A Prescription for the Customer-Centric Commercial Model in Pharma

It’s time to close the gap between sales representatives’ priorities and physicians’ wants.

By Casey Carey, Giorgio Ortolani, and Michael Gaviño
Few pharmaceutical companies have uncovered the key to capturing the full potential of their products: physician advocacy.

Bain’s recent global survey reveals that peer advocacy is one of the top influencing factors in physicians’ prescribing decisions. In fact, it’s on par with the table stakes of insurance companies reimbursing the drug and relevant authorities including the drug in their treatment guidelines.

According to our survey, in the US, 77% of prescribers say that peer advocacy plays a significant role in their treatment selection compared with 80% citing reimbursement and inclusion in guidelines (see Figure 1a). More than half of European physicians also hold peer advocacy in high regard (see Figure 1b).

How can pharma companies generate peer advocacy? We’ve previously found that 40% of physician advocacy for drugs is directly linked to customer experience and loyalty.

And yet, when it comes to customer experience, most pharma sales representatives are flying blind. Our survey results indicate a fundamental gap between what sales reps think doctors want from them and what doctors truly want from them, with sometimes a two- to threefold difference between how sales reps perceive the value of their roles and how physicians actually value those roles (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1a:** For US physicians, peer advocacy is one of the most important factors in prescribing decisions

**Percentage of physicians who find each criteria important when prescribing a drug (US)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insurance companies reimburse drug</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant authoritative bodies include drug in treatment guidelines</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers advocate for drug</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key opinion leaders advocate for drug</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient specifically inquires about drug</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital or practice leadership advocates for drug</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office managers in practice find it easy and convenient to engage with pharma company</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses in practice advocate for drug</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bain Global Pharma Physician Survey, 2021 (110 US respondents)
A Prescription for the Customer-Centric Commercial Model in Pharma

**Figure 1b:** European physicians also place heavy importance on peer advocacy

**Percentage of physicians who find each criteria important when prescribing a drug (UK and Germany)**

- Relevant authoritative bodies include drug in treatment guidelines: 85%
- Hospital or practice leadership advocates for drug: 61%
- Key opinion leaders advocate for drug: 58%
- Peers advocate for drug: 55%
- Insurance companies reimburse drug: 55%
- Patient specifically inquires about drug: 33%
- Nurses in practice advocate for drug: 26%
- Office managers in practice find it easy and convenient to engage with pharma company: 19%

Source: Bain Global Pharma Physician Survey, 2021 (220 respondents from the UK and Germany)

**Figure 2:** Sales reps vastly overestimate physician appetite for some services while failing to recognize the value of others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Percentage of US healthcare providers</th>
<th>Percentage of pharma sales reps</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate processes for patients</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3.6x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide trend data</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>2.4x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify new patient opportunities</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>2.3x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide educational materials or pamphlets</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>2.1x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce physician to other experts</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1.5x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: US healthcare providers were asked “What are the four most valuable roles a pharma sales representative can play for you?”; US pharma sales reps were asked “What are the four most valuable roles a pharma sales representative can play for a physician?”

Sources: Bain Flash Survey (44 respondents); Bain Global Pharma Physician Survey, 2021 (110 US respondents)
While both parties are aligned on physicians’ basic needs, sales reps vastly overestimate the appetite for certain services. Many believe they add value by providing educational materials and identifying new patient opportunities, but doctors see the most value in reps who provide trend data, facilitate patient support, and introduce them to other experts.

In other words, the roles that physicians value can significantly diverge from the traditional sales rep job description and incentives, which often focus solely on demand generation. These findings remain steady across countries and specialties, confirming a widespread trend: Doctors want customer relationship managers who they can “pull” on to help build frictionless practices; they don’t need sales reps who “push” products and take up their time.

To close the growing chasm between sales reps and physicians, meet new preferences, and boost advocacy, pharma companies will have to overhaul their commercial models—or face a mounting struggle to deliver growth.

The call for customer centricity

In many other industries, companies have started to place the customer at the center of the commercial model, using a more sophisticated, data-informed approach, yet few pharma companies have cracked the code. The traditional volume-based sales play has been a burden on physicians for some time now, inundating them with sales and marketing messages across channels. Covid-19 struck the final blow, straining the system, overwhelming physicians, and leading practices to further restrict access.

Even when the crisis eases, the situation is unlikely to change, permanently tipping the balance of the physician-rep relationship. The next generation of industry-leading pharma companies will be those that help physicians serve patients through a seamless, hassle-free experience. With a customer-centric approach, they will create loyal customer advocates and ultimately win outsized market share.
But achieving the level of sophistication required to succeed won’t be easy. It often requires a full transformation of the commercial model. Pharma companies can get started by fundamentally shifting their mindsets, boosting their skill sets, and building up their toolkits.

**The mindset**

To address the dissonance between physicians’ and sales reps’ notions of value-added services, sales reps will need to shift from a self-oriented mindset to a customer-oriented one. Currently, more than half of sales reps believe that cultivating a personal relationship with physicians is one of their most important roles, yet only 29% of doctors find a personal relationship valuable (see Figure 3).

Instead, doctors care about services that lighten their loads and assist them in meeting patients’ needs. They want pharma companies to provide the linkages to patient support programs and to make their lives easier through access to a single source of content.

Similarly, too many sales reps overlook quick-win opportunities that could help them become more customer centric. For instance, doctors are 12.5 times more likely than sales reps to cite faster response times as a key opportunity for pharma companies to add value.

---

**Figure 3:** Pharma companies have a clear opportunity to take a more customer-centric approach to physician interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respond faster</td>
<td>12.5x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide on-demand information</td>
<td>2.4x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivate stable, long-term relationships with physicians</td>
<td>1.8x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more targeted patient support programs</td>
<td>1.8x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide single source of content</td>
<td>1.6x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: US healthcare providers were asked “What are the top three improvements pharma companies need to make in order to make your interactions with them more valuable for you?; US pharma sales reps were asked “Which of the following initiatives would have the greatest positive impact on the physicians you interact with? Choose up to three”

Sources: Bain Flash Survey (44 respondents); Bain Global Pharma Physician Survey, 2021 (110 US respondents)
The skill set

To deliver on a customer-centric mindset, pharma companies will need to foster a set of integral skills in their customer engagement managers. The best customer engagement managers will ensure coordination across patient managers, access managers, and medical science liaisons to better serve customers. These different roles will need to work together as a cohesive unit to deliver integrated account management.

In addition, top companies will spur innovation through centralized groups that equip the field with digital tools, data-based insights, and codified lessons from across siloes within the broader organization.

The toolkit

Pharma companies will also need to equip their field force with the appropriate digital tools. Artificial intelligence–integrated customer relationship management, patient and physician portals, digital companion apps, and predictable reimbursement are rapidly becoming minimum requirements for competition. Winning pharma companies will use data- and analytics-based platforms to convey the right messages to the right customers at the right times.
Moreover, the demand for digital services that help doctors support patients is growing: Around 60% of healthcare providers now say that digital tools to support patient education, provide physician support, and manage patient care are important when they consider working with a pharma product manufacturer (see Figure 4).

Underlining the burgeoning opportunity in this space, investments in commercialization support services skyrocketed in 2020. Harvest Partners invested in ConnectiveRx (formerly PSKW), a provider of technology-enabled patient support and adherence services for specialty and branded biopharma manufacturers. We expect the flurry of deal activity to continue over the coming years.

Beyond digital tools, leading companies also will build speed and repeatability into their commercial toolkits. In some organizations, for instance, it could make sense

---

**Figure 4:** Physicians want value-added digital services

### Percentage of physicians who consider service important

- **Digital tools to support patient education**: 62%
- **Digital tools to provide physician support**: 60%
- **Digital tools to help manage patients’ care**: 60%
- **Online portal to place order or make service requests**: 54%
- **Priority access to medical science liaisons**: 49%
- **Digital tools to provide support related to insurance and formulary plans**: 49%
- **Dedicated 24-hour hotline**: 39%

---

Notes: Respondents were asked “How important are each of the following value-added services when considering working with a pharmaceutical product manufacturer (pre- and post-prescription)?”, percentage of physicians include those who responded “important” or “extremely important” for each service

Source: Bain Global Pharma Physician Survey, 2021 (470 respondents, excluding pharma respondents and Australian physician respondents)
A commercial model transformation won’t happen overnight. The winning model of the future will be dynamic and iterative.

for a central group to develop a library of compliant, preapproved content. Reps can quickly pull this concise, snackable content off the shelf for any given situation, circumventing lengthy approval processes.

A commercial model transformation won’t happen overnight. The winning model of the future will be dynamic and iterative. Once they’ve set the changes around the organization’s mindset, skill set, and toolkit in motion, leading pharma companies will install systems to constantly keep their finger on the pulse of doctors’ wants and needs. They will evolve their commercial model accordingly to delight prescribers, support the best patient outcomes, and achieve sustained growth.
Bold ideas. Bold teams. Extraordinary results.

Bain & Company is a global consultancy that helps the world’s most ambitious change makers define the future.

Across 63 offices in 38 countries, we work alongside our clients as one team with a shared ambition to achieve extraordinary results, outperform the competition, and redefine industries. We complement our tailored, integrated expertise with a vibrant ecosystem of digital innovators to deliver better, faster, and more enduring outcomes. Our 10-year commitment to invest more than $1 billion in pro bono services brings our talent, expertise, and insight to organizations tackling today’s urgent challenges in education, racial equity, social justice, economic development, and the environment. We earned a gold rating from EcoVadis, the leading platform for environmental, social, and ethical performance ratings for global supply chains, putting us in the top 2% of all companies. Since our founding in 1973, we have measured our success by the success of our clients, and we proudly maintain the highest level of client advocacy in the industry.