

Brand Positioning Strategies for Prescription Drugs

ANJALI SHARMA¹, TANUJA SINGH², VIKASH KUMAR BHARTI³, UPENDRA SINGH⁴,
ASHVANI KUMAR⁵, HAKIM SINGH RAJPUT⁶

^{1, 2, 3, 4} Research Scholar, Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences & Research, Unnao, U.P.

^{5, 6} Associate Professor, Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences & Research, Unnao, U.P.

Abstract- Brand positioning in the pharmaceutical industry, particularly for prescription drugs, is a complex and strategic process aimed at differentiating products in a highly regulated and competitive market. Unlike consumer goods, these drugs are primarily marketed to healthcare professionals, requiring strong scientific evidence and ethical promotion. Effective positioning depends on clinical differentiation, safety, efficacy, and therapeutic value. Pharmaceutical companies use strategies such as first-in-class, best-in-class, and differentiation to establish a unique identity. The role of the marketing mix, especially promotion through detailing and digital platforms, is crucial in influencing prescribing behavior. Physician-centric and patient-centric approaches are increasingly important in modern healthcare systems. Value-based positioning emphasizes cost-effectiveness and improved patient outcomes. However, challenges such as regulatory restrictions, generic competition, and pricing pressures persist. Emerging trends like digital marketing, real-world evidence, and data-driven strategies are transforming pharmaceutical branding. Overall, successful brand positioning requires integration of scientific credibility, strategic marketing, and stakeholder-focused communication.

Keywords: Brand Positioning, Pharmaceutical Marketing, Prescription Drugs, Clinical Differentiation, Physician-Centric Approach, Patient-Centric Care, Value-Based Positioning, Digital Health, E-Detailing, Generic vs Branded Drugs

I. INTRODUCTION

The pharmaceutical industry operates within a highly complex and regulated ecosystem that involves multiple stakeholders, including regulatory authorities, physicians, patients, and payers such as insurance providers and government agencies. Each of these stakeholders plays a critical role in determining the success of a pharmaceutical product. Regulatory bodies ensure the safety, efficacy, and quality of drugs, while physicians act as the primary decision-makers in prescribing medications. Patients, although the end

users, often have limited direct influence on drug selection, and payers increasingly impact access and affordability through reimbursement policies. This interconnected environment makes pharmaceutical marketing fundamentally different from other industries.

Brand positioning for prescription drugs is uniquely challenging due to strict regulatory frameworks and the indirect nature of consumer targeting. Unlike consumer goods, pharmaceutical companies cannot freely advertise prescription medicines directly to the general public in many countries. Instead, they must focus on healthcare professionals, using scientifically accurate and ethically compliant communication strategies. As a result, promotional activities are centered around clinical evidence, safety data, and therapeutic benefits rather than emotional or lifestyle-based appeals commonly seen in other sectors.

Brand positioning refers to the process of creating a distinct and favorable image of a product in the minds of the target audience. In the pharmaceutical context, this involves more than just branding; it requires establishing a strong perception of clinical effectiveness, safety, reliability, and overall therapeutic value. Companies aim to differentiate their products based on factors such as mechanism of action, efficacy outcomes, side-effect profile, dosing convenience, and patient compliance. Additionally, building trust among healthcare professionals is essential, as their confidence directly influences prescribing behavior and long-term brand success.

In recent years, the importance of brand positioning has increased significantly, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. The pandemic accelerated digital transformation across the healthcare sector, leading to the widespread adoption of telemedicine, e-detailing, virtual conferences, and digital marketing platforms.

Pharmaceutical companies are now leveraging these technologies to engage with healthcare professionals more effectively and to deliver personalized, data-driven communication. At the same time, increased competition, rapid drug development, and the growing presence of generic alternatives have intensified the need for clear and compelling positioning strategies.

In this dynamic and competitive environment, effective brand positioning has become a critical factor in achieving sustainable growth, market differentiation, and improved healthcare outcomes.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyze brand positioning strategies in prescription pharmaceuticals
2. To evaluate factors influencing drug positioning
3. To examine traditional and modern approaches
4. To identify challenges and future trends

III. METHODOLOGY

This review is based on:

- Secondary data from journals, reports, and articles
- Systematic literature review approach
- Analysis of pharmaceutical marketing frameworks

IV. CONCEPT OF BRAND POSITIONING IN PHARMACEUTICALS

Brand positioning is defined as designing a product's offering to occupy a distinct place in the target market. In pharmaceuticals, positioning focuses on:

- Clinical efficacy
- Safety
- Innovation
- Physician trust

Different positioning strategies include:

- First-in-class positioning
- Best-in-class positioning
- Cost leadership
- Niche specialization

V. ADVANTAGES OF BRAND POSITIONING STRATEGIES

5.1. Competitive Differentiation

Brand positioning helps pharmaceutical companies distinguish their products from competitors, especially in crowded therapeutic segments. By highlighting unique features such as efficacy, safety, or mechanism of action, companies can create a clear identity in the market.

5.2. Builds Trust and Credibility

Strong positioning based on scientific evidence and clinical data enhances trust among physicians and healthcare professionals. A well-positioned brand is perceived as reliable, safe, and effective, leading to consistent prescriptions.

5.3. Influences Prescribing Behavior

Effective positioning directly impacts physician decision-making. When a drug is clearly positioned for specific benefits (e.g., faster action or better safety), it becomes a preferred choice in clinical practice.

5.4. Enhances Brand Recall and Recognition

Consistent messaging and promotion improve brand recall among healthcare professionals. This ensures that the drug remains top-of-mind when prescribing decisions are made.

5.5. Supports Premium Pricing

Strong brand positioning, especially for innovative or first-in-class drugs, allows companies to justify higher pricing. Physicians and patients are often willing to pay more for perceived superior value.

5.6. Facilitates Market Expansion

A well-positioned brand can easily expand into new markets or indications. Strong reputation and trust help in gaining acceptance across different regions and patient groups.

5.7. Encourages Patient Compliance

Positioning that focuses on patient benefits (e.g., convenience, fewer side effects) improves adherence to treatment, leading to better outcomes and brand loyalty.

5.8. Long-Term Brand Loyalty

Once a brand gains physician trust, it can maintain long-term prescription support even in competitive markets, ensuring sustained sales.

VI. DISADVANTAGES OF BRAND POSITIONING STRATEGIES

6.1. High Cost of Marketing and Promotion

Developing and maintaining strong positioning requires significant investment in clinical trials, promotional activities, medical representatives, and digital marketing.

6.2. Regulatory Restrictions

Pharmaceutical marketing is strictly regulated, limiting the claims that can be made. This restricts creative freedom and makes positioning more challenging compared to other industries.

6.3. Risk of Mispositioning

Incorrect or unclear positioning can confuse healthcare professionals and reduce brand acceptance. Repositioning later can be costly and time-consuming.

6.4. Impact of Generic Competition

Even well-positioned brands may lose market share when low-cost generics enter the market, reducing the effectiveness of branding strategies.

6.5. Dependence on Physician Perception

Brand success heavily depends on physician trust. Negative experiences, adverse effects, or lack of confidence can quickly damage positioning.

6.6. Rapid Market Changes

Advancements in medicine, new drug launches, or updated clinical guidelines can quickly make existing positioning outdated.

6.7. Ethical Concerns

Aggressive promotion or biased communication may raise ethical issues and damage the company's reputation if not handled responsibly.

6.8. Limited Direct Patient Influence

Since prescription drugs are primarily promoted to healthcare professionals, companies have limited direct control over patient perception and demand.

VII. UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF PRESCRIPTION DRUG MARKETING

7.1 Regulatory Constraints

Strict regulations limit promotional claims and direct advertising.

7.2 Target Audience

Primary target: Physicians and healthcare professionals

7.3 Scientific Evidence-Based Marketing

Promotion must be supported by clinical data.

7.4 Ethical Considerations

Marketing practices must follow compliance guidelines.

VIII. FACTORS INFLUENCING BRAND POSITIONING

Brand positioning in the pharmaceutical industry refers to how a drug is perceived in the minds of healthcare professionals, patients, and other stakeholders compared to competing products. Several critical factors determine the success of positioning strategies.

8.1 Clinical Differentiation

Clinical differentiation is one of the most important factors in pharmaceutical brand positioning. It involves highlighting the unique therapeutic benefits of a drug compared to existing alternatives.

- **Efficacy:** Drugs are often positioned based on superior effectiveness in treating a condition. For example, a drug that provides faster relief or better long-term outcomes gains a competitive advantage.
- **Safety Profile:** A lower incidence of side effects or better tolerability can significantly enhance brand preference.
- **Onset and Duration of Action:** Drugs with rapid onset or prolonged action are often positioned as more convenient or effective.
- **Novel Mechanism of Action:** First-in-class or innovative drugs are strongly differentiated due to their unique pharmacological pathways.

Thus, strong clinical evidence from trials and real-world data plays a key role in building a distinctive brand identity.

8.2 Competitive Landscape

The market environment in which a drug is launched greatly influences its positioning.

- **Presence of Generics:** When generic versions are available, branded drugs must emphasize quality, reliability, or added benefits to justify their position.
- **Number of Competitors:** Highly saturated therapeutic categories (e.g., antihypertensives, antibiotics) require more aggressive and creative positioning strategies.
- **Competitor Strength:** Established brands with strong physician loyalty can make it difficult for new entrants to gain market share.
- **Market Trends:** Emerging therapies or shifting treatment guidelines can reshape positioning strategies.

Companies must continuously monitor competitors and adapt their messaging to maintain relevance.

8.3 Pricing Strategy

Pricing plays a crucial role in shaping brand perception and accessibility.

- **Premium Pricing:**
 - Often used for innovative or patented drugs.
 - Implies superior quality, advanced technology, or higher efficacy.
 - Targets specialized or high-income patient segments.
- **Affordable (Value-Based) Pricing:**
 - Focuses on cost-effectiveness and accessibility.
 - Common in developing markets or for widely used therapies.
 - Helps in gaining large market share through volume sales.
- **Differential Pricing:**
 - Different pricing strategies across regions or patient groups.

Pricing must balance profitability with patient affordability and market competition.

8.4 Physician Perception

Physicians are the primary decision-makers in prescribing medications, making their perception critical for brand success.

8.4.1. Trust and Credibility:

Doctors prefer brands backed by strong scientific data, clinical trials, and reputable manufacturers.

8.4.2. Experience and Familiarity:

Physicians often prescribe drugs they are familiar with or have seen positive patient outcomes with.

8.4.3. Medical Representative Influence:

Effective communication by pharmaceutical representatives can shape physician opinion.

8.4.4. Continuing Medical Education (CME):

Educational programs and scientific engagement improve brand recall and trust.

A positive physician perception leads to consistent prescriptions and long-term brand loyalty.

8.5 Regulatory Environment

The pharmaceutical industry is highly regulated, and compliance significantly impacts brand positioning.

8.5.1. Approval Requirements:

Regulatory bodies require extensive clinical data before approving drugs, which influences claims that can be made.

8.5.2. Marketing Restrictions:

Strict guidelines limit promotional activities and ensure ethical marketing practices.

8.5.3. Labeling and Claims:

Only approved indications and benefits can be communicated, restricting exaggerated positioning.

8.5.4. Pharmacovigilance:

Continuous monitoring of drug safety affects long-term brand reputation.

8.5.5. Pricing Regulations:

In many countries (including India), government controls on drug pricing can limit positioning flexibility.

Compliance with regulations not only ensures legal safety but also builds credibility and trust in the market.

IX. BRAND POSITIONING STRATEGIES FOR PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Brand positioning strategies in the pharmaceutical industry are designed to create a distinct identity for a drug in the minds of physicians, patients, and healthcare stakeholders. These strategies focus on highlighting unique benefits, clinical value, and competitive advantages.

9.1 First-in-Class Strategy

The first-in-class strategy involves introducing the first drug in a completely new therapeutic category or with a novel mechanism of action.

- **Definition:** A drug that is the first to target a specific biological pathway or disease mechanism.
- **Advantages:**
 - Establishes strong brand recognition and leadership.
 - Faces minimal or no direct competition initially.
 - Sets treatment standards and prescribing habits.
- **Challenges:**
 - Requires extensive clinical validation and education of physicians.
 - High research and development costs.

This strategy provides a significant competitive advantage and often allows premium pricing.

9.2 Best-in-Class Strategy

The best-in-class strategy focuses on developing drugs that are superior to existing therapies.

- **Key Features:**
 - Improved efficacy (better therapeutic outcomes).
 - Enhanced safety profile (fewer or less severe side effects).
 - Better pharmacokinetics (longer duration, reduced dosing frequency).
- **Positioning Approach:**
 - Highlight clinical superiority through comparative studies.
 - Emphasize improved patient outcomes and quality of life.

This strategy is effective in competitive markets where multiple treatment options already exist.

9.3 Differentiation Strategy

Differentiation strategy aims to distinguish a drug from its competitors based on unique features.

Focus Areas:

- **Mechanism of Action:**
 - A unique or targeted mechanism can make the drug stand out scientifically.
- **Faster Onset of Action:**
 - Drugs providing quicker relief are often preferred in acute conditions.
- **Better Compliance (Adherence):**
 - Reduced dosing frequency (once-daily vs multiple doses).
 - Convenient dosage forms (ODTs, sustained-release tablets).
- **Additional Differentiators:**
 - Fewer drug interactions
 - Improved tolerability

This strategy is widely used to build a distinct brand identity in crowded markets.

8.4 Niche Positioning

Niche positioning focuses on targeting a specific subgroup of patients rather than the entire population.

- **Examples of Target Segments:**
 - Pediatric or geriatric patients
 - Patients with comorbid conditions
 - Rare diseases (orphan drugs)
- **Advantages:**
 - Reduced competition
 - Higher relevance and effectiveness for specific patients
 - Opportunity for premium pricing
- **Approach:**
 - Tailor marketing messages and clinical evidence to address the needs of the selected segment.

8.5 Value-Based Positioning

Value-based positioning emphasizes the overall value of a drug rather than just its price.

- **Key Elements:**
 - Clinical outcomes (effectiveness)
 - Cost-effectiveness (economic benefits)
 - Reduction in hospitalization or complications

- Approach:
 - Demonstrate pharmacoeconomic benefits.
 - Highlight long-term savings for patients and healthcare systems.

This strategy is increasingly important in healthcare systems focusing on cost control and outcome-based care.

8.6 Evidence-Based Positioning

This strategy relies on strong scientific evidence to support the drug's positioning.

- Sources of Evidence:
 - Randomized controlled trials (RCTs)
 - Meta-analyses
 - Real-world evidence (RWE)
- Benefits:
 - Builds credibility and trust among physicians.
 - Supports regulatory approvals and marketing claims.
- Approach:
 - Use data-driven communication in promotional materials, conferences, and publications.

8.7 Physician-Centric Positioning

Since physicians are the primary prescribers, this strategy focuses on addressing their needs and preferences.

- Focus Areas:
 - Clinical efficacy and safety data
 - Ease of prescribing
 - Familiarity with the drug
- Tools and Activities:
 - CME (Continuing Medical Education) programs
 - Scientific detailing by medical representatives
 - Conferences, seminars, and workshops
- Outcome:
 - Builds trust, confidence, and loyalty among prescribers, leading to increased prescriptions.

8.8 Patient-Centric Positioning

Patient-centric positioning focuses on improving the patient's experience and treatment outcomes.

- Key Components:
 - Patient Support Programs (PSPs): Education, counseling, and disease awareness initiatives.
 - Adherence Solutions:

- Reminder apps
- Simplified dosing regimens
- Easy-to-use dosage forms
- Benefits:
 - Improves treatment compliance and outcomes.
 - Enhances patient satisfaction and brand loyalty.
- Modern Approach:
 - Incorporates digital health tools, telemedicine, and personalized care strategies.

X. ROLE OF MARKETING MIX IN POSITIONING

The marketing mix (4Ps: Product, Price, Place, Promotion) plays a crucial role in shaping how a pharmaceutical brand is perceived in the market. In the pharma industry, positioning is not only based on clinical performance but also on how effectively these elements are managed.

9.1 Product

The product is the core element of brand positioning in pharmaceuticals, as it directly relates to patient outcomes and therapeutic effectiveness.

- Quality:
 - High standards of manufacturing (GMP compliance) ensure safety, purity, and consistency.
 - Reliable quality builds trust among physicians and patients.
- Innovation:
 - Novel drug delivery systems (e.g., sustained-release tablets, oral disintegrating tablets).
 - Development of new molecules or improved formulations.
 - Combination therapies that enhance efficacy.
- Brand Identity:
 - Brand name, packaging, labeling, and dosage form contribute to recall and differentiation.
- Clinical Performance:
 - Efficacy, safety, and tolerability strongly influence product positioning.

Thus, a well-developed product with strong clinical backing forms the foundation of successful positioning.

9.2 Price

Pricing strategy significantly affects both perceived value and market accessibility.

- Premium Pricing:
 - Applied to patented or innovative drugs.
 - Reflects superior efficacy, advanced research, or unique benefits.
 - Targets specialized markets and high-income patients.
- Generic (Affordable) Pricing:
 - Focuses on cost-effectiveness and wider accessibility.
 - Important in developing countries like India.
 - Helps gain high prescription volume.
- Price Sensitivity:
 - Physicians and patients often consider affordability when choosing therapies.
 - Government regulations (e.g., price control policies) also influence pricing decisions.

A well-balanced pricing strategy ensures both competitiveness and profitability.

9.3 Place (Distribution)

“Place” refers to how the drug reaches the end user efficiently and consistently.

- Distribution Channels:
 - Wholesalers and stockists
 - Retail pharmacies and hospital pharmacies
 - Online pharmacies (e-pharmacies)
- Availability:
 - Continuous product availability ensures prescription conversion into sales.
 - Stock-outs can damage brand trust and physician confidence.
- Geographical Reach:
 - Expansion into rural and semi-urban areas increases market penetration.
- Supply Chain Efficiency:
 - Proper storage, transportation, and inventory management maintain drug quality.

Effective distribution ensures that the product is accessible at the right place and time, reinforcing brand positioning.

9.4 Promotion

Promotion is the most influential factor in pharmaceutical marketing, as it directly impacts prescribing behavior and brand recall.

- Detailing (Personal Selling):

- Medical representatives (MRs) provide scientific information to physicians.
- Face-to-face interactions help build trust and influence prescriptions.
- Digital Marketing:
 - Use of emails, webinars, mobile apps, and social media platforms.
 - E-detailing and virtual meetings are increasingly important.
- Scientific Promotion:
 - Clinical data presentations
 - Journal publications
 - Participation in medical conferences
- Advertising (Limited in Pharma):
 - Mostly restricted to OTC drugs; prescription drug promotion is regulated.
- Reminder Tools:
 - Visual aids, brochures, samples, and gifts (as per ethical guidelines).
- Patient Awareness Campaigns:
 - Disease education programs and awareness drives.

Why Promotion is Most Influential:

- Directly affects physician prescribing habits
- Builds brand recall and loyalty
- Helps communicate clinical benefits effectively
- Bridges the gap between scientific data and practical use

X. PHYSICIAN INFLUENCE AND PRESCRIPTION BEHAVIOR

- Physician detailing strongly impacts prescribing
- Marketing strategies influence rural and urban doctors differently

XI. BRANDING VS GENERIC COMPETITION

- Patent expiry leads to "patent cliff"
- Brand repositioning is essential post-generic entry
- Targeting loyal prescribers improves ROI

XII. BRAND LIFECYCLE AND POSITIONING EVOLUTION

Stages:

1. Pre-launch (clinical positioning)
2. Launch (awareness building)
3. Growth (differentiation)

4. Maturity (defensive positioning)
5. Decline (repositioning or OTC switch)

Positioning evolves continuously based on market feedback

XIII. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN PHARMA POSITIONING

- AI-based targeting
- Omnichannel marketing
- Digital detailing
- Telemedicine integration

XIV. UMBRELLA BRANDING STRATEGY

Companies leverage brand reputation across products

- Improves trust
- Expands market reach

XV. CASE STUDIES

Case studies help in understanding how pharmaceutical companies apply branding and positioning strategies in real-world scenarios. The following examples highlight differences in strategic approaches and market perception.

15.1 Cipla vs Sun Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd.

This case study compares two leading Indian pharmaceutical companies with distinct positioning strategies.

Cipla – Positioning Based on Accessibility and Global Healthcare Impact

- Core Positioning: Cipla is widely recognized for its patient-centric and affordable healthcare approach.
- Key Strategies:
 - Focus on low-cost medicines, especially for chronic and life-threatening diseases (e.g., HIV/AIDS, respiratory disorders).
 - Strong emphasis on accessibility in developing countries.
 - Early mover in providing affordable antiretroviral therapy globally.
- Brand Image:

- Trusted for ethical practices and social responsibility.
 - Positioned as a company that prioritizes public health over profit.
 - Global Reach:
 - Strong presence in emerging markets and developing nations.
 - Collaborations with global health organizations.
- Conclusion: Cipla's positioning is rooted in affordability, accessibility, and humanitarian healthcare.

Sun Pharma – Positioning Based on Innovation and Specialty Leadership

- Core Positioning: Sun Pharma is positioned as a research-driven and specialty-focused pharmaceutical leader.
- Key Strategies:
 - Investment in research & development (R&D) and specialty drugs.
 - Focus on complex generics and niche therapies (e.g., dermatology, oncology).
 - Expansion through acquisitions (e.g., global companies).
- Brand Image:
 - Known for innovation, high-quality manufacturing, and global standards.
 - Positioned as a premium and technologically advanced pharma company.
- Global Reach:
 - Strong presence in regulated markets like the US and Europe.
 - Leader among Indian pharma companies in global revenues.

XVI. CHALLENGES IN BRAND POSITIONING

1. Regulatory restrictions
2. High competition
3. Patent expiries
4. Ethical concerns
5. Pricing pressure

XVII. ETHICAL AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

- No misleading claims
- Transparency in communication

- Compliance with guidelines

XVIII. EMERGING TRENDS

- Personalized medicine
- AI-driven marketing
- Patient engagement platforms
- Real-world evidence-based positioning

XIX. Future Scope

The future of brand positioning in the pharmaceutical industry is rapidly evolving due to technological advancements, changing healthcare dynamics, and increasing patient awareness. Modern strategies are shifting from traditional promotion to more digital, personalized, and patient-inclusive approaches.

1. Digital-First Strategies

The pharmaceutical industry is increasingly adopting digital-first approaches to enhance brand positioning.

- **E-detailing and Virtual Engagement:**
Pharmaceutical companies are using webinars, virtual meetings, and mobile applications to interact with healthcare professionals more efficiently.
- **Omnichannel Marketing:**
Integration of multiple digital platforms such as emails, social media, telemedicine, and online portals ensures consistent communication.
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Automation:**
AI tools help in analyzing physician behavior, predicting trends, and optimizing marketing strategies.
- **Benefits:**
 - Wider reach and accessibility
 - Cost-effective promotion
 - Real-time interaction and feedback

Digital transformation will continue to redefine how pharmaceutical brands communicate and engage with stakeholders.

2. Data-Driven Personalization

Personalization is becoming a key element in future brand positioning strategies.

- **Use of Big Data and Analytics:**
Companies analyze large datasets from clinical trials, prescriptions, and patient records to understand behavior patterns.
- **Targeted Communication:**

- Customized messages for different physician segments
- Tailored treatment information for specific patient groups
- **Real-World Evidence (RWE):**
Data from real-life clinical settings is used to demonstrate drug effectiveness and support positioning.
- **Benefits:**
 - Improved engagement with healthcare professionals
 - More relevant and impactful communication
 - Better clinical outcomes

Data-driven strategies enable precision marketing, making brand positioning more effective and scientifically aligned.

3. Increased Patient Involvement

The role of patients in healthcare decision-making is expanding significantly.

- **Patient-Centric Care Models:**
Patients are now more informed and actively involved in treatment decisions.
- **Patient Support Programs (PSPs):**
 - Education, counseling, and adherence programs
 - Digital tools like reminder apps and telehealth services
- **Direct-to-Patient Engagement (Where Permitted):**
Awareness campaigns, disease education, and digital platforms empower patients.
- **Benefits:**
 - Improved treatment adherence
 - Better health outcomes
 - Stronger brand loyalty

Future positioning will increasingly focus on patient experience and satisfaction, not just clinical performance.

- Digital-first strategies
- Data-driven personalization
- Increased patient involvement

XX. CONCLUSION

Brand positioning in prescription drugs is a dynamic and complex process requiring a balance between scientific accuracy, ethical compliance, and strategic

marketing. Companies must adopt innovative and evidence-based approaches to sustain competitive advantage in the evolving pharmaceutical landscape.

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