and advance the opportunity it has created.

Progress Demands Sustained Actions

In 2019, the industry was at a low point: Americans were more than twice as likely (58%) to rate the pharma industry negatively than positively (27%), according to a Gallup annual industry ranking poll. As the world battled a pandemic and pharmaceutical companies worked to discover and test vaccines, positive sentiment soared. A Harris Poll in May 2021 found that 60% of consumers rated pharma companies favorably.

While progress has been made, the pressure on the industry has not let up and, in fact, will only increase. New scrutiny builds in Congress, with a sharpened focus on health policies that have left too many behind. And as policymakers consider the meaning of infrastructure and what constitutes a "system," global leaders find themselves reconsidering the value of intellectual property at the World Health Assembly and in the halls of the European Commission. Against the demand – and expectation – to lead us into a new era of global health, policymakers and industry heads find policies, business and moral responsibility being tested.

From Responsibility to Accountability

As we build back from COVID-19 stronger, better and fairer, the public is calling for something deeper from businesses. A post-pandemic world will require a new social contract focusing squarely on the comprehensive needs of all societies and leverages value chains across the board to ensure the health and safety of our people and our economies. Such a contract must maintain a long-term commitment to yield real impact, beyond image or reputation.

In a shifting, complex landscape, corporate social responsibility is now simply the price of entry. To make and sustain global social impact, companies must lead with purpose and achieve corporate social **accountability** – *answerable* for its actions. It means not only integrating day-to-day goals with commercial opportunities, but connecting those efforts to a greater, higher order purpose that creates an authentic connection between the work and the well-being of the world.

How Pharma Can “Get There” And “Stay There”

A new era of global health requires a change in thinking and demands a new way of working within and across sectors. The re-envisioned social contract will require us to address the tension that has traditionally existed between political and social will, perpetuating misalignment and mistrust and keeping communities at odds with the very systems and policies meant to protect them. But now, we find ourselves at an historic juncture, with an opportunity to leverage the unprecedented public perception of the pharmaceutical industry to broker a new path forward, uniting industry, communities and policymakers together in service of a collective vision: a healthier future for all.

To do so, we must recognize each of our calls to arms is bigger. We are greater than the sum of our parts, and we must force ourselves to remove our blinders to think far beyond the specific task we have been hired to do and instead consider our role in the collective purpose.



Figure 1: Public Affairs Trifecta Model

Public affairs executives can lead their organizations to break down functional siloes and align goals

By bringing traditionally separate functions together (Figure 1), organizations can more effectively and agilely work toward a set of shared goals, rather than being divided by brand, function or discipline.

The Public Affairs Trifecta model is built on the premise that global health, advocacy and public policy should exist interdependently, whenever possible. As in a trifecta in horseracing, every horse runs the race, but when bet on together, they have the potential to yield a far greater return.

Look Holistically at the Trifecta



Global Health

We are at a critical juncture where we understand more than ever how health anywhere has the power to impact health everywhere. The public health crises of today – from COVID-19 to diabetes to cervical cancer – require public health responses. Companies must ensure that their efforts are grounded in a true public health need validated by epidemiological trends, one that drives a global agenda and transcends borders, whether that be a community, a population or the world. Now is the time to revisit that focus to ensure we acknowledge the vast intersection of experiences and determinants of health.



Advocacy

Knowing the problem you want to solve goes a long way in aligning on an agenda. As critical is having those impacted at the table, regardless of disease, gender, race, identity or geography; we should also look to less likely, non-traditional voices to find unique opportunities for meaningful change. Sustained power behind any effort requires that we work directly and deeply with communities to ensure that efforts are aligned with needs – and that the paths we take to address them work. The motto of *For Us. With Us.* has never been more true or more needed.



Policy

From the beginning, we must acknowledge that long-term change is solidified through policy. By identifying, early on, the policy barriers and/or gaps that, if modified, will help lead to sustainable change, we can ensure greater public health impact for more people. If we always think with policy goals in mind, asking first what solution is needed and what role we can play – as both citizens and corporate partners – we can better anticipate the human infrastructure required, facilitate bringing the right people to the table and activate communities.



A Winning Way Forward

Companies are no longer beholden to their shareholders alone; they are beholden to their stakeholders across a broad ecosystem – from their employees and consumers to the societies and environment in which they operate. People expect not only more, but better, and as we move into a post-pandemic era, their demands for corporations to be accountable for their commitments and actions will, rightly, remain. CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) is table stakes. What is needed is a robust, strategic approach to deliver on both business and societal needs. It is a tall order, but one that a renewed public affairs model can deliver.

The best approaches will tackle challenges holistically, driving consensus to co-create solutions (and look for best practices to amortize at every turn) – and deliver sustained actions – and greater accountability. This approach must ensure a company engages with all stakeholders in a responsible and meaningful way but, as important, that it is accountable for their community engagements. This is what ties the business to a higher-level purpose that creates an authentic connection between it and the communities it serves.

As public perception – and expectation – continues to rise, companies have no choice but to respond accordingly. We will place our bets on the public affairs team to lead the way.

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