

Top Story

ThinkGen's Habit LensSM: The Missing Element of Pharmaceutical Brand Strategy

The Case for Evaluating Customer Habits as Part of a Successful Commercial Model

By Noah M. Pines and Audrey Wu, ThinkGen

Introduction: The Blind Spot in Brand Planning

Most pharma marketing teams have a blind spot. They significantly overestimate customers' demand for new treatments, while overlooking or underestimating the behavioral inertia – customers' ingrained behaviors or habits – that must be overcome for a new product to reach the hands of patients who need them most.

There is an answer. Marketing teams must incorporate a deep understanding of customer habits at the earliest stages of launch planning and demand forecasting. This type of research and analysis helps teams fully grasp the drivers and barriers of this behavioral inertia, and design and calibrate their launch priorities accordingly.

While technology, social media, and CPG companies thrive on the neuromarketing insights of habit understanding, few of today's biopharma companies do this.

Habits Form Very Quickly in the Pharmaceutical Practice Setting

A habit is a routine behavior that is regularly performed without conscious deliberation. Think for a moment about eating breakfast or driving to work. These are mundane behaviors we perform automatically. Habits enable survival and efficiency; they help humans get through the day.

Research has shown that people establish habits through repetition: we are conditioned to act when triggered (by a specific cue) that appears within a stable environment (or context), and we repeat this behavior reflexively as a function of reinforcement. In his studies of animal behavior, psychologist B.F. Skinner noted: "Hit the lever, get the pellet."

It is a cycle. The more we do something and receive a reward, the more it becomes hard wired into the circuitry of our brain. Neurobiology research proves this.

While we think of healthcare providers (HCPs) as fundamentally rational decisionmakers who deliberate over the costs and benefits of each treatment decision, they, too, develop habits - and sometimes very strong habits. This is rooted in the context in which HCPs practice – a context characterized by limited time, situational variability, and often high risks. Anyone who has launched a pharmaceutical product, especially in crowded and/or genericized market spaces, knows that HCPs' ingrained habits can counteract adoption.

In preparation for launch, marketers will have surveyed the patient journey, competitive landscape, and unmet needs, but they haven't had a methodology to rigorously evaluate customer habits. Nor have they had a way to incorporate an understanding of habits as part of the brand planning process. Until now.

About the Authors

Noah M. Pines is the Founder & CEO of ThinkGen, a global marketing research and brand strategy consultancy dedicated to helping life science companies develop and commercialize life-improving treatments. With 30+ years of experience, Noah leads a team of all-star researchers at ThinkGen. He has authored over 50 publications on therapeutic topics and research methodologies, and has spearheaded the development of several proprietary methods. Noah was the 2020 Intellus Clement-Fordyce recipient and named to the PharmaVOICE List of 2019's 100 Most Inspiring People.

Audrey Wu, Vice President, has over 20 years of experience as a commercial leader in the pharma industry. She has led numerous brand and launch plans from the manufacturer, agency, and insights perspectives. An MIT engineer with 4 patents who was awarded a Rising Star by the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association in 2019, Audrey is a founding innovator of ThinkGen's Habit LensSM framework and methodology.

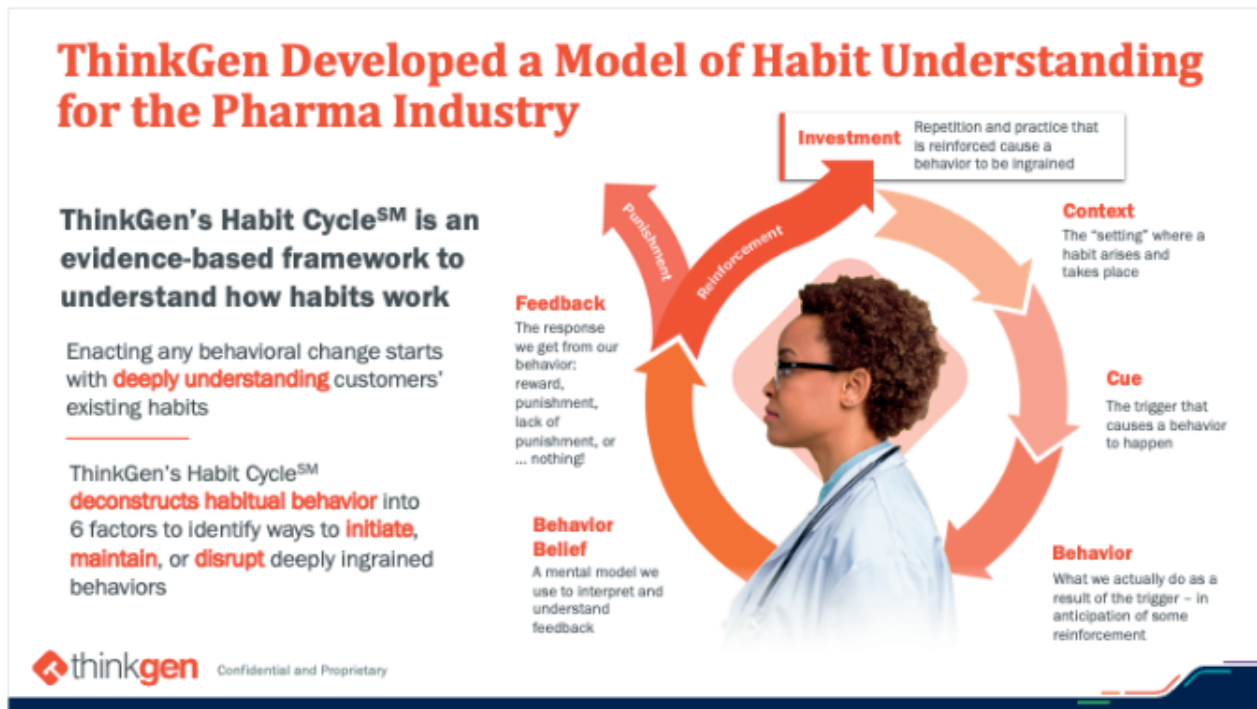
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ThinkGen's Habit LensSM Addresses The Blind Spot

ThinkGen's Habit LensSM is a behavioral science framework we designed specifically for commercial teams in the pharmaceutical industry. Our Habit LensSM reveals the mechanics of a habitual behavior and identifies ways to disrupt or sustain those behaviors. A number of our clients have integrated this framework as part of their commercial planning process. These companies recognize that understanding habits and leveraging the resulting neuroscience-driven insights are critical to the success of their brands.

The Habit LensSM features a systematic deconstruction of a given behavior based on ThinkGen's Habit CycleSM, a model that examines the components of routine activities within the healthcare ecosystem. We built this construct based upon the progressive, modern academic and popular literature on human habit dynamics, assimilating the writings of Nir Eyal, Charles Duhigg, and Neale Martin, Ph.D.



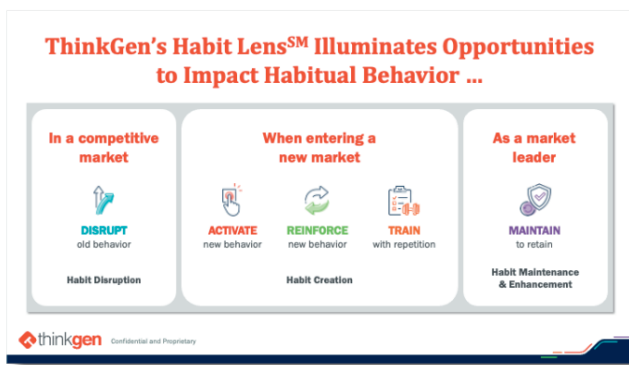
The advantage of a Habit LensSM analysis is that the pharma marketer can better understand why a behavior (which may be stubborn, irrational, or antiquated) is highly ingrained – and how that habit might be disrupted, and a new habit created. Together with existing market research methodologies that seek to understand how customers make conscious decisions, understanding habit provides a complete picture of the dynamics that influence use of pharmaceutical products.

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Habit Understanding is Essential to Behavior Change

Armed with a Habit LensSM analysis, a marketing team can step back and strategically examine the behavioral priorities for the brand: whether it needs to disrupt an existing habit, create a new habit, or maintain/build upon an existing habit. Each of these involves a unique set of considerations.



To disrupt an existing habit, for example, the brand team needs to determine how to bring customers' conscious attention to their existing behavior, triggering a deliberative process that fosters the opportunity for a new behavioral routine to be intentionally considered. Once this new behavioral routine is trialed by customers, it is critical that this behavior is associated with a direct and distinct feeling of reward that reinforces repetition. Customers must go through a process of rewarding product trial several times before they start to change their behavioral patterns such that the new behavior becomes their default – and eventually their unconscious, automatic choice.

A Case Study: Insomnia – Context Matters

One critical insight from our investigation into HCP habits in the management of insomnia is that context matters. Many HCPs are not keen to prescribe treatments for insomnia because of the perceived behavioral “punishments” such as adverse events (including habituation) associated with older medications such as benzodiazepines and “z-drugs;” perceived lack of effectiveness; and insurance push-back against newer medications.

However, within the context of a devastating and unmanageable condition like Alzheimer's disease (AD), for example, treating insomnia can be particularly rewarding and empowering since it is among the only symptoms in these patient types where HCPs can exert some control. We helped our client to identify the distinct cues and proximal clinical rewards that help activate a new habit when managing insomnia in patients with AD.

Conclusion

Pharma commercial teams have been omitting a critical pillar in their brand and launch planning activities: an intentional, systematic evaluation of customer habit. As a result, they design brand and launch plans as if their stakeholders make deliberate decisions only – when this is simply not the case. This prevents products that reflect substantial investments in R&D funding and a costly regulatory approval process from meeting their full potential – and reaching the patients who need them most. It is therefore crucial to include the Habit LensSM and habit understanding into the brand planning process as early as possible.