Basic Primer in Pharmaceutical Selling Techniques

By Clint Cora

First Edition 2006

Tips for Reading on Screen

Use the bookmarks tab on the top left hand side for easy navigation throughout the ebook. Adjust size of the document text as desired by using the – and + buttons at the top. Use the latest versions of Adobe Reader or Acrobat for best results.

© 2006 Clint Cora  All Rights Reserved

Published by Free Spirit Publishing, a division of Free Spirit Gallery.

No portion of this book may be reproduced mechanically, electronically, or by any other means, including photocopying without written permission by the publisher. The original purchaser is authorized to make one printed copy for their personal use.
# Table of Contents

- Introduction ................................................................................................................. 1
- Probing ......................................................................................................................... 2
- Offering Solutions with Product Features and Benefits ............................................ 4
- Supporting ..................................................................................................................... 5
- Handling Objections ..................................................................................................... 6
- Closing ............................................................................................................................ 6
- Example Dialogue of a Pharmaceutical Sales Call ..................................................... 7
- Selling at a Higher Level ............................................................................................... 10
Introduction

This is a very basic primer on professional selling techniques using a pharmaceutical sales call for illustration. Entire books and courses are often used to teach professional sales techniques so do not consider this primer as a complete reference. Instead, use it as an introduction to professional selling techniques and concepts in a medical environment with a physician as a target customer.

For those of you who have been in professional corporate sales before, many of these techniques will be familiar. It will be interesting for you to see how they are applied to a pharmaceutical sales situation. For those of you who have never been in sales or have had sales experience only in the retail arena, this type of selling may be new to you. Professional selling on a corporate level is part selling and part counseling with much long term customer relationship building.

The counseling element comes into play in sales because we are trying to help customers solve their problems. In many cases, the customers themselves don’t even know that they have problems and that’s when professional sales reps have to be creative in helping the customers realize them without offending them. Then we help the customers solve these problems with solutions offered by our products and services.
Probing

In order to solve our customers’ problems, we must first learn what they are and this is done by probing. Probing involves questions we ask to establish where the customer is at in regards to the area of interest. In a doctor call, we would ask questions on specific areas of treatment including what current therapies the doctor uses as well as the experiences they have had with each therapy.

In many cases, open ended questions are best for probing rather than closed ones. Open ended questions begin with such words as ‘what’, ‘how’, ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ which can result in a variety of responses. We want the doctor to talk freely in order to fully understand his or her position so open ended questions will promote more discussion. Some examples of open ended questions are;

“What are you currently using for treatment of osteoarthritis pain?”
“How do you find the current drug therapies available for GI ulcers?”
“Which types of patients do you use the long acting forms of antihypertensive agents on?”

Closed ended questions usually restrict the customer to either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses or a very limited number of possible answers. Examples of closed ended questions are;

“Do you treat psoriasis?”
“Do you use cytoprotective agents when prescribing NSAIDs?”
“Do you prefer to use Drug X or Drug Y for treating symptoms of menopause?”

Sometimes, we have to use closed ended questions in order to move the discussion towards the direction we want but again, we should try to use more open ended questions whenever possible.

So probing with a few open ended and closed ended questions help us get to know our customers’ situations or problems better so we could offer the appropriate solutions. This is one of the main differences between a high level professional sales representative and your run of the mill retail sales person. The professional takes the time to understand each customer’s needs where the average retail sales clerk doesn’t really bother.

Of course, the higher end a retail establishment is such as for very expensive clothing or jewelry, the more likely we will find retail sales people using more professional selling techniques. The same goes for specialized services. This is where the good listening skills of a sales professional come in. Whether it is in pharmaceuticals or any
other fields, professional sales reps utilize their listening skills to help understand the needs of their individual clients recognizing that each customer is unique.

Like this ebook so far? Get more FREE personal development resources by author Clint Cora at his official website at;

Offering Solutions with Product Features and Benefits

Once we understand our doctor’s problems, we can proceed to offer appropriate solutions with our products. Of course, not all of the doctor’s problems can be solved with our products all the time and it is usually better to be honest with our customers when we know that certain issues cannot be addressed with our drugs. This approach is much better than to simply overstate the claims of our products. Honesty builds trust in the business relationship which will lead to more future sales.

When presenting products as solutions, it is important to discuss both their features and benefits. Too often, mediocre sales people just talk about features of a product without getting into the benefits. Many sales people do not understand the difference between features and benefits. Picture one of the worse case scenarios where a retail sales clerk just rambles on and on about the different technical features of an electronics product while the customer just stands there obviously a bit dazed. The customer ends up not really listening because the information seems so irrelevant. Too often, such sales people think that they are impressing us with highly technical jargon while in reality, they are really turning us off and potentially losing sales opportunities. They do not focus on what the product can do for us which is actually much more important than the specific technical features. It is important to understand that customers buy into benefits, not product features.

Features can be considered the technical aspects or characteristics of a product or service. For example, a computer’s speed or memory capacity, the materials that a piece of furniture is made of, the number of megapixels of a digital camera and the horsepower of a car’s engine are all product features. For pharmaceutical products, a special coating on a tablet, the addition of a decongestant in a cough syrup and the availability of multiple dosage strengths are all features.

The examples just mentioned are not benefits because they do not really describe what they can do for a customer. A good way to test something in order to determine whether it is a product feature or a benefit is with the ‘so what?’ response. If a customer can respond to a fact by saying ‘so what?’, then it is a feature, not a benefit. For example, if a tablet has a special coating and the customer responds by saying, ‘so what?’, then this fact is a product feature of the drug, not a benefit. The customer doesn’t recognize the significance of the special coating.

Professional sales reps must be able to take product features and expand them into product benefits in order to sell effectively. The benefits will be clear descriptions of what the features can do for the customer. Using our coated tablet example, we can expand on this and claim that the benefit is the increased ease of swallowing for patients which in turn will make the medication much easier to take. This benefit exists because of the feature which is the special coating on the tablet.
Therefore, features of a product can result in certain benefits for a customer but they must be clearly presented in a sales call. We cannot assume that our customers will automatically recognize the benefits of a product just from hearing its features. So remember, benefits sell the product, not the features.

For any product or service you sell, a complete analysis of its features and benefits should be done. Use the ‘so what?’ test on each feature in order to come up with a benefit for each one. We will see how the pharma rep in the upcoming dialogue does this.

**Supporting**

In very technical fields such as pharmaceuticals, it is important to support product claims with documented evidence. Usually, data from clinical studies are used in pharmaceutical sales calls. Supporting evidence helps establish the credibility of the product benefits. They act as proof sources for product claims. In pharma sales, the use of clinical data is an entire seminar in itself and will be part of any sales training program for pharmaceutical sales forces.
Handling Objections

Customers will often have objections which are their reasons for not buying or using your product. It is important to know as many possible objections for each of the products you sell. Carefully planned responses to each possible objection will help you make the sale. Not addressing a customer’s objection will usually result in no sale. It is also very important to acknowledge customer objections since it also shows that you are listening. Again, the important listening skills of a professional sales rep come in. The example dialogue will also demonstrate how our rep will expertly handle the doctor’s objection.

Sometimes not all objections are voiced by a customer. An objection can certainly be hidden and it would be up to the rep to discover any such objections since they will often have an impact on sales. Sometimes customers may not want to reveal all of their objections since they fear that the rep might put on a high pressured sell. It is up to the rep to show that he or she is a good listener who is able to draw out any hidden objections and address them appropriately without making the customer feel uncomfortable.

Closing

Closing is basically asking for the business. Surprisingly, many sales people actually miss this important last step of a sales call and quite often, no sales result because the customer is not committed to trying out the product. Many sales reps are also shy asking for the sale thinking that closes are too high pressured but in reality, effective closes are really not that difficult or uncomfortable for both parties. The customer may agree on all points brought up during a sales call but for whatever reason, the sale may still not happen. The customer may forget to buy after the rep leaves or there could be other concerns about the product that were not addressed (such as hidden objections). Closing will help bring out any other issues that are important to the customer. We’ll see an example of an effective close during the dialogue.
Example Dialogue of a Pharmaceutical Sales Call

Here is a very basic example of the dialogue between a pharmaceutical sales rep and a physician. It has all the elements of the basic selling techniques that were just discussed. The narrative text within brackets describes what is happening during the conversation between the rep and the doctor. We will assume that the introductory social chatter has already happened and will pick up the conversation where the business part starts.

Rep: “I would like to talk to you about antibiotics for pediatric chest infections. Since you do see quite a lot of children and the cold season is coming, I would like to ask you what is your usual first line antibiotic therapy for kids?”

Doc: “I generally use OLDDRUG on the kids and have been using it for years.”

Rep: “OLDDRUG has been the standard therapy for many years. I remember taking it myself as a kid. How do you find it as a treatment these days?”

[The rep is probing with open ended questions to understand what the doctor’s preferences are for treating his young patients with antibiotics. The rep will also try to identify problem areas even as the physician initially doesn’t think there are any]

Doc: “OLDDRUG has been great. Worked well for years. It’s a very effective antibiotic.”

Rep: “It is a very effective drug. How do you find the compliance with its four times per day dosing particularly with school kids?”

Doc: “Well, now that you mentioned it, there are times when compliance could be better. It’s not always easy to get the kids to take their medication four times per day especially when they are at school all day. It can be a big hassle for the parents and teachers. I do see kids stopping their medications because of this.”

Rep: “So do you wish there was something just as effective as OLDDRUG but with better compliance?”

Doc: “Yes, of course. Anything to get the kids to take their meds better will help.”
[The rep has established the doctor’s problem of compliance with OLDDRUG. Notice that the rep did not say anything negative or slam what the doctor is currently using. In fact, the rep even acknowledged that OLDDRUG is a good drug but as we will see, a better solution will be presented]

Rep: “We have a new treatment called NEWDRUG which is used for the same infections as OLDDRUG. The chemical compound is very similar to that of OLDDRUG. The main difference with NEWDRUG is that instead of requiring a four times per day dosing, it requires only a once per day sustained release dose of 50 mg.”

“This means that the kids can take their tablet first thing in the morning before going to school and the drug will last all day until the next morning. This will eliminate the hassles of having kids take meds during the daytime while at school. This will make things much easier for the parents and the teachers. This will increase the compliance and reduce the discontinuation rates greatly for you.”

[The rep presented the product feature which is the once per day dose but also expanded to describe the benefit for the patients, their parents, their teachers and the doctor which is greater compliance]

Doc: “Wow that sounds great. But quite often, many new once per day drugs do not work as well as the older ones that still require multiple dosing. So I’m a bit skeptical with NEWDRUG.”

Rep: “I can certainly understand your concern doctor. After all, what good is increased compliance if the drug doesn’t work as well? Well, let me show you the results of a head to head comparison clinical study recently published in the World Medical Journal. In this study, 200 kids were put on OLDDRUG and another 200 were treated with NEWDRUG. This chart shows that the compliance with NEWDRUG is clearly better with only 1% discontinuing treatment while the OLDDRUG group had a 35% dropout rate. This is no surprise since NEWDRUG is dosed only once per day.”
Rep: “This second chart shows the relative effectiveness of each drug. As you can see, both treatments among the patients who still remained on the drugs for the recommended one week duration had equal levels of effectiveness. That is, both groups had 98% effectiveness in clearing infections within a week. This study therefore proves that NEWDRUG has a superior compliance level with the same effectiveness as OLDDRUG.”

Doc: “That is very interesting.”

[The rep has addressed the doctor’s objection in using NEWDRUG by using supporting evidence from a clinical study which shows that it is superior in compliance but just as effective as OLDDRUG. The promotional materials used during the sales call probably featured such data in a visual aid for ease of presentation. Use of visual aids is also part of sales training sessions at pharmaceutical companies]

Rep: “So based on what we have discussed today doctor, especially with respect to superior compliance, would you be willing to use NEWDRUG on your pediatric patients?”

[This is one form of a close. As you can see, it is quite straightforward and non-threatening. It can help gauge how effective your sales call was. If the doctor is still skeptical, the rep would have to dig deeper in order to find out what the doctor’s other concerns may be]

Doc: “Sure, I think I could certainly give NEWDRUG a try with the kids coming in.”
**Selling at a Higher Level**

The above example, although simplified for illustrative purposes, demonstrates the different professional selling techniques discussed. Of course, many pharmaceutical sales calls are much more complex with many more factors including side effects and costs but the example shown is actually quite representative of the cases where pharma reps try to persuade doctors to use newer medications with superior dosing forms.

Formal sales training courses will go into much more detail but at least with this primer, one can get some appreciation of not only a typical pharmaceutical sales call, but the techniques involved in professional sales. As you can see, professional corporate sales such as in pharmaceuticals, is a much higher level of selling than say in a typical retail environment.

If you are ever asked to demonstrate some of your selling techniques during a job interview, just make sure that you follow a similar strategy like what the rep used in the above dialogue. No matter what the product is, the first thing is to understand the customer’s needs and problems through effective probing. Then provide solutions by discussing both features and benefits of your product. Support your claims and handle objections as required followed by a close.

Sometimes an interviewer may ask a candidate to make a mock sales presentation using a pen or some other object that is present during the interview as the product. Just use similar professional selling techniques as discussed in this primer. Don’t worry about the accuracy of the product features and benefits as you can make them up as you go along. They can even be exaggerated make-believe. The interviewer just wants to see you demonstrate the selling techniques so feel free to have fun with some outrageous product claims if you want.

Once you are familiar with professional selling techniques, you will notice that there are a lot of individuals out there in the world of sales who are clearly not good sales people. This is especially true in the retail environment but can also happen in the corporate world where sales people have not been properly trained in professional selling techniques.

Some of these mediocre sales people do not take the time to understand their client’s needs. Some are just presenters of product features without really telling customers what the benefits are. Some are good talkers but awful listeners especially when it comes to listening to the customer’s real needs as well as objections and concerns. Unfortunately, many of these mediocre sales people have put a negative image of the sales profession in general.
In reality, high level professional sales individuals are really like consultants or counselors helping out their clients. This is why top professionals can command high levels of income. Positions such as pharmaceutical sales jobs require certain attributes, skills and involve a high degree of training. These are not jobs that any high school kid can walk into.

There is some truth that professional sales representatives actually make the toughest customers for other sales people. The pros definitely know it when others are not using proper selling techniques. The use of professional selling techniques will set you apart from the average sales person and your compensation will reflect this as you will be selling at a much higher level.

Summary:

• Probe with open ended and closed ended questions to understand customer needs and problems.
• Offer solutions with your products by presenting both features and benefits.
• Support your claims as required.
• Handle customer objections without making customers feel uncomfortable.
• Do not slam your competition.
• Close your calls by asking for the business.
• The use of professional selling skills sets a high level sales rep apart from the usual mediocre sales person.
How To Expand Your Comfort Zone To Finally Conquer Even Your Most Daunting Goals In Life

With specially selected parts from high energy live keynote presentations, author, motivational speaker and Karate World Champion Clint Cora will share with you in a **FREE 3-part Personal Development Video Series**;

- The #1 profound mind-shift that allowed me to break through his own personal tragedy
- The 2 most important decisions you MUST make in your life for success
- The hidden lesson underneath EVERY life experience you have
- The BIGGEST secret and surefire way to actually achieving your goals (and why almost EVERYONE does this wrong)
- How to get OUT of your comfort zone and why it's one of the biggest KEYS to your long term happiness
- Three micro-changes you can make in your life right now to IMMEDIATELY get closer to achieving your goals
- Why you should NEVER make wishes for the things you desire in your career, personal life or health and what you should do instead
- Secret surprises that will unexpectedly BOOST your personal growth ten-fold

For more information on how to access this **FREE 3-part Personal Development Video Series**, go to;

Now Available!

Details at http://www.clintcora.com/booksaudio.html