

Focus on Specialty Reps: FROM INFORMATION SOURCE TO INFORMATION CONNECTOR

There is a jump in demand for data on specialty sales areas, including oncology, biopharma, and niche therapy markets. As primary care recedes in relative importance in many — though not all — companies, large-tier companies are focusing more on high-performance specialty brands. The change is not just in scale but in kind, requiring significant operational shifts with serious implications for training.

The role of the sales representative, traditionally the primary source of information for healthcare professionals, is evolving to that of information connector. In this new role, the representative becomes the key point person for accessing a much broader range of expertise than required, or even available, in the past. Training and development leadership has an opportunity to help drive this transition and shape it for maximum business impact.

This is new territory for everyone, whether their experience is in large-, mid-tier, or specialty pharma. Selling teams now evolving bring together a range of skills, requiring training for:

- Clinical education, including disease state, diagnosis, and patient types in a customer-centric model;
- Reimbursement for managed care and business-to-business selling across the payer environment; and
- Customer service, including sample maintenance and patient education.

A New Role: Information Connector

Companies that have begun to see sales reps in this new role of information connector are also shifting the emphasis to identifying resources and opportunities in addition to physician interaction. A recent TGAs Advisors client query shows that the majority of respondents have made changes to their selling philosophy or model and sales representative curricula over the past two years, increasing training on business acumen, managed care, and strategic ac-

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count management. They are moving away from unstructured consultative selling to a more delivery-oriented approach. Some are also changing district manager and regional director curricula to focus more on coaching, business acumen, and compliance. Based on experience across all areas of commercial operations, it is expected that incentive compensation will evolve to include more qualitative measures, with training following suit.

Emphasis on Specialty Brands

The increasing emphasis on specialty brands will have a major impact on training

budgets and staffing. Benchmark data show that primary care trainers have nearly twice as many reps as specialty trainers. Specialty and hospital trainers have about 15% more hours of home study than primary care for initial training, while oncology has 20% to 25% more than specialty and hospital trainers. Looking ahead, training departments will need to plan and budget for the higher level of resources the new focus on specialty requires.

Career Pathways

Shifts in training also have implications for career pathways as representatives are expected to demonstrate higher-level account skills and resourcefulness. A small sampling of the companies we queried have instituted formalized mentor programs and career pathways for their specialty sales force but most have not yet done so.

Measuring Results

Measurement is another key area. As high-performance specialty and niche brands grow in importance, so will metrics for training. Those accustomed to measuring activity — hours, courses, exams — will increasingly be asked to measure ROI, the impact of training on the business. Putting an economic value on training raises the stakes as well as the strategic importance of training and development as companies move into the new era. **PV**

TGAs Advisors, a division of KnowledgePoint360 Group (www.knowledgepoint360.com), is a leading benchmarking and advisory services firm serving pharmaceutical commercial operations organizations.

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