

# Let them fly

## Implementing a development continuum for real-world sales training

by Rickey Mehta, Managing Director,  
RM Consulting International

In the movie “The Big Kahuna,” a salesman played by Kevin Spacey mentors a fresh recruit at a sales conference. “You’re going to throw me in the water and see if I can swim,” the young man says. “No,” Spacey replies. “We’re going to throw you off a cliff and see if you can fly.”

Today, many pharmaceutical firms are unintentionally hurling their new sales reps over the edge. Asking sales reps to implement customer strategies they are unprepared for can undermine even the best marketing efforts. But pharmaceutical firms that structure their training and coaching functions around a rep

**Asking sales representatives to implement customer strategies they are unprepared for can undermine even the best marketing efforts.**

development continuum get quick results from new reps. In addition, by aligning marketing and sales initiatives, pharmaceutical firms build sales forces that can more effectively execute customer strategies.

### The current pharma sales environment

Over the last ten years, the pharmaceutical sales job has become more difficult and complex. Competition is increasing due to huge growth in sales forces, decreasing product differentiation and exclusivity periods, and fewer new product introductions. New analytic techniques encourage more complex sales and marketing strategies. Reps must coordinate multiple sales channels and



maintain access to increasingly overwhelmed customers. Yet pharmaceutical sales reps are younger and more inexperienced than ever, and they are being asked to produce results more quickly.

### A new approach to training

To ensure maximum sales effectiveness, firms must redesign rep training and provide the tools sales managers need to be successful coaches. Marketing strategies must align with the needs and capabilities of the sales force.

**Training redesign.** Keeping reps from going over the cliff starts with training. Traditional sales training departments have focused primarily on product knowledge and regulatory compliance, often neglecting other fundamental needs of the new sales rep. In fact, the most effective sales reps often score lowest on product knowledge. Why are they successful? Because they have mastered critical sales skills that many reps aren’t taught in

training: relationship building, account management and meeting customer needs.

### Real-world training.

Redesigning training programs to focus on “real-world” interactions with the customer helps reps become more productive more quickly. One example of a real-world interaction is the sales call role-play. In traditional training, reps at some major firms still practice delivering the “ideal” detail – often lasting 10 to 15 minutes. In recent years, busy physicians have shortened the typical detail to two minutes. The best training programs teach reps to deliver effective one-to-two-minute details by role-playing with doctors.

Often, the physician detail is the easiest part of a sales call. Increasingly, gatekeepers restrict access to physicians. One coach recently observed a rep who made 10 office visits, but made it past the gatekeeper only once to speak to a physician. While this rep had excellent product knowledge, there was rarely a chance to put it to work. Accessing the customer, learning the customer’s real needs and developing a relationship that is valuable to both participants are all critical, mandatory skills that sales reps must be taught.

**Staying current.** To make sure reps are adequately prepared to thrive in a changing marketplace, firms must develop training programs with rep and first-line manager input. Using surveys, field travel and cross-functional teams helps firms identify key training gaps and possible solutions. Just as important, trainers need time with reps to remain current on the changing responsibilities of sales reps, the changing needs of customers and how it all affects their approach to training.

## By considering the abilities of the sales force when designing sales and marketing strategies, firms can improve the customer experience and boost sales.

**The development continuum.** The one-size-fits-all approach to training reps also limits rep effectiveness. New reps have different backgrounds, skills and training needs. The best firms assess and train reps on a development continuum to advance reps through several competency levels when they demonstrate readiness.

**Training methodology.** By working together, sales trainers and sales managers can determine appropriate combinations of classroom training, mentoring and coaching for reps at each development level. This process starts with evaluating each rep to determine his or her competency level, because reps must master the skills and behaviors at each development level before proceeding to the next. Best-in-class firms use a variety of techniques, such as classroom learning, peer mentoring, manager coaching and e-learning, to help reps progress along the development continuum.

**Timing of training.** Timing is another critical training consideration. In a typical four- to six-week training course, reps are deluged with so much information that they often retain only 15% to 25% of it. Reps can learn basic skills in classroom simulations. More advanced skills cannot be effectively taught or coached until the rep has some meaningful field experience. Training delivered over the course of one to two years can increase rep effectiveness at key stages of development. Staging the training along the development continuum helps reps become more effective faster by mastering basic skills before being expected to apply the more advanced ones.

### Good reps need good coaches

Ongoing coaching is critical to reinforcing classroom training and supporting rep progress along the development continuum. Following classroom training, the first-line sales manager becomes the critical enabler of sales rep effectiveness. Unfortunately, most district sales managers receive little if any training in coaching and developing reps.

The first step of developing an effective coach is to refine the sales manager's job description.

Firms should formally incorporate coaching and rep development into the first-line manager's roles and responsibilities, and train managers in key coaching skills. After they are trained, first-line managers can participate directly in the design of the rep training curriculum. How many times have first-line managers complained about "retraining" reps to make the transition from classroom training to field selling? Aligning training and coaching functions helps identify appropriate responsibilities respectively and maximize the effectiveness of new reps.

### Align marketing strategies with sales

Finally, firms must ensure that marketing strategies are tailored to the capabilities of the sales forces that will execute them. Recently, a top 20 pharmaceutical firm established a new sales force to launch two new products. The marketing department developed sophisticated targeting and frequency strategies. Six months into the launch, sales were lagging for a number of reasons. First, sales reps didn't understand the targeting strategy. Next, achieving frequency goals was difficult for new reps who were inexperienced in routing. Finally, reps couldn't overcome access barriers to key customers. When sales initially fell short of the goal, reps abandoned the targeting and frequency strategies to call on non-target physicians in a desperate attempt to "get scripts any way we can." While the marketing strategies were probably sound, this inexperienced sales force wasn't ready to implement them.

By considering the abilities of the sales force when designing sales and marketing strategies, firms can improve the customer experience and boost sales. Today that often means simplifying customer strategies to ensure successful sales execution.

In an effort to serve as many customer segments as possible, marketing managers often create multiple programs that must be implemented or coordinated by the sales force. An inexperienced rep coordinating several programs, each with a separate participation goal, often loses focus. To keep participation numbers up, unfocused reps often

attempt to sign up physicians for programs that weren't designed for them. This leads to three inadvertent results:

- Programs are ineffective because they don't reach the intended customers.
- Reps view marketing programs as burdens rather than sales enablers.
- Physician-representative relationships suffer because the rep focuses on meeting activity goals rather than delivering value for key customers.

To ensure that the sales force can implement customer strategies, marketing and sales must collaborate on development of marketing programs, beginning by assessing the field force talent mix. Are most reps at the "independent" and "in training" competency levels, or is the sales force composed mostly of "experienced" and "sales leader" reps? Is experience evenly distributed across the sales force so that inexperienced reps are teamed with experienced mirrors? Until sales and marketing have evaluated the relative abilities of the sales force, it will be difficult to design customer strategies that will be effectively implemented.

### A formula for success

With the proper tools, new sales reps need not fear falling off cliffs, nor should pharmaceutical firms fear placing their most valued customers in the hands of their least experienced employees. Designing training, coaching and marketing plans around the capabilities of a sales team helps firms get maximum return on their sales investment. PR

*Rickey Mehta founded Wilmette, IL-based RM Consulting International in 1996. With a background in electrical engineering and a computer science degree from Yale University, Mehta has devoted his professional life to providing both qualitative and quantitative solutions to the healthcare industry. For nearly 20 years, Mehta has pioneered tools and techniques to improve healthcare sales and marketing. For further information, contact RM Consulting at (847) 251-2146.*

