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Mini Review

Imparting medical knowledge to pharmaceutical sales force

Sunil Chaudhry^{1,*}, Vishwas Sovani²

¹Honorary Médical Director, Bioclinitech Technologies Pvt Ltd, Mumbai, India & GPATutor.com

²Founder and Director, Pharmawisdom, Mumbai, India



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ABSTRACT

Key customers of the pharmaceutical industry are qualified medical practitioners. To be able to stand their ground the sales representative needs training about medical terminology, the relevant disease, the molecule being marketed and some competitor information. A short induction could be followed by ongoing refresher training either face to face or online. The medical department has a major role to play here. Product launch training is planned by medical and marketing team based on the feature benefits of the product being launched. The training unit of the medical department of pharma companies are an inseparable part of the whole marketing effort.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of marketing effectiveness is to optimize marketing spend for the short and long term in support of, and in alignment with, the brand/company strategy by building a market model using valid and objective marketing metrics and analytics.¹ A key aspect of this model is training of the sales force. The sales team comes in direct contact with highly qualified medical practitioners who are the decision makes for prescriptions. Only a person having good knowledge about the product and its differentiators will be able to stand his ground. To provide these capabilities is one of the functions of the medical team in a pharmaceutical company. Such an individual will be more productive and contribute majorly to the goals set above.

Training of the sales force is an ongoing process. The trainings have to be adapted according to various needs and situations.

1. Induction training

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sunil.r.chaudhry@gmail.com (S. Chaudhry).

2. Ongoing or refresher training

3. Product launch training

The medical department plays a major role in these trainings Major areas of responsibility for the medical department are to:

1. Act as the medical conscience of the company;
2. Ensure adherence to relevant legal requirements and guidelines;
3. Provide a medical perspective to product development;
4. Provide the medical input to the servicing and support of marketed products throughout their life cycle;
5. Provide general as well as specialized medical expertise, as required; and
6. Act as the company's expert interface with all sectors of the medical profession as well as other external stakeholders (e.g. Regulatory authorities: Regional and Central, Pharmacovigilance Programme of India).

The Medical Director works closely with the sales and marketing teams to provide the strategic medical input into core brand (product) strategies and to support

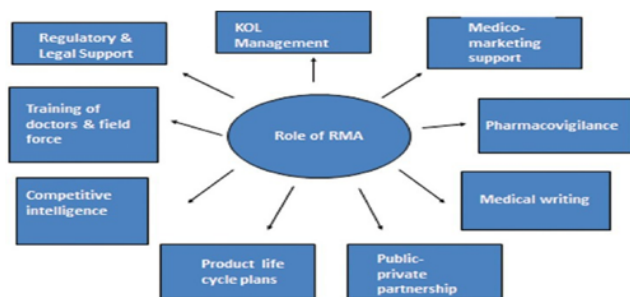


Fig. 1: Functions of medical head of pharmaceutical company

medical/marketing activities such as promotional material generation/product launches.²

1.1. Basic training

The nature of this training challenges the teacher to simplify a medical topic so that an individual not medically qualified will not only understand it but will be able to carry out a meaningful conversation about the same with a qualified medical practitioner. The 1960s was the era of multinationals who marketed only their own patented products in specific therapeutic areas. These trainings would spread over 4 to 6 weeks and ended up making the sales person a mini doctor.

The patent law was amended in 1970 leading to the era of Indian branded generics and the growth of domestic companies with marketing muscle. They had a plethora of products to market and offering detailed training for all therapeutic areas and products would only increase nonproductive time of the sales representative. The induction training was cut down to about 2 weeks allowing the representative to be productive early. It covered medical terminology, relevant diseases, the molecules being marketed and some competitor information. This was compensated by ongoing or refresher trainings while on the job

1.2. Ongoing or refresher trainings

The content of this training is decided by doing a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of important molecules. SWOT is widely accepted tool due to its simplicity and value of focusing on the key issues. It is

1. Simple to do and practical to use;
2. Clear to understand;
3. Focuses on the key internal and external factors affecting the company;
4. Helps to identify future goals;
5. Initiates further analysis³

The SWOT will identify unmet training needs based on which the medical department can design a training programme. These Face to Face provide a much-needed interaction with the teacher. But this could pull out the representative from his sales area leading to at least some dip in sales numbers. Hence, some companies resort to online training. This is in fact a boon in COVID times.^{4,5}

Many online certification courses are available for representatives on systems such as Cardiology, Neurology, Diabetes, Oncology etc which are listed by global companies or prepared by experts for routine use. Companies arrange for online training for Medical Representatives where Medical Advisor educates sales representative with slides and queries are resolved on spot. These are often labelled as Knowledge Caffe, where advantage is effective training at low cost and the sales people are not off field.⁶⁻⁸

Such online or digital training as some would call it has many advantages;

1. Course can be archived, anytime where tablets, mobiles or laptops can be supported and are for 24 hours.
2. Immediate Feedback can be provided, as it's a self directed study
3. Use of Program CDs for Training are effective, way of effective training, Most of Atlas in Anatomy, Applied Anatomy, ECG Reading & interpretation, Radiology are available in CD rom.
4. Clinical orthopaedics, dental implant procedures are available on net from which simple presentations are prepared for Medical Representatives⁸

1.3. Product launch training

This is a collaboration between the medical and marketing departments. The contents of this interaction is usually decided only after a FAB (Features, Advantages and Benefits) study for the product

1. Features — facts about the product/product label. A Feature describes some characteristic of a product or service.
2. Advantages — what are the advantages to the customer of using your product or service? An advantage describes how a product, or a product feature, can be used or can help the buyer. Advantages, as we have seen, are more persuasive than Features.
3. Benefits — what personal benefits does the customer get from the purchase? Benefits are the most powerful way in which a seller can describe the product. A benefit describes how a feature and advantage of a product can meet a specific need the buyer might have for that product.⁹

1.4. Trim and Pan classified the strategic launch decisions into three groups

1. Product strategy, e.g. product's image and branding
2. Market strategy, e.g. market targeting, competitive activities
3. Company strategy, which reflects the corporate culture and mission, as well as the launch process.⁶

The medical department designs and delivers content based on the strategy and the FAB. The launch visual aid which the medical team has helped design, is also discussed thoroughly with the team.

Product knowledge training with relevant sales and marketing training, improves sales dynamics and thus it is conducted in quarterly cycles. Highly trained sales personnel perform better. The trained medical representative makes presentations to doctors, practice staff and nurses hospital doctors and pharmacists in the retail sector¹⁰



Fig. 2: Module of sale force effectiveness

2. Conclusion

Sales force training is vital factor to generate revenues. The medical team plays a crucial role in basic and ongoing training as well as product launches.

Basic training is often in a short format followed by ongoing training either face to face or online. The content is defined post a SWOT analysis to identify weak areas. The product launch training is a collaboration between marketing and medical team, contents again based on a feature benefit analysis of the molecule. The training unit

of the medical department of pharma companies are an inseparable part of the whole marketing effort.

3. Source of Funding

None.

4. Conflict of Interest

None.

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Author biography

Sunil Chaudhry, Honorary Medical Director, Bioclinitech Technologies Pvt Ltd Mumbai India

Vishwas Sovani, Founder and Director

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