

## **Impact of COVID-19 on Customer Relationship Management Initiatives Offered by Pharmaceutical Companies to Doctors in India: An Overview based on opinion of Pharmaceutical Industry Experts**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically influenced various sectors globally, with the pharmaceutical industry experiencing significant transformations, especially in its customer relationship management (CRM) initiatives. This paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on CRM initiatives within pharmaceutical companies in India, analysing changes, challenges, and advancements in the industry. The study incorporates data from industry executives & expert interviews, and aims to decipher it for the betterment of CRM innovations by Indian pharmaceutical companies, to provide a comprehensive overview. The study also aims to analyse the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on in practice CRM initiatives of Indian pharma industry and the innovations derived by the industry to match the unprecedented circumstances during Covid. The study also tries to conclude how much of those innovative CRM initiatives evolved during the covid times are relevant in post Covid conditions.

**Key Words:** Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), Prescribers (Doctors), Pharma CRM, Newer Trends in CRM, Effectiveness of Newer Trends, Covid-19, Medical Representatives, Indian Pharmaceutical Industry, Impact of Covid-19.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Indian pharmaceutical industry was practically non-existent until the early 1970s, it was dominated by multinational companies such as Glaxo, Pfizer, and Roche. However, since the decade of 80's this has drastically changed<sup>1</sup>. (Ghosh, P. K., et al.) Today, India is recognized as the "Pharmacy of the World" due to its capabilities in manufacturing advanced pharmaceutical and biotechnological drugs and vaccines. With evolving circumstances, the Indian pharma industry has carved out a niche in the global pharmaceutical domain. Currently, India is considered one of the top five emerging pharmaceutical markets worldwide. As of March 2024, For the month of Mar'24, the Indian Pharmaceutical Market (IPM) reported about 16158 Cr with a positive value growth of 10%. On a MAT basis, the market has recorded 197976 Cr on a MAT (Moving Annual Total) basis with 6.5% value growth.<sup>2,37</sup> ([www.pharmarack.com](http://www.pharmarack.com))

All the top therapies have shown an exciting positive value growth for the month except Respiratory segment. Relatively higher unit growths are seen in the Cardio-diabeto therapies, Gastro Intestinal, Derma, Neuro/CNS, Hormones, and Urology markets as well. Anti-neoplastic have shown the highest unit growth of 42% for the month. Major contributing markets such as the Anti-hypertensives, Lipid-lowering drugs, OAD combinations, Antacids have outperformed for the month of Mar'24, boosting the growth in IPM. Cosmo Derma product portfolio has shown value/volume pick up; majorly by increased usage of Emollients, Protectives and Sunscreens with the commencement of summer season. Monoclonal antibodies, Immunosuppressive agents, Protein kinase inhibitors continue to influence the voluminous growth of Anti-neoplastic therapy.<sup>3</sup> (Government of India, Ministry of Chemical & Fertilizers, Department of Pharmaceuticals, Annual Report – 2023-24.)

The current scenario, which looks very promising and glittering, was not the same during the last few years, specially between 2020 – 2022. This was the time when the entire world was gripped under an unexpected & unwarranted threat named Covid 19. The COVID-19 pandemic, declared by the World Health Organization in March 2020, has induced unprecedented disruptions across industries. The pharmaceutical sector, critical in the fight against the virus, faced unique challenges in various aspects in India. Due to various sanctions & rules imposed by the government during that time period

like lockdown, limited movement of manpower & goods, non-availability of field work force, scarcity & shortages of raw materials, and so many associated problems, the pharmaceutical industry in India had gone through the most unprecedented challenges, it had ever expected or estimated.<sup>4,5,24</sup>

The worst hit department in the Indian Pharmaceutical framework during Covid-19 pandemic duration was Marketing. There were no ways left for any marketing initiative to run in the market, all the 4Ps of marketing, as described in the books of marketing management viz. People, Place, Price, & Promotion were severely disrupted. There were no people to work, Places were restricted for movement of humans & goods, Prices were under the control of government & then comes the most severely hit façade of marketing – The Sales Promotion. In absence of the first three components, there was no way, one can even think of Product promotion strategies during Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>6,36</sup>

The most important component of Sales Promotion strategies in pharmaceutical industry in India is CRM or Customer Relationship Management. During the Covid-19 pandemic period there were no ways left with pharmaceutical companies for maintaining and enhancing relationships with their customers.<sup>31</sup> (Nidhi Pandey)

Before this pandemic struck, Customer relationship Management was a continuous endeavour at Pharmaceutical Industry in India, as the sales of scheduled medicines is strictly governed by the law of the country and it depends completely on a third-party advocacy. This Third party in case of Pharmaceutical Industry are Doctors. Although they are not the end consumers of the product but the sale of product happens only when they advocate or prescribe a particular medicine to the end consumer that is Patient. These Doctors not only helps the company is increasing their sales base, they also act as Opinion Makers for a company. Their perception about a company matters more than the mere sales numbers, as they can transfer that perception about a particular company easily in the mind of end consumers, the patients with their opinion or mindset about that company and its products. Therefore, it's a compulsion for every pharmaceutical company to be in constant touch with its product advocates, who are Doctors, consider them as the Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and treat them as their core customers. So, building a strong and long-lasting relationship with this KOLs & their retention is the most important aspect of Pharmaceutical Marketing. One of the most used models for such retention were always Customer Relationship Management techniques. Looking into the fiercely competitive market for Pharmaceutical Companies in India, with time, the established trends in the field of Pharma CRM were –

- Establishing a first-hand contact with its customers with the help of its hired representative called Medical Representative, or MRs. These MRs represents their companies, meet the customers on regular basis and promote their products, based on superior quality, scientific knowledge, convenience of administration, lower cost of therapy or any such marketing superiority.
- Keeping a track record of contacts of its customers, like address, contact numbers, mail IDs etc. and keep in regular touch with its customers.
- Providing essential knowledge to medical practitioners, needed for their skill enhancement in forms of Journal subscriptions, research papers, Organising Continuous Medical Education meetings (CMEs), or helping the medical fraternity in organising their annual / monthly conferences.
- By providing small value Gifts / or Product samples to its customers that hold the company logo or brand names of their products.
- By sponsoring the Continuous Medical Education of Doctors in the country or abroad. Organising / Sponsoring Medical symposiums in either India or any foreign country for the purpose of training.
- Directly paying the customers, the commission for buying their products in bulk quantities.

These were the basic customer relationship management techniques imparted by the industry to win over its customers with some or the other changer, predominantly, all the pharmaceutical companies were having their marketing strategies more or less on the similar set of principles.<sup>10</sup> (Singh, A., & Sharma, P. (2021).

There were some innovations here and there by some companies, but largely, the set norms of CRM in pharma industry were all these above-mentioned processes. Although there are many newer CRM trends which were also being in practice since last decade or so with the advent of newer technologies, but they are practiced by a few companies and couldn't become norms of CRM practices by Industry on doctors. These New CRM initiatives which were evolved during the last decade or so, comes in picture largely due to the restrictions imposed by law of the land and some due to the advancement in technology over a period of last 10-15 years when medium of communication transfers itself from written & spoken medium to the digital world.<sup>24</sup> (Chinmay Bahera et al.)

These newer CRM trends which are emerging recently can be broadly listed as –

- Use of eCRM software & emails / messaging by companies with their help, or Provision of patient information Booklets / Cards / Patient's data management. These initiatives are broadly categorised these days as Digital CRM.
- Educating the paramedical staff of doctor's hospital / clinic in the required field like initial first aid / emergency treatment etc.
- Procurement of equipment / machinery needed for the allied hospital by pharmaceutical companies.
- Provision of Hospital Ads/ Printing of Prescription Pads / Doctor's Name Plate installation etc.
- Patient support initiatives like on call patient services, where representatives of pharma companies go to patient's place for helping them with their disease management on the insistence of the patient's doctor.
- Helping the doctor for developing their own digital platform like website, mobile app, or social media networking.
- Interact directly with the customer with the help of Digital platform of the company or the social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram etc.

But, with the arrival of Covid-19, almost all these initiatives were being made impossible to be implemented. With domestic & international travel restrictions, there were no meetings, no conferences of doctors happening anywhere. Without people working in the field, there were no means of providing Gifts / Samples / Reminders to the customers. Even some of the newer forms of CRM initiatives were restricted due to the limited manpower movement.<sup>15</sup>(Mehta, Suhani, and Mansi Gupta.), <sup>16</sup>(Singh, Niraj, and Rahul Gupta)

This research aims to explore the impact of the pandemic on CRM initiatives in Indian pharmaceutical companies, evaluating how the pharmaceutical companies and their marketing people in India have evolved over their limitations to meet new challenges and constraints arises due to a sudden interruption.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative data collection approach, with qualitative insights from interviews with industry experts and CRM managers based in pharmaceutical companies in India. The data collection spanned from August 2023 to April 2024. Marketing & Sales executives of Indian pharmaceutical companies based at different places and on different positions starting from Medical Representative to Regional & Zonal Sales Managers, Assistant – Deputy - & General Managers in Product Management, Sales, & CRM departments, and reaches up to Presidents, Vice-Presidents & CEOs of Indian Pharmaceutical companies. Around 100 such pharma executives were shortlisted based on acquaintances & reachability, were send a questionnaire in form of Google Forms, in which they have to answer a few questions and reply back to the sender. The data is then collected and the inferences, conclusions, & suggestions were made based on the collected & deciphered data.

## DATA COLLECTION & ITS INTERPRETATION

Out of the 100 plus executives, whom the questionnaire was sent, 61 had sent their replies. 55 via their emails and 6 via the telephonic interview. The questionnaire was largely based on what was the impact of Covid-10 pandemic on their company's in practice CRM policies, how they'd managed the CRM initiatives of their respective companies during the Covid-19 pandemic, what were the reactions of their customers, when they'd been subjected to a sudden and abrupt change, what were their demands from the Pharma industry during the pandemic, what were the industry's action on these new demands, were the doctors still ready to see people from the industry during those difficult days, or were they totally averse to that idea, how was the channel of communication kept intact during those days, what challenges were faced by the industry for implementation of new set of CRM initiatives which were mutually beneficial during that time frame, and was it felt by all the stake holders that these newly developed & evolved initiatives should stays relevant still post the completion of this pandemic.

The questionnaire and the responses provide by all the executives of pharmaceutical industry are being tabulated as the below mentioned tables. Each table contains the problem in form of question and the respondent's number for various options given as the answer. By this, we can conclude, that as per the industry, what should be the most near correct solution for the problem arises due to Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 1

Question	Do you think Doctors are comfortable with the visit of Representatives of Pharmaceutical companies at their clinic / Hospital/place of practice post Covid times?	%age of respondents
Options	Yes	47.5
	Comfortable with due precautions	37.7
	Not comfortable, but allow reluctantly	11.5
	No	3.3

Table 2

Question	Have you noticed any change in CRM initiatives taken by pharmaceutical companies during Covid	%age of respondents
Options	Yes, changes for good	29.5
	Yes, but changes for worse	1.6
	Remained the same	27.9
	Unique ideas were introduced by some companies	41

Table 3

Question	Do you feel these CRM initiatives were essential or absolutely not required during that difficult environment?	%age of respondents
Options	Yes, CRM was the need of the hour.	24.6
	No, it was not required at all during that period	14.7
	Companies should have taken a middle approach	19.7
	Innovative CRM strategies were the need of the hour	41

Table 4

Question	Do you feel Pharmaceutical Industry stood beside the Doctors during those difficult days	%age of respondents
Options	Yes, it does. Dr's were happy	68.9
	No, they were not up to the mark	1.6
	To an extent they tried, but was not as per expectations	24.6
	No, instead they tried to take advantage of the situations	4.9

Table 5

Question	Were you appreciative of pharmaceutical companies connecting on phone calls or on WhatsApp communication during Covid with Doctors	%age of respondents
Options	Yes	50.8
	No	14.8
	May be on WhatsApp	34.4

Table 6

Question	Were you connecting on phone calls or on WhatsApp on the Birthdays or Marriage Anniversary date of Doctors during Covid	%age of respondents
Options	Yes, always	53.4
	No, Never	13.3
	Only to very important customers	33.3

Table 7

Question	Are you agreeing with the fact that pharmaceutical company representatives were integral part of our collective fight with Covid during the pandemic?	%age of respondents
Options	Yes, Agreed totally	70
	Yes, they were a good help	21.7
	Maybe, but not much of help was provided	8.3
	Not at all	0

Table 8

Question	What according to you is the most important change pharmaceutical companies has to adapt to when it comes to CRM initiatives post covid as per your understanding?	%age of respondents
Options	Paradigm shift from personal services to patient centric services.	44.3
	Provision of latest equipment / machinery for clinics / Hospitals	23
	Provision of Cost-effective medicines	32.8
	A blend of fresh changes & some of the useful older initiatives	41
	Drs don't need MRs visits post covid	0

Table 9

Question	Do you think Covid Pandemic had created a new bridge between Dr, Patient, & Pharmaceutical industry which was unheard before it	%age of respondents
O p t i o n s	Yes	62.3
	No	4.9
	May be, Not Sure	32.8

Table 10

Question	Out of the following CRM initiatives taken by the pharmaceutical companies during Covid, which one your customer prefer the most	No of respondent said yes out of 61	%age of respondents
O p t i o n s	Sanitation of your clinic / Hospital	32	53.3
	Managing essentials like Oxygen cylinders, Antiviral medicines, Concentrators, Oximeters, etc. whenever they were needed	32	53.3
	Free sampling of Medicines they promote	29	48.3
	Managing medicines and outside works for your Clinic / Hospital when it was difficult to go out & work	27	45
	Assistance is setting up Digital Platform for doctors like App, website, Zoom Calling consultation etc.	23	38.3
	Regular visits & follow up from company representatives	22	36.7
	Trade discounts for pharmacies		18.3
	Provision of Gifts & supportive supplies from time to time	9	15
	Sponsorship for attending Medical Conferences	7	11.7
	International Torus & Medical symposiums	2	3.3

Table 11

Which out of these CRM activities done by representatives of other pharmaceutical companies during Covid appeals you the most	No of respondent said yes out of 61	%age of respondents
Providing sanitation Needs at that time like Masks / Gloves / Sanitizers / Surgical items	44	72.1
Taking proper care of Hygiene / Sanitation / while visiting you at Drs clinic. Providing protective shields in Drs consulting rooms.	30	49.2
Providing medicine samples on regular intervals to either to Dr or directly to the designated patient's place	27	44.3
Providing Drs / Clinic / Hospital with supplies of Oximeters / Oxygen Cylinders / Concentrators etc.	24	39.3
Reminders about their products / Medicines on phone to Doctors, & Regularity in visiting Doctors that time	22	36.1
Digital CRM service & help	19	31.1
Providing information to the Patients about Hospitals, available beds, Medicines availability	19	31.1
Keeping regular follow up with Drs in case they've given some tasks to them for work related to Covid situations	17	27.9
Helping Drs / family during your hospitalization due to Covid	16	26.2
OPD or Medical Camps @ Drs clinic with supplies of essential medicines like immunity boosters etc.	15	24.6

Table 12

<b>The CRM Activities appreciated by Doctors which were done by the pharma company people during Covid-19</b>	
C R M  i n i t i a t i v e  d u r i n g  C o v i d - 1 9	Provision of sanitary items like gloves, sanitizers, PPE kits, etc was very well appreciated by Drs during Covid-19.
	Doctors were asking us to help patients which was a new trend of CRM in Pharma
	Regular supplies of Medicines was appreciated
	Proper communication was the key during Covid with Drs
	Digital CRM was a great help during Covid
	Med Reps helps Doctors to come out of fear, they motivated the Dr fraternity.
	Provision of masks and sanitisers by Pharma companies
	Provided immune booster medicine sample
	Providing need base medicine to Dr ,any personal need of drs , personal service , telephonically in touch with close Dr about there need family health any assistance that time
	Being instrumental in arranging CME & creating digital knowledge sharing platforms which were critical in the dynamic time of Covid
	Provided online consultation platform to the Dr
	Clinic sanitization. Provision of Oxymeters & Concentrators at Hospitals
	Provision of Protective PVC shield for Drs on their consultation table.
	Scientific Sessions on Zoom
	Provision of Medicines & essentials to Patients on special requests from Doctors
	Company was involved in sanitizing the clinics of the Drs and erecting the protective PVC shield between Patient & the Drs on their examination tables.

Table 13

New CRM initiative taken by Pharma Companies during Covid-19 which remains relevant post Covid also		%age of respondents
C R M  i n i t i a t i v e s  d u r i n g  C o v i d - 1 9  r e l e v e n t  t i l l  d a t e	After covid Dr likely to take more interest on patient care like free camps ,bmd s,also instrument need base	71
	Blood Glucose monitoring, BP monitoring of patients at their Home and report the same to Drs, providing Physiotherapy sessions, supplying Remdicivir to Patients	65
	Patient centric activities, we provided Drs a software with which they can consult their patients on video call and prescribe medicines to them on phone.	65
	Digital patient education activities	58
	Development of Digital Platform for Doctors like Website, Patient's Mobile App, Social Media engagement enhancement & AI assisted help in diagnosis & prevention of diseases.	55
	provided the doctors with personalised digital banners including mobile number & brief write - up about him/her to be hosted across digital platforms	50
	Provided Hospital needs instrument and Safety Items	37
	Protective PVC shield between Patient & the Drs on their examination tables.	35
	Whatsapp Reminders	30
	Educating Doctors on the latest developments in Covid and Its treatment pattern via mobile app and reminder cards was very much appreciated, Dr mobile consultation app development	25
	Regular sanitization & Essential medicine Supply	12
	Provided sanitization services to the clinics and Hospitals.	10
	Providing Oxygen concentrator	10
	Supply of Immunity booster Ayurvedic Products.	8
	PPE kit & medicine supplied by Company.	5



## FINDINGS

The responses received from Pharma Industry executive has given a deep inside into the fact that how much CRM activities were in use before Covid-19 struck us and what was their relevance during the progression of Covid-19 pandemic.

Once the responses of questionnaires provide to all the executive form industry were tabulated the organised form a lot of Creative insights about the fact that what was the impact of Covid-19 on customer relationship management initiatives offered by pharmaceutical companies to the doctors in India, can be formed. Based on the questions that were sent across as a questionnaire to all the respondents, the most important findings which one can conclude are:

1. The first and the most important question which was being asked to all the respondents was about the relevance of medical representatives who are visiting the doctors during the pandemic. Before Covid-19 this was the simplest CRM strategy adopted by almost all the pharmaceutical companies in India to send their medical representatives to the doctors, and it was well appreciated by doctors also. The study just wants to understand that was this basic and the most important faced of customer relationship management was being affected at all or not during this covid-19 pandemic. With the responses which we have received from the industry colleagues it was really heartening to know that other than the initial few days, even after facing so many issues in pandemic, doctors were really comfortable with the visits of pharmaceutical companies' representatives at their clinics. Almost 48% of respondents replied in total affirmation and the additional 38% said that the doctors were comfortable with representatives visiting them with due precautions. This shows that almost 85% of industry executives believe that the visit of MRs to the doctors during Covid-19 was not objected by the doctors in per say and sometimes also appreciated by the doctors. Only 15% of the respondents believe that doctors were not comfortable with these visits, and this can be considered as their own opinion and not of the entire industry.
2. The respondents were then asked were they noticed any change in the implementation of CRM strategies during Covid, to which the 70.5% respondents replied in positive. They believed that yes there were changes observed in CRM initiatives during Covid, and these changes are for good, in fact 41% of respondents believed that with these changes some unique CRM initiatives were designed which are going to stay in the industry for long. 28% of the respondents said that the CRM remains similar to what it used to be pre Covid. Only a negligible amount of 1.6% respondents feels that these newer initiatives in CRM had changes the scenario for worst which can be considered insignificant.
3. When the respondents were asked about the significance of CRM during Covid-19, there were mixed responses. 24.6% believed that yes, CRM initiatives were the need of the hour even if there were adverse conditions, while 19.6% believes that the companies must have taken a middle approach, for slowing down with these initiatives & not going too aggressively about them. A staggering 41% respondents believed that the CRM initiatives were indeed needed but with a blend of innovation which can help Doctors more during that period, that that forms the basis of Newer & innovative trends of CRM in Pharma industry. These respondents are the people who are the flag bearers of these newer CRM initiatives. Around 15% of respondents believed that pharma companies must have stopped all CRM activities during Covid-19 pandemic.
4. When it was asked that whether doctor's fraternity was happy with efforts of pharmaceutical industry being stood beside them during the pandemic, 69% of respondents said, yes, they feel so. Rest 24.6% feels yes, they were happy but the industry should have tried a bit more. Only 6.5% feels that Pharma industry wasn't up to the mark when it comes to stood beside doctors during Covid-19.
5. The respondents were asked about the usefulness of communication channels during Covid-19, either via Phone calls or WhatsApp, 51% respondents were of the opinion that Doctors were fine with both these modes of communication, while the other 34.4% felt, only WhatsApp was the correct way to communicate with the doctors during the hard times. Overall, around 85% respondents were of the opinion that it was important to communicate with doctors that time whatsoever the mode of communication should be. Only 14.8% were against the idea of communicating with doctors during Covid-19. In fact, when asked whether they wished their doctors on the important dates like Birthday or Anniversary, 53.4, more than half of the respondents said, yes, they did it even in

covid times, while the other 33.3% did wishes to doctors, but to only those who are really close to them, & not to all. Only 13% of total respondents have not made any phone calls or WhatsApp messages to wish their doctors.

6. When it was probed that whether doctors consider medical representative meeting them as integral part of their team in their fight against covid, 71 % of people responds in positive, rest 22% also felt that the representatives were good help to doctors during Covid, which made this assumption a fact that doctors had considered pharmaceutical company's field force as their trusted assistants in their nemesis against this disease.
7. The respondents were then asked about the most important change pharmaceutical companies have to adapt to, when it comes to CRM initiatives post covid, people have given divided opinion. While 44.3% feels it Paradigm shift from personal services to patient centric services which is the need of the hour, 41% agrees on the need of a perfect blending of fresh changes & some of the useful older initiatives. Some 33 & 23% of respondents believes that providing cost effective medicines or providing latest equipment's or machinery to the allied hospitals can serve the purpose in a better way. With the responses of people, it was observed that a paradigm shift from personal CRM services to the more better patient centric CRM is the best way to go ahead in this post Covid era. What was most heartening to know that none of the respondent felt that doctors don't need visits of medical representatives' post Covid, so this oldest but most reliable CRM initiative of pharma industry holds its place firmly despite of adversities imposed by Covid-19 in all these years.
8. Around 63% of all respondents believes that Covid Pandemic had created a new bridge between Doctors, Patients, & Pharmaceutical industry, which was unheard before it's advent. The other 33% thinks that it may have created this bridge, but they still want to be surer about it, before forming an opinion, while only 5% respondents feel nothing like that had happened, but it is too small to be of any significance.
9. Respondents were probed regarding CRM activities done by representatives of other pharmaceutical companies during Covid which appeals them the most, there were varied opinions. In the decreasing order of responses, these activities are tabulated –
  - a) 72% liked the company's Providing sanitation Needs at that time like Masks / Gloves / Sanitizers / Surgical items / PPE Kits, etc.
  - b) 49.2% voted for initiatives which takes proper care of Hygiene & Sanitization while visiting at doctor's clinic.
  - c) 44.3% prefers initiatives of providing medicine samples on regular intervals to either to Dr or directly to the designated patient's place.
  - d) 40% goes for Providing Doctors the supplies of Protective Shield for consulting table / Pulse Oximeters / Oxygen Cylinders / Concentrators etc. at their Clinic or Hospitals.
  - e) 36 % 31% respectively were in favour of Product reminders over phone or WhatsApp, and regular visits to the doctors at their clinics.
  - f) There were many other initiatives taken by pharma industry like Providing information to the Patients about Hospitals, available beds, Medicines availability, Helping Drs / family during your hospitalization due to Covid, & organising OPD or Medical Camps @ Drs clinic with supplies of essential medicines like immunity boosters etc. which were also appreciated by may respondents. These activities were tabulated and multiple option selection was allowed to the respondents so many respondents have liking for more then one activity hence the total percentage is always more then 100%. The activities are arranged in order of activity which was preferred by maximum number of respondents and then in gradually decreasing order.
10. When asked about out of the following innovative CRM initiatives taken by the pharmaceutical companies during Covid, which one was the most preferred by the doctors, 53.3% believed that the Sanitization of the clinic / Hospitals of the doctors and Managing essentials like Oxygen cylinders, Antiviral medicines, Concentrators, Pulse Oximeters, etc. whenever they were needed by pharma company's people was preferred most by the doctor across the country.

48 & 45% also believes that Free sampling of essential medicines and managing medicines like Favipirvir, Remdicivir, Steroids, etc; and doing outside works for doctor's Clinic / Hospitals when it was difficult to go out & work was the biggest help rendered by pharma industry to the doctors.

The activity which was appreciated initially by around 38.3% of the respondents in the study, but is gaining surprising momentum during and post Covid days was Assistance in setting up Digital Platform for doctors like App, website, Zoom Calling consultation etc. This is a part of Digital CRM techniques which is an activity setup for the future. Many companies are helping doctors in setting up their applications where they can give appointments to their patients, consult them over the phone in case of emergency, can track the visits records of patients, records their patient's vitals and many more things. This is the future of pharmaceutical CRM in the country and will gain more momentum in the years to come.

Provision of Gifts & supportive supplies from time to time, Sponsorship for attending Medical Conferences, International Torus & Medical symposium sponsorships were the activities which were very prevalent before Covid-19 outbreak but were the least preferred activities during the entire duration of the pandemic and were found no takers. The impact of Covid-19 on these activities is so massive that even after the normalisation of conditions post Covid, these activities are yet to restore their older shine and are almost considered out of favours both by the doctors, & the pharmaceutical industry.

11. When asked about which of these new & innovative CRM initiatives taken by Pharma Companies during Covid-19 remains relevant post Covid also, respondents provide multiple suggestions on various shortlisted initiatives provided to them in the questionnaire. The responses are tabulated as below –

- a) 71% of respondents suggests that post covid Doctors are likely to take more interest on initiative aimed at patient care, like free medical camps, Free sample distribution, & supply of medicines at the door step to the patient.
- b) 65% respondents feel that the activities like Blood Glucose & BP monitoring of patients at their Home and providing their reports to the Doctors, providing home Physiotherapy sessions to patients, guiding patients about how to take medicines in case of major illnesses, providing palliative care essentials to needy patients & ensures some lifestyle changes of patient's on requests of Doctors, opens up a whole new arena of CRM which link Doctor – Patient – Pharma Companies in a chain which will be beneficial to all the stake holders.
- c) 65% respondents also opine that Digital patient education activities like providing Doctors a software with which they can consult their patients on video call and prescribe medicines to them on the App itself, helping the doctors to develop such Apps for them, creation of Digital content about diseases & their manifestations for doctors, which the Doctor can show to his/her patient for better understanding of their disease condition etc. is getting immense popularity as a CRM initiative of the future.
- d) Provision of Protective PVC shield to the doctors to be erected on their consultation table so that they remain protected from the patient's infection, is still relevant in practice as per 35% of the respondents. However, with more of the doctors already covered under this initiative, the trend is supposed to decline with passing time.
- e) Reminders of products on WhatsApp and other similar social media Apps also considered by 30% of respondents as future CRM initiative which is going to stay for long.
- f) All other initiatives like Educating Doctors on the latest developments in Covid and Its treatment pattern via mobile app and reminder cards was very much appreciated, Dr mobile consultation app development, Regular sanitization of clinics & Essential medicine Supply, provision of instruments like Pulse oximeters, Oxygen concentrators, Cylinders, provision of immunity boosters, Ayurvedic products, PPE Kits, & essential like gloves, masks are being patronized by on an average 5-10% of respondents even after the Covid-19 era gone a long way. These essentials may lose their importance as compared to the covid times but, still remains relevant as many new variants of covid and the threat of other respiratory infectious diseases is still prevailing at large.

These were the finding of this research study aimed at analysing the Impact of COVID-19 on Customer Relationship Management Initiatives offered by Pharmaceutical Companies to Doctors in India, based on the responses provided by the

senior / middle / & junior level executives working in the Indian pharmaceutical industry. Prior to the pandemic, pharmaceutical companies heavily relied on in-person meetings, conferences, and seminars to engage with healthcare professionals. These interactions allowed for face-to-face discussions, product presentations, and networking opportunities. However, COVID-19 mandated strict social distancing measures, rendering these traditional methods obsolete. The inability to hold physical meetings disrupted the flow of information exchange between pharma representatives and doctors, and that was the very reason the Indian pharmaceutical industry had to evolve its CRM initiatives and drive them towards innovation and technology.<sup>17,18</sup>

Based on these responses and findings we can definitely derive concrete conclusions and give beneficial suggestions to the industry for the development of their future CRM strategies. Before that let's discuss the Case study analysis of 3 major pharma companies from India, and learn how they reform their CRM strategies with the help of digital innovations that are available to them for the better promotion of their products.

## **CASE STUDIES ABOUT DIGITAL CRM TRANSFORMATIONS IMPLEMENTED BY MAJOR INDIAN COMPANIES:**

### **Case Study 1:**

**Dr. Reddy's Laboratories:** Dr. Reddy's implemented a comprehensive digital CRM strategy during the pandemic. The company launched virtual platforms for product launches and training sessions, and utilized AI-driven chatbots to provide real-time support to healthcare professionals. These initiatives resulted in a 20% increase in customer satisfaction scores and a significant reduction in response times to customer queries.<sup>19</sup>

### **Case Study 2:**

**Cipla:** Cipla adopted telehealth services in collaboration with leading telemedicine platforms. This initiative not only facilitated continuous patient care during lockdowns but also provided Cipla with valuable insights into patient experiences and needs. As a result, Cipla was able to develop more targeted marketing strategies and improve patient adherence to medications.<sup>20</sup>

### **Case Study 3:**

**Sun Pharmaceutical Industries:** Sun Pharma invested heavily in data analytics to enhance its CRM initiatives. The company used predictive analytics to identify at-risk patients and provide personalized adherence support. This approach led to a 15% improvement in medication adherence rates and strengthened relationships with healthcare professionals through tailored communications and support.<sup>21</sup>

## **CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS:**

The findings of the study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has driven significant innovation in CRM initiatives within the Indian pharmaceutical industry. The shift towards digital engagement and personalized services aimed towards the patients has enhanced customer relationships, although challenges such as data privacy concerns, technological infrastructure limitations, and resistance to change persist.

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for transformation in CRM initiatives in the Indian pharmaceutical industry.<sup>9</sup> (Kapoor, Sanjay, and Reena Gupta) The findings suggest that while the pandemic has posed significant challenges, it has also driven innovation in CRM initiatives within the Indian pharmaceutical sector. The paradigm shifts towards patient-centric CRM and personalized services for doctors in place of pre-existing & established models of foreign trips and commission in terms of discounts in medicine purchases have taken a back seat for the betterment. One thing, which is firmly established with this study is the need for regular visits of the doctor by companies' representative, remains intact. Despite of all these newer trends and Digital transformations in terms of CRM, one CRM initiative which remains unchanged even after withstanding the strongest adversity of Covid-19 pandemic, is the need of regular visit given by medical representatives of the companies to the doctors. It was needed before also, as it is needed today. This fact is very strongly established by this study. No doubt the newer trends of CRM innovated during the Covid times has enhanced customer relationships but it also requires ongoing investment and adaptation to the newer environment, to be remains relevant in future.

The conclusions derived from the study, can be summarized in the following points. The same can be taken as suggestions to the pharmaceutical industry for future implementation:

- a) COVID-19 pandemic has driven significant innovation in CRM initiatives within the Indian pharmaceutical industry over its old in practice initiatives.
- b) Despite of all these newer trends in terms of CRM, one old CRM initiative which remains unchanged even after withstanding the strongest adversity of Covid-19 pandemic, is the need of regular visit given by medical representatives of the companies to the doctors.
- c) There is a marked shift towards patient centric activities from the earlier used Doctor centric activities in field of pharma CRM.
- d) There is a marked shift towards digital engagement as it has enhanced customer relationships, although challenges such as data privacy concerns, technological infrastructure limitations, and resistance to change persist.<sup>7</sup>(Patel Dipika et al.) <sup>8</sup>(Anjali Singh et al.)
- e) Doctors also prefer initiatives which benefit them as well as their patients, that's a significant change post covid.
- f) Need for clinic disinfection and sanitization increased manifold and the same is being utilised by pharma industry as they convert this need into their main CRM tool for satisfying their customers.
- g) Doctors acknowledge the contribution and help of Pharma industry in their fight with Covid-19 and appreciate the role of pharma field force during those difficult days.
- h) Foreign Trips, Conference sponsorship, Commission on product purchase, and provision of gift articles are now outdated CRM initiatives, and doctors are rarely influenced by them now a days.
- i) Medicines with supply issues are being out of favour, the new age demand is the steady and regular supply of medicines to the patients.
- j) The 3 case studies mentioned above are the classic example of change in CRM from physical to digital. The digital world makes it easy for the doctor to identify the patient in need and can suggest appropriate help to the pharma industry towards that patient. This will not only benefit the patient, but also doctor, who is ensured of continuous therapy taken by the patient, & to the industry as its volumes are bound to increase due to the regular consumption of the product and the brand loyalty of the patient for their product.<sup>22</sup>(Sanket Kumar & Deepak Chaudhary)

This is a "New Age CRM" in Indian pharmaceutical industry.

#### **LIMITATIONS OF STUDY & FUTURE SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:**

The study was done on a limited pool of 61 respondents from a limited geographical area where people from pharmaceutical companies of Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Baroda, & Lucknow were taken, so there will always be a scope of enhancement of scale of research which may yield more concrete facts.

The study was aimed at just changes in CRM strategies by pharmaceutical industry during and post covid-19 period. Similar studies can be planned by researchers not only in the field of CRM but also in the field of Logistics, HR Department, Production & procurement department, as all these departments were hit severely during Covid-19 and a research study will definitely help finding new ways and means in Indian pharmaceutical industry.

Future research could delve deeper into the long-term impact of hybrid engagement models on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of data analytics in predicting customer behaviours and preferences would provide valuable insights into the evolving CRM landscape.

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