

# Digital health coach: the evolving role of pharmacists

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Today's consumers are accustomed to using their mobile devices to efficiently complete many everyday tasks, such as checking their bank balance, ordering a taxi, booking a restaurant reservation, or planning travel and accommodation. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that many are starting to ask why their healthcare providers do not provide the same ubiquitous 24/7/365 service and convenience.

In response, healthcare outsiders – companies spanning Silicon Valley start-ups and Venture Capital firms, to tech behemoths like Google, Apple and Samsung – are racing to “disrupt”, “creatively destroy” and “hack” some of the long-standing healthcare issues that technology can conceivably address, like inefficiencies, costs, access, and quality.

Mobile consumer health applications and wearables, along with more systemic, efficiency-enabling solutions geared to healthcare practitioners, all signal a new digital health world – one that is still finding its way in terms of consistency and continuity throughout the healthcare ecosystem.

The uptake of digital health apps and devices is a key opportunity for pharmacists to evolve their role to that of Digital Health Coach, leading to healthier bottom lines and healthier Canadians.

Within this evolving digital health landscape, pharmacists play an integral role. As the most readily accessible and most trusted<sup>1</sup> healthcare professionals, they have a unique opportunity to guide and affect people's overall health and wellness on an ongoing, day-to-day basis. Pharmacists can, in fact, be the hub that both supports and enables patients to be more engaged, and that helps healthcare providers be more proactive and prepared.

Pharmacists and independent pharmacy owners, especially, may view the digital health and “consumerism” trends at first glance as yet more daunting challenges. Already, they must juggle their integral patient care roles as medication experts and health advisors with growing their businesses in the face of increasing competition from new entrants and consolidation in the pharmacy industry, combined with downward pressure on drug prices by government and private payers.

Even so, these trends are actually prime opportunities for pharmacists to improve customer engagement and loyalty, leading to both healthier bottom lines and healthier Canadians.

Here's why:

**Consumers want to better manage their health and increasingly are turning to digital tools to do so.**

As part of the broader societal trends of consumerism and self-service, consumers – from the “worried well” to the “quantified selfer” – are taking more active roles in managing their own health, and are increasingly turning to their mobile devices and wearables to do so.

As a result, the digital health industry is experiencing explosive growth. Consider:

- Over 43,000 apps<sup>2</sup> are categorized as “Health & Fitness” or “Medical” in Apple’s App Store alone
- 500 million people worldwide<sup>3</sup> will use mobile health apps by 2015
- The mobile health app industry will be worth \$26 billion in 2017<sup>4</sup>
- The number of fitness bands and other activity trackers shipped worldwide will increase from just over 50 million units in 2013 to over 200 million units by 2018<sup>5</sup>

Many of these digital health tools are related to medication management and pharmacy – for example, TELUS’ Pharma Space portal has been used by over 240,000 Canadians to request 2.7 million prescription refills from their community pharmacies since its launch in 2011.

**But they are not yet realizing the full potential of digital health.**

Despite the enthusiasm and market growth, it is also apparent that these products are not being used to their full potential. For example, half of the health apps on the Google Play app store are downloaded fewer than 500 times<sup>6</sup>. Even when the apps are heavily used, only 2 in 5 apps users<sup>7</sup> share the information with their healthcare teams to improve their care. Finally, 50% of fitness-tracking device users<sup>8</sup> tire of their devices and quit wearing them within 12 months.

This early data suggest that customers are motivated, but not sufficiently supported, to be successful “Health DIYers”. They don’t achieve the potential benefits of digital health apps and devices, in part, because they do not have complete views of their data, don’t always know what the data mean and thus, what to do about it.

While customers are not using health apps and devices as substitutes for their healthcare providers, their popularity does present a golden opportunity to improve consumers’ collaboration and interactions with their care teams. Right now, the apps and devices and data are there, but the “customer support” is not.

**Enter the pharmacist as the “Digital Health Coach”**

Who better than the community pharmacist to fulfill that role, to be an accessible and knowledgeable “Digital Health Coach”; to recommend and sell digital health devices and to help patients understand what their data means, and what they need to do about it?

After all, pharmacists have long been the “go-to” medication and health device advisors – learning to coach patients on how to use inhalers and glucometers, for example, has been a rite of passage for generations of pharmacy school graduates. It makes sense then, that as health devices evolve, so too should the role and expertise of pharmacists.

Similarly, pharmacists triage patients in their pharmacies – either providing expert advice, or advising patients to see their doctors – often supported with an accompanying “Dear Doctor” letter or follow-up phone call. They are well-suited to provide a similar triaging of data coming from health apps and devices. In fact, provincial governments are increasing professional scopes of practice of pharmacists. Exposing pharmacists to increased data and clinical trends will enhance their abilities to provide quality care, to manage lower-acuity patients in the pharmacy, which frees up physicians to care for sicker patients.

Finally, many pharmacies offer excellent clinical programs for patients to manage hypertension, diabetes or food allergies. These programs can be enhanced and be more valuable to customers if they encourage them to voluntarily track and monitor their progress and the impacts of lifestyle or medication changes.

**Digital health can be good for business.**

Being involved in digital health is not just good for patients and the health system, it also makes good business sense for pharmacies. In addition to the revenues from selling the next generation of data-connected glucometers, weigh scales and fitness trackers, pharmacies can also deploy digital health tools to increase both prescription sales and store efficiencies.

For example, pharmacies are now starting to launch portals that allow their customers to perform simple but valuable tasks, such as requesting refills anytime, anywhere using any mobile device, or accessing information about their medications or health conditions.

Pharmacies can then layer on more functionality and provide richer value to customers, such as automatically uploading data from customers' fitness trackers, glucometers, weigh scales or health apps, to provide one consolidated view, over time, of health indicators and medication histories. Add in the ability to book pharmacist consultations online, and pharmacies can increase customer engagement, provide a unique customer experience, and lock them into the pharmacy ecosystem.

Retail banks in Canada have been especially active and successful with this type of strategy, investing heavily in providing Canadians with online and mobile access to a wide suite of banking services. This has contributed to unprecedented levels of customer loyalty, decreasing switching rates from 15% to 5% over the last five years.

With the emergence of health apps, fitness trackers, wearables, and data-connected devices, consumers have never been as motivated and equipped to monitor and manage their health as they are today. However, for the potential of digital health to be fully realized, consumers must be supported by healthcare providers to help them understand what the data means, and when and how to act upon it.

Accessible, knowledgeable and trusted, the pharmacist is the ideal candidate to fill the role of Digital Health Coach—it is a natural extension of their current roles as medication and health advisors.

## References

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- <sup>3</sup> MHEALTH REPORT: The "Global Mobile Health Market Report 2013-2017
- <sup>4</sup> Research2Guidance, 2014
- <sup>5</sup> Business Insider, 2014
- <sup>6</sup> 2013 IMS Institute for Healthcare Informatics, Patient Apps for Improved Healthcare
- <sup>7</sup> HIT Consultant, 2014
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