

The inside track from academia and industry

# The evolution of life-sciences sales

In the age of e-commerce, sales reps must give more than just information: they must be trusted advisers.



Tamara Zemlo

Are sales representatives for supplies in the life-sciences industry becoming obsolete? The accessibility of information over the Internet and the increasing consumer-savvy sophistication of scientists have transformed life-sciences sales. Much of the information typically provided by sales reps can be readily obtained from the company's website. No longer satisfied with generic sales presentations, scientists are turning to life-sciences suppliers whose sales reps can present valuable propositions that are tailored to their research needs.

Complicating matters for reps is the widespread buying, selling and assimilation of companies in the life-sciences industry, which have a major effect on staffing, account coverage, product knowledge, pay and morale. And there are other hurdles: sales reps may encounter products that become obsolete much more quickly, greater customer service requirements, sales territory realignments and inadequate product training. To maximize sales opportunities, reps need to adapt to this changing landscape. Success in this dynamic environment requires redefining professional skills and potentially restructuring the life-sciences sales force.

Along with competitive pressures in the marketplace and changes in how companies advertise their goods, the pervasiveness of online product offerings has encroached on the traditional role of life-sciences sales reps towards their customers. E-commerce offers the reps new ways to interact with their existing customers, and unprecedented opportunities to acquire new ones. Our research has found that most customers prefer to order life-sciences products (with the exception of instruments, which are expensive and often need to be customized) through the company's website, even if a sales rep had influenced them to buy the product. To

accommodate this preference, sales reps can help by answering enquiries or addressing issues that are likely to arise during the purchasing process. Although most of the life-scientists who responded to a survey we carried out said that they did not need sales reps to explain how to order or reorder products online, they continue to value reps' assistance in problem-solving, status updates and speeding up service.

Because customers have a limited amount of time to spend with sales reps, they have specific ideas about what technical support they expect. What they

**"To succeed, sales reps need vast amounts of information about their company's products and about their customers' research."**

appreciate most, according to our survey, is the rep's ability to show them how to use new products or to provide assistance in troubleshooting. But before they can offer these services, a sales rep must build up the customer's trust. This credibility can be established by understanding a customer's unmet needs and research goals — including those they may not realize they have — before giving them a sales pitch.

To succeed at this customized approach, sales reps need vast amounts of information about their company's products and their customers' research. Processing and applying such information to connect with as many customers as possible, while developing close relationships with the most valuable customers, will require exceptional skill in balancing competing demands of efficiency and effectiveness.

Sales reps should also be well versed in the advantages and disadvantages of competitors' products: not to answer questions about them, but to try to avoid

questions being raised. By providing the knowledge, insights and experience to help them make informed decisions, sales reps become an invaluable resource for their customers. More than anything else, customers expect sales reps to understand the applications of the products they sell, according to our research. Customers also expect a sales rep to have a science degree, the ability to understand a customer's research objectives and two or more years' experience in a research laboratory. Collectively, this training and experience helps to establish the rep's authority, which will enable them to identify, pursue and win sales.

The value of a sales rep's influence in the purchasing process cannot be overstated. If a customer has been influenced to buy a product and has had a favourable experience during the sales process, they may be more inclined to buy other products recommended by the rep from the same company. The scientist may also recommend the company's products to colleagues.

Sales reps can encourage customers to make informed decisions by, first and foremost, establishing the value of the product or service being offered. This value is whatever outcomes are most important to the customer (such as increased productivity, cleaner data, less time-consuming experiments or more-powerful resolution.) The customer, rather than the sales rep, must articulate this value. The sales rep's role is to act as a guide and offer suggestions.

In a sales landscape increasingly shaped by the Internet and e-commerce, understanding one's customers and then delivering personalized information tailored to their interests is paramount if sales reps are to succeed. ■

**Tamara Zemlo is director of syndicated research and analysis for Bioinformatics in Arlington, Virginia.**