How to Increase your Online Pharmacy Sales

Inbound marketing is not something that pharmacists typically concern themselves with. Most independent pharmacy owners don't place a huge emphasis on proactively marketing their products and services. There is rarely a structured, consistent, proactive marketing strategy to build brand awareness, increase footfall and entice new customers. We can kind of get away with it due to the nature of retail and the importance of location. People will see a new store in their town and curiosity will get the better of them. They will pop in, see your ranges, meet your staff and hopefully spread the word about your store.

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Unfortunately, when you launch your pharmacy website, it's not as easy. Launching a pharmacy website is like opening a retail pharmacy in the desert. You have no passing trade. You're not going to make any money unless you proactively bring people to your store. When you launch your pharmacy website, you need to proactively market your online store to increase awareness, entice people to visit your website and convince them to purchase your products.

Once upon a time, you could just launch a website and easily rank on page one of Google or get huge exposure on social media. Nowadays, it's not as easy. There's too many competitors, you need to spend money on paid adverts to get huge exposure on social media and you're competing with pharmacy chains who have been doing this for years, with specialist marketing teams that are spending tens of thousands on advertising every month.

I hate to dash your dreams of sipping cocktails on a beach in Bali counting your millions a few months after you launch your pharmacy website but it's not that simple to grow a profitable online pharmacy business. It definitely is possible but it takes a lot of work and you need to implement a comprehensive digital marketing strategy.

To create a sustainable, profitable online pharmacy business you need to implement the tactics listed below with a coherent digital marketing strategy that engages your customers at all four phases of your potential customers' journey.

Phase 1: You need people to know that you have an online store.

Phase 2: You have to actually compel them to go and visit your website.

Phase 3: You need to persuade them to purchase.

Phase 4: You need to maximize their lifetime customer value.

You should create a digital marketing ecosystem where you are using many of these tactics simultaneously to move as many people as possible through these four phases as quickly as possible, with the greatest value.

Organic Social Media Marketing: refers to the regular posts that you publish on social media. It's a long-term strategy that should be used on a daily basis to position your brand as healthcare experts and to build a connection with your followers so they get to know, like & trust you.

Unfortunately, most independent pharmacies use social media to spam their followers with deals & discounts rather than using it to build their brand positioning or enhance the connection with their followers. Don't forget that social media marketing is a disruptive form of marketing. People are browsing social media to find out the latest news, have a laugh and keep up to date with their friends, favourite celebrities, and sports teams. They're not looking for your "amazing" discounts on shower gels.

While you may think the only way to sell is to showcase offers, by taking this approach you will reduce your engagement rates while also creating the perception of being a discount retailer. What you should be doing is using social media to educate & infotain: answer questions, provide advice, show your personality, take them behind the scenes of working in a pharmacy. If you're a bit camera shy then focus on creating posts that provide healthcare advice, tips to manage conditions, reduce symptoms & product recommendations.

Social Media Paid Advertising: Most people have used the blue "Boost" button on Facebook to push out their posts to more people. However, there are much more sophisticated & efficient advertising tools available when you are selling online. Facebook's Ads Manager is undoubtedly the best & most relevant social media advertising platform for independent pharmacies. It allows you to advertise on Facebook, Instagram, Messenger and other sites & apps that have partnered with Facebook. You can start with advertising budgets as low as €1/day but you'll need to spend a lot more than that to scale your online sales significantly.

The huge amounts of data that Facebook has collected on all of its users has allowed them to create a very effective advertising platform. You can target specific people based on their interests, behaviours and demographics. You can also advertise specifically to people who have previously engaged with your pharmacy brand online. This process is known as remarketing and is one of the most powerful tactics to grow your online sales. You can create a wide range of adverts including single images, videos, stories, carousels with multiple videos and/or images and immersive mobile landing pages. These adverts can be linked directly to the products on your website to enhance conversion rates. When you publish your adverts, Facebook will use its data systems to optimize their delivery to increase your sales.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO): involves using a range of tactics to improve the quality and quantity of website visits that you receive from search engines. With SEO, you are attempting to rank higher in search engines for relevant keywords that your target market is using. For example, you might make changes to existing website pages, images, or publish

new content to be deemed more relevant for terms like "online pharmacy ireland". SEO is a long-term strategy that does not involve spending money on advertising. However, it does take time, skill and experience to improve your rankings and outrank your competitors for relevant keywords. A major benefit of SEO as opposed to paid advertising is that the website traffic and sales won't dry up when you stop investing in it. But if your competitors are actively developing their SEO they could climb above you in the rankings.

Google AdWords: is the search engine version of using paid advertising on social media to get greater exposure. When you search for anything on Google, you'll typically see that the first and last few results on the page are sponsored ads. With Google AdWords, you are paying Google to attempt to be ranked higher than competitors for a particular search term. Doing this profitably takes a lot of time, skill and testing but also requires a good website conversion rate.

Google AdWords is typically much more competitive and thereby expensive than social media advertising. But you are advertising to people with greater buyer's intent i.e. who are actually searching for products or services rather than disrupting their browsing on social media. There is far less advertising space and much more competition for high value search terms. You need to make sure that your product pages, checkouts and website in general, is optimized to convert as many visitors as possible into customers.

Email Marketing: You're probably familiar with the most basic form of email marketing: the monthly newsletter. Email marketing tends to get a bad reputation by marketers trying to sell new tools & tactics but it remains one of the most profitable forms of online marketing. Once you have collected your email subscribers in a GDPR-compliant manner, you should use email marketing regularly to engage your subscribers, offer value, build brand awareness and increase sales.

When you start using paid advertising on social media or Google, you will always be worrying about how much you're spending. When it comes to organic social media you will be frustrated that you only reach a small percentage of your followers. Email marketing offers a free (aside from minor software fees) to immediately contact all of your subscribers at specific times. This can be of particular benefit during

key seasonal times such as Black Friday, Valentines Day etc.

The other less known side of email marketing is what are called automations. When you integrate your email marketing software with your website you can trigger pre-created emails to be sent automatically based on people's actions on your website. A simple version of this is the confirmation email customers receive after they complete an order. There are more comprehensive follow up automations that you can use to grow your website traffic and increase your sales without doing any additional work.

Affiliate Marketing: is a type of referral scheme where you provide a unique trackable link for your website to people who will market your website for you. Any sales that come from people clicking on this affiliate link will be tracked and they will receive a commission in return. Affiliate marketing can start out as simple as a referral scheme with your customers or it can involve experienced marketers who should be able to grow your sales further. The benefit of affiliate marketing is that you don't have to make payments up front and you will only have to pay when a sale is made. Therefore, you can build a lot of brand awareness & generate leads for free. The downside is that it's hard to find reliable affiliates and you also need to provide them with content guidelines & support to ensure they maintain the integrity of your brand.

Influencer Marketing: Another type of referral marketing where you're paying someone who has created a following online to get exposure for your brand. Influencer marketing often gets a bad reputation and rightfully so in many cases. You could pay a pretty penny up front and be left with very little in return. An affiliate arrangement is more secure and also provides greater potential upside for them too.

You need to be very diligent when choosing what influencers you're going to work with. Have they an engaged following who will be interested in your products? Are they constantly spamming their following with offers? Can they show you past results of campaigns? Is their audience relevant to your business? What style of content will they create? Will they fit with your brand? A good way to get started is to work with some local or niche "micro-influencers" who have built a small but engaged following. Test out the process before spending large sums working with more high profile influencers.

Ideally, you want your team & pharmacy featured in the content whether it's showing them around your pharmacy, doing a Q&A, showcasing the latest products or taking them on a tour of your website. The more connection you build with their audience, the more likely they will be to become customers.

Content Marketing: includes your social media content but in particular, I want to use this section to focus on long-form content such as blogs, webinars, and guides you can create to advise your audience and answer their questions. Long-form content is a great way to position your brand as healthcare experts but also can be used to boost your SEO, create engaging social media content and generate leads. This type of content is a great way to build trust & connection with your audience.

Traditional Marketing: using channels such as newspapers, radio stations, PR, TV, billboards, leaflet drops etc. are by no means near the top of the list when it comes to increasing your online sales but they can definitely form a part of your marketing strategy.

As you can see there are lots of different ways to increase your online sales. You need to define which tactics are the best for your pharmacy given your current experience, resources and advertising budget. Then you need to implement these tactics with a coherent marketing strategy that will build brand awareness, attract more visitors to your website, convert more of these visitors into customers and enhance the lifetime value of these customers. You can learn more with our free webinar on **www.thesocialpharmacist.com/ webinars** which expands further on these tactics.