How global pharma organizations are overcoming barriers to scaling omnichannel

Insights on what's holding companies back and how they can scale for impact

By Gayatri Buddha, Zainul Jafferji and Kara Ang

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Many pharma organizations are maturing in how they talk about omnichannel: Most have seen the value of omnichannel and instead are now focused on how to roll it out and scale it. The pressure is on to show and realize impact, especially given the multimillion-dollar investments and huge global and regional digital transformation programs in play. A lot of the focus (and noise) has been centered on what to pilot, such as orchestration capabilities or content transformation. There is very little data comparing the experiences of how well different companies have been able to scale—and what barriers seem to emerge.

What we learned about omnichannel scaling in pharma

To answer these questions and learn from the experiences of industry leaders, ZS analyzed 13 global pharma clients (both inside and outside the U.S.) to contrast various aspects of omnichannel scaling. Specifically we wanted to know:

- What omnichannel capabilities have pharma organizations successfully scaled and in what markets

- What's stopping pharma organizations from scaling to more markets, therapeutic areas and brands

- What it will take for pharma to achieve wider omnichannel scaling

Here are our top five takeaways from the study:

1. **No organization is truly omnichannel yet.** Many have built foundations, but no one has systematically deployed all omnichannel capabilities in their most important markets.

2. **Omnichannel is still very focused on commercial engagements—and on healthcare providers.** While some are experimenting with driving omnichannel across medical organizations and patient groups, these attempts haven't been broadly scaled.

3. **Scaling isn't global today.** With a few exceptions, most organizations haven't found the formula to build digital capabilities across smaller markets.

4. **Content personalization, field and marketing channel orchestration** have not been scaled yet, but they are capabilities that could be next in line to achieve scale and fill gaps.

5. **Organizational challenges** such as global or local tensions, organizational structure and legacy ways of working are the most-cited challenges for pharma organizations, reinforcing the importance of change management as a start rather than an afterthought.

Global reach, limited touch: The state of omnichannel scaling

We wanted to understand the state of omnichannel scaling as well as future directions and challenges to growth. In Figure 1 we see that, currently, scaling has focused on major markets and foundational capabilities. More advanced capabilities (such as content personalization and orchestration) and scaling beyond commercial capabilities are still in early phases. Key challenges include cross-functional funding, effective local capability transition and operational challenges.

FIGURE 1:

Current scaling status, emerging trends and key challenges

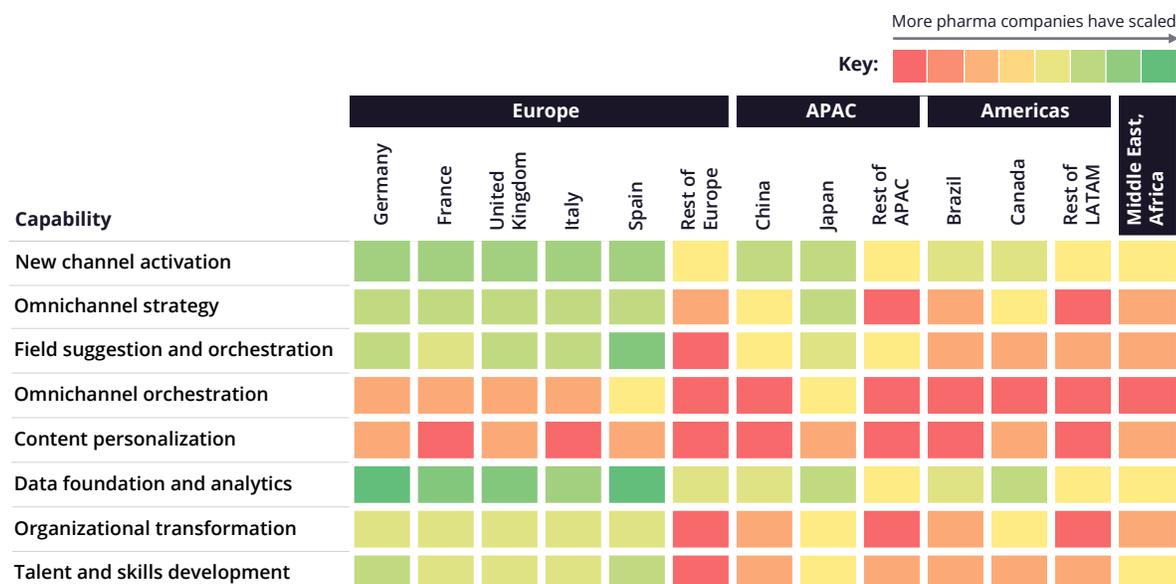| Current status of scaling	Emerging scaling trends	Key scaling challenges
60% Have focused on capability enablement in **M7 markets[1] and are yet to expand to MEA or the rest of APAC**.	**20%** Have developed **content personalization or omnichannel orchestration.**	**<15%** Have secured **cross-functional funding** or driven efficient **local capability transition** to continue scaling.
70% Have initiated **at least two of these activities: platform build, data foundation and analytics and new channel activation**.[2]	**14%** Are tracking the ability to **scale beyond commercial.**	**Top 3** Most-cited challenges are **global-local tensions, neglect of wider scaling effort and org structure and legacy.**

Source: ZS Omnichannel Scaling Study, 2023
[1] EU4, UK, CA & JP. [2] Rep-triggered emails, HQ emails, third party, etc.

In Figure 2, we see that so far, omnichannel scaling has largely been limited to foundational capabilities and large, mature markets. All pharma companies reported scaling at least one capability across M7 markets (the EU4, the U.K., Canada and Japan). And 80% of respondents had scaled a data foundation, analytics and platform build to more than five markets. Companies seem to disagree on how small a market needs to be to stop investing in omnichannel; some will stop at M7 countries, others have managed to get well into their long tail of smaller countries. This suggests that some have figured out how to reduce costs or make implementations so smooth that they can get all the way to smaller and smaller markets. We also see a difference between partial and complete scaling: Some companies have scaled some items (e.g., a data foundation), but not in a fully comprehensive way or in a way that has supported all channels.

FIGURE 2:

Where and how companies are scaling

More pharma companies have scaled

Capability	Europe						APAC			Americas			Middle East, Africa
	Germany	France	United Kingdom	Italy	Spain	Rest of Europe	China	Japan	Rest of APAC	Brazil	Canada	Rest of LATAM	
New channel activation													
Omnichannel strategy													
Field suggestion and orchestration													
Omnichannel orchestration													
Content personalization													
Data foundation and analytics													
Organizational transformation													
Talent and skills development													

Efforts are still heavily focused on commercial capabilities targeting healthcare practitioners; medical omnichannel or patient activation are only just emerging with advertising technology lagging behind.

Omnichannel scaling in pharma: What's blocking wider adoption?

What's keeping companies from scaling omnichannel more widely? We've identified four factors:

1. **Circumventing scaling fatigue.** Scaling fatigue is perhaps the biggest barrier companies report today. Overambitious and inefficient scaling programs can meet with local resistance, leading to major fatigue and falloff from scaling. Many large programs have failed to succeed because they take considerable time, effort and resources to overcome local market resistance to change.

2. **Scaling impact measurement**. Narrow and infrequent key performance indicator (KPI) tracking leads to unclear scaling success and creates business case barriers to further scaling. While most organizations track the number of markets and brands they scale to, few are tracking adoption and engagement KPIs, and vanishingly few focus on the impact to customer experience or sales. Many of these KPIs are also tracked in silos by capability and infrequently rather than as a scaling program as a whole. This paints an unclear picture of scaling success and makes it harder to build a strong business case to move forward.

3. **Operationalization of capabilities.** Operationalization often comes as an afterthought after the launch of omnichannel capabilities. Leadership sometimes ignores these issues and scales capability by capability, ignoring possible synergies. Siloed scaling operations and funding keep capabilities from evolving and prevent scaling ambitions from being realized, which can make it difficult to support local markets in the day-to-day.

4. **End-to-end omnichannel strategy.** A disjointed omnichannel strategy leads to bottlenecks (for example, in content production), preventing scaling toward advanced capabilities and smaller markets. As we have seen earlier with pharma organizations focusing on a data foundation, analytics and platform build, many have yet to develop an end-to-end omnichannel strategy from upstream (such as customer journey design) to downstream (serving personalized content to customers). This results in a bottleneck that prevents scaling toward more advanced capabilities and smaller markets.

Winning practices for scaling up

Adopting a "global platform" approach to scaling foundational capabilities with packages of support to increase the speed of scaling across local markets. For example, a company set up a global platform for orchestration with highly preconfigured suggestions to make it easy to speed up rollouts. They provided different levels of support (gold, silver, bronze) as options for local markets to choose which to "purchase" or "co-invest" with a global team. These packages allowed them to scale and support markets quickly, rather than creating a fully customized approach to every local market.

Creating cross-functional customer experience design pods and co-creation workshops. These should happen across teams with the aim to design a truly end-to-end customer journey and strategy, focusing on a customer-centric approach that delivers a connected experience to healthcare providers. For example, one company designed customer engagement journeys by mapping out the content they planned to share with their customers with a wide team of marketers (who owned the "story"), tech teams (who owned the operations to make the journey come to life) and analytics experts (who provided insights on how to make the journey better).

Appointing dedicated omnichannel or local engagement planners within the organization to act as a bridge between technology and business teams. For example, a company designated one role to tie marketing strategy to tech capabilities, driving stronger collaboration and connected customer experience strategy. This role helped the tech team roll out digital platforms and communicated with the wider organization about how to use them. This person also helped the business teams plan in a way that best leveraged their omnichannel capabilities. The right person for this role will understand both technology and digital capabilities as well as marketing goals and customer strategies.

Offering tiered operational subscription services for local teams based on a market's operational needs. Similar to the "global platform" option above, this solution focuses on operations after the implementation build of the platform. Usually, global teams invest in some "build" costs of platform, but in this scenario, local markets would have to bear the operations cost after build. For example, a company offered subscription services tiered across basic, advanced and sophisticated levels of operations support.
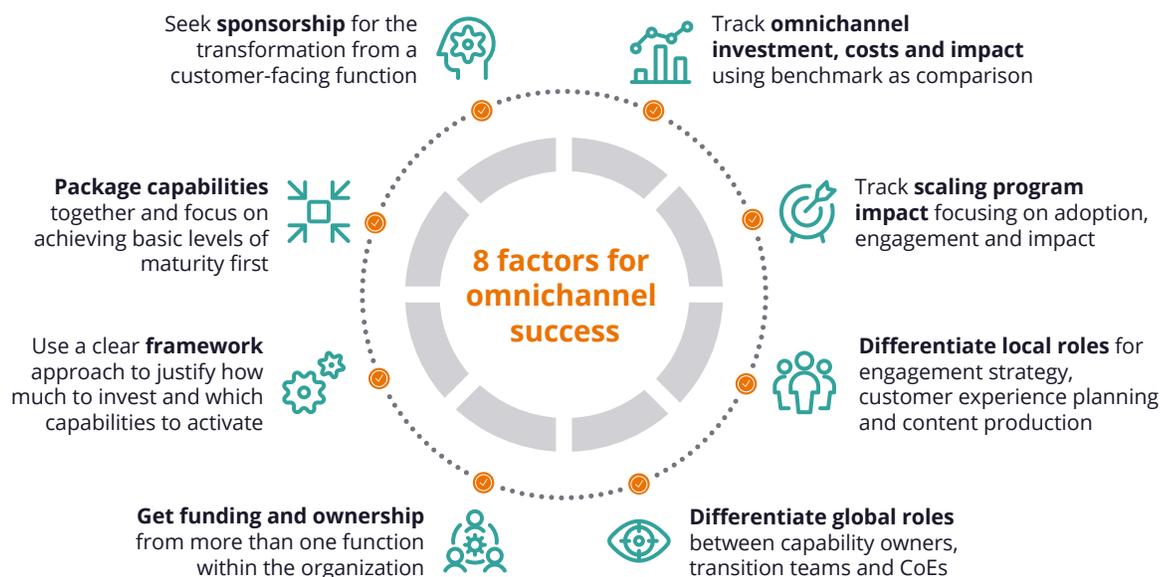
Dedicating effort to measure results. Most organizations focus on pumping funds into omnichannel capabilities and rolling them out as quickly as possible, leaving impact measurement of omnichannel capabilities and investment as an afterthought until the question of "investing in the capability again for next year" comes up too late. For example, one company set up a dedicated pod supporting impact measurement of indicators like percent of market or brand adoption, percent of customers reached via omnichannel and percent of sales uplift at regular intervals. They were also tasked with problem-solving and identifying opportunities to improve the impact of the program (which was easier for them as they were a specialized team focusing on just that kind of data).

Cracking the code for scalable omnichannel

To scale omnichannel effectively, pharma organizations should consider eight key factors for success.

FIGURE 3:

8 key factors to scale omnichannel effectively

Seek **sponsorship** for the transformation from a customer-facing function

Track **omnichannel investment, costs and impact** using benchmark as comparison

Package capabilities together and focus on achieving basic levels of maturity first

Track **scaling program impact** focusing on adoption, engagement and impact

8 factors for omnichannel success

Use a clear **framework** approach to justify how much to invest and which capabilities to activate

Differentiate local roles for engagement strategy, customer experience planning and content production

Get **funding and ownership** from more than one function within the organization

Differentiate global roles between capability owners, transition teams and CoEs

Taking the next step in the journey

There's no silver bullet to scaling omnichannel capabilities, given the breadth of capabilities across markets, therapeutic areas and brands. Each organization has a unique structure and legacy, ways of working, culture and operating model. While it's helpful to understand what other organizations are doing, companies may benefit from adopting a test and learn mindset to find what works most effectively for them.

Our experts can take you through the complete research in more detail.
To learn more, **contact us**.

About the authors

Gayatri Buddha is a principal with ZS in London and is the practice lead for the Digital Customer Experience team in Europe. She is responsible for helping clients elevate their digital capabilities and leverage them for omnichannel engagement and marketing transformation. With more than 20 years of experience, she specializes in digital transformation, content optimization, digital asset management and leading teams to implement modular content strategies. Gayatri has an undergraduate degree in advertising and communication and holds an Executive MBA from Kellogg-Hong Kong University of Science Technology.

Zainul Jafferji is a manager with ZS in London. As a core part of ZS's European Customer Centric Marketing team, his expertise is in strategy and enabling analytics for clients in global markets. Zainul has worked with clients to solve a range of sales and marketing issues, focusing most recently on implementing multichannel strategies outside the U.S. He holds an a master's degree in philosophy and a bachelor's degree in economics, both from the University of Cambridge.

Kara Ang is a manager with ZS in London. She supports clients in developing digital strategies and capabilities, in turn accelerating growth for the organization. As part of ZS's Digital Customer Experience team, Kara's expertise lies in developing digital capabilities across the organization, including omnichannel customer journey design, cross-functional pilot initiatives, change management and capability implementation. She holds a bachelor's degree in information and communications from Nanyang Business School, Singapore.

About ZS

ZS is a management consulting and technology firm focused on transforming global healthcare and beyond. We leverage our leading-edge analytics, plus the power of data, science and tech products, to help our clients make more intelligent decisions, deliver innovative solutions and improve outcomes for all. Founded in 1983, ZS has more than 13,000 employees in 35 offices worldwide.

About ZS's Digital Customer Experience practice

ZS has been pioneering digital omnichannel transformation in the pharma industry through a portfolio of disruptive solutions across consulting, technology and AI and software platforms. Our Digital Customer Experience (DCE) practice offerings span across strategy development and implementation, technology, analytics, operations, content, orchestration and organizational transformation. With more than 550 dedicated practitioners, the DCE team has successfully partnered with more than 180 clients on more than 1,900 projects in 2023. Leveraging the ZAIDYN Customer Engagement platform, the team enhances customer interactions through personalized engagement strategies and data-driven insights.

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