Real Life Case Studies
In Pharmaceutical Sales

By Clint Cora

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For Aspiring Pharmaceutical Sales Representatives

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Introduction

These five pharmaceutical sales case studies are all based on real life experiences of actual sales calls to physician customers by successful drug reps. They will give you an insight to some success stories in pharmaceutical sales as part of your ongoing sales and marketing education. They will also help in job interviews for those who want to enter the field.

This ebook is meant for both current pharmaceutical professionals as well as aspiring drug representatives. So depending on which situation you are in, just take what you think might be useful from these cases and apply as you see fit.

Case #1 - Selling Newer SR/LA Drugs Against Older Versions

Here is a common pharmaceutical sales scenario where drug reps will try to convince doctors to use newer long acting drugs known as sustained release (SR) or long acting (LA) versions of older short acting medications.

Short acting drugs do not last long in the bloodstream so they must be dosed three to four times per day while the new SR/LA forms require to be taken only once per day. Long acting drugs are slowly released in the bloodstream resulting in constant levels throughout the day even with single doses.

For the added convenience of single dosing, there is usually a significant premium in cost with the SR/LA drugs compared to the older originals. This is especially true in the case of many drugs including antihypertensive agents and antibiotics that have already been genericized (duplicated as brand 'X').

Many drug reps promoting the SR/LA products will often get resistance from doctors who want to stay with the older drugs as they would say, "The new drugs are too expensive so I'll stick with the old ones."

What reps have to do in these cases is to probe deeper for any dissatisfaction that doctors may have with the older drugs. Reps will have to ask something like, "Doctor, are there any patients that have compliance issues with three to four times per day dosing?"

Clinically, it is widely recognized that as dosing requirements increase, compliance levels will drop. Doctors will admit that there are some patients who either forget to take their pills or they are usually caught in activities making it inconvenient to take them (one example is outdoor work).
When doses of drugs are missed, levels in the bloodstream will drop below what's required for effective treatment. Many patients will actually discontinue their treatments because of the inconvenience of multi-dosing.

This is especially true with children who have to be reminded or interrupted in class during school hours to take their medications. In children, treatment failure rates with drugs requiring three to four doses per day often surpass 50%.

 Needless to say, it can be very frustrating for physicians when patients do not take their medications properly or discontinue them altogether.

Once doctors acknowledge the existence of these problem patients, the drug reps can offer the newer drugs as better solutions. That's what good sales people do.

Once per day dosing results in much better compliance levels and therefore higher treatment successes. Even with kids, a single dose taken once in the morning before going to school is all that's needed for the entire day. This is much easier than multi-dosing!

Smart drug reps convey the point that although the older versions of drugs are less expensive, they are useless if treatment failures are high due to non-compliance. Doctors will usually agree and start using more SR/LA forms to avoid these kinds of treatment failures.

When physicians switch to using the newer long acting medications, it becomes a win-win situation for all. Patients get better treatments, doctors achieve higher success rates (fewer problem patients) and pharmaceutical companies earn more with sales of the higher priced newer drugs.

**The Lesson**

The lesson here is that it is possible to successfully sell customers more expensive products if the value of using them could be proven. Drug reps must find problems that physicians have with cheaper older drugs and offer their products as better solution. Helping doctors with their treatment problems will result in sales.

I have personally been involved in the selling of a few SR drugs in the fields of hypertension and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) where this type of strategy against older drugs was used.

For aspiring drug reps, convincing pharmaceutical companies to hire you is similar as you have to show them the value of your skills for their sales forces. You have to prove to them that you are the best solution compared to your competition.
Case #2 - Selling an Older Drug Against Newer Popular Medications

Here is an interesting pharmaceutical sales scenario involving the very competitive antihypertensive market (blood pressure lowering agents).

This is a market where new antihypertensive drugs are received quite well by many physicians as pharmaceutical companies who market them tend to aggressively promote the additional cardiovascular benefits of their products besides just saying that they simply lower blood pressure.

Not surprising, the most popular antihypertensive drugs on the market tend to be the fairly newer ones. It is extremely difficult to market an older blood pressure drug against the top blockbusters widely used today. But one company was actually successful in doing just that.

This pharmaceutical company had marketing rights to an older but unique alpha-beta blocker antihypertensive that was not widely used, even when it was first launched in the market many years ago by another company.

When the drug reps with this company asked doctors what they used for their hypertensive patients, the newer drugs were usually mentioned. This was of no surprise. Most of these doctors showed little interest in using an older drug like an alpha-beta blocker. So the company had to find a workable niche.

It turned out that all of the top market leaders in the antihypertensive market were officially indicated for mild to moderate hypertension. This meant that they were all very effective in lowering blood pressure that was not too severely high.

But when it came to patients with severe hypertension, the newer drugs did not do a very good job at lowering blood pressure adequately. Doctors often had to combine two and sometimes three or more of the different new drugs to control blood pressure for these severe cases.

This would result in a high cost of treatment for the patients. After all, we are taking about taking a number of these new costly drugs every single day.

Meanwhile, the official indication for this company’s older antihypertensive drug was in fact for moderate to severe hypertension. This was a drug that was specifically designed to handle tougher cases of high blood pressure. And as a bonus, this older drug was not expensive compared to the newer antihypertensive agents.

So the drug reps went into their sales calls and got the acknowledgement that there was indeed a major weakness with the newer antihypertensive agents. The doctors admitted that the big blockbusters just couldn’t handle the severe cases on single drug therapy.
The reps quickly offered the ideal solution which was to use their older drug which was specifically indicated for this tougher group of patients.

The reps stressed that the cost of treatment with their drug would be significantly lower than compared to combining a few of the newer agents together.

They even gave out a pocket sized price comparison card which listed the cost of treatments using the different antihypertensive drugs on the market. The doctors loved this piece as it was a handy reference tool for them.

Although this company was not able to make any major dents in the sales of the market leaders with its older product, it wasn't the expectation. By sliding in the older drug for a specific group of patients that the newer medications weren't able to address very well, the drug reps were able to carve out a healthy niche for themselves in this competitive market as sales for their product went up quite nicely.

The Lesson

The lesson from this particular case is that sometimes it is possible to successfully sell an older drug against the new blockbusters. It's a matter of finding weaknesses that the new products had.

The drug reps for this small company promoted their older drug as a solution for the problems doctors had with their patients with severe hypertension. These reps identified and successfully went after that niche.

Incidentally, I was the product manager who developed this selling strategy for the drug discussed in this case. It was a great feeling to watch the pharma reps in my company succeed in selling this older product in such a competitive market.

Helping customers with their problems is part of successful selling. For those of you who want to get into the industry, showing that you understand this concept during your job interviews will help you come across as a high potential candidate for a pharmaceutical sales position. It's up to you to show companies how you can help with their sales goals.
Case #3 - When Side Effects Scare Off Customers

Dr. W. was a senior physician who had a huge practice which consisted mainly of elderly patients. So when a new drug which protected elderly patients from stomach ulcers was launched, he quickly put the drug to the test by putting himself and three of his best friends on it since they were all in the same age group that was prone to stomach ulcers.

Unfortunately, this drug was initially launched with a four times per day dosing schedule and at this dosage, a significant percentage of patients experienced a very nasty side effect, namely diarrhea.

The next day after taking the drug, Dr. W. and his three buddies went out to play their favorite game which was golf. At the ninth hole, all four men suddenly experienced the diarrhea side effect from taking the drug. Their golf game was certainly cut short.

When the new drug rep responsible for promoting this drug visited Dr. W., the doctor told the rep that based on his awful experience with the drug, he will never prescribe the product again.

This was a major setback for the drug rep because Dr. W. was potentially one of the most important customers in the entire sales territory due to his mainly senior age patients who were all candidates for the drug. This was not a good way for this drug rep to start his brand new career in pharma sales.

Fortunately, Dr. W. did like another one of this drug rep's products so the rep wasn't thrown out of the office. So what this rep did was to continue supporting Dr. W.'s use of this other drug in order to slowly build up a good business relationship with the physician.

Over the next couple of months, the rep visited Dr. W. every other month making sure that his office was always stocked with an adequate supply of drug samples since the doctor liked using them for his patients. The rep kept Dr. W. up to date on all of the company's products in terms of the latest published clinical studies.

He also took Dr. W. to a few medical conferences featuring some very high level medical specialists which furthered Dr. W.'s own education on the latest medical treatments.

Dr. W. learned during one of these medical education events that top specialists were experiencing great success with the rep's product without the diarrhea side effect by using a twice per day dosage rather than four times daily. At this lower dosage, patients were still adequately protected from stomach ulcers but didn't get the nasty side effect.

The rep gently encouraged Dr. W. to try the drug out on a few patients at the lower dosage as reported at the medical conference. It took an entire year before Dr. W. did
eventually try the drug again but when he did, patients came back reporting good results without side effects.

Dr. W. put the drug on more patients including himself again. No side effects were noticed this time. Over the next few months, Dr. W. prescribed the drug to a huge portion of his elderly patients with success.

He became one of the rep's biggest supporters in the sales territory. With similar support from other physicians, this rep grew the sales level of this drug significantly beyond budgeted expectations.

As a result of his performance, the rep was promoted to a senior hospital specialist rep position in the country's most important medical market.

The Lesson

The lesson from this case is that selling pharmaceuticals sometimes require the building of long term business relationships over time rather than going for the quick sales as in retail.

The rep took the time to build Dr. W.'s trust and provided good service over an entire year by such activities as keeping the doctor up to date with clinical information and drug samples as well as bringing him to high level medical educational events. Consistent service was the key in building long term business relationships.

Dr. W. was initially a worse case scenario since he personally experienced the drug's side effect himself but the rep was able to eventually turn him around and made him into one of the biggest users of the product.

The new drug rep in this case was in fact me and this was one of my most memorable stories from out in the field.

Building business relationships in your own network with the goal of landing a pharmaceutical sales position or getting a more senior position is also important. Rather than being one of the nameless hundreds of candidates who apply for each job opening, it is much better to be the first one to be recommended for positions when they come up.

For pharmaceutical industry hopefuls, my book ‘How To Get A Dream Job In Pharmaceutical Sales – Direct Inside Advice and Guidance From A Sales Manager’ shows you how to build such a network. With so much competition for jobs these days, you can't afford NOT to build a network if you are indeed serious about getting a pharmaceutical sales job. Networking of course is also very important for those already working in the industry.
Case #4 - Using Patient Demand in Pharmaceutical Selling

This case looks at a sales scenario in the hormone replacement therapy market for menopausal women. The market leader had been a blockbuster for years but later it was made more publicly aware that the product is derived from hormones extracted from horse urine. As more and more women were becoming more eco-friendly, this news did not go over too well with many of them.

At the same time, a pharmaceutical company re-introduced a rather dormant product that was a hormone replacement drug to compete with the market leader. Both drugs relieved menopausal discomfort symptoms in female patients.

But the interesting thing about this re-introduced drug was that rather than being derived from horse urine, it was sourced from a soybean plant. Chemically, it was altered to be identical to the estrogen hormone found in humans.

So in essence, this drug was considered more 'natural' than the market leader in two ways. First, rather than subjecting live horses to a urine extraction process and then using a product derived from horse urine, this other drug was made from plants.

Secondly, rather than being a cocktail of horse hormones, this other product was identical to the human estrogen which implied that its use would not involve putting a foreign substance into the human body.

News about this alternative to the market leader made its way around groups of menopausal women and they wanted to switch to this drug rather than stay on something made from 'horse pee'.

Drug reps for this alternative drug went to see their physician customers and promoted the natural aspects. They also made physicians aware of published clinical studies which proved that the 'natural' drug resulted in a lower rate of side effects as well when compared to the market leader, possibly due to its identical chemical structure to the human hormone.

Many physicians, particularly female doctors, embraced this alternative right away by starting all newly diagnosed patients on this drug and offering a switch for existing patients currently on the market leader.

The drug reps also asked physicians whether they were getting requests from patients for the natural drug and most admitted that there was indeed patient demand out there.

So these drug reps did a smart thing by reinforcing the existing patient demand for their product. Most doctors, even the resistant ones, did give in and switched their patients to the more natural drug when their patients requested it.

This alternative drug to the market leader became first line therapy for many physicians and did put a dent in the sales of the market leader.
The Lesson

The lesson from this case is that patient demand can be a very powerful weapon in pharmaceutical sales and this example actually showed how a once dormant drug can become a major competitor to a market leader. Smart drug reps used patient demand to their advantage without offending their physician customers.

I was one of the drug reps that sold this natural drug discussed in this case and later became the product manager for it. It was one of the most enjoyable drug products I've ever worked with.

The concept of using patient demand is similar to using referrals in a pharmaceutical sales job hunt. With people recommending you for a pharma sales position, you can put a major dent in your own competition for the jobs.
Case #5 - Another Important Customer Group in Pharma Sales

We all know that physicians are the primary group of customers for pharmaceutical sales reps. But there is another group of healthcare professionals that is important in many therapeutic areas.

One company marketed a multi-purpose skin cream. It was used as a moisturizer for dry skin and also acted as a popular base for pharmacists to add other chemical compounds to form medicated prescription creams for patients with various skin conditions.

Naturally, the drug reps for this product called on physicians including family doctors, pediatricians and dermatologists, the primary users of drugs for the skin.

One day, a doctor told one of these reps that some of his cancer patients were coming back from the cancer clinic with this product upon recommendation of the staff there.

The rep did some further investigation by visiting the cancer center and found that the nurses there were routinely advising all patients going through radiation treatments to use this particular cream product.

The clinic nurses showed the rep that they made up their own special sheets that had directions for care after radiation treatments and included the liberal use of this specific cream by product name in order to reduce the effects of radiation burn. These sheets were handed out to every single patient who went in for radiation treatments.

The rep took these findings back to his company and it was soon determined that all nurses working in similar cancer treatment centers across the country should be called on by the company’s sales force. Some other cancer centers were already on board with this product while many were not.

The sales force did a special campaign to call on all cancer clinic nurses to inform them about how other cancer nurses were recommending the product and soon, all cancer treatment centers enthusiastically came on board with adding the company's product as part their post-treatment care guidelines.

Many of these cancer clinics also had small pharmacies in house and upon follow up visits, the drug reps found that many of these pharmacies have been stocking up on the product. In fact, the majority of these tiny cancer pharmacies carried more of the product in stock than typical major retail pharmacies!

Sales of the company’s cream product skyrocketed to record levels not because of increased promotion to doctors, but to cancer clinic nurses. Although these nurses were not physicians, they proved to have the power to recommend certain products directly to patients which in turn significantly increased sales.
The Lesson

The lesson from this case is that although physicians are the primary customer group to call on in pharmaceutical sales, other types of healthcare professionals could be just as important for certain products. It's a matter of finding out who the important players are for specific drug products.

I was the hospital specialist rep who stumbled upon these cancer clinic nurses in this case. It was a real eye opener to see how important nurses can be in the sales of certain pharmaceutical products. There have been other cases in my career where nurses had positive impacts on sales of drugs in other therapeutic areas as well.

An effective job hunting campaign for a pharmaceutical sales position should have the same strategy with respect to finding out who can really help you. You should take the time to find out who the key players are in the pharmaceutical industry in your area since these people may have the power to help you get a position.

The most important players are not always the most obvious ones. This is one of the most important topics covered in my book and audio book ‘How To Get A Dream Job In Pharmaceutical Sales – Direct Inside Advice and Guidance from a Sales Manager’.

Identifying WHO to target in the industry and HOW to gain access to them will put YOU ahead of the rest of your competition vying for the same pharmaceutical sales jobs as you.

Conclusions

These real life cases were some of my most memorable when I was working in the pharmaceutical industry. I hope that you found these cases to be interesting and in some way, they will help you whether you are a current pharmaceutical professional or somebody who hopes to enter the industry one day.

Clint Cora

Speaker & Author
Former Pharmaceutical Industry Executive
About the Author

After graduating with science and MBA degrees as well as a few years working in the high technology sector, Clint Cora made a switch to pharmaceuticals. Clint started his pharmaceutical sales career in Winnipeg calling on family/general practice physicians in 1990 and turned one of the lowest performing territories into one of the highest winning him a Director of Sales award.

He was then promoted to become a specialist representative in the teaching hospitals in Toronto. In this position, he also developed key medical speakers and advocates among some of the top specialist physicians. He more than doubled the user base for his products while working in the teaching hospital system. Over the next few years, Clint continued to win awards for high sales achievements.

After having been a successful sales rep, Clint was promoted as a product marketing manager. In this position, he designed unique marketing programs to help grow the sales of various drug products in his portfolio. Clint also had duties training pharmaceutical sales representatives. After his marketing and training roles, Clint went on to become a national sales manager where he was responsible for hiring and managing an elite team of specialty pharma reps across the country.

After a very successful fourteen years in the pharmaceutical industry, Clint decided to start his own businesses. One of his projects was a book called ‘How To Get A Dream Job In Pharmaceutical Sales – Direct Inside Advice and Guidance From A Sales Manager’, written to help others get their start in a pharmaceutical sales career.

A martial arts world champion with a huge interest in the areas of motivation and success, Clint has since become an award winning international motivational speaker. He is also the author of a personal development book called ‘The Life Champion In You.’ For speaking engagements, contact him at http://www.ClintCora.com.
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