



TO UNLOCK BIOPHARMA GROWTH, RETHINK THE ROLE OF THE SALES REP

By Stephen Waddell, Mike Marquis, Colleen Desmond, and Ken Keen

THE OBITUARY OF THE traditional pharma sales rep has been written many times during the past decade. Why does the role survive? In our experience, the most effective biopharma companies have found a way to continually reinvent the role in response to changing market dynamics. For these forward-looking companies, the days of the one-size-fits-all sales rep are long gone. The ongoing evolution of providers, payers, and the drugs themselves has given rise to a new and more complex set of customer needs and sales challenges.

To meet those needs and challenges effectively, sales reps must develop a far broader set of skills—and learn to wear many different hats. On the basis of our work with dozens of sales forces in numerous therapeutic areas, we've identified six distinct roles: *traditionalist*, *sherpa*, *economist*, *data maven*, *strategist*, and *conductor*. Some of these are outward-facing roles through which sales reps help a wide variety of customers make better decisions. Others help the sales reps themselves do a

better job of managing their territories. Let's look at each role more closely:

- **The Traditionalist.** The more things change, the more they stay the same. The traditional activities—detailing and educating health care providers on biopharma products and the diseases they treat—are still important today. Despite the proliferation of online data sources, most doctors say that they still consider sales reps highly valuable sources of medical information. In therapeutic areas with diverse treatment options or when a disease is not well understood, the role of the sales rep as a traditionalist—with strong abilities as a detailer—remains as critical as ever.
- **The Sherpa.** Each therapeutic area—and sometimes each product—presents a unique set of barriers that can make it difficult for doctors to adopt and prescribe the best solution. Formulary restrictions present the most common barriers, but there are others, including restrictive distribution networks, new

ways to administer treatments, and potential side effects. The sales rep in the sherpa role helps doctors and their office staff navigate and overcome these barriers (in a compliant manner), just as the Sherpas of the Himalayas help climbers ascend and descend the highest mountains.

- **The Economist.** The role that pricing plays in a buyer's or prescriber's decision-making process can vary considerably. For drugs sold to group-purchasing organizations or directly to a hospital or clinic, cost may be the primary consideration. Doctors, payers, and hospital administrators must weigh cost against efficacy and, increasingly, economics against clinical outcomes. When cost is an important consideration, sales reps must be adept at addressing economic sensitivities while adhering to local legal and compliance requirements.
- **The Data Maven.** Pharma sales reps have always relied on data to guide their call planning, the frequency of doctor visits, and the messages they'll focus on. The biopharma industry is data rich, largely owing to the availability of doctor-level prescribing data. Unfortunately, the complexity and fragmentation of available data sets are growing, particularly as specialty pharmacy and direct-to-hospital sales become more common. As a result, sales reports deliver fewer insights that sales reps can use to inform their territory-level sales strategies and tactics. The sales rep as a data maven fills this gap by knowing the strengths and weaknesses of different data sources, where to go for what information, understanding how to connect the dots, and excelling at pattern recognition.
- **The Strategist.** A truism among biopharma sales reps—"if you've seen one geography, you've seen one geography"—is more relevant now than ever before. The mix of payers, providers, hospital systems, and influence networks in each location is a unique,

complex, and ever-evolving ecosystem that requires increasingly strategic and customized selling. The sales rep as strategist can decipher what it takes to be successful in detailing and driving adoption of pharmaceutical products in any location, whether it's Boston, Boise, the Bay Area, or Birmingham.

- **The Conductor.** Biopharma companies have recognized that one way to address what seems to be an always-expanding list of customer needs is the creation of new, many of them field-based roles. Sales reps, key account managers, reimbursement managers, patient support specialists, medical liaisons, regional payer managers, and field health economics representatives are just some of today's players. This proliferation of roles has an obvious downside—greater complexity for the customer and more demands on their time. The sales rep as conductor takes the lead in driving compliant collaboration, coordination, and communication across the enterprise, ensuring that customers' needs are being addressed as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Over the course of a product's life cycle, each of these six roles can come into play, but not every disease, therapeutic area, or location needs all six at once. The right mix depends on the territory, strategic objectives, competitive landscape, and specific needs of different customers. For instance, one pharma company launched a number of new products in a short period of time while trying to maintain the lagging share of its flagship product. Analysis revealed that the company's possible customers had a variety of needs. For the flagship product, customers needed an economist to explain the long-term clinical and economic benefits of the treatment. For the new products, customers needed a sherpa who could overcome the barriers to prescribing and product adoption.

These insights had far-reaching implications for sales training and development. By customizing training to specific customer needs, the company was able to stabilize

share losses in the flagship product and double the sales of two new products over the course of one year.

Given the changes in the industry landscape and the need for sales reps to wear many hats, we recommend that biopharma companies rethink their overall approach to training. Since upskilling an entire field

team in all six areas is infeasible, companies must prioritize the roles and upgrade the capabilities of the frontline sales managers to better coach their teams. Pharma companies and commercial organizations that see the need for new approaches and mindsets will be able to navigate the changing terrain more successfully—and gain a competitive edge.

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