Post pandemic collaboration challenges:
Is CRM still the solution for Pharma?

The pandemic has further accelerated the planned move towards hybrid sales representatives, digitization and omnichannel engagement. Given the speed of acceleration, it is important to ensure effective implementation of cross-functional collaboration and the supporting system implementation, learning from others. This article looks at recommendations to maximize success for pharma companies.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic was thought to be a game changer for the way pharma would engage with customers and the services the industry would provide to stay relevant. Thought to have accelerated changes to the ways that sales representatives engage with customers, through digitization and omnichannel engagement, the question posed is, did it?

If not, why did the pandemic not have the impact anticipated?
Is the technology available? If so, where did the industry stumble?
In terms of technology, we have upgraded, added multiple new features, new functionalities and forced a quick change, however, did we do it right?

This article seeks to identify and discuss some of the changes believed to be required in a post pandemic pharma world, as well as pointing out some potential areas of improvement in the way that health care professionals (HCPs) and health care stakeholders are engaged.

The hybrid sales representative

While hybrid sales representatives have been previously discussed, the pandemic marked the ‘birth of the hybrid sales representative’. Typically understood as a mixed approach to sales, a hybrid sales representative uses both traditional face-to-face methods of HCP engagement, as well as digital options, such as virtual meetings and online demos. This hybrid approach is a forced evolution of the sales representative’s competencies. The hybrid sales representative is evolving as a figure that adapts to customers desires, navigating adeptly between the analogue and the virtual world to predict customer requirements and wants.

What is required is the coordination of inputs from other cross-functional teams, leveraging marketing content to target health care professionals (HCPs). To create this omnichannel approach, well-educated and digitally mature hybrid sales representatives are required, with the same social selling skills as before.

What has become clear in the post-pandemic world, is that a high degree of flexibility and accessibility is wanted by customers and sales representatives alike. The skills and especially the responsibilities of the hybrid sales representative are vastly different from the traditional sales representative as the hybrid sales representative must be able to manage content and messages much more swiftly and independently across the channels available. National marketing plans and rigid engagement targets become obsolete if the hybrid sales representative is to manage the flexibility requested by the HCPs.

Who sits in the driver’s seat?

There are several flavors of a hybrid sales representative, from a mere “channel” among many, to the mastermind of orchestrated engagement, utilizing an omnichannel system. However, the key question that needs to be answered is who sits in the driver’s seat?

The new empowered sales representative? The role with primary responsibility for customer engagement seems an obvious choice to lead the orchestration of engagements and channels selected to bring the utmost value to customers. They are knowledgeable of the tone and sentiment of the conversation with the customer and are a natural primary vehicle for the communication between the company and the customers.

The selection of the sales representative as the conductor of the orchestration of engagements does require a significant effort in training and change management, refocusing the value creation from the single face to face engagement to the full suite of engagement options in the new hybrid space.

Furthermore, the constant adaptation around the sales representative’s perception of the customer relationship will pose a challenge as first impressions, attitudes and perceptions tend to last despite new insights. This is a key component to manage if the value of information is to provide benefit to the engagements.

Marketing as the conductor is also a viable option. Experienced with the data set brought forth by the digital capabilities, the analytical approach, and time/resources available will bring forth insights valuable to the engagement models for any segment or cohort of customers. The challenge will be to bring or sustain the focus on the individual needs of the customer and of the sales representative as the sales representative also becomes a key stakeholder in the relationship.

The change required here will be in understanding and valuing the individual customer and not letting individuality suffer too much at the expense of the rule of large samples.

The answer: cross-functional collaboration

During the last 20 years of working within sales and marketing, there has always been a mismatch or missing link. Sales and marketing are supposed to work alongside each other to ensure an aligned approach to the customers. So why do we still see that sales and marketing work in their own silos. Despite the solution being obvious, a holistic approach between marketing and sales – ultimately involving medical (as permitted by compliance) - is rarely accomplished. For this to be achieved there needs to be a collaboration between the silos, requiring systems that bridge the gap. Simply put, customer relationship management (CRM) systems need to increasingly become a collaboration tool.

This having been said, it’s important to consider the broader question of 'what does cross functional collaboration really mean?'. It is no longer as simple as sales representatives and marketers working together to achieve classic segmentation and targeting. Modern sales force approaches are much more sophisticated than the traditional representative/hybrid representative model. Senior leaders are increasingly turning towards account managers who have a more strategic role. These are normally senior employees in the company who can direct ALL company activities at a local level, in much the same way as a conductor manages an orchestra. They can leverage all elements of the marketing mix, working together to use internal assets, and examining the whole user journey to bring value to specific account opportunities. This data should be captured by CRM systems and used to develop a holistic view at Account Level – a demonstrably more complex and impactful approach than traditional segmentation and targeting.

Push and pull

To answer the question above, we need to reflect on what it is that Pharma companies are selling to health care professionals (HCPs).

To HCPs, the key product being sold is the information on key medical advances, and how these advances are brought to impact on specific patient populations. The product itself is less important as this is merely a vehicle to deliver the expected outcome. As the HCP is rarely an end user, they are not gaining personal experience from the drug effects. It is only through patient feedback that the HCP will gain personal insights.

Thus, whilst Pharma is selling tangible products (pills / health) to patients and governments, it is knowledge that is being sold to HCPs.

Pharma becomes a key channel for HCPs to provide better services to their patients, who seek knowledge.

- Patients – are transformed into knowledge seeking experts. They are pulling for more information and to take control of their illness / disease.
- HCPs – are keeping abreast the rapid growth of information provided. This will create the push for proactive engagements.
- Pharma - creating awareness of what the patients are looking for in combination with knowledge on demand, services on-demand. While securing sufficient information flow to the HCP.

Impact on CRM and CRM deployment

When asking sales representatives what they think about CRM systems, it is evident why there is a lack of collaboration. Sales representatives do not always see CRM as useful, often quoting the below:

- “I see no value in CRM”
- “This is just a system for control”
- “No one looks at the data I fill in”

This arises from the fact that, historically, sales representatives have not felt the need for cross-functional collaboration. Instead, sales representatives usually feel that there is no clear ownership of data and platform, and that there is no clear communication of “what’s in it for me?”.

Through omnichannel engagement, sales representatives will learn to collaborate the hard way. If they do not collaborate, they will be bypassed by other channels and will lose control. If they do collaborate, they will have the chance to remain relevant for the HCPs and - ultimately – defend the value of their job.

“The what’s in it for me?” needs to be clear to gain the motivation of the sales representatives. Firstly, there is a need for actionable data-driven insights. Secondly, there needs to be the support for collaboration in the omnichannel world.

Within the pharma industry, we have always tried to map and track as much as possible. Looking back, we know that most of the data was not actionable. Static data does not provide the required insights.

Instead, the data needs to be based on the objectives and ambitions for the organization **and** customers. Factors such as customer education, knowledge, attendance to classroom seminars, key messages delivered, response to online interactions, as a non-exhaustive list, are all elements that need to be tracked, enabling those who require it to have the right data at the right time.

Moreover, the support for collaboration in the omnichannel world needs to be in place. Before Covid 19, sales representatives struggled with time spent in the field, and did not want to take more days out of the calendar than necessary. With COVID-19, we now have all the tools we need to set a baseline for training and development. To build trust within the organization it is necessary to have clear and communicated objectives, continuous training, coaching and feedback. With these basics in place, companies can work to implement the support required, and build trust between the silos.

Conclusions

In conclusion, CRM needs to be implemented and used as a collaboration tool, helping sales representatives to remain relevant. The CRM system, in tight combination with content management systems such as VEEVA Vault, and the addition of a learning management system (LMS) will be the ‘cockpit’ for sales representatives and solution providers that we need in the future.

Moreover, this process needs to undergo Change Management. This is not an instant change, but a process, taking the sales representative from a “lonely rider” to an “orchestrator”. There needs to be a clear communication of the benefits, and “what is in it for me?”. Lastly, there needs to be actionable data-driven insights, delivering on the promise of the right data at the right time.

Have you reviewed the connection between “Seeing the business value” and “CRM data quality” for your organization?

All digital initiatives and projects completed during the pandemic, ensuring access to HCP’s and other customers are now faced with the need for alignment and clean up to ensure that CRM remains the solution for Pharma. We are aware of your challenges and can help you to maximize your output.