

# The devil is in the detailing

## Doctors prescribe the best ways for pharma reps to sell to them

A novel may not always be the best point of reference for a real-life professional challenge; however, the situations facing pharmaceutical sales representatives bring to mind some of the frustrations confronting the characters in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. The WWII airmen in Heller's novel follow the rules and strive to complete their missions so they can go home but illogical and inescapable rules inevitably frustrate their efforts. They can't fight "catch-22."

Dictionary.com offers a definition of a catch-22 as, "a frustrating situation in which one is trapped by contradictory regulations or conditions." Though pharmaceutical sales reps are not facing the horrors of war, they, too, have their own set of catch-22 situations, which can frustrate their efforts to familiarize physicians with their products. The following list is certainly not exhaustive, but highlights a few of the situations that "catch" sales reps each day.

**Situation:** Physicians are busy professionals who do not have time to study the details of every new product or changes to current products. They rely on sales reps to provide them with pertinent, up-to-date information.

**Catch-22:** Physicians are busy professionals who do not have time to talk with pharmaceutical sales reps.

In one-on-one interviews and in focus groups, physicians stress the importance of both of the issues above. Pharmaceutical sales reps are an important source of new-product information, particularly for physicians whose days are jam-packed with patients and are unlikely to take part in clinical trials, or have no research institutions nearby.

*"As a physician, you don't have time to know everything ... Drug reps are essential in that regard, to expose you to new things that come onto the market."*

But the same time restraints that prohibit exhaustive study of the drugs they prescribe also limit their availability to talk with sales reps. Reps are all too familiar with the scenario of catching doctors in the hallway and racing to communicate their intended message in 60 seconds or less.

*"I don't have time to stop and talk if there's nothing new."*

**Situation:** Physicians insist that sales reps offer specific reasons why their product is better than other companies' products for the same therapy area.



By Patti Kaiser

### snapshot

Drawing from candid physician responses during research interviews, the author offers dos and don'ts for the pharmaceutical sales process.

*Editor's note: Patti Kaiser is project director with Integrated Marketing Associates, a Bryn Mawr, Pa., research firm. She can be reached at 610-527-5500 or at [pkaiser@imalink.com](mailto:pkaiser@imalink.com). To view this article online, enter article ID 20111006 at [quirks.com/articles](http://quirks.com/articles).*

**Catch-22:** Physicians insist that sales reps talk only about their own company's products rather than bashing the competition.

In looking at sales-aid data, physicians consistently ask for head-to-head data. They explain - understandably - that they need to see measurable differences between medications to help them make educated choices for their patients.

*"I want to know the head-to-head data - I'm interested in something that differentiates these medications."*

Reps don't always have head-to-head data to share but when they do have it, they have to be careful not to knock the competition. Physicians are adamant that they do not want to hear sales reps make negative comments about products from other companies.

*"I think they need to stick to their own product and not bad-mouth or say anything about the competition. That starts things off on a very bad note in my office."*

**Situation:** Physicians often find memorable visual aids helpful in learning new information quickly.

**Catch-22:** Physicians hate product sales aids and don't want to look at them.

Many physicians appreciate the simplicity and clarity that an eye-catching illustration can bring to the presentation of complex materials. During a lightning-fast detail, they are often more likely to remember a colorful graph than a block of text.

*"If you give me a picture or diagram pointing out where things are and what things are, it's very helpful to me to not only keep my attention but to explain."*

No matter how attractive or organized sales aids may be, many physicians simply do not want to see them. Judging by their self-described reactions, many physicians put up their guard as soon as they catch sight of a glossy detail piece - it provides a red flag that this smiling, friendly-looking person is about to try to sell them something. Even if that something is a product that they know and trust, no physician wants to feel persuaded by a sales pitch.

*"I don't like seeing the flashy cards*

*... I don't know any doctor that likes sales aids."*

There is one "catch" that can work in a sales rep's favor:

**Situation:** Physicians strive to use only the medications best-suited to their patients' needs and base their prescribing decisions on education, input from medical colleagues and clinical experiences.

**Catch-22:** When choosing between medications that are equally effective, safe and affordable, physicians are likely to favor the products presented by reps who have been helpful and informative.

Physicians are professionals. They have spent years learning how to best treat their patients' conditions. They have taken an oath to use their abilities and judgment to the benefit of their patients. Perhaps understandably, many are not interested in getting prescribing advice from someone who did not go to medical school.

*"I went to school. I did this work. I know the patient, so what drug I choose is going to be the one I think is the best one."*

Physicians are also people, and like most, are likely to spend more time listening to someone they enjoy being around, someone they consider a friend. They are also likely to prefer doing business with those friends whenever it is appropriate.

*"It's a business and it's a relationship business. You'd never shortchange a patient but when all else is equal, you're going to use the products of people who seem to take an interest in your practice."*

While this last "catch" is good news, sales reps must deal with ever-increasing restrictions on their options for making use of company resources to build relationships with physicians. What can pharmaceutical reps offer physicians' practices that will be valuable and memorable but will not cross the boundaries set by the PhRMA guidelines? Serious limits on gifts with any monetary value are going to force reps to focus more than ever on the personal skills that are the true basis for their effectiveness, not only

as salespeople but also as partners and useful resources for physicians' practices.

In research settings, such as one-on-one interviews and focus groups, physicians are not at all shy about expressing their opinions on what makes a pharmaceutical sales rep valuable to them:

### **Relationships**

Physicians may not have gone into medicine to make friends but they are more inclined to take time out of a busy day to talk with someone who has taken the time to get to know them, someone they recognize as colleague who can help them serve their patients. Sales reps who show an interest in the practice, who ask questions - not only about prescribing habits but also about family, hobbies, sports - those who get to know the physicians and the staff are, in turn, more likely to be known and appreciated by those in the offices they visit.

### **Respect for their time**

All sales reps know that time is NOT on their side when it comes to trying to see physicians. There is never enough time for them to do what they need to do. Physicians spend their days trying to squeeze in enough time to see their scheduled patients and they particularly appreciate sales reps who take notice of just how busy they are when they call. Being considerate enough to say, "I'll come back later," may buy a rep more time with a physician another day.

### **Respect for the staff**

Physicians can be very protective of their workday "family" and expect sales reps to treat the office managers, nurses and PAs with courtesy and respect. In addition to making a favorable impression on physicians, taking time to get to know the office staff broadens and strengthens the overall relationship with a practice. Having friends in the front office may provide opportunities for discovering new ways to serve the practice. Reps may also benefit by taking time to familiarize staff members with their products, giving

a full-office detail rather than focusing only on physicians.

**Reliable information**

Whether they like it or not, physicians rely on sales reps for information about their products. Because physicians are always pressed for time and they regularly receive information about multiple products from a variety of salespeople, they expect reps to provide updates: thoroughly but quickly; without bashing the competition; that will differentiate the product;

and in a way that assures them that the rep is NOT trying to tell them how to practice medicine!

**Focuses on their sales force**

Pharmaceutical companies make regular use of marketing research to test sales materials, hoping to maximize the effectiveness of the information about their products. But these companies can also benefit from research that focuses on their sales force. One-on-one telephone interviews, or even small-group conference calls, can be

worked into sales reps' busy schedules, to help find out how materials are being used, what practices and attitudes contribute to the success of top performers and what might be lacking in the approach of the lower performers.

Increased familiarity with the day-to-day experiences of the sales force can help managers identify training issues and potential improvements in sales tools that might help keep reps from being caught in some of the frustrating situations that confront them. | Q