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## Letters

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**C**ustomer relationship management — what does it actually mean? Depending upon the organization, this business strategy can have multiple connotations. At its very core, a CRM philosophy mandates that a company shift all thinking and processes to transform itself from product focused to customer centric. CRM can help companies increase profits and sales by better understanding who their customers are, which ones are driving the greatest profits, what their high-value customers want, and how to satisfy them.

This fundamental change within the life-sciences industry would mean significant organizational restructuring. Pharmaceutical companies are typically formed around silos — brands, therapeutic categories, divisions, etc. CRM would mandate that companies begin to implement horizontal business structures, processes, and systems across their vertical holdings. All agree that this realignment will not be easy, in fact, it may be impossible to implement enterprise-wide, but industry experts say pharmaceutical companies have to begin to share data, learnings, and processes to better serve and identify their core customer groups.

Recent technological advances can help to make this transition easier. However, CRM should not be viewed as an IT initiative, but rather as a business strategy that must be embraced at all levels of the organization — starting in the boardroom down through the call center.

According to a recent research poll conducted by Harte-Hanks Inc., one-third of top executives, representing a cross-section of vertical industries, currently implement a CRM strategy. More than four out of five companies implementing and building CRM solutions rely on the support of external software providers or consultants to help move the companies to customer-centricity. Seventy-two percent of those polled expect to invest a minimum of one year's time into the development of a CRM process, with 36% reporting that their initial efforts already have been completed. With a vast portion of the business world planning to



CRM requires the cooperation of all stakeholders within an organization for the capture and analytic use of data to be successful.

implement — or already implementing — a CRM strategy, it's not a question of whether the pharmaceutical industry must follow suit, but how soon.

CRM requires a customer-centric business philosophy and a commitment to support effective marketing, sales, and service processes across direct and indirect customer interaction channels, or touch points. The pharmaceutical business model is complex and requires sophisticated models and processes to integrate the multitude of customer touch points within an organization.

Pharmaceutical companies are very good at identifying and communicating with physicians from the sales-rep level. Physicians, however, are more than just prescribers. They can, and do, have many disparate roles, from clinical investigator to thought-leader to spokesperson.

Physicians are not the only customer a pharmaceutical company relies on for data. In the pharmaceutical industry, CRM requires the capture of data within all channels and with all stakeholders, including, but not limited to, healthcare professionals, patients, medical researchers, wholesalers, pharmacists, payers, patients — virtually anyone involved in the process.

The challenge for pharmaceutical companies is to link all of these different touch points in one customer record to drive growth through customer loyalty, persistency, and compliance.

Taren Grom  
Editor