Improving Sales Force Effectiveness with Digital Technology Part 1: eLearning

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Pharmaceutical companies depend on their sales force to build strong relationships with physicians. However, a Forrester report stated that traditional detailing has 'reached the end of its rope'. The report stated that doctors generally don't trust sales reps and are increasingly not seeing them. In contrast, the total US sales force of the top 40 pharmaceutical companies has approximately doubled in the last 5 years to around 63,000 (1999 figures), which is in stark contrast to the 15% growth in traditional detail visits, according to the report.

The conflicting sales force growth and contraction of sales force time spend with customers is accentuated by the increasing number of products to detail. Companies have to prioritise their products and ensure that key messages differentiate their products in the limited and decreasing time that sales reps spend with physicians. This has resulted in forward thinking pharmaceutical companies to investigate new ways of assisting the sales reps to gain access to physicians, influence physicians in a fair and balanced way, and increase prescriptions. There are several ways that new technology is being used to influence these areas. The most popular current areas are:

- eLearning
- eDetailing
- eCRM
- eCME
- Mobile applications.

This series of articles will examine one of these areas each month. It will assess the important considerations when implementing these systems as well as outlining a recent pharmaceutical case study and typical results obtained utilizing these systems. This month, the focus is eLearning.

Part 1: eLearning

It is not unusual for a large pharmaceutical company to employ around 5000 sales reps. The turnover and replacement costs are high – annual turnover rates are around 15% and annual sales training costs approximately $100,000 per new sales representative, with an average replacement period of 8 weeks. In their first year, a sales rep will often spend 6 weeks in training. Further training is required to keep sales reps up-to-date with new product launches and learning about new detailing pieces. This is all time away from detailing to customers, which means lost revenue. Increased efficiency in sales force training is rapidly becoming a top priority. The ever-increasing complexity of new products and powerful competitive launches, underscore the need for new training methods and tools for sales reps to enable them to compete more effectively.

eLearning is showing impressive results: sales force time out of the field is reduced significantly (20-30%) and time to sales effectiveness is also significantly increased (40-50%), thereby reducing time to peak sales. eLearning can also assist CRM, in addition to reducing the costs of launches and 'plan of action' meetings. It also guarantees that the sales force has immediate access to all information requirements to stay up-to-date and competitive.

So, what is eLearning? eLearning is using Internet-enabled technologies to equip the sales force with new knowledge in the fastest and most effective way. It is often in the form of an interactive portal for geographically dispersed sales reps to plan product learning, have help from tutors online, and interact and learn – either individually or as a group. These types of systems can be housed on the pharmaceutical company Intranet or be hosted on an external portal using an application service provider (ASP) model, therefore bypassing any requirements for additional internal software and technology infrastructure.

The eLearning sessions can be many variations of two basic formats. The first is independent of place and occur interactively (input from both trainer and sales force individuals with video links) in real time over the Internet or Intranet. This format usually has voice-over IP, high-quality picture quality as well as recording ability. The second format allows the training to be independent of both time and place. The sales force can train at times that suit them best. Discussion boards can be part of the package allowing opportunities to motivate information interchange. Online tutors, also known as 'eMentors', are also used to facilitate and moderate group discussions, help users, summarise salient points and manage online documents.

Professor Sa'ad Medhat, Vice President, eLearning and Knowledge Management, Futuremedia, Visiting Professor at Bournemouth University, and Guest Professor at Bath University's School of Management, suggested a checklist for companies to consider when planning effective eLearning systems:

- Provide personalised learning plans for each learner
- Ensure certification or confirmation of study is available
- Combine real time interactive and independent learning facilities
- Allow scheduling of learning resources and eMentors time
- Ensure ability to enrol and register individuals
- Provide means of measuring competency levels
- Provide skills gaps analysis on training requirement against job function
- Include ability for task planning and notification
- Provide ability to deliver security with privilege access levels
- Ensure compliance to AICC, SCORM eLearning industry standards
- Make the portal customised and branded to give the pharmaceutical company brand image
- Integrate it with existing applications such as enterprise resource profiling, HR and CRM systems.

In a recent eLearning deployment in a large global pharmaceutical company, the R&D, product development teams and sales force were involved in the use of a system simultaneously. Information from clinical trials was disseminated to product development teams to ensure direct communication with the clinical trial teams, as well as to the sales force to help their understanding of the product features and benefits over time and therefore be more effective in communicating the product attributes to their physicians at product launch. This eLearning system significantly reduced the sales reps time out of the field and accelerated the time to sales effectiveness, thereby reducing the time to peak sales and increasing revenue. Before the implementation of this eLearning system, the sales force would not have received information in the pre-launch phases, only immediately prior to the launch. Therefore they would not have product 'ownership' and the time to become thoroughly familiar with the product would have been lengthened.

eLearning is assisting pharmaceutical companies business objectives including:

- Decreased time for new sales rep training (and can be linked to staff performance systems)
- Geographically dispersed learning
- Improved logistics of training sessions (travel time, accommodation)
- Decreased costs
- Rapid dissemination of information and individualised help throughout the company
- Well-organized supervision of training
- Integration of training with other company systems
- A variety of different learning styles (auditory, visual, kinaesthetic)
- Improved sales force enthusiasm and morale
- Rapidly disseminate changing market information and needs.

Conclusions

eLearning systems are providing real business benefits to pharmaceutical companies that provide bottom line improvements. However, it is not a quick fix despite the impressive (and rapid) results being seen. It is important to conduct training needs analysis prior to implementing these types of systems to ensure that the culture, previous training focus, level of empowerment, and responsibility are all aligned to the new approach for maximum effectiveness. Also, it is critical to ensure that the sales force have buy-in prior to implementation to ensure success of the system.

For further help and assistance with eLearning, please contact Mednet Media http://www.mednetmedia.com in any of our offices:

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