

Ornella Barra, Corriere della Sera - “Innovatori 2021”, 27 November 2020



Original version (Italian)

https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=677758889574339&ref=watch_permalink

English translation

Good afternoon everyone, thank you for having me today.

While thinking about the title of this Festival dedicated to Innovators, I asked myself - what does it mean to be an innovator? Especially in a moment of crisis and uncertainty like this one?

Well, I think that innovators are first and foremost those who embrace change as a way of life. Those who never stop, neither in the face of difficulties nor when they reach the highest levels.

For someone like me who is an entrepreneur, this constant dynamism comes out in three main ways:

- Through a vision, that creates engagement and passion in others and comes to life both in the short and long term;
- Through creativity, to make the best use of resources and talents;
- Through courage, that helps facing challenges with firmness, adaptability and a good deal of flexibility. Courage is also needed to choose the right moment in time to innovate.

This is how the “entrepreneur-innovator” carries out his/her mission to create something new in the world - even in a deep crisis like the one we are experiencing.

With the pandemic, the healthcare sector is going through many difficulties, but it is also responding with an unprecedented acceleration of innovation processes. Industries and countries have invested on innovation an unprecedented amount of money, new technologies and experts, and in a matter of months, great achievements have been made, with new therapies and diagnostic methods created against an unknown virus, and vaccines that normally require over ten years developed in a matter of months. And these innovations will serve other purposes in the future.

Pharmacy is also evolving rapidly in this context, adapting and re-inventing itself. And it will continue to do so, because it is becoming an increasingly critical resource for people's health and communities.

Think of Covid diagnostic testing - we've already done several million of these at our pharmacies in the US and the UK. Or mass vaccinations, like the ones we have to do now against Covid. In many countries, pharmacies have been decisive in vaccinating against influenza for years – like the United States and the UK, but also Germany, France and Spain. I hope we can soon mention Italy as well.

Or think of "digital medicine", that will soon be part of our lives, such as prescription apps to monitor drug intake, or pharmacogenetic services to treat everyone with a targeted drug therapy.

Pharmacy is essential to making all of this happen. And our company, which has always had pharmacy in its DNA - I am a pharmacist myself and we have thousands of pharmacists across our organization - is moving proactively. Because, as I said, innovation is not the result of a single action but of a mental attitude that is applied over time.

And that's how we're moving our projects forward, starting with the great digital transformation journey we're doing together with Microsoft...which is now entering its most fascinating phase, "Horizon3", for the development of a digital platform of new health services.

In the US, our Walgreens app is one of the most downloaded in our industry, about 65 million times, and continues to evolve. We have a system called Find Care, to search for and book health care services at our own and third-party facilities, via our app and website. And just recently we launched the new myWalgreens loyalty program with 100 million members, almost a third of the entire US population! In addition to home delivery, customers can now pick up products at the pharmacy within 30 minutes of ordering online.

In this health emergency, we have also enhanced telemedicine services across all our channels, connecting patients with our pharmacists and physicians.

Another example is the project with VillageMD: in the US, Walgreens will be the first pharmacy chain to offer full-service clinics at our stores on a large scale. It means having under one same roof the different profiles that take care of the patient, with a multidisciplinary approach that can radically change the way we treat chronic diseases, for example.

Thus, pharmacy is no longer a place to sell medicines, but a true platform of services - physical and virtual - where skilled people take care of patients, also with the help of technology but not only.

It's clear that in the face of all this, the "online sale" of medicines is somehow reductive with respect to the variety of skills that you can find in a pharmacy. And I find it quite dangerous to compare the experience of buying a drug with that of any object of common use.

Amazon's arrival in pharmacy "is breaking news" but certainly does not surprise us. Our strategic approach has long taken this market evolution into account. The innovations I just mentioned prove it.

To me "doing business" means just that - perceiving what is going to happen and moving ahead of time.

This crisis that has affected the whole world, from world leaders to common people and unfortunately it has not shown its harshest face yet - both for the economic consequences and for the further impact there will be on healthcare systems, because of all the exams and surgeries that have been postponed in the past months.

Technology can help overcome all of this, because it creates efficiency and gives us new tools. But especially when it comes to health, it shouldn't be overwhelming. We must strike and keep a healthy balance between what is virtual and what is physical and real.

In fact, to conclude, after this "total digital immersion" that the pandemic has forced us into, even with this event today...I believe we will appreciate the value of human contact even more!

Presenter's question: Given your long experience in pharmaceutical distribution, can you help us understand how the distribution of vaccines will take place? How will it be possible to distribute vaccines all over the world?

I am currently spending many hours a day to understand the vaccine distribution. The first doses of the vaccine against Covid could be available within a few weeks, after the necessary authorizations by the authorities, like the FDA in America, the EMA in Europe and AIFA in Italy.

The first two vaccines, by Pfizer and Moderna, show a higher than expected efficacy, around 95%. Both are developed with an innovative technology, awarded with the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2020. It relies on messenger RNA, or genetic material that induces in our cells the formation of proteins such as those used by the coronavirus to attack us, to stimulate antibody production.

Then there should be AstraZeneca's vaccine - it has been announced will be slightly late - and soon after Johnson&Johnson's, which will arrive as soon as safety will be fully assured and which could be one of the truly "mass vaccines", as it will require just one dose, without a second booster weeks after the first.

These are the reasons to be optimistic, however we must also be realistic. The challenge is truly enormous, in terms of numbers and logistical complexity.

It is estimated that we will achieve herd immunity worldwide when 75% of the world's population will have been vaccinated. This means that more than 5 billion people will need to be vaccinated - an unprecedented amount! To have a small term of comparison, last season in Italy about 10 million people out of a population of 60 million were vaccinated against influenza.

Now, the US, UK and EU have signed agreements to buy vaccines from different manufacturers and countries are getting organized. Each one in a different way unfortunately. Each brings forward their own plans based on the local context and the infrastructure needed to do these mass vaccinations.

In the UK, for example, in addition to traditional healthcare facilities, plans are being made to use large sports centres and even our Boots pharmacies. It goes without saying that pharmacies will give or could give a decisive contribution in countries where pharmacy vaccination will be allowed. With Boots UK we have already trained thousands of army soldiers in Covid testing and we will be moving forward with vaccinations as well.

In the US, Walgreens is involved in the federal Operation Warp Speed. States have autonomy on how to organize vaccination campaigns, but they are waiting for guidance from the central government and the timing is complicated because of the White House transition.

In poorer countries, the issue will be particularly critical. A key role is played by the COVAX initiative supported by the WHO, GAVI Alliance – you mentioned Bill Gates earlier - and many governments.

Now, let's look at the logistics, with the various stages of storage, transportation and administration that our company is involved in, in many countries across the world.

Each vaccine requires a different handling. Pfizer's needs to be stored at -70 degrees Celsius. It will leave the factory in special containers, each containing 5 boxes of 975 vials each, with 5 doses per vial. Once defrosted, it can be stored at +2/8 degrees for up to 5 days. Prior to administration it will need to be reconstituted and injected within 6 hours.

For Europe, it will be produced in Belgium and distribution will start from there. Pfizer will transport the vaccines up to the centres established by individual countries, then each country will decide how to organize and take action, possibly using distribution networks such as ours.

Moderna's vaccine instead will be produced by Rovi in Spain and the distribution will start from there. This vaccine must be stored at -20 degrees, then it can be kept at +2/8 degrees for 30 days and must not be reconstituted before being injected.

The path that the vaccine vials will follow is therefore: from the factory to the warehouses established by the governments; from there to the specialized distribution centers; and then obviously on refrigerated vehicles to the administration location.

Since it will have to be injected, it will require supplies of syringes and sterile needles, and of course all anti-infection measures will have to be in place, with PPEs, safe routes, sanitation and so on. After the injection, people will have to wait for about half an hour to monitor any unexpected side-effects – a step that requires further organization, spaces and so forth.

If we multiply all of this by the exorbitant numbers I have mentioned...well, it is fair to be optimistic, but we cannot delude ourselves. This is an unprecedented challenge and the time frame will be long. My prediction is that this process will go on through 2021.

In the meantime, the best protection for me remains the facemask, which we must continue to wear, while continue to apply all anti-infection rules, with common sense and, let me add, a little self-denial!

Christmas is coming and we need to avoid what we saw last summer.

Information is key in this. Technology has increased the supply of information, but I don't know if it has made us more aware. Everyone should talk about what they know - however, unfortunately, many have expressed opinions that are not always adequate, creating confusion and wrong behaviour.

Hopefully this will not happen for vaccines.