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# Moments of Truth – Voices from the Launch Arena





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## Introduction

**It's launch time. The heavy lifting of R&D and interaction with HCPs, regulators, and patient groups has been concluded and a co-ordinated 'battle plan' has been signed and sealed. Time to exhale?**

Far from it. Product launches require a particular intensity and commitment to survive a precarious period that is still being shaped by changing demands and regulatory pressures across healthcare systems. Fault lines can easily develop if organisations sit back and admire their hard work and anchor ambition to traditional formulae.

This new Launch Age, which is being forged in the pandemic's aftershocks, scientific advances, and digital disruption, is littered with potential sinkholes and crevasses where hope, good intention, and profit projections can easily disappear.

It is a demanding, complex, and volatile environment, with organisations now launching multiple products across several indications a year, rather than working towards landmark blockbuster events.

Regulators are also placing more demanding and specific emphasis on engagement with patients while the influence of real world evidence – across healthcare systems, with their in-built idiosyncrasies – is creating a fresh reimbursement dynamic. Value, access, and affordability are always launch touchstones, but they are now subject to more nuanced metrics factored around engagement and performance.

And all this in a world where healthcare data is on an exponential growth curve and information is being consumed, and often diffused, across multiple channels where launches come thick and fast in bustling condition areas, where differentiation is essential.

Launch is way more than a countdown and blast off.

This *Moments of Truth* whitepaper is powered by unprecedented levels of front-line industry experience and their voices provide unique insights into this critical and hyper-competitive sector of pharma.



## Focus and synchronise

Relying on routines and mechanisms that have served well over the last generation of launches will not equip an organisation to prosper in the current, changing climate. “Launches cannot cling to the strength of the science, new class entry, or the fire power of thousands of field representatives,” says Dana Maiman, Chief Executive Officer of IPG Health, a global collective of more than 45 diverse agency brands with deep market understanding, from biopharma start-ups to Top 20 global pharmaceutical companies.

“Everything about launches can be summed up in three letters – BAM. Blockbusters Are Made,” she says. “Today, all the different pre-launch pillars need to be implemented and executed exquisitely.

“While building to that blockbuster status may look a bit different today, there are numerous components that have remained critical throughout the years, such as maintaining focus and energy, and the ability to communicate effectively and clearly with teams and key stakeholders. Setting a clear vision and direction from the start and continuing to measure all activities and efforts against that purpose is paramount.”

She underscores the need for a synchronised, collaborative approach across an organisation, adding: “It’s important to remember that all launches come with potential scenarios and curve balls. The teams that succeed are those who pivot with passion, remind

each other of the bigger picture goals and make decisions to prioritise, maintain consistent communication to stay aligned, stay motivated, and ensure prompt issue resolution. And match talent to task, ensuring we’re leveraging our team’s skills and competencies to drive greater efficiency and productivity, and that they understand how their roles and contributions support the overall strategy.”

Those skills and competencies are transitioning within an industry needing to work harder to forge meaningful connections with HCPs, who continue to be time-pressed and operate as digital nomads, channel-hopping through content storms. A detailed map of physician interests and touchpoints, along with the awareness levels of patient groups, has become a launch imperative. And connecting the swirling virtual and in-person contours of this landscape needs elevated levels of communication and collaboration.

Kathleen Gillooly, Group Management Director at healthcare agency AREA 23, an IPG Health company, observes: “First impressions matter – in life certainly, and equally so in pharmaceutical launches. While the importance of launch is often well understood, especially when a new product is entering the market, there is a tendency in the industry to follow tried and true methodologies that can lead to lacklustre results in the days, weeks, and months that follow Day One. As new technologies, new capabilities, and higher than ever stakes set the stage for launch in the emerging future, it’s more important than ever that launch planning evolve to better allow for emerging complexities, contrasting insights, and shorter windows of planning.”

Succeeding across all factors takes huge investment, cross-department collaboration, and a bold approach to marketing and communication. Gillooly sees launch as an opportunity to refresh and disrupt approaches.

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She comments: “Launches, whether they are as a new therapeutic entrant to the market or of a new clinical dataset or indication, represent critical moments of inflection across a product’s lifecycle and require purposeful investment of time and expertise to get right. Taking advantage of these lifecycle opportunities with disruptive marketing and creative strategies that frame your products’ unique points of differentiation can have exponentially positive or negative impacts for the months and years ahead. Positive launches can reshape marketplace perceptions and turn a stagnant sales curve into a positive peak that delivers halo impact for years to come. Some even have the potential to reshape a category all together. Conversely, poorly managed launches can create an unwanted lasting impression that requires an abundance of commercial resources to undo. Brands that fall prey to poor planning are left with unwanted cleanup and audience confusion that requires a clarification of their role amongst an increasingly competitive set.

“Brands that can take a more modern approach, that allow for more individuality and adapt quickly are set to win big – in terms of customer relevance, marketplace differentiation and in overall cost efficiencies.”

**“Preparing a good launch plan, supported by the right culture, is becoming more and more important.”**

Catarina Santos, Executive Director Medical Launch Region Europe at Novartis, believes that a flexible-dynamic culture is a key to navigating launch challenges, and she states: “Face time with HCPs is reducing, which places greater importance on getting your engagement and communications in shape for launch. Our ‘air time’ in terms of education and partnership building is shortening and a lot is changing across healthcare systems that puts launch excellence at risk. Preparing a good launch plan, supported by the right culture, is becoming more and more important.”

Culture, communication, and clarity are now enshrined as launch components that sit alongside the science, patient engagement, and market awareness as critical factors of success.





## The power of the story

**With a multitude of connection and engagement points available across a product and patient journey, the need for a curated narrative is paramount. Staccato, self-contained communications that punch out with timetable rigidity can undermine understanding and potential reach with HCPs, KOLs, and patients.**

“Telling the same story, with the depth and context appropriate for the audience and channel, is essential. Finding the right lexicon – words that can help differentiate or create a sense of urgency while clearly and credibly communicating our brand story – is one of our most powerful tools for doing that,” says Ariel Buda-Levin, President of Medical Communications across AREA 23 on Hudson, ProHealth, and Trio – IPG Health companies.

“Many times, a lexicon is designed internally amongst agencies and clients, but we find that the step of vetting with both KOLs and community treaters is essential to ensure the language resonates and conveys the message we hope it will. KOLs are not usually the main audience for the lexicon or the messaging but, since we need their advocacy, it’s important to consider their perspective and likelihood of adapting that language. The right lexicon, socialised appropriately, takes on a life of its own, and KOLs are the drivers of that, adapting the language into their podium presentations and publications.”

“Inconsistent messages can lead to customer confusion and dilute the brand’s identity, ultimately undermining impact and effectiveness.”



This discipline needs to work internally and externally and Mardene Miller, President of New York-based creative marketing and advertising agency Neon, an IPG Health company, observes: “Message resonance across an organisation is extremely important because it rallies cross-disciplinary groups behind a consistent brand story to communicate to their respective external stakeholders. It helps your stakeholders understand the company’s vision, mission, and goals. Without that consistency, the value proposition of a product may either not be realised (launch) or may erode (established brand), and uptake or utilisation can be limited or possibly niched. Inconsistent messages can lead to customer confusion and dilute the brand’s identity, ultimately undermining impact and effectiveness.”

Having the entire organisation from the ‘inside-out’ exude enthusiasm and passion for the same core brand narrative, or lexicon, improves an organisation’s morale and can increase the likelihood of messages sticking with target audiences, she adds.





## Driving commerciality with clarity

**A product's success rate is clearly energised if it grabs the attention of KOLs, HCPs, and patients, and conceptual creativity is a prime element of any campaign. But the more workhorse qualities of education and engagement are also vital to reach and retain audiences. This is best achieved by robust and relevant messages that are easily and swiftly understood.**

“As a new product moves from pre-launch to launch, it is crucial to properly educate both physicians and patients on the clinical data that underpins the brand's differentiators. It is also important to maintain relationships with KOLs,” says Sommer Bazuro, PhD, Chief Medical Officer at IPG Health.

“Often, the need for branded education is underestimated, especially when the product involves novel clinical trial designs, endpoints, complicated dosing schedules, or associated biomarkers. Physicians, despite their medical training, require clear, simplified explanations of these elements to confidently prescribe the product and communicate effectively with their patients.”

She adds: “Simplifying complex scientific information with a narrative and visuals enhances engagement, aids memory retention, and supports decision making.

When the science behind a product is made accessible, healthcare professionals and patients are more likely to connect emotionally with the brand, leading to better adoption and adherence to treatment protocols.

**“Clarity around the brand identity and unique selling points can then resonate and appear with higher impact and frequency within the messaging.”**

“By simplifying the science and maintaining strong advocacy, the brand can secure a successful launch and achieve sustained impact in the market.”

Duncan Trew, a pharma executive in Oncology and Emerging Markets with a wealth of launch excellence experience, believes that building clarity around the brand identity is a fundamental to success. He observes: “During the launch phase many of the learnings from the earlier medical and access engagement are incorporated into a newer, fresher brand story with certain points refined and a clear direction towards what is resonating with the early experience.

“Many of the strong messages from the lecturer’s podium that were tested to be more powerful are incorporated into the launch commercial messaging. Clarity around the brand identity and unique selling points can then resonate and appear with higher impact and frequency within the messaging.”

Continuous high-quality coaching plays a pivotal role here, he adds, with its ability to first foster assertive communications that align with brand objectives and then finesse delivery depending on market response.

The coaching ethos needs to exist across an organisation, with particular attention paid to embedding messages in marketing companies that inform, inspire, and equip field forces with the content they can deliver consistently and effectively, he adds.

The volatile nature of the current launch market can lead to fractures between marketing and sales, but experts believe that coaching provides a golden thread that can survive twists and turns so that a product’s unique characteristics and potential can be shared faithfully and effectively with HCPs and KOLs.



## The new patient paradigm

**Launching a new product now has a core obligation to connect with the patient on a much deeper level than basic brand awareness. Patients are knowledgeable about and empowered in their treatments, so the communication thread needs to entwine them, as well as KOLs and HCPs.**

Marc van Unen, Business Unit Head, Cardiovascular for Bristol Myers Squibb, has led multiple launches across different condition areas involving a range of modalities and devotes critical attention to patients and niche markets.

“We need to look at what leverage points we can influence to smooth that journey, increase patient flows, and make it easier for them.”

“When we’re talking about preparing the product, we need to understand how the patient moves through the healthcare system, which can be very different by country to country. We need to look at what leverage points we can influence to smooth that journey, increase patient flows, and make it easier for them. Knowing where we could intervene to bring benefit is important,” he says.

He cites the example of an anticoagulant therapy that reduced the need for young patients to visit the clinic every six weeks for blood tests. “For them it was a huge benefit,” he adds. “These are the areas where you can intervene and improve patient flow and also have a good benefit for the physician. In terms of the story, it is about looking at where the product has a critical benefit.”

**“The focus at launch tends to be on awareness, awareness, and awareness.”**

Van Unen is a strong advocate of building social capital with interdependent launch teams and laying the ground for them to become highly motivated and generate initial momentum for a product. Investing in those internal connections and listening to, and understanding, the needs and drivers of HCP and patient behaviour can be labelled soft skills, but they are increasingly recognised as the route to significant dividends.

Laura Catalusci, MA, MCHES, Group Director of Learning Strategy at YuzuYello, an IPG Health company, observes: “Shifting from pre-launch to launch priorities involves a tremendous behavioural shift. Not only a shift of physician diagnosis and prescribing behaviours, but a shift requiring patients to gain a renewed understanding of their treatment options and assessment of how treatment changes affect their day-to-day routines and health outcomes.”

“The focus at launch tends to be on awareness, awareness, and awareness. But what happens if patients get an Rx and don’t exactly know what to do with it or how to stick with it? That’s where the often-overlooked Patient Support Program experiences really shine. Brands need a launch plan and programme aimed at catching those with prescriptions and guiding them through the access and adherence process before they get lost.”

Medical Affairs teams increasingly view the value of the patient as a stakeholder with a voice in discussions of endpoints and a key audience for education and evidence dissemination that is delivered with plain language. Clarity is something that needs to be developed, practiced, and finessed along the journey.



## Field force response to real-world requirements

**A sharp focus on the needs of financial decision-makers in hospitals, health systems, and medical groups is another essential strand of value communications and a balanced flow of content across channels needs to be achieved around a launch.**

Messages need to land with clarity and consistency, while also being tailored to the diverse factors that influence their day-to-day and impact their choices.

“This area is frequently overlooked,” says Joshua Bueller, Director of Strategic Planning at McCann Health Managed Markets, an IPG Health company. “These organised customers have different value drivers than traditional payers, having not only to manage care for their patients, but also manage costs for their organisations. Real World Evidence (RWE) planning can also be an afterthought and typically focused on in the post-launch environment.

“However, there is now a growing trend to integrate RWE strategy between medical and commercial pharma teams to support long-term market access and product positioning. One final example that is typically overlooked is moving managed care customers from awareness to retention of key product information and value statements.

“Addressing these areas proactively during the transition from prelaunch to launch can help ensure a smoother market access process and better overall launch outcomes in today’s managed care environment.”

Duncan Trew advocates that every bit of experience and intelligence needs to fuel how field forces can deliver a coherent product message that can both work well at launch and, crucially, respond to market feedback with finesse.

“It is vital to have extensive field-testing and pre-launch medical and access engagement to really understand your unique selling point and what resonates with customers, both HCPs and patients,” he says. “An internal cross-functional task force that determines the messaging that aligns across an organisation and drives a clear mission for the newly-formed or existing field forces is key, but it is equally important to have a process of feedback from the external world during those first eight to 10 weeks of launch.”

He sees value in establishing a focus group from field team members who rapidly report back on the active dynamics of both the customers and the competition.

“Often, a focus group or consensus group of field team members contributes to bringing in refinements and feedback and what is having the greatest impact. The flow is that of the top of a pyramid and down, including extensive work with key influencers and thought leaders to shape and refine the narrative,” he observes.

“Often the competition will alter or shape their messaging upon launch, creating a whole new dynamic within the market place. It is extremely important that the clarity and precision in the chain of command is present through coaching and guiding leadership with many of the leaders also present externally at this critical moment.”

An existing strong communication and messaging platform makes it easier to add further points and supporting argument along with early real world experiences to the mix to reaffirm belief in the product.

**“Often, a focus group or consensus group of field team members contributes to bringing in refinements and feedback and what is having the greatest impact.”**





## Get personal and go digital

**Mike Guarino, Chief Commercial Officer at IPG Health, is a launch veteran and advises on creating a product narrative that is consistent across organisations as early as possible to create the foundation of a communication platform.**

“One frequently overlooked but powerful approach cultivated in consumer products marketing and evolved for pharma marketing is the use of emotion to create ownable space for brands,” he says. “The ability to connect viscerally often activates a more influential brand association, enabling marketers to move beyond the typical ‘reasons to believe’. This emotion-based marketing approach has been supported by a wide range of behavioural sciences studies.”

“Now, with the proliferation of Large Language Models (LLMs) and the integration of AI within our strategic process, we’re able to more rapidly uncover often hard-to-articulate emotional insights across all customer types – from the high influential thought leader specialist to the mother searching for the right treatment for her child.”

KOLs are clearly a powerful downstream force for product awareness and take-up, but a new cohort of Digital Opinion Leaders (DOLs), who operate in digital communities, are playing increasingly influential roles in healthcare. They need to be integrated into launch strategies.

**“Offering clear guidelines coupled with creative freedom strikes a balance between brand consistency and authentic engagement.”**

This requires careful planning to ensure message consistency and clarity across all channels, says Jack Vance, Managing Director of Data and Activation at IPG Health and SOLVE(D). “The first step is to carefully select the right DOLs and, by using social listening tools and network analysis, brands can pinpoint DOLs who align with their values and have the authenticity needed to effectively deliver key messages,” he says.

“Establishing a collaborative relationship with DOLs is crucial. Digital platforms are dynamic, with messages evolving rapidly. Co-creating content with DOLs ensures that messaging remains consistent while allowing their unique voices to resonate with their audience.

“Offering clear guidelines coupled with creative freedom strikes a balance between brand consistency and authentic engagement.”

Data-driven insights can track DOLs engagement and message dissemination levels and allow for real-time adjustments to ensure unified messaging across all digital touchpoints.

“DOLs have become essential to modern healthcare launches. By strategically identifying, collaborating with, and integrating them into a broader strategy, we can ensure clear, consistent, and impactful messaging across the digital landscape,” adds Vance.



## Conclusion

**Ground level market research and feedback draws a picture of an increasingly crowded and specialised world of product launch, where the time-honoured lines of activity are being blurred and re-shaped.**

A study by QuintilesIMS revealed a competitive and innovative environment and observed that the focus was turning to “more specialist therapy areas, limited key launch countries, healthcare budgets, doctor attention time, and even patients.”<sup>1</sup>

With many new and disparate factors at play, it forecasts: “Achieving true Launch Excellence will become even more challenging.”

Maintaining clarity and consistency of message that functions both internally and externally has never been more important as the economic and scientific case will need to resonate across different audiences and be flexible across a product's life cycle.

Formulaic launches are unlikely to prosper, so constructing bespoke approaches with in-built adaptability that can weather fluctuating markets and shifting demands is being hailed as the highway to success. This can only be achieved with a strong focus on communication, and a willingness to listen, understand, and respond.

Preparing field forces with strong, clear, and dynamic content that can be communicated with impact is more critical than ever. The product narrative, its value to patients, HCPs, and healthcare systems has to be incisive enough to cut through crowded markets and flexible enough to respond to feedback without losing its mission-clarity.

Equipping field forces with communication skills and competencies helps make the connections that matter and make a difference to patients, to HCPs, and promote market viability and success.

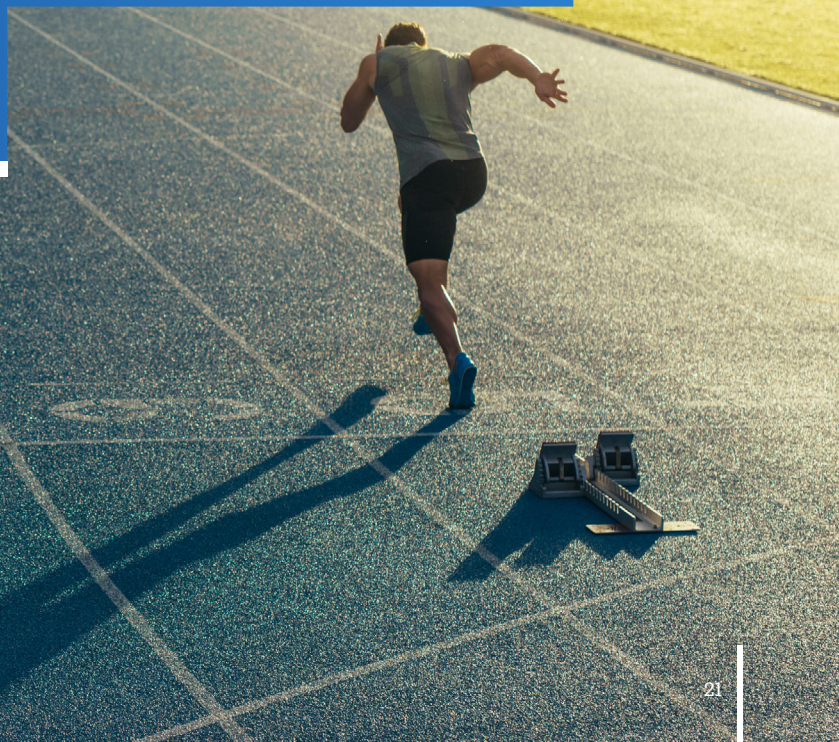
Launch is a time to be creative, collaborative, and to have a bold vision that can be shared with KOLs, DOLs, HCPs, and patients. Telling your story with clarity and compassion is never more important than at launch.

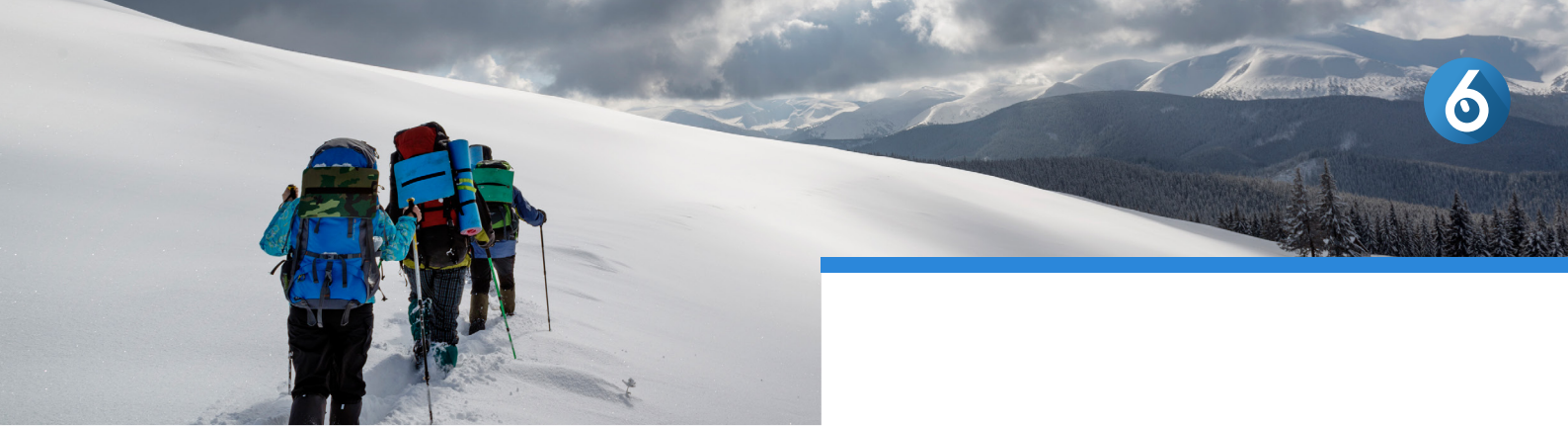
## Reference

1. <https://www.iqvia.com/-/media/quintilesims/pdfs/launch-excellence-v.pdf>

# Launch notes

- 1** Abandon assumptions: No two launches are the same.
- 2** Invest in internal and external communications.
- 3** Ensure creative and practical collaboration across all departments.
- 4** Differentiate your product, your company, and the unique support to patients it can offer with a powerful, consistent narrative.
- 5** Be hyper-relevant to understand customer's experiences.
- 6** Dig deeper for the human truths involved in choosing treatments or managing a condition.
- 7** Make the science accessible with clear, concise branded education for HCPs and patients.
- 8** Leverage the clinical experience of trialists and clinicians to underscore product benefits.
- 9** Develop strategies to navigate increased payer management, and supporting practices in achieving coverage and reimbursement is essential to achieve brand success.
- 10** Deploy Ambassador Experience Tracking and expand it to include just-prescribed patients.





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*The views of the contributors are their own.*

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## About 60 Seconds

60 Seconds is a remote coaching app designed to help users communicate with greater clarity through practice, coaching and measurement. It was built by a coach for coaches to deliver measurable learning momentum.

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## 60 Seconds

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Practice, Coaching, Measurement