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How to Right Size an Oversized Sales Force

By Frank Johnson

In the late 90s, when Big Pharma's bean counters concluded that a sales call with a sample generated the highest ROI for marketing dollars, a legion of pharmaceutical sales representatives was born.

The legion grew as Pharma front-loaded promotion in order to pull the product life cycle forward and maximize the value inherent in a drug's patent life. Risk sharing among companies made the number of sales representatives swell even more, with multiple sales forces (both intra- and inter- company) selling the same drug mirrored down to the territorial level.

All of this has led to the situation we have today: More and more sales representatives trying to meet with doctors who have less and less time — and inclination — to meet with them.

Now Pfizer, among others, is laying off thousands of sales representatives. Is this the end of the Big Pharma sales representative? Or could we see a "right sizing" that will keep the sales representative as one ingredient in a more diverse marketing mix?

The sales call can still be a productive marketing channel, so instead of over-reacting let's look at how we could fix the problem through right sizing:

1. Give your representatives more products: They can handle more than two products. Create specialty representatives. Align them by medical specialty or give them the entire product line and the call list for every non-specialist physician in their territories.
2. Give your representatives the responsibility of *being* your company in a specific territory: If more companies did this, the number of representatives vying for the doctors' attention would decrease. When doctors are not

overrun with sales representatives, they are likely to spend more quality time with those that do call on them.

3. Enlarge territories so your representatives have more than a 250-call list: If the call list is too short, representatives can find themselves cooling their heels waiting to see a doctor they saw just two weeks before. It might take a leap of faith for companies to give representatives a 400-call list, but the upside would be doctors more likely to find the time for them when they come around every six weeks instead of every two.
4. Re-establish your sales representative's credibility with the doctors: If you do numbers 1, 2 and 3, this will follow. Doctors will come to see that your representatives know the product line and that they are your company's ambassadors.
5. Reward continued service: Sales representatives used to retire from the sales force, but this happens much less frequently now because the industry doesn't value experience and depth of knowledge. Long service builds trust from the customers. A new (mostly pretty) face every two years cannot.

None of these suggestions are revolutionary, but sometimes we just need to get back to the basics. The truth is that pharmaceutical sales representatives can be a quick and easy way for doctors to learn about what is new, and they will always find time to see representatives who have something to offer.

If you would like to share your experience in these issues, or discuss how you can ensure a successful product launch, send an email to rkeefe@tcgbiopharma.com.

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