
Genuine Transformation

Preparing for Pharma's New
Sales Coaching Reality



60 Seconds
Clearer Communication

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Introduction

COVID-19 has been a catalyst for a huge amount of change across the pharmaceutical industry, acting as an accelerant for progress in its use of digital technology and prompting a reassessment of how the sales function should work.

The pandemic's first effects on pharma sales were swift and immediate, as lockdowns were put in place and doctors did everything they could to avoid unnecessary face-to-face contact with patients and representatives. This prompted a huge shift to virtual contact, and the extent to which that will continue post-COVID has already been the subject of much debate.

Certainly, as the world adjusts to a new sense of normality, the central role for sales won't change, but the environment will – and companies that don't respond to this will fall behind.

Pledges to adopt an omnichannel approach in sales and marketing already have a renewed urgency to them, and upskilling sales representatives will be a key part of this.

But, if instilling change in an organisation is difficult at the best of times, these are clearly not the best of times. Consequently, sales training needs to adjust to its own new reality – one that places a premium always on remote engagement that can be methodical, manageable and measurable.

This white paper will look at the recent evolution of the pharma sales function and how training and coaching changed during the pandemic; as well as how to prepare for what is coming next.

The industry faces the dawn of a new age in sales coaching. Read on to learn how to adjust to it.



The Evolution of the Pharma Sales Function

Even before the pandemic, the pharmaceutical industry had been working towards being more customer-centric, driven by a growing recognition that it is the customer that has all the power in the engagement relationship.

Healthcare professionals' 'time-poverty' has increasingly focused their minds on whether they are able to accept invitations from sales representatives. This has accentuated the need to bring value to each and every touchpoint during sales interactions.

“This is about bringing customer or patient-centricity truly to the heart of their commercial strategies.”

“The technology is there to achieve that,” Dirk Abeel, CEO and Founder of Omni-X-Ellevation, notes, “But if you overuse it, like we’ve been overusing face-to-face, it will result in the same old approaches, leading to disengaged customers due to an overload of non-value adding interactions, product dump.”

Alongside this, there are generational shifts that cannot be dismissed. An increasing number of sales reps are digitally-savvy and as their ranks swell the need for a blended learning approach is only going to grow. The same is valid for the company’s customer base and their patients which has some pressing consequences for pharma companies.

“Those companies prepared to genuinely embrace a new way and follow through with it, will derive enormous benefit.”

“Companies need to understand the importance of an in-depth segmentation of the customer and the different approaches this requires,” says Dirk. “This is about bringing customer or patient-centricity truly to the heart of their commercial strategies.”

For that to be achievable, however, a more joined-up approach is needed. Torben Kosboth is Senior Executive Client Director at the organisational consulting firm Korn Ferry. He’s clear that today’s sales managers are not adequately supported to provide training and coaching to their teams.

“The first basic reason is they are tied up with sales administration work to a much bigger extent now. The sales managers and sales leadership don’t even have enough time to do coaching and if they do, they are not enabled with skills and methodologies on how to do it.”

Even in those long-ago, pre-pandemic days, change was coming to the pharmaceutical sales function. But, as 60 Seconds’ Founder and CEO Marcus West notes, while there was a slow realisation that embracing new ways of learning is critical, there’s still a long way to go in terms of execution.

“There were a lot of false starts because technology deployment is so difficult to get right,” he says. “However, those companies prepared to genuinely embrace a new way and follow through with it, will derive enormous benefit. All of a sudden, change will be upon us. So, we must be ready.”



Traditional Training and Coaching

The changes that are coming to traditional training and coaching approaches will, to some extent build on what physical sessions do well, while augmenting them with options that they just can't provide.

"The traditional training and learning model is good if you really want to do one knowledge transfer to a big group - that's good," says Dirk. "If you want to train people about the principles or the methodology, the philosophy of coaching, then yes, I can do that in class or in a traditional manner and even virtually or through e-learning. But that's the easy part."

"I've seen that happening many times - too many times."

“You know what?
I want to do this.”

Such traditional approaches can also be ideal if team-building and internal networking are a requirement, although there can still be some potential risks if the more personal nature of these environments allows too many distractions.

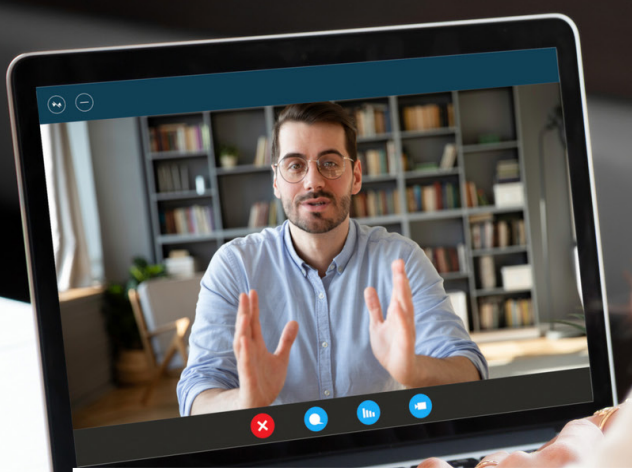
But, what happens when the learners leave the classroom is unknown, making covering the time between face-to-face sessions to make training more efficient and effective particularly tricky. A lack of follow-up to sessions, sustainability, transparency, ownership and a poor use of technology can also be all-too-common issues.

“The only technology that is genuinely embraced in health sciences is the CRM”

Drawing on his own years of life sciences training and coaching, Dirk explains that it's easy to focus on the single workshop and neglect what needs to come next. “I've seen that happening many times - too many times. People say, ‘Okay, this was a great programme,’ but then there's no support or follow-up, so, in the best case, after having tried some new, interesting approaches without direct success, they turn back to the ‘good old’ habits.”

The idea that information retention quickly suffers without regular revision has been studied ever since the 19th Century and Hermann Ebbinghaus's work on the “forgetting curve.” This suggests memories of newly learned knowledge will be reduced by half in a matter of days or weeks, without work to review the material. For pharma, this could be the point where the right use of training technology comes in, but to date the industry has made poor use of it.

“The only technology that is genuinely embraced in health sciences is the CRM because it's mandated,” says Marcus. “Really, that raises an interesting point: to what extent do we mandate and to what extent do we try to create a push-pull interaction with technology? You've got to push it to a degree, of course. But, technology should also be attractive enough for users to experience it and say, ‘You know what? I want to do this.’”



COVID's Changes

One of the many changes brought about by the pandemic has been a rapid acceptance of a new reality that is squarely focused on remote engagement. The final, future shape of the sales environment is yet to be determined, but in the short to medium term there are some vitally important training needs.

"The upskilling of your salesforce is a critical success factor," explains Dirk. "They've become a lot more strategic than they had been in the past and now they need to orchestrate their whole omnichannel experience that they need to build. They also need to add value across all touchpoints in a seamless and consequent manner and this requires different approaches."

The upshot of this is that a robust programme of continuous development is required. However, in such a dramatically changed environment as the pharma industry now faces, one size really doesn't fit all.

"The expectations are completely different than even two years ago."

"The expectations are completely different than even two years ago," says Dirk. "Today, an organisation - the whole organisation - really needs to go through a tremendous change. Customisation, and a 'slice and dice' approach is even more important. The investment that line managers and those in training and learning development need to do in the differentiation of their approach is, for me, also another critical success factor, including also how you incentivise your people."

“In addition to that that, they need to get familiarised with new technology allowing them to execute a true omni-channel engagement with their customers, while capturing the relevant data and insights across all channels.”

Now that knowledge acquisition has moved out of traditional, in-person environments, how training and coaching is delivered is undergoing a seismic shift.

“In training, my observation is that the knowledge acquisition has moved out of the workshop environment and face-to-face environment,” says Torben. “So, a lot of things need to be acquired via e-learning, via micro-learning, learning nuggets and stuff like that. Then, in the workshop, it’s more about application and exchanges about experience, that’s on the training side. In coaching, it’s a little bit the same. Some coaching takes place virtually and sometimes it still needs to be face-to-face.”

“Exploit a range of touchpoints with the HCP and know how this then fits”

Kick-off meetings, product launches or parts of new hire training will still require event-based training, and the pandemic doesn’t alter that. Indeed, one of the lessons of COVID has been that human beings need company to flourish. But the future will need to offer more diverse training options.

Companies must modernise themselves and adopt a hybrid approach, says Marcus, noting that COVID has “fast forwarded” us all.

“What would eventually have happened is simply occurring quicker and it is up to us to respond, for us to keep up. Salespeople need to be able to sell effectively in a range of formats – in person, via Teams Meeting or even over the phone. And there are different skills for each of these formats from a content and delivery perspective, which all need to be practised and coached.”

“They also need to understand their omnichannel plan well and exploit a range of touchpoints with the HCP and know how this then fits in with the broader strategy.”



The New Reality in Coaching

It's not that the old ways must be ditched, but they certainly do need to be changed, with an appropriate use of technology put in place, as an enabler for the new reality of coaching.

“Technology can improve outcomes in a way no one ever thought possible,” says Marcus. “This is like asking would you like to visit the local video store or surf Netflix? The latter is easier, cheaper, offers greater choice and is more enjoyable; the former is extinct.”

“Coaching itself has changed significantly,”

“Technology is changing sales training forever, just as it is changing everything else. We are all being ‘disrupted.’ How we handle that is the key.”

“I could count on one hand, the amount of people who practise a speech out loud.”

Part of that will depend on where expectations lie for training and coaching in this new, fluid environment.

For Torben, training today is “more about enabling and empowering - more things are now added to the training, instead of just skills, or conversation skills”. At the same time coaching too is evolving, with ‘hybrid’ being the operative word, so that companies can tailor-make options for each sales rep’s reality and capability development needs.”

“Coaching itself has changed significantly” Torben says. “In the past, it was role-plays during the workshops, and this is now clearly more outside the workshop, either by facilitators or coaches or by the sales managers.”

“The beauty of this system that we’re talking about is that it’s like a Fitbit for your presentation skills.”

The role for technology amidst all this has, Torben thinks, “really increased significantly,” driven to some extent by generational shifts and new modes of behaviour around mobile devices.

“For sure, they will not accept spending two days in a workshop, instead of doing it on their mobile phone, whenever they want to do it and that they first can see themselves. That’s something sellers would like to correct themselves first, on their own.”

“Depending on that result, they might ask for more coaching, content or whatever; but give me mobile technology, in-hand, where I can do that.”

This is about companies putting in place a holistic approach that can help people improve, by supplementing traditional coaching with self-directed learning.

For Marcus, with his decades of experience in coaching, it all comes down to one thing: practice.

“For many years, we’ve seen people practice on the doctor - I could count on one hand, the amount of people who practise a speech, out loud, before they deliver it. It’s like saying to a musician, ‘Look, I know you’re playing that symphony on Friday night, but don’t bother practising. Just do it when you get there. Just feel it,’ which is ludicrous.”



Key Requirements

What does the future of sales coaching and training look like in pharma?

Well, it's not the future, for a start. It's the now, and it's continuous, measurable training interventions and support, through role-playing and presentation skills practice.

Dirk says: "That's where a solution like 60 Seconds for me is a no-brainer, because you can do a lot more than you could do originally with face-to-face. If you use such an application, it's about bringing an experience and insights in a 'safe training' environment; practising and learning through sharing."

"Seeing that the frequency was going up"

"Medical affairs, medical marketing, sales managers and other key functions like learning and development can all see how a particular person, in a specific situation, is representing my brand to the market here. It is literally bringing the daily realities and related challenges sales reps, MSLs and KAMs face in their offices, allowing them to act on gained insights, at the point of need."

While working for Nestlé, prior to the pandemic, Dirk piloted the use of 60 Seconds in Latin America, finding that it gave increased frequency of learning, higher messaging retention rates and a more sustainable skills development approach for better results.

"You started also seeing that the frequency was going up and that the retention of the learning and the development was going up along with that. It also helped closing the gap between two coaching sessions, keeping the newly learned application of skills top-of-mind."

For Marcus, it's about being able to offer a completely transparent and methodical approach to deliver tailor-made training programmes.

“Otherwise, you're not going to get engagement and you're not going to get enjoyment. The beauty of this system that we're talking about, is that it's like a Fitbit for your presentation skills.”

Digital Maturity for Disruptive Times

“What is the goal of all the skills that we invest in these trainings we pay for? It's to, very simply said, delight a customer and also help them do the same with the patients,” says Dirk.

To get them there, in uncertain, disruptive times, will require companies to learn digital maturity in order to be able to sustain the ongoing development of their people.

Dirk explains: “In the future, sales will become more and more in the virtual space. I believe that every sales rep or whoever in the organisation will have their virtual assistant or trainer, that is based on all the insights from the systems and tools they're using. Also, machine learning and AI will be at their service here to help them better convey messages related to their branded and unbranded solutions resulting in a better user experience and enhanced health outcomes.”

“Introducing a piece of technology where you've got a coach in your pocket”

The key to success is, he suggests personalisation. “You do not want to make robots of people. It's about strengthening what you're good at, helping you to overcome your weaknesses.”

Marcus concludes: “We're just trying to shorten that improvement time by introducing a piece of technology where you've got a coach in your pocket, who can really help you and really clearly define what it is to be an effective presenter or to be an effective salesperson.”

“Those skills are difficult. They need to be understood clearly, and then they need to be practised, and then they need to be coached. We're just providing an environment where all that can happen in one place, in an enjoyable fashion.”

About the Interviewees



Torben Kosboth

is Senior Executive Client Director at Korn Ferry.

His personal consulting focus is

on sales and service management, sales enablement, sales leadership and coaching, as well as increasing sales and service performance. In addition, he helps organisations and individuals transforming their sales and service approach to exceeding customer expectations, in any touch point of the customer journey of a modern buyer.



Dirk Abeel is CEO and Founder of Omni-X-Ellevation, which offers a step-by-step and modular

approach based on an in-depth assessment that ranges from a go-to-market to an execution-by-excellence approach by commercial teams. Dirk's passion lies in helping life-science, medtech, biotech and FMCG companies make this transformation successful and sustainable by delivering increased efficacy across the whole organisation. Previously Dirk was Global Medical Sales Director at Reckitt Benckiser and before that worked for Nestlé, where he was Global Head of the Medical Field Force Effectiveness Unit.



Marcus West

is CEO and Founder of 60 Seconds, and a presentation skills coach of thirty

years standing. With a background in theatre, he has adapted the skills of working as a director to coaching senior people to perform at their best. His particular focus areas are media training, storytelling and leader presence. Over three decades Marcus has coached a who's who of the corporate, political and TV worlds. In 2013, he conceived the 60 Seconds remote coaching app, as a way to help more people present with punch, by having their coach in their pocket; an on-demand 360-degree coaching support system.

About 60 Seconds



60 Seconds

Clearer Communication

60 Seconds is a remote coaching app designed to help users communicate with greater clarity through practice, coaching and measurement. It was built by a coach for coaches to deliver measurable learning momentum.

60seconds.com

Contact CEO and founder, Marcus West at marcus@60seconds.com



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Practice, Coaching, Measurement