

**HEALTH MARKETING AND HEALTHCARE SERVICES TRANSFORMATION IN
NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY**

Otobo Perearau Ph.D.

Department of Business Education

Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama, Bayelsa State

operearau@gmail.com

and

John I. N. Inyanga, Ph.D.

Professor of Social Marketing

Department of Marketing

Faculty of Management Sciences, Imo State University, Owerri

inyangaboy@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examined the role of technology in health marketing and healthcare services transformation in Nigeria. Healthcare marketing refers to the application of marketing concepts and principles in healthcare service delivery. It includes coordinated set of strategies and communication tactics employed by healthcare organizations to promote their market offerings /reach their customers in order to foster customer engagement and improve healthcare service outcomes. One sure way of achieving transformation in healthcare service delivery is the introduction and application related technologies for effectives services delivery. The study used adopted a desk research method were it used secondary data. It was observed that application of technological in the healthcare marketing in Nigeria is saddled with a lot of challenges such as non-stringent government policies and regulations of adopting technological transformation by healthcare service providers/marketers, high level of digital/computer illiteracy, lake of functional tech-gadgets and amenities among other. The following recommendations were made: conscious development of comprehensive government policies and regulations on technological transformation in Nigeria in the health sector, provision of enabling and sustainable healthcare technologies/infrastructures by stakeholders in the healthcare sector, training and retraining of healthcare workers on the utilization and application of modern healthcare technologies, and creation of digital healthcare awareness and education to healthcare services customers among others.

Keywords: Healthcare/services, health marketing, technology and transformation.

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Introduction

To understand the concept healthcare services and health marketing better requires brief explanations of these terms: health, marketing and healthcare services. This is because of the differences in definitions, interpretations and understanding of the terms by different people at different places and times. However, they exist in reality and practice, the differences notwithstanding could be transformed through the application of technology which in itself has its challenges due to differences in meanings, applications and scope.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2022), health is the condition of being sound in body, mind and spirit; a condition in which someone or something is thriving well: well-being. It is a state of equilibrium between human physical, biologic, and social environment, compatible with full functional activity is the extent to which an individual or group's physical, social. Health can also be seen as the general condition of the body or mind with reference to soundness and vigor and soundness of body or mind, freedom from disease or ailment

According to Eze and Maxwell (2024), electronic medical records improves access to patients' information. The authors opined that technological advancement can significantly reduce the impact of brain drain in developing nation like Nigeria. it also helps to prevent mortality rate and poor knowledge transfer in the healthcare system. It is believed that at the end of this study, the existing and potential conflicts in these fields must have been settled for the interest of the stakeholders in educational transformation in Nigeria through technology.

In summary, the Nigerian Healthcare system was once described by the Health and Development Dialogue as very sick and in urgent need of intensive care. It lacked the vision of its goals and strategies; failing to respond to the cries of the sick and the dying; and seemingly incapable of doing things its neighboring states have mastered. It was and is still in most cases and situations dysfunctional, inefficient, under-capitalized, costly and inaccessible (World Health Organization, 2022). To compound the problems of healthcare and services in the country, non-adoption/usage of technologies related health care in delivering healthcare services and this has a resultant effect on the overall service delivery and outcomes. Hence effective healthcare marketing through

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application of related technologies is one of the strategies to be adopted in reducing the healthcare challenges in the country and improving the sector.

Health/Healthcare

Health, according to the Palliative Care Dictionary (2024), health is a state characterized by anatomic, physiologic, and psychological integrity; the ability to perform personally work, deal with physical, biological, psychological, and social stress; a feeling of well-being; and freedom from the risk of disease. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) defined health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity. This definition emphasizes that health is holistic and not just the mere absence of illness, but it encompasses a positive state of overall well-being. The import of these views is that a healthy person and a healthy nation is a wealthy nation. This is because of the positive relationship between health and productivity, education and other sectors of a nation's economic growth, development, transformation and modernization. The definition recognizes that health is a not just about physical well-being of an individual, but also includes the social and mental well-being of an individual. It also implies that health is not a static state but a dynamic state that is influenced by various factors throughout one's life (Eze et al, 2024). Inyanga (2014), sees healthcare as the provision of conditions for normal, mental and physical development and functioning of human beings individually or as a group. It includes health promotion measures, preventive measures, and curative measures in all its ramifications. The health system in itself, is all the activities whose primary purpose is to promote, restore, or maintain health (Todaro & Smith, 2009).

With particular reference to Nigeria, the healthcare is a shared responsibility of the government of all levels: federal, state and local governments in addition to the private sector's participations. While local governments are supposed to and in some circumstances be in charge of the primary level of healthcare (emphasizing preventive medical care – health clinics, dispensaries, etc), state governments are responsible for the secondary level (emphasizing curative medicine/first referral – general hospitals, etc); the federal government is in-charge of the tertiary level of care (emphasizing referral medical care) to which teaching and specialist hospitals belong.

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The country equally adopted and is still practicing the provisions of the Primary Healthcare (PHC) which according to the 1978 Declaration of Alma-Ata (WHO, 1978) includes education concerning health management, preventing health problems and the methods of preventing and controlling them, promoting food supply and poor nutrition, adequate supply of safe water and basic sanitation, maternal and child healthcare, including family planning. Others are immunization against the major infectious diseases, prevention and control of locally endemic diseases, appropriate treatment of common diseases and injuries and provision of essential drugs. Both at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, the health sector and healthcare in Nigeria are suffering from certain challenges that prevent their growth and development. According to Adebayo et al (2023), Inyanga (2006), these challenges have not been solved completely and they include: poor health policy formulation, implementation and control, high degree of corruption in the health sector, poor funding (inadequate finances), and inadequate coverage of health facilities in both the rural and urban areas. In addition are healthcare consumers integration in decision making (due to poor coordination), communication gaps between the communities (target markets) and the health services providers, and scarcity of basic health data due to lack of technologically aided services which makes all stages of health services planning, implementation and evaluation difficult (Anduriel, 2023).

Marketing

Marketing has been defined by different authors with different interpretations to give it a common meaning. Perreault, Cannon & McCarthy (2010) defined marketing as the performance of activities that seek to accomplish an organization's objectives by anticipating customer or client needs and directing a flow of need-satisfying goods and services from producer to customer or client. Sexton (2002) viewed marketing as managing perceived value. To manage perceived value, the marketer must understand his competitive environment, target markets, position products and services, build strong brands, satisfy customers, set price, develop advertising, organize sales efforts, arrange distribution, forecast results, and motivate people and other activities, satisfactorily. For the purpose of this study marketing will be seen as all worthy efforts by either

individuals or business organizations aimed at identifying consumers' needs, and providing a flow the right good/services that will satisfy such needs in order to achieve organizational goals/objectives. Such products should be rightly prices, promoted and distributed to the consumers. The definitions above show that customer satisfaction through need identification is the basis of any business, this is because a satisfied customer is a valuable asset to every business organization.

The marketing offering of any organization is either in form of a tangible product or an intangible product. Healthcare falls into intangible product also referred to as services which is basically characterized by intangibility, inseparability, perishability, variability and perishability. Furthermore, healthcare services are categorized under social service – a type of services provided by an individual, group of individual, voluntary organisations or government of a nation for the accomplishment of social goals in order to improve the standard of living people in the society (Anyanwu & Ibekwe 2024). Marketing social services requires the adaptation of commercial technologies and programs designed to personal (customer) welfare and that of the society which they are a part of (Andreasan 1994).

The meanings of health/healthcare and marketing as presented above brings into existence health marketing with its respective definitions, concepts, scope and applications.

Healthcare Marketing: Meaning Concept, Nature and Principles

According to Thomas (2008), healthcare marketing is the marketing of products and services related to health and includes all activities related to the development, pricing and provision of healthcare products/services as well as the mechanisms related to their promotion. This means that healthcare marketing applies the same marketing principles, concept and mix or tools as it is with commercial or traditional marketing. These principles are marketing research; product which could be a separate health service procedure, or program; price which includes monetary cost and non-monetary factors, either charged directly to the consumers or to a government or nongovernment organization (NGO) program; promotion which involves strategies to raise awareness and demand

for these services; place which implies how and where these services or programs can be accessed, and after sales services of the healthcare services (Ibe, 2023).

Oke (2025) posits that healthcare marketing is the application of marketing principles and strategies in the healthcare sector. It is basically aimed at promoting health services, products and healthy living practices that will benefit consumers and the public. It promotes health and well-being by spreading information, guiding stakeholders in the healthcare sector through their care journey. Core elements of health/healthcare marketing are: building trust and relationship among stakeholders through information and transactions, education and information sharing, focus on public benefit, audience centered strategies and strategic planning.

In Nigeria, the sector is wide and comprises the following: health financing, national health insurance scheme, human resource development, health policies development, health sector reform, the development of health infrastructure, primary healthcare, control of fake and adulterated drugs, disease control, and maternal and child care (Okonofua, 2013).

Scope of Healthcare Marketing

The scope of health marketing is broad as many participants or stakeholders indicate interests for it for their respective reasons or needs, and roles in the healthcare system. These existing and potential participants are patients – access to healthcare and quality treatment; doctors – decent wages and respect; health managers – control and return on investments, insurers – shared risk and profit-, and public institutions – better health status of the population for the money spent. In all these divergent interests marketing is a necessity (Valkov & Penkova, 2022).

Expected and Actual Benefits of Health Marketing

Healthcare organizations embark on healthcare marketing because of the benefits they ought to derive from this branch of marketing, the healthcare/services, providers, the government, the stakeholders involved and the society in general. These benefits are summarized by Valkov and Penkova (2022), Inyanga (2014) and Berkowiz and Hillestad (2012) as follows:

- (1) Marketing makes more adequate coverage of health needs and the needs of the population by improving the production function of healthcare, and meeting the public expectations and those of individual patients.
- (2) Marketing makes healthcare more accessible by increasing the popularity of health products/services through public awareness which reduces many health risks, improves health literacy of the population, thereby transforming and improving the quality of the demand of healthcare itself.
- (3) Marketing improves the quality of healthcare. Greater accessibility of health by patients via marketing are provided by systems pooling of health risks (social security and health insurance) which allow marketing priority to be a quality feature of healthcare. Quality of healthcare is therefore reached and maintained through services' availability, accessibility, affordability, and reachability to the patients.
- (4) Marketing leads to integration, continuity, integrity and awareness of healthcare. Marketing focuses the overall activity of medical institutions on the health state of the patient and patient expected outcomes which require coordination, integration and continuity of healthcare (patient-centered care). It also stimulates the internal awareness and exchange of medical information (e.g. telemedicine, or doctors detail – aimed marketing of pharmaceutical products conducted by representation of the pharmaceutical companies).
- (5) Marketing allocates resources and financial results more efficiently by providing the services to areas and periods of most needs by the patients, medical staff and the health institutions concerned. These shifts in financial and other resources from areas of surplus to those of shortage create efficiency in healthcare services.
- (6) Marketing stimulates innovation and accelerates technological improvements. The open feedback channel provided by marketing equally provides information for continuous improvement of products, technologies and services as well as accelerating and focusing on clients/patients the process of introducing new products/services, technologies and services.

- (7) Marketing improves competition in healthcare. This it does by focusing on the respective needs of patients, thereby creating a winning reputation and removes barriers of mistrust and natural dissatisfaction. Everything being equal, the more satisfied patients are through healthcare organizations or institutions providing their needs the more competitive those firms will be in the highly competitive, highly regulated healthcare industry and marketplace.
- (8) Marketing improves staff satisfaction. The public recognition improvement created by marketing is an incentive for the employees working in the health system generally and productivity increases.

In the more advanced nations of the world today, such as the United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, China, etc, health marketing is taking the center stage of all government policies, budgets and plans because of the discovery of the importance of marketing in the healthcare industry and society. According to Vincent (2024), the reasons for these shifts and changes include the following.

- The behavior of consumers (what to buy, when, where, how and why or why not) towards healthcare services are fast changing from better quality of care to provision of convenience, accessibility and digitally integrated services that fit into their daily lives. As a result of these recent changes, it is now the duty and responsibility of healthcare services organizations and institutions to create such close-relationship with their healthcare consumers by educating the existing and potential patients through offering the best offers in product qualities, prices, promotions and channels to attract new ones while still retaining the existing patients' loyalties.
- With the existence of technology/internet web, healthcare consumers are now shifting from the traditional methods of waiting for medical doctors, nurses and other pharmaceuticals by visiting the hospitals and other health centers for treatments and medical advice to non-traditional remedies via the internet using google, other social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, etc, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to ask questions and receive answers on health issues.

- Internet research is on the increase through “Google” that offers the patients solutions to their health matters by spending little time comparing prices, outpatient hospitals, virtual care patients and walk-in clinics or retail stores that are more convenient, accessible, affordable and efficient.

The extent these opportunities exist and operate in the developing nations of which Nigeria is one, particularly in the rural areas, is still a subject of concern further research.

Healthcare marketing transformation.

Globally, there is a fundamental shift in the approaches to healthcare services marketing/delivery in many significant aspects. This includes financing, accessibility, structure, and delivery. Elechi et al (2024) noted that the digital transformation of healthcare services in Nigeria is an evolving process that is characterized by both significant challenges and promising initiatives. It refers to a shift from the traditional, institution-centered marketing to modern, patient-centered data-driven healthcare marketing. Key development in the utilization of digital technologies in the Nigerian health sector includes the national e-health policy framework (2015-2020) which outlines the vision for the use of information communication technology service delivery, electronic health records, telemedicine initiative, mobile health and artificial intelligence etc.

Otobo, (2022) outlined major aspects of healthcare marketing transformation as follows:

- 1. Targeted Digital Campaigns:** Advancements in technology now enable healthcare providers to deliver highly targeted campaigns via social media, mobile applications, and websites. These tools help reach specific demographics, tailor messaging to individual health needs, and expand outreach across various patient segments.
- 2. Customer/Patient Education:** Digital platforms serve as accessible channels for health education, offering reliable information on disease prevention, treatment options, and overall wellness. These resources empower patients to make informed decisions and take proactive control of their health.

3. **Patient- centered services:** this involves focusing on understanding customers' (patients') needs and a critical analysis of how to meet the identified needs as well as preferences and behavior of the patients
4. **Telemedicine and Remote Monitoring:** Through telemedicine and remote monitoring solutions, technology extends the reach of healthcare services to remote and underserved populations. These innovations enhance access to care, improve convenience for patients, and ensure continuity in treatment.
5. **Data-Driven Marketing:** Healthcare providers can now leverage analytics from digital platforms to better understand patient behaviors and preferences. This data enables the development of personalized marketing strategies that are more effective in engaging and retaining patients.

Challenges of Applications of Technology in the Transformation of marketing in Nigeria

Efot (2023) identified some of the challenges confronting healthcare services in Nigeria through technological transformation as follows:

- 1) Non-stringent government policies and regulations of adopting technological transformation by healthcare service providers/marketers.
- 2) *Automation:* majority of the hospitals and health centres in the country, particularly in the rural communities, are not computerized and as such there are much gaps between some of their computer-literate patients and such healthcare institutions.
- 3) *Poor recorded keeping/follow up:* this is a challenge in that; information about patients are incomplete and are not updated. The author noted that while few health institutions are computerized, building and maintaining patient's data-base for constant follow up after patients visits and treatments are scarce.
- 4) *High level of digital/computer illiteracy:* a very significant number healthcare professionals and patients lack the essential digital skills needed to effectively utilize and benefit from modern technologies especially in the rural areas. Similarly, some patients are not computer literate such that communications through the internet, web and other social media platforms are difficult. This poses a challenge in service delivery.

- 5) *Lack of functional tech-gadgets and amenities*: technology and its applications in healthcare requires such social infrastructure like electricity, computers, data/internet installations, high-tech phones (android) etc. The scarcity and absence of electricity supplies in the country especially in rural areas is an impediment for quality healthcare services using computer-based services. This is also the case when there is limited or no communication network, internet connections and other digital technologies. These factors pose challenge in operating a technologically compliant healthcare service delivery/marketing system.

Etang (2024) observed that in Nigerian, the health sector is still suffering from insufficient budgeting and proper appropriation at both the federal, state and local government levels. The scarcity of funds is therefore a hindrance to what the health workers and their managements can do towards transforming the sector to meet the world accepted standards especially in terms of incorporating modern technologies in the sector. High initial cost of soft and hard wares, installations, upgrades and maintenance costs makes it difficult to many healthcare facilities to adopt modern technologies.

Outlining some challenges in applying technology in healthcare services delivery, Vincent (2024) observed that most of the hospitals and other health-oriented facilities or institutions like health laboratories are still using outdated tactics and technology in their operations. The author also noted that most patients in the country do not have, computers or phones especially, android powered phones that can connect them with health institutions and their staff for easy accessibility and communications thereby creating a gap in the patients – hospital regular contact relationship.

Otobo (2022) stated that regulatory uncertainties, resistance to change, security and data privacy issues are some factors that inhibits the use of technologies in the healthcare services delivery.

Conclusion

Healthcare marketing in Nigeria is a vital aspect of the health sector, as such its importance cannot be overemphasized. It has the potential of bridging geographical gaps between healthcare services consumers and stakeholders, improves and enhances patients' (customers') outcomes. For healthcare services to be effective in its operations and have a positive impact on the lives of beneficiaries (both service delivery agencies/providers and consumers of healthcare services), inclusion of technological transformation is needed. It is therefore imperative to incorporate technologies that are assessable, usable and sustainable by all stake holders in the healthcare services industry for effective marketing of healthcare services.

Recommendations

For technology to be a transforming agent in healthcare services marketing in Nigeria, the following recommendations should be adopted and put into practice by all the stakeholders in Nigeria healthcare sector.

- (1) There should be a conscious development of comprehensive government policies and regulations on technological transformation in Nigeria in the health sector.
- (2) Provision of enabling and sustainable healthcare technologies/infrastructures such as constant and efficient electricity supplies, internet connections, communication networks by stakeholders in the healthcare sector.
- (3) Training and retraining of healthcare workers on the utilization and application of modern healthcare technologies.
- (4) Creation of digital healthcare awareness and education to healthcare services customers (patients).
- (5) Healthcare providers and customer should encourage change/innovations, be open to and adapt to technological changes in the sector.
- (6) There should be adequate and sustainable financing both in public and private healthcare centers by relevant authorities.

- (7) Since modern healthcare consumers/patients are increasingly motivated by convenience and personalization, marketers (health workers) should take cognizance of these desires and create rich, compelling content and communications that make it easier for patients to find and receive medical care.
- (8) Healthcare institutions should create healthcare marketing departments and designate dedicated employee (that is technologically and digitally literate) to be responsible for implementing and operating a marketing automation tools.

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