



WORDS BY *Jan van den Burg*

DEATH OF A SALESMAN?

To thrive across
the new terrain
the role of sales
representative must
evolve rapidly.

M

uch has been written about the supposed ‘death of the sales representative’. Digital disruption, declining representative access to physicians, and the increasing appetite of healthcare providers for readily available digital information have led some industry observers to suggest that the traditional field sales role might soon become obsolete. But while the role of the sales representative is certainly changing, the industry shift towards intelligent engagement means it may prove more valuable than ever.

Healthcare professionals want pharma to engage with them on a more immediate and in-depth level than ever before. HCP expectations, coupled with a shift across the industry towards customer centricity, are compelling communications teams to tailor engagement to each customer’s needs and anticipate how they will want to consume information.

“Gone are the days when we could just sit down with somebody for 45 minutes and detail them with a paper sales aid,” says Dan Gandor, Head of Digital Accelerator at Takeda. “It’s about reaching them online, offline, face-to-face, when they want it, how they want it.”

For field representatives, this presents an opportunity to deepen the relationship with their customers and broaden points of engagement with the HCP. Historically, if an HCP asked for a piece of information to be sent by email, a representative’s only option would have been to push for another face-to-face meeting to deliver that information.

Leveraging other channels, such as approved email or remote detail, means the representative can deliver on the request from the HCP, which, in turn, drives a better customer experience. Kara Zubey, Senior Director of HCP Engagement at GSK, explains: “The customer is expecting more of them, and they also want to *be* more for their customers. They want to be able to answer their questions and have information at their fingertips.”

Responding to the needs of customers with relevant, timely information, however, is just the start. The true value of multichannel platforms

is in the insight gleaned from HCP interaction with the various touch points – and that is where representatives can really enhance their currency. In a well-orchestrated, multichannel interaction, the frequency of engagement can increase by thinking carefully about when face-to-face interaction would make sense, versus a digital exchange.

This approach to intelligent engagement is the most dramatic shift in the role of the representative, as Zubey explains: “To be able to carry through a conversation not only between calls, but also between interactions that are happening on a digital level, sales representatives need to understand how their conversation is intertwined with all the other touch points. That’s a very different model than historically, where it’s really been face-to-face selling as the primary channel.”

Alex Azar, former President of Lilly USA and former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, notes that, rather than side-lining representatives, this new digital model puts them firmly at the centre. “I really think that the sales representative becomes a critical part,” he says. “That does mean there are a lot of changes that can and should happen, as we think about technology in building a suite of services around representatives.”

Glen Tate, Senior Director of IT at Medac Pharma, agrees. “What digital disruption allows us to do is enhance what the representative is doing,” he says. “We can use digital technology to integrate marketing. We can take items that sales operations have created and push that back to marketing, and then integrate sales representatives into all three elements.”

If today’s representatives are key to joining the dots between digital tools and platforms, however, they must learn to read between the lines. Their role is becoming more subtle, requiring them to understand the finer nuances of influencing the HCP. This needs to leverage the information and insight available to them, as well as their personal understanding of that HCP; their attitude, behaviour and values.

Ultimately, it’s about building trust, says Rick Priem, Global CRM Manager of Nestlé Health Sciences. “I don’t believe that today, physicians necessarily look to a representative as the sole source of information,” he explains. “But, rather, the sole source of their *access* to information. The representative who can provide that access is the will be successful.”

The amount of information available to HCPs is growing at an incredible rate. In an ever-more complex digital landscape, the field representative will continue to play a key role in navigating that information to find what the HCP needs, in a quick and convenient manner.

“The sales professional is, to multi-billion dollar pharma companies, the broker of capabilities,” says Azar. “In that physician’s office, they’re the face of a massive global company and all the services it offers.”

So, while the function of today’s representative may be evolving from seller to navigator of information, it’s clear that the role will remain critical to the relationship between healthcare and pharma. In short, it seems, the death of the pharma sales rep has been greatly exaggerated. ¶

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NATURAL SELECTION

By 2020,
67% of HCPs
will be ‘digital natives’
– QUALIFIED SINCE THE
INTERNET WENT MAINSTREAM

**THREE-QUARTERS
OF DOCTORS**
USE SEARCH ENGINES
weekly or more often

50% of GPs
USE DIGITAL LIFE SCIENCES
RESOURCES, SUCH AS
PRODUCT INFORMATION.

Source: Valtech

