



# How Digital Thinking Enables Medical Affairs Strategy

A Collaboration Between MAPS Medical Strategy & Launch Excellence and Digital Strategy Focus Working Groups (FAWGs)



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## Introduction

From the ubiquitous use of online and video calls to the emergence of telehealth, the pandemic accelerated digitalization across industries. In healthcare, digital technologies are improving prevention, screening and diagnosis, while enabling more precise monitoring of patients' diseases progression and adherence to care plans. From the perspective of Medical Affairs teams in pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical technology organizations, digitalization allows new ways of generating, analyzing, and interpreting data, as well as emerging mechanisms for scientific exchange, insight generation/management and forward-looking strategies to communicate findings with internal and external stakeholders. In short, digitalization offers Medical Affairs teams working within the healthcare ecosystem the opportunity to rethink strategy and actions across the lifecycle of traditional and nontraditional products, elevating Medical Affairs as a strategic partner within and beyond the organization.<sup>1</sup>

This article is the first in a three-part collaboration between the MAPS Digital and Medical Strategy Focus Area Working Groups (FAWGs) describing the role of Digital in guiding and enabling Medical Affairs strategy. Here we seek to define Digital, identify its value to internal and external stakeholders, and provide a recipe for embedding digital into Medical Affairs strategy.

## How Societal Digitalization Impacts Medical Affairs

Medical Affairs has long been a voice of patient-centricity in the industry. This term has now expanded to "people-centricity," including the perspectives of healthcare providers, caregivers and everyone with whom Medical Affairs interacts. This means that in addition to bringing the organization's priorities out into the world, Medical Affairs is also reactive to the external environment – watching, noticing and responding to societal trends. Accelerated by the pandemic, one of these trends is digitalization. On a societal level, this is immediately obvious in the shift toward personalized, online shopping; in healthcare, this can be seen in the shift toward telemedicine combined with personalized medicine.<sup>2,3</sup> Today, digital is inherent in the customer experience. On one hand, this creates the challenge of matching the sophisticated digital offerings that external stakeholders now expect. On the other hand, overall societal digitalization presents the opportunity to create valuable insights from dramatically expanding data sources such as telehealth and even social media.

## Defining Digital

In Medical Affairs, the term Digital goes beyond recreating in-person or on-paper activities in digital or online formats. Rather, it describes a true paradigm shift in the way organizations, teams and individuals conceptualize problems, solutions and actions. In this way, Digital is a mindset, a philosophy and a way of thinking that goes beyond any single technology. At the same time Digital is not a strategy that exist in a silo; rather, it is a partner that enables Medical strategy to be taken to the next level. In Medical Affairs, we start with the problem and then use Digital to solve the problem. In short, Digital describes the emerging reality of technology embedded in and enabling the ways we think and work as individuals, teams and society.

## The Value of Digital for Medical Affairs

Digital helps Medical Affairs teams accomplish existing activities faster and better, and also creates opportunities for new activities that wouldn't otherwise be possible.<sup>4</sup> Faster largely comes down to automation, using technology to streamline routine, structured tasks so that Medical Affairs leaders and teams are able to focus on creativity, clarity and connection. Better means improving current actions with digital tools. For example, using technology to identify and analyze Real World Evidence or offering platforms for more personalized interactions guiding the customer journey. Of course, Digital also allows Medical Affairs teams to implement new tactics based on emerging technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and digital therapeutics (DTx), as well as those we have not yet imagined.

## The Role of Digital in Medical Strategy

Strategy requires making choices. Digital thinking and the tools of technology that accompany this thinking can help to create understanding to inform the strategic choices of Medical Affairs leaders and teams. In this way, Digital thinking is an important perspective that has the potential to expand many strategic choices and actions; however, determining when digital tools will help strategic priorities or when, conversely, digital tools hinder strategy is key to using this partner well. Unfortunately, while many organizations are using digital tools to accomplish initiatives, most Medical Affairs teams are not yet leveraging the strategic value of digital thinking. For example, a 2021 survey by the Medical Affairs Digital Strategy Council found that while 73% of those surveyed reported their companies are planning to implement an omni/multichannel strategy driven by digital, only 27% had started moving toward this model.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, a survey by Best Practices found that only 22% of surveyed Medical Affairs professionals had a clear digital strategy in their organization, while the majority of those surveyed (51%) reported no digital strategy in their organization but were implementing digital initiatives.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Medical strategy requires not only understanding where you are, but where you would like to be. Strategizing for future situations is especially important for Medical Affairs, in that the function's value depends on the creation and maintenance of long-term relationships. The information clarity offered by Digital enables teams to identify what is noise and what is a trend or pattern, and to plan strategically for emerging conditions. Likewise, digital thinking may help Medical Affairs leaders identify future possibilities that require more immediate actions. Note this is a "vision first" approach – Digital may extend thinking to allow for a new vision of what is possible but making these strategic decisions continues to occur per the vision of human leaders (Figure 1).

### Examples of Digital Enabling Medical Affairs Strategy

**Evidence Generation:** Social listening allows Medical Affairs teams to include aggregated patient perspective in strategic decisions. For example, an organization's Medical Affairs function utilized digital tools to analyze 2 million social media interactions of people with autism, identifying integrity, independence and inclusion as prime areas of concern. Bringing these learnings to discussions with patient association groups helped the Medical Affairs team to build credibility.

**Engagement:** HCPs increasingly expect hyper-personalized scientific exchange, engaging on their own terms through their preferred channels. From the perspective of Medical Affairs strategy, this has meant using data analytics to guide content strategies for evidence communication. Digital Opinion Leaders (DOLs) now represent an essential Medical Affairs audience, requiring digital tools to identify, engage, and communicate with this group, while integrating DOLs into overall Medical Affairs strategy. Similarly, from a strategic point of view, congresses are no longer a moment in time, but a more longitudinal opportunity for engagement, requiring digitally driven, experiential approaches.

**Scientific Communication:** The audience for publications has broadened past scientific experts to include patients and the general public, requiring the strategic use of digital/enhanced content to contextualize the science in many ways. Many companies are now effectively using multiple social media channels to communicate and educate on Medical content.

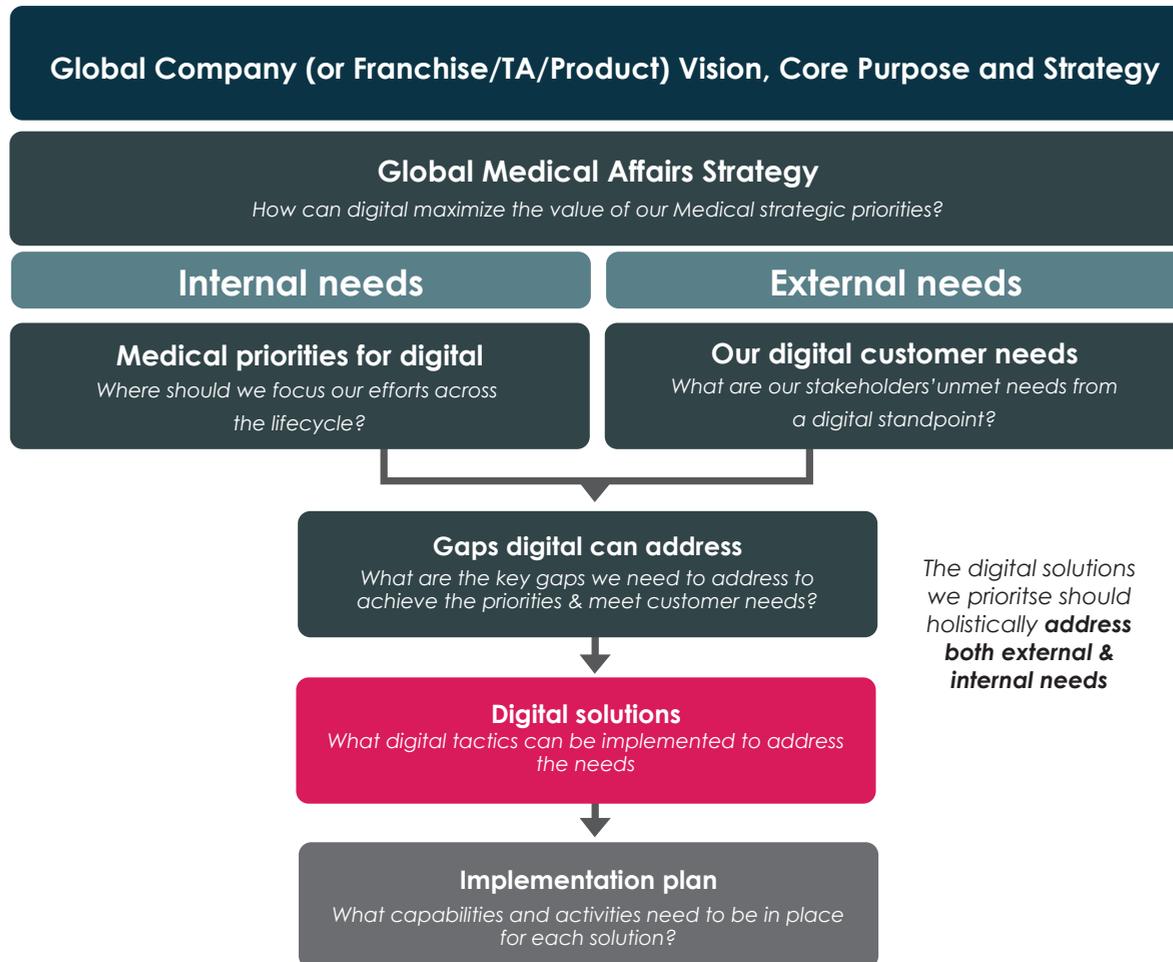


Figure 1. Integrating Digital in Global Medical Affairs Strategy. Source: ZS Associates

## Medical Affairs Digitalizing Within the Organization

Because the outputs of Medical Affairs tend to be qualitative rather than quantitative, it can be difficult to demonstrate the value of initiatives like digitalization with the clarity of those in R&D or Commercial functions.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, R&D and Commercial have long prioritized strategy, methodology and technology for measuring performance as well as the technological capabilities and competencies of teams and individuals, whereas Medical Affairs has focused on hiring or training other skills including scientific rigor and in-person communication. Due to these factors, digitalization in some Medical Affairs organizations may lag behind that of other functions. In order to realize the opportunities of digitalization, Medical Affairs leaders may benefit from the following practical steps:

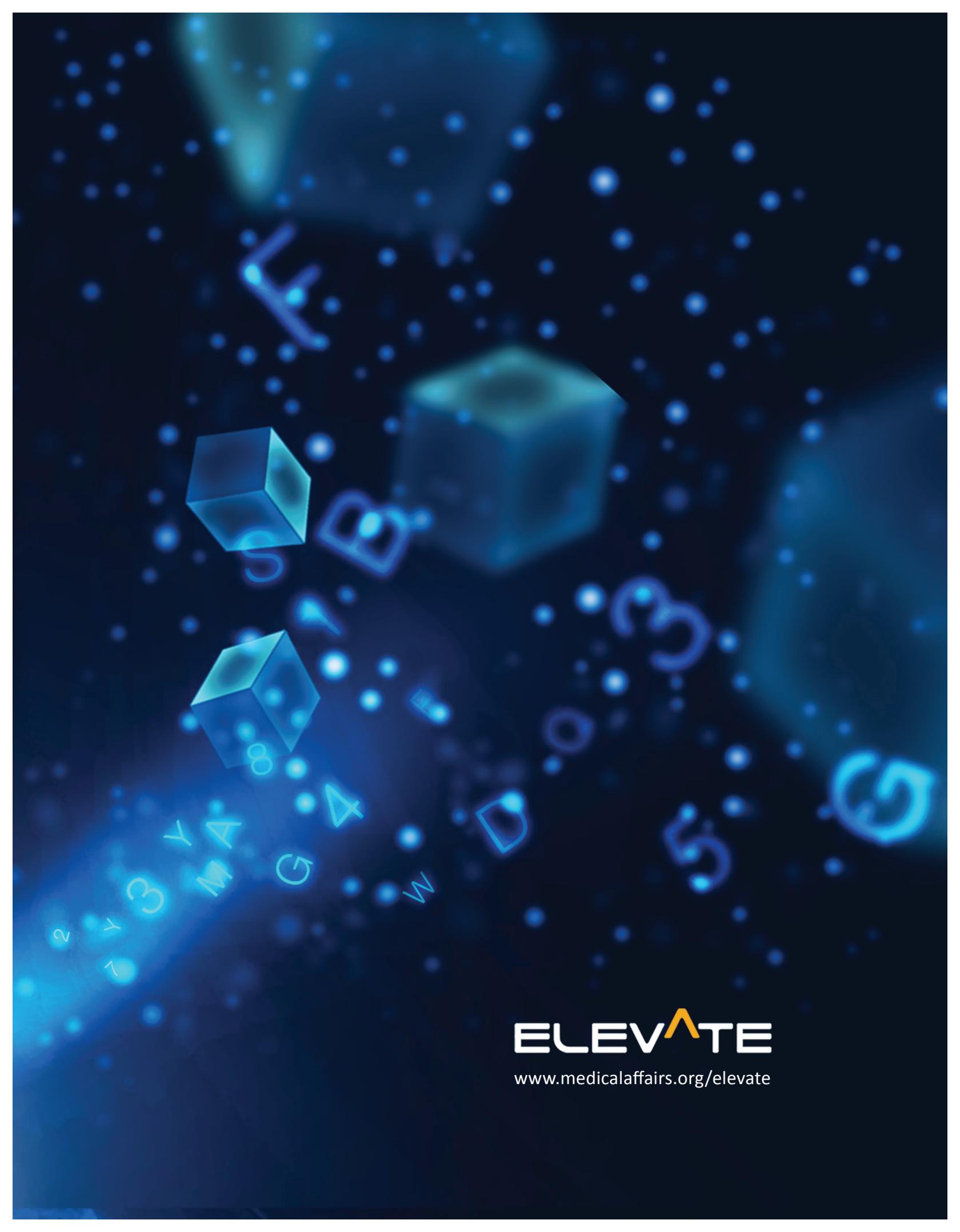
- Partner with IT to make the most efficient use of digital tools that may already be in use elsewhere in the organization
- Be prepared to talk about the “business case” for digital initiatives, i.e., cost savings by using new technologies
- Create the internal case for how digital tools will enable strategic priorities
- Ensure physical systems such as proposal templates for strategy/tactics are fit for the inclusion of digital tools

## Conclusion

In an October 2020 MAPS Global Town Hall<sup>7</sup>, Robert Stevens, VP, Global Head of Digital Medical Affairs for Novartis likened today's Digital revolution to the development of an electricity infrastructure in early 20th century United States. Early in the implementation of electricity, attention was focused on how to use the new technology, i.e., on the mechanics of how to generate electricity and deliver it safely at scale. Once the infrastructure was built, the focus shifted to what could be done with it. Today, Medical Affairs is at this stage where the Digital infrastructure is sophisticated enough to turn our attention from focusing solely on how to use new, digital technologies, to instead imagine what we can do with them. This imagination remains the role of humans, and in Medical Affairs, specifically the role of leaders with the vision to imagine how Digital can support strategic priorities. Digital can offer clarity. It can offer a background. But eventually human Medical Affairs leaders are required to shape the uses of these new digital technologies.

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The background is a dark blue gradient filled with numerous small, glowing blue particles of varying sizes, creating a starry or nebula-like effect. Several larger, glowing blue letters and numbers are scattered throughout the scene, appearing to float or drift. Some of these characters include 'F', 'S', 'B', '3', '4', 'G', 'D', '5', '8', 'Y', 'A', 'M', 'W', '2', and '1'. Two translucent, glowing blue cubes are also visible, one positioned above the other. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and digital.

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