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TRAIN ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Scientific knowledge must be combined with relationship-building skills training to prepare representatives for the unique pharmaceutical sales environment; additionally, training must be continued throughout a representative's career. BY STEVE NILES

Shrinking share of voice is making pharmaceutical product detailing increasingly difficult, but steps can be taken at the training stage to help prepare sales representatives for the new reality. Pharmaceutical sales representatives have only a small window of opportunity to make an impression with physicians. Although strong scientific and technical knowledge is vital for establishing credibility and providing value, many companies are failing to provide the relationship-building skills representatives require to understand physicians' needs. Sales representatives must develop listening and appreciation skills and learn how to efficiently probe and ask questions so that messages can be tailored to individual prescribers. Although many companies are falling short by only providing intensive training for newly hired sales representatives, new technologies can help build programs that can extend that training to every phase in a rep's career.

More than 85,000 industry sales reps operate in the United States, according to business-information company Cutting Edge Information (cuttingedgeinfo.com).

These analysts say the representatives who innovate and demonstrate their value as conveyors of medical information, as therapeutic-area experts, and as business advisors to physicians' practices earn themselves priority access over competitors. By providing reliable, up-to-date information, sales representatives will build lasting, trusting relationships with their physicians. But the traditional training techniques used by many pharmaceutical companies are failing to prepare sales representatives to deal adequately with the short detailing sessions allotted to them, according to Steven K. Budd, president, global sales and marketing services, PDI Inc. (pdi-inc.com). PDI is a provider of outsourced sales solutions.

Companies are starting to adopt these techniques. "What we've seen these days is a move away from the robot-like deliver-the-message-and-leave-type selling models of the 1990s, where reps were more or less message boards for product," says Garry O'Grady, VP, sales practice, **Campbell Alliance** (campbellalliance.com). "For the most part, companies are trying to move away and present reps in a slightly more sophisticated way and give them the tools to engage physicians in more-compelling conversations. By developing selling skills training that allows for open-ended, free-flowing conversation with physicians that eventually allows representatives to home in on exactly what that physician is thinking or doing vis-a-vis their product or their product class, companies are gaining a strategic advantage."

Technologies are emerging to make continuous training of sales reps an easier process. "We're seeing more and more sales forces where a higher percentage of the sales force has access to broadband or high-speed Internet connections, which has enabled training departments to provide content to them via the Web," Mr. Rauschkolb says. "Some of the synchronous technologies that are out there, such as Centra or WebEx, have also made it easier because now, rather than having to fly people into a central location for components of a meeting, it can be done in a synchronous way that allows them to stay close to their territory and return to their territory immediately after the meeting."

Sales trainers with ExecuProv put the focus on role-playing. "We work the same way an improv director would work with an actor and use their best talents and get rid of weaknesses," says Cherie Kerr, founder of **ExecuProv** (execuprov.com), a provider of presentation and communications skills training. "When we do any kind of sales training, we take a look at each person within the group ... and make sure that we're using every bit of potential that they have and getting rid of things that are really impeding their professional delivery system."

Trainees in an ExecuProv class are encouraged to focus on the who and the why of the detail, rather than the what. "It's a very different approach that we use at ExecuProv because it's all about training your mental muscles to be quicker, more agile, more fluid, go with the flow, be in the moment," Ms. Kerr says. "To react and respond to the last thing said or last idea held, your listening skills have to be finely honed as well as to be able to stay in that moment with that particular customer and give them what they need and want."