

The evolution of the sales representative

Pharma needs reps who are able to add value in an increasingly digital world

Under pressure to treat more patients in a shorter time, it's hardly surprising that 93% of GPs in the UK report that their workload is impacting upon the quality of patient services¹. Yet despite the rise of instantly-available digital information, the majority of healthcare professionals (HCPs) still prefer face-to-face interaction with a pharma company above any other channel²³. That preference for meeting the sales rep runs deeper the longer an HCP and rep know each other, and when their interaction is based on aligned goals to improve patient outcomes³. So why is that?

The amount of information available online about diseases and products is almost overwhelming. HCPs want and need help to navigate it quickly and effectively, so they can spend time treating patients rather than researching treatment options. They expect sales reps to understand their medical practice needs, to tailor information accordingly, and to share their goal to improve patients' lives quickly and cost-effectively. By helping HCPs to access the right information via their preferred communication channels, a digitally-literate sales rep can be a valuable navigator in the journey to improving patient outcomes.

Getting multichannel sales right

It's not easy to put in place the right multichannel sales approach, so pharma needs strategic support in helping the sales rep to do this. The challenge is not

just choosing the right mix of channels, but understanding how those channels work together, with effective content, to create a harmonious experience for the HCP in treating patients, and contribute to positive outcomes for pharma. The most effective channels to support the salesforce will remain largely consistent across countries and customer types (email, detailing, websites); however they need to be utilised as part of a strategy that delivers real value to the customer, and ultimately the patient, to provide any real return on investment.

'The challenge is understanding how channels work together, with effective content, to create a harmonious experience'

"One of the biggest mistakes that we see commercial teams make is to think about digital channels as just another way to 'contact' HCPs," says Andrew Binns, SVP strategy and planning at Ashfield. There is a growing realisation within the industry that sales reps should be incentivised based on more significant measures of engagement with their customers.

"While sales remains the absolute measure of success for any sales team, we have seen companies starting to move away from outdated and misleading metrics such as 'number of sales calls' to measure salesforce effectiveness. That principle is being applied to both our field-based employees



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and rapidly growing teams of virtual reps," adds Colin Watson, managing director of Ashfield Commercial in the UK. The shift is giving much richer insight to inform ongoing strategy.

"Digital channels are no different," continues Binns. "They offer engaging and innovative ways to interact with HCPs, and their effectiveness should be judged by their contribution towards a co-ordinated and reactive multichannel sales approach, and not simply by the number of sales messages they have helped to put in front of the HCP."

By combining the most effective channels with the right content, companies can begin to construct multichannel strategies that complement the sales rep to create meaningful experiences for their customers, right across the product lifecycle.

Digital literacy

A knowledgeable, loyal and digitally-literate sales rep will continue to be particularly valuable for newly-launched products and those in a crowded marketplace. It's expected that HCPs will increasingly go to other channels for long-established and LoE products, where product awareness is already high. It's essential to

understand what this means in terms of customers' needs, and to have appropriate plans in place to satisfy them. There isn't a 'one size fits all' approach. For example, a good self-service portal may be effective at delivering basic information for an older drug among the GP customer segment, but an appropriately motivated and supported retail salesforce - whether field-based or virtual - could prolong sales of the same drug by targeting retail pharmacists. For this reason, it is imperative that internal priorities and capabilities are considered alongside channel reach, when deciding how to augment your salesforce with digital resources.

The key is to get an adaptive strategy in place that acknowledges the role of the rep as the human information conductor for the healthcare professional, while recruiting and equipping reps who are able to add value in an increasingly digital world.



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¹ <http://web.bma.org.uk/pressrel.nsf/wall/1720ABD16578822D80257E22002F7325?OpenDocument>

² <http://www.mmm-online.com/features/engaging-hcps-rep-and-a-hard-place/article/404573/>

³ HCPs: "We Want Partnerships with Pharma." An eyeforpharma whitepaper, September 2015