



Improve Your Rep, Rep!

In May last year, British Medical Journal editor Richard Smith infamously condemned drug companies for what he called their 'grubby ties' with doctors. He called for greater distance between the two, and among other things, more use of comparative head-to-head trials and less incentives such as hospitality events and 'freebies'.

While in many other industries customers and suppliers are seeking ways to create greater 'entanglement' leading to more effective partnerships, the BMJ article and others are telling our customers to disentangle from us.

To group all aspects of the industry together and write the whole lot off as somehow 'corrupt' is obviously a very extreme view, and one I'm happy to say I have rarely experienced. It might be easier to dismiss such views and those raised in the subsequent debate as outdated or lacking an understanding of the industry. However, it is clear that in some quarters at least these views are strong and have influence.

While many of the points arising from the BMJ and other articles relate to clinical trials, use of journals, editorials, etc, there was also reference to how those on the 'front line' (medical representatives, territory managers, key account execs, clinical specialists, NHS Liaison, business development managers, etc) conduct themselves.

So, what have we done about it in the last six months? Do we ignore the debate and hope it goes away, and that in time our

customers will view us in a more equal light?

We all know representatives who have the respect of their customers and are viewed as successful by their companies both in business and 'relationship' terms. What is it that these people do that creates this positive reaction?

Analysing their behaviour shows what we can do on a day-to-day basis to ensure we maximise our chances of success and, where necessary, improve the perception of ourselves and the companies we represent.

Shared goals

Pharma companies and doctors necessarily have close relationships because they share some common goals. It's OK to admit we're in business and we shouldn't shy away from this.

However, it goes without saying that we have a common goal with the doctors in creating patient benefits from whatever course of action we are recommending.

In addition, though some comments about 'conference tourism' and so on might be true of twenty years ago, there is no longer a significant emphasis on 'freebies' and 'away days', at least in the UK. In fact research shows that, when they do happen, they are often ineffective as reps lack the skills to capitalise on any such 'investment'.

The sales process is now much more complex and invariably requires decisions from more than

one person. As well as doctors, medical reps must also establish their reputations with a host of other clinical and non-clinical customers, some with very different needs from those of the prescribing doctor - and all with their own views of the industry.

So how can reps ensure they are a professional and credible 'face' of their company in front of these myriad customers?

On Your Best Behaviour

Certain behaviours help establish and develop the professional approach we should all aim for. Of course, excellent product knowledge and thorough understanding of the NHS environment are essential, but not sufficient in themselves. So what else?

There is evidence of common mistakes which have a detrimental effect on the customer/rep relationship and ultimately on sales. When we look at what consistently successful medical reps do, which their average counterparts do not, some interesting insights emerge.

One key to success is understanding what the right questions are and how to ask them. For example, some elicit answers that uncover real needs and help the customer to specify exactly what they are looking for.

Research shows that if you get your customer to express their needs in this way, you increase your

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chances of a successful call outcome from 39% to 72%. Better still, if you can discuss your products or services in the most impactful way that relates to these needs, your chance of success increases by a further 11% to 83%.

Other questions help build your company's case as the ideal supply partner. Asking even one question that helps the customer see the value of solving a particular issue or problem can have a very significant impact on success, as can asking about the impact of these problems. That is, you help customers conclude for themselves that your company offers the best solution.

Demonstrating a willingness to listen and respond effectively to needs, right from the outset builds credibility. This includes simple things like finding out when would be the best time to speak with a customer and how much time is available. If, however, you can successfully build a persuasive case, an initial ten minutes often extends to more. If you still run out of time, get agreement to a call back.

An interesting research finding is the effect of making an appointment with a doctor rather than visiting 'on spec'. While some success was seen where no appointment was made, call outcomes that resulted in an advance towards a sale, or agreement to prescribe, increased by 20% when the rep made an appointment.

What's The Problem?

Questions in a face-to-face call are clearly essential. However, there is

a fine line between asking unnecessary questions and posing those which yield answers enabling you to create a win-win situation for you and the doctor.

Questions you might think are handy ice-breakers ('How many patients do you treat?', 'What procedures do you use?', 'How many staff do you have?') are necessary in some cases, but don't actually build value for the doctor or give any insight to your offering. Failure to do your homework on the basics before you meet the doctor risks gaining a reputation as an ill-informed time-waster.

The evidence suggests that new customers are particularly intolerant of these types of questions. Too many can reduce your success rate by 27%.

Talking Sales Aid Or Talking Sense?

The 'talking sales aid' approach no longer has a place. Simply assuming you know your customers' needs and attempting to meet them with a list of product features is rarely the most productive interaction.

Talking about your products' advantages can be persuasive with some customers, but is less effective with others. Having the most supportive marketing materials and sales aids to help you uncover needs and meet them effectively is another way of boosting your chances of success.

Asking the right questions and getting the customer talking about their needs means listening more and talking less. Poor sales rep

behaviour includes not giving customers real 'air time' to express their needs.

You will also establish the relationship on a sound commercial and ethical footing by following simple rules: Don't keep the customer waiting or overtly knock the competition, don't make unfounded claims or set expectations you cannot meet and keep all your promises from the outset. All of these things help build your professionalism in the eyes of the customer and are the types of behaviours we observe in successful reps.

The Ultimate Aim

High investment in drug research and development should lead to products that address customer and patient needs. It is your task as a sales rep to identify and develop those needs and ensure that you meet them appropriately.

All companies have the potential to be the ideal supply partner for doctors. If you can't differentiate your product, then you, and the company you represent, must be the differentiators. It is your job to communicate your strengths openly and persuasively to ensure that, when you do win the business for your company, it truly benefits both sides... and, of course, the patients.

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