RICHARDSON SALES PERFORMANCE
Growth, simplified

Gaining Virtual Access to Healthcare Professionals

The barriers between sales professionals and physicians are growing.

The intensified challenges of gaining access to healthcare professionals (HCPs) today is largely attributed to the upheaval of the global pandemic and the rise of the virtual engagement.

Many healthcare sales representatives find themselves tapping into new skills not used in healthcare sales before. These skills include creating demand and stimulating the physician’s interest in an effort to earn a call. COVID-19 is a major contributing factor in this shift and adds to other systemic issues that have always been in play.

Consider this: research from Annals of Internal Medicine reported by **Deloitte** shows that “80% of physicians are at capacity or overextended.” The same body of research shows that a similar proportion of physicians occasionally or frequently suffer from burnout. It is not surprising that physicians are burdened by their considerable responsibilities given the doubling time of all medical knowledge. Data from **Transactions of the American Clinical and Climatological Association** shows that in 1950, medical knowledge doubled every 50 years. By 1980, doubling occurred every 7 years. Today, it is estimated that doubling occurs every 73 days.

This rate of change means that most physicians must absorb volumes of information to simply remain "current" in their field. Therefore, any outreach from a sales professional, especially to take part in a virtual engagement, represents an interruption to the physicians' growing pace. As a result, sales professionals must reconsider their approach to earning the HCP's interest. After all, there are only so many sample calls, label changes, or safety updates that one can depend on to gain virtual access. They must become less of a "seller" and more of an ally to the HCP. They must become a resource. To do so, sales professionals must front-load their efforts so that the first outreach call sparks the physician's interest.

Here, we offer three ways in which sales professionals can do so. These three strategies work together to form a single, incisive approach to capturing the HCP's attention.

Think Beyond the Solution

Too often, sales professionals start with the solution. That is, they begin with an explanation of the solution capabilities they believe will resonate with the customer. Sparking the HCP's interest, however, requires the reverse approach. The sales professional must begin with an exploration of the customer's core needs and challenges. It is easy to see why this more effective approach is ignored; the sales professional has a deep knowledge of the solution and therefore can easily represent themselves as a wealth of information by leveraging readily available detail.

This pitfall is common and carries the name "availability heuristic." Simply, the availability heuristic is our innate tendency to believe that something is important if it can be recalled easily. Psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman won the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences due, in part, to his work exploring this powerful bias. The problem with the availability heuristic is that it fools us into believing what was true "over there" is also true "over here." In the context of selling, a sales professional may apply the same reasoning that worked in one sale to an entirely different opportunity. It is critical for sales professionals to remember that the availability heuristic is often at work without our knowledge. Moreover, "there is much evidence showing that, once an uncertain situation has been perceived or interpreted in a particular fashion, it is quite difficult to view it in any other way," according to **Kahneman**.

Rather than assign the solution's capabilities to the customer's challenges, sales professionals should start with the nuance of the customer's challenges and determine what aspects of the solution are salient. Put simply, they must become an expert in understanding customer challenges, not just the characteristics of the solution. With this approach, the sales professional will be better prepared to gain the HCP's attention with an early signaling of the key challenges. When the HCP sees that the sales professional has an understanding of the core challenges, they will be more receptive to whatever message follows.

Seek Out What the HCP Seeks Out

Understanding the customer's core needs presents a unique challenge: the sales professional needs this information to earn the customer call, and they need the call to earn this information. This scenario leaves the sales professional with the task of uncovering pertinent needs without the help of a customer conversation. The solution is to explore the data and research that is most likely to be of interest to the HCP.

To find relevant information, sales professionals must seek the journals, web sites, information, and research with which the customer engages. With this current, salient, and granular information, the sales professional can more effectively create a hinge that prompts further conversation. A hinge is a point of connection, a name of a referral, a peer-reviewed study, a current and relevant industry post, or even an event like the initiation of a new phase in testing trials. By citing a commonality, the customer will feel less distant from the sales professional. This approach is part of the credentializing process, a key step in overcoming inertia. If the customer is going to engage in a conversation, they need to know that they are speaking to an informed voice.

When sharing information learned during research, a sales professional should remember that the eventual goal is to trigger the buyer's journey. Two factors trigger the buyer's journey: a pain point and an opportunity.

A customer experiences a pain point when they encounter clinical or practice challenges, such as declining patent volume, missing quality treatment metrics, or deteriorating conditions. Customers act when factors like these threaten their objectives, culture, and goals. Customers see the effects of the pain point before they know what it is. Therefore, sales professionals can offer value by helping the customer diagnose the problem. Early involvement means that the sales professional can participate in the customer's research process. Collaboration leads to closing.

The unexpected nature of an opportunity means that customers often need new capabilities to realize its value. Opportunities arise when new markets open, regulations loosen or tighten, or margins become more favorable. While the opportunity might be clear, the way to capitalize on it might not be. Sales professionals who help customers identify opportunities benefit in two ways. First, they uncover a potential sale. Second, they demonstrate their strategic and analytic abilities by showing customers where to find more revenue. This skill is a precursor to moving the customer through the buying journey.

Build a Rapport with Professionals in the HCP's Orbit

Much of the sales professional's success resides in the activities that unfold before their first call with the customer. This is the phase of the pursuit in which the sales professional can begin to build a rapport with the people in the HCP's orbit. This approach is not only helpful, it is imperative. In nearly all cases, the sales professional will need to convince others of their value before they are granted access to the HCP.

The key is to take steps toward forming a partnership because "B2Bs win by building relationships, not selling on price," according to research from **Gallup**. The researchers learned that nearly one quarter of accounts that had "high engagement scores" with sellers grew by 20 percent or more in the following year. The key to building a relationship is focusing on mutually beneficial outcomes. This sense of shared goals must emerge from the sales professional's words and actions. Those who are a first point of contact between sales professionals and HCPs must be able to see how the solution is valuable enough to warrant the physician's time. In short, the individual controlling the HCP's availability needs some sense of the business case for the solution.

Clearly articulating the business case requires leveraging affect, rather than exhaustive explanations that undercut the effectiveness of the message. To understand the value of brevity, sales professionals should consider the power of the "affect heuristic," which tells us that people make quick assessments based on their mood. Researchers published in **The Journal of Behavioral Decision Making** explain that "people rely on affect when judging." Putting this concept to work means choosing words that will encourage the customer to develop a positive "gut feeling." Sales professionals should craft their message around positivity so that the customer will identify them and their capabilities as beneficial, rather than risky. Lead with industry-specific benefits. “Affect is a strong conditioner of preference,” conclude the researchers.

Finally, just as sales professionals need to focus on the publications, research, and current events that are of interest to the physician, they must do the same with regard to those in regular contact with the HCP. They must seek out the current research and topics that will resonate with gatekeepers, nurses, physician assistants, and specialists.

Change has intensified in recent months, and these circumstances offer more opportunities to address new needs. In fact, these changes have led to a setting in which 45% “of health executives say rapid advancements in new technologies and scientific innovations are poised to disrupt their industries,” according to research from **Accenture**. These disruptions represent a chance for sales professionals to position their solutions.

Doing so effectively means executing more research and preparation before the call. With this approach, the sales professional can more effectively and succinctly establish the HCP’s need for a conversation. Sales professionals need to think of the HCP’s challenges first and the solution second. They need to seek the research and resources that interest the HCP, and finally, they must take the perspective of those serving as the first point of contact between the sales professional and the HCP.

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