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Online Pharmacies Struggle to Convert Orders into Sales

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Mumbai: Indian online pharmacy startups chasing an almost \$1-billion market are struggling to convert orders into sales. The hitch? Customers aren't providing proper drug prescriptions.

On average, half the orders received by online pharmacies get rejected because of prescription-related errors. The startups, already facing opposition from offline chemists and under the scrutiny of regulators, are now spending a large chunk of their investments on improving patient awareness of proper prescriptions.

"Indians are used to buying

medicines without prescriptions and online pharmacies are the most law-abiding firms. On our website, you cannot view a medicine unless you upload the prescription," said Rajiv Gulati, cofounder of New Delhi-based Mchemist, an online pharmacy startup.

Gulati said the rejection rate of orders reached almost 30% at his company a few months ago because of prescriptions that were dated or did not carry the doctor's credentials.

"Chronic patients are hesitant to go back to doctors because they have to pay for the consultation fee," said Hemant Bhardwaj, CEO of Ziggy, an online medicine seller that has cancelled as much as 80% of its orders due to invalid prescriptions. "Because of this, they

end up going to their neighbouring pharmacy stores."

Some startups are now going the extra mile to attract customers

by not only helping to fix appointments with doctors on their platform, but also paying consultation fees for needy patients. Dharmil Sheth, one of the founders of PharmEasy, had customers who sent pictures of medicines they wanted.

"One of the most common trends that we have seen is people sending images of their tablet strips or syrup bottles or at times writ-

ing down their requirements on a piece of paper and uploading it. Those ones lead to instant rejection," he said.

Every state Food and Drug Administration has specific guidelines for prescriptions. The Maharashtra FDA requires prescriptions to mention the date, doctor's name, address, registration number, dosage and duration of medication, among other things.

Customers purchasing medicines from local chemist stores often don't follow such an exhaustive list of requirements. Online pharmacies say they have to be extra cautious with the rules. FDAs across the country still haven't warmed up to the idea of selling medicines online because of the many regulatory issues involved.

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