

# From Seller to Navigator: The Changing Role of the Sales Rep

Much has been written about the supposed "death of the sales rep." Digital disruption, declining rep access to physicians<sup>1</sup>, 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 one day become obsolete. But while the role of the sales rep 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. It is estimated that by 2020, 67% of HCPs will be "digital natives." This means they will have qualified during or after the internet went mainstream, and have relied on digital interactions throughout their professional careers<sup>2</sup>. According to a recent study, nearly three-quarters of doctors use search engines weekly or more often<sup>3</sup>, and more than half use digital life sciences resources regularly, with product-related information as the most accessed website resource<sup>4</sup>.

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 – and when – 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 reps, 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 rep'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 rep can deliver on the request from the HCP, which, in turn, drives a better customer experience. Kara Zubey, senior director of HCP engagement at GlaxoSmithKline, explains, "The customer is expecting more of them, and they also want to be more for their customer. They want to be able to answer their questions. They want to have information at their fingertips."

But responding to the needs of customers with relevant, timely information is just the start. The true value of multichannel is in the insight gleaned from HCP interaction with the various touch points – and that is where reps can really enhance their value. 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 interaction.

This approach to intelligent engagement is the most dramatic shift in the role of the rep, as Zubey explains: "To be able to carry through a conversation not only between calls, but also between interactions that are happening on the 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 US Department of Health and Human Services, notes that rather than sidelining reps, this new digital model puts them firmly at the centre. "I really think that the sales rep becomes – or remains – a critical part," he says. "That doesn't mean that there aren't a lot of changes that can and should happen as we think about technology in building a suite of services around that rep – or where a rep doesn't have access, building that as a substitute."

Glen Tate, senior director of IT at Medac Pharma, agrees. "What digital disruption allows us to do is enhance what the rep is doing," he says. "We can use the digital technology to integrate marketing. We can take items that sales operations have created and push that back to marketing, and then integrate sales reps into all three of those things."

But if today's reps are key to joining the dots between digital tools and platforms, they must also learn to read between the lines. Their role is becoming increasingly subtle, requiring them to understand the finer nuances of influencing the HCP. This understanding needs to leverage the information and insight available to them, as well as their personal understanding of that HCP – their attitude, behaviour and values. These various information sources need to be applied in the right way. And that's where the human factor comes into play. Consider an online-only digital transaction, such as a travel-booking site. If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the service, you more than likely leave that site and find an alternative. You feel no loyalty to that initial provider – predominantly because there's no human involved in the interaction.

Ultimately, it's about understanding the customer and building trust, says Rick Priem, global CRM manager of Nestlé Health Sciences. "I don't believe personally that today, physicians necessarily look to a rep to be the sole source of their information," he explains. "But, rather, the sole source of their access to information. The rep who can provide that access is the rep who's going to be successful – and the company that's going to be successful. So the more tools that we provide them that can do that, that is how we believe we are going to become that trusted advisor."

It's a valid point. The amount of information available to HCPs is growing at an incredible pace, and the difficulty of accessing information

is increasing at the same pace. In an ever-more complex digital landscape, the field rep will continue to play a key role in navigating all that information to find what the HCP needs in a quick and convenient manner.

“The sales professional is, to these multi-billion-dollar, many-thousand-people pharmaceutical companies, that broker of capabilities,” says Azar. “They’re the face of this massive global company to that physician’s office, for the massive amount of services and capabilities and information available from that company, if done well.”

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

## REFERENCES

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