Business Acumen and the New Sales Leader

By Scott Moldenhauer and Bruce Mathewson

As the challenges of managed care, physician access and healthcare reform mount, sales leaders must quickly move beyond traditional selling methods. They must find new ways to achieve ongoing sales growth.

One term generating buzz within pharma and biotech is business acumen. Business acumen models abound, but finding models that create continuous sales growth remains an elusive task.

Systems Approach to Selling

Sales leaders understand that sales growth can no longer be achieved by focusing exclusively on the physician. While average representatives continue to pound away at physicians with a one-dimensional product approach, top performers take a "systems" approach to selling. They have learned to expand their circle of influence.

Best-in-class representatives intuitively understand the need to tailor their approach and messages to meet the needs of each stakeholder within the physician's office. But how do sales leaders pass the talent of their top-performing representatives to their more average-performing sales representatives?

Part of the solution resides with sales leaders and their desire to be keenly aware of messages that resonate with each stakeholder group. Frontline managers observe hundreds of interactions every year. Patterns emerge from these observations. They know which messages work best with each stakeholder group — including reimbursement coordinators, nurses, gatekeepers and office managers.

Advanced Messaging Skills

Representatives with business acumen have developed more complex messaging skills. For every sales leader who complains of stagnate sales, the same leader can readily identify pockets of exceptional growth. These bright spots are typically occupied by representatives who have learned to overcome the multitude of new selling challenges by becoming more persuasive during face-to-face customer interactions.

This is not to say that representatives with business acumen skills have abandoned traditional selling skills. On the contrary, best-in-class representatives continue to capture the physician's attention, present with professionalism and move the physician to the next level of prescribing.

These representatives are typically more talented when utilizing new resources (e.g., co-pay reduction programs) and better at selling through managed care objections. Moreover, the old-school product focus has been replaced by a focus on product benefits from the perspective of the physician, the patient and the overall healthcare system. Consequently, messages are more credible and compelling.

Training Business Acumen

Business acumen represents a promising new way of creating sales results, but how do you train business acumen? If only a handful of representatives intuitively understand business acumen skills, how do you transfer their skills to others?

Perhaps the first step to training business acumen program is to define what "business acumen" means to you and your organization. To date, most out-of-the-box business acumen programs take one of two formats — follow the healthcare dollar or strategic planning.

Representatives who have the ability to follow the healthcare dollar will better understand reimbursement realities, but it will do little to drive sales. Similarly, representatives with strategic planning skills will be better equipped to identify priority accounts, but the finer points of business acumen (e.g., advanced messaging skills) will be overlooked.

We have found principles within both organizational and social psychology to help teach the more subtle components of business acumen. These disciplines provide research-based strategies for bringing the abstract concept of "business acumen" into a concrete and teachable format. ■

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