

THE BATTLE FOR CUSTOMER ACCESS IN HEALTHCARE SALES

How the medical industry became its own worst enemy and what can be done to right the ship

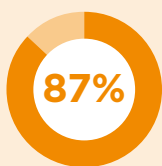
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It's putting it mildly to say that selling in the healthcare space has become increasingly difficult over the past 20 years. As the obstacles have piled up higher and higher each year, they've accumulated into major barriers to revenue growth, driven by both external and internal factors. In addition to the bottom-line concerns, organizations are finding that even their best people are becoming frustrated, demotivated and disengaged in this environment.

One of the biggest challenges is that the issues have been coming from all sides. Not only do salespeople have less direct access to their customers, in many cases, the audiences they need to reach are less receptive to their messaging. At the same time, managers continue to “lead behind the desk” rather than make the time to consistently coach and support their teams. As a result, many salespeople are struggling to navigate the new reality and are questioning whether they have what it takes to succeed now that the game has changed so significantly.

The impact of Covid-19 only compounded the problems. The turmoil created by the pandemic has been particularly disruptive for salespeople in the medical device and diagnostic, pharmaceuticals, and biotech businesses. With in-person access to their customers cut off instantaneously, these reps were forced to reckon with the fact that many of their go-to practices, like drop-in visits and hands-on demos, were no longer an option. As the world opened back up, it became clear that there was no going back to business as usual. Tighter policies, changing preferences by physicians and the proliferation of sprawling buying groups involving a broader coalition of stakeholders (including the [economic buyers](#) that KPMG calls one of the “big rocks” blocking revenue growth) have shifted the dynamics in healthcare sales.



In the new sales world “87 percent of HCPs want either all virtual or a mix of virtual and in-person meetings even after the pandemic ends.”

– Accenture COVID-19 Healthcare Provider Survey (2020)

COMMON CHALLENGES FOR TODAY'S HEALTHCARE SALES PROFESSIONALS

- Access barriers and resistance
- Message fatigue (overused messaging that no longer resonates)
- Rapport-building vs. selling (more concerned with being liked than being respected)
- Inability to uncover unmet needs (doing more talking than listening)
- A belief that activity is selling (activity ≠ productivity)
- Inability to close/build an effective call continuum (“party crashers” vs. being invited)
- Managers “not having time” to coach (leading teams from behind a desk)
- Clinical teams not getting support they need (aversion to being viewed as salespeople/still have a strong desire for patient advocacy)
- All compounded by Covid

While the pandemic brought many of these changes to the forefront in dramatic fashion, the reality is, they were already well underway. A number of [studies](#) over the past decade have pointed to a **growing trend of physicians restricting access to manufacturers' reps and allocating less time to reps than in the past. Covid accelerated these patterns — and revealed just how many sales reps are unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with them.**

In today's sales environment "fifty percent of accessible HCPs are highly selective and limit their access to three or fewer biopharmas, and that access can vary greatly by specialty ... 30% of psychiatrists limit access to just one company."

- Veeva Pulse Field Trends Report

Seismic shifts have also been occurring within the companies themselves. To adapt to the changing preferences of healthcare providers and the interests of these diverse buying groups, many medtech companies are attempting to pivot to a more omnichannel sales approach.

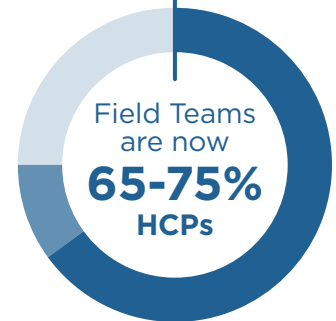


According to [McKinsey & Company](#), **64% of medtech companies are launching or growing inside sales functions and placing more emphasis on digital marketing, ecommerce and remote selling.**

“However,” McKinsey observes, “medtech companies have yet to reinvent the way they engage with stakeholders to provide a seamless experience across digital, remote, and in-person channels; in fact, 77 percent report experiencing channel conflict.”



Another tactic many pharmaceutical and medical device industry businesses have taken is to diversify their customer-facing teams by bringing on more providers who have firsthand experience with their solutions. In many of these organizations, **HCPs now comprise up to 65-75% of the field teams.** With advances in technology and more specialized tools available, companies recognize that these clinicians are able to speak effectively about the use of their solutions in a way that lay people can't. After all, they've been in the customer's shoes.



But now those organizations are running up against a harsh reality: **The traditional formula of clinical training plus product knowledge often results in their clinical teams acting more as service and support providers rather than consultative salespeople who can drive value and revenue.** That presents a significant issue for sales leaders, who are counting on this key group to help them achieve aggressive growth goals in this challenging environment.

Their clinical teams are capable of so much more, and so are sales reps. While the changes ushered in by Covid brought many of these issues to the forefront, the problems exist and persist because **too many training departments, leaders and salespeople continue to apply the strategies of the past — strategies that, in many cases, were already failing to deliver results — because it's all they know.**

To succeed in today's environment, pharma, biotech, med device and diagnostic businesses are going to have to reframe their approach to sales team development and coaching. Sales success requires more than just product knowledge, clinical expertise and well-crafted marketing messages. It requires the right mindset, a consultative model and skillset, a common language around sales and service, and, just as importantly, the leadership to support it.

The Mindset Factor

The Providers who've pivoted to industry are a good example of how consequential mindset is to sales success. Many of them have come into their new role with vivid memories of being customers themselves and having to deal with pushy salespeople who didn't respect their time, understand their needs or care about their patients. These experiences have shaped their mindset and belief system over time about what it means to be in sales. Because of this negative view of selling, the last thing they want is to be seen as one of "those salespeople." They've come to see selling as something you do to people rather than something you do *for* and *with* them.

However, most of them continue to be motivated by advocating for improving patient care and outcomes. But they're not sure how to fulfill that purpose now that they're on the side of industry, and they don't want to feel like they're being "salesy." Ultimately, their mindset drives their behaviors, and they often see their role as one limited to service and support — because that's something they can feel good about — which then leads to repeatable behaviors they demonstrate with customers.

Clinical teams aren't the only ones whose mindsets can create barriers to success. Most people come into healthcare sales with the preconceived belief that "selling is telling," - selling is being able to talk effectively about your product. **Often, the training they receive — information about disease state, product knowledge, features and benefits, competitors — only reinforces this belief.** Leadership that prioritizes activity and call frequency cements the belief even further that messaging and activity equate to selling.

It's not that these things aren't important. But in today's world especially, they simply aren't sufficient.

These are all behaviors that stem from a mindset rooted in a view that selling is something you do *to* people. This one-sided approach of talking about your company, your product and yourself has limited returns. This approach has led to an alienation of the healthcare customer, a devaluing of the sales professional and clinical team, and a "watering-down" of their capabilities.

It may get the customer's attention initially, but that's typically as far as it goes. You've given them the message. If there's no increase in value beyond that, the customer's engagement will drop off.

When this inevitably happens, we often find that the salesperson will start to question how they can really be successful and have more impact in their role. And if they don't believe they have what it takes, their behaviors will follow suit: They become apathetic and complacent, and activity replaces productivity.

If the healthcare industry doesn't learn from past mistakes and change the way they interact with their clients the current embrace of virtual selling will revert to limited access as well.





“It’s not just bringing doughnuts anymore. It’s understanding that physicians have different channel preferences [and] having that nuance and understanding ... To reap all the bottom-line benefits of digital selling, however, companies will need to revamp their rep training and better leverage data. Having a clear vision and strategy that articulates why it is critical to continue investing in hybrid selling will also be key to driving long-term change and impact.”

– Dan Rizzo, Vice President, Veeva business consulting



The Problem with Sales Training

Considering how important mindset is in sales, particularly with people who don’t self-identify as salespeople, it’s not surprising most traditional sales training falls short. **The mental side of selling is the most overlooked aspect in training**, not just in healthcare but in every industry. Without addressing mindset as part of the training, the skills, online videos, technology, tools and everything else you package up for your teams won’t make a dent. Those inner belief systems are going to keep getting in the way.

What’s perhaps most surprising is that this isn’t really a surprise to most senior leaders. Whenever we ask groups of leaders to compare skillset versus mindset in terms of which has the most positive impact on sales behavior and results, overwhelmingly they choose mindset. Yet when we ask them how much of the training time they spend working on mindset, which includes the more psychological aspects like self-belief, attitude, confidence and achievement drive, the answer is almost always around ten percent or less.

It’s good to recognize how important this is, but you have to do something about it: A sales mindset can be developed. People aren’t just born with a fixed amount of achievement drive. They can expand what’s possible for themselves, their clients, patients, and organizations. Healthcare companies and sales leaders simply have to prioritize this aspect of sales development and then dedicate the time and the resources to it.

From “Tellers” to Valued Partners

Healthcare companies must “empower their reps to be the centerpiece of the HCP experience at a time when pressures on capacity and access demand more precision and relevance than ever. Granting reps more autonomy over digital touchpoints and equipping reps with novel data to enrich the content and impact of their discussions, can help achieve a new level of personalization and impact.”

– Accenture COVID-19 Healthcare Provider Survey (2020)

With access more limited and buying groups becoming more diverse, healthcare salespeople need to make every customer interaction count. They must be able to engage in meaningful dialogue to uncover various stakeholders’ unmet and sometimes unstated needs and provide solutions that deliver real value. This requires a mindset shift as well as the consultative selling skills and model to support this pivot.

It starts with a common language and understanding, whether someone has a clinical or a traditional sales background, of what it means to be in sales. By reframing sales as a process of identifying someone’s wants or needs and then creating value for them — a mutual win-win activity — you change the lens entirely from that one-sided, “selling is telling” mindset. It’s no longer about pushing a product; it’s about identifying a need and providing solutions that improve patient care and outcomes.

As one clinician put it,

*“Don’t ask me to sell.
Ask me to save a life.”*

That’s something they can get behind. When you introduce a sales model that’s tied to their value system, they can connect with it, which means they’ll be able to execute it.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR PRODUCTIVE, SUCCESSFUL SALES TEAMS



A value-based sales process that everyone understands and is accountable to practice



A commitment to the activities required to sell successfully in a dynamic environment



A genuine desire to create value for all key stakeholders



Consistent, effective coaching by managers

You also have to build and sharpen their consultative selling skills. Despite healthcare being an arena where logical thought process rules the day, we know that, from a human level, emotions drive actions and buyer behaviors. Consultative selling is an approach based on partnering and collaboration as opposed to conflict or challenge. It's about listening more than telling. The salesperson is guiding someone along the way to reach a decision that's in their best interest. Because they're creating value and building trusted relationships, your clinicians will feel good about this kind of "sales" role. And if they feel good about it, it's behavior they'll repeat.

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“Conducting deep ethnographic research with patients, clinicians, procurement professionals, and others can expose unmet needs and pain points and help inform which channels, messages, and experiences should be included in the design of new engagement models.”

– McKinsey & Company

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Coaching Healthcare Sales Reps to Excel

The most common barrier (cited by 59% of respondents) to delivering effective sales training is that salespeople are not being held accountable for skills learned in training. ([ATD State of Sales Survey](#))

Here's one more harsh reality: If your leaders aren't willing and able to coach to these concepts, it's going to be an uphill battle all the way. Just as training has to align with a consultative, values-driven approach to selling, so does the approach to coaching.

While it's tempting for sales managers to give in to the tyranny of the urgent, especially in demanding times like these, they can't put coaching on the back burner anymore. Making the time to coach, regularly, consistently and individually, is among their most important responsibilities — because it has an outsize impact on their team's success.



There are 3 key coaching areas every healthcare sales manager should be focused on:

- 1 **BELIEFS:** How salespeople feel about their ability to sell in this environment may have as much to do with their success as any aspect of their jobs. While coaching on skills is important, sales managers must recognize the need to coach beliefs and attitudes. By opening up discussions with salespeople about their beliefs, the sales manager can gain insights into how they view their ability to do the job in light of today's realities.
- 2 **PLANNING:** Planning — including long-term strategic and pre-call plans — has never been so essential to success in healthcare sales. With the availability of resources like LinkedIn, customer websites, online analysis and trends, and 24/7 news sites, customers expect salespeople to do their homework. Considering the speed of change, the intensity of the competition, and the tight control over time and budgets, generic conversations and “winging it” won't cut it. Many salespeople are quickly realizing preparation is a non-negotiable activity. However, others need coaching to make planning a consistent sales behavior.
- 3 **ACTIONS:** Selling to a broader coalition of stakeholders presents another coaching opportunity. Even if salespeople believe they can be successful, making the transition will likely stretch their comfort zones. And remember: Understanding the products isn't enough. To become trusted partners to their customers, salespeople have to understand the bigger view—the changes in today's healthcare environment and how they impact their customers.

Coaching salespeople to interact with stakeholders should now include:

- **Creating** strategic account plans with clearly defined account goals
- **Identifying** stakeholder goals, initiatives and challenges
- **Engaging** all key stakeholders in meaningful dialogue
- **Selling** *value* beyond product



An Action Plan for Healthcare Sales Success

When you consider the training and coaching being offered, you can see that a lot of the problems many life sciences companies are experiencing are self-inflicted. The industry has created generation of “tellers” who desperately need consultative sales skills training and the mindset for sales success.

“In a post-pandemic world, relevance of interactions will replace the volume of HCP touchpoints as the key measure of successful engagement ... While there will still be a need for face-to-face interactions and intelligence gathering, high-quality content delivered by experts will prove to be the most effective form of engagement.”

– Chris Moore, President, Veeva Europe

HERE'S AN ACTION PLAN TO GET STARTED:

- 1 **Redefine sales as a process of identifying someone's wants or needs and then creating value for them** — a mutual win-win activity — and change the lens entirely for clinicians in customer-facing roles.
- 2 **Create clarity, don't add to the complexity:** Help salespeople think strategically and sell value beyond product.
- 3 **Align the sales process with what customers want:** A value-based sales process will help sales representatives approach selling in a highly consultative way.
- 4 **Help salespeople make every conversation count:** Sales representatives must quickly build rapport, engage their customers, listen to understand their needs and position their products and services appropriately.
- 5 **Reinforce the attitudes, values and beliefs that drive change:** Ultimately, a salesperson's ability to change may hinge on emotional aspects of performance, like actions, feelings and behaviors. Sales managers will likely need to spend more time coaching beliefs and attitudes.
- 6 **Measure what matters:** Evaluate performance based on metrics that have a tangible impact on sales success in today's environment and with today's buyers.
- 7 **Coach to patients, outcomes and efficiencies** vs. prioritizing deals, numbers and quotas.
- 8 **Make sales managers a key part of the strategy:** There's a good chance many of today's sales managers built their own successes by selling in a different way than today's environment demands. That means they may need additional development to be able to effectively coach and support their teams going forward.
- 9 **Determine upfront what training success looks like:** Measurement is about answering the question, How will we know if the sales training is working? Focus on the leading indicators — financial, performance and behavioral — that will tell you whether what you're doing is affecting change and putting you on the right track toward your goals.
- 10 **Focus on developing consultative selling skills:** Consultative selling emphasizes partnering and collaboration vs. conflict or challenge. Provide the customer guidance to reach a decision that's in their (and the patient's) best interest. Create value and build trusted relationships that allow clinicians to feel good about this kind of "sales" role and repeat behaviors.

In a healthcare environment that has changed dramatically over the past several years and continues to evolve, the biggest mistake you can make is to get trapped in old ways of doing things. Dedicate the time and resources into building the right mindset, skillset and support for your sales and customer-facing teams. They'll be more engaged, energized and able to achieve more — for their customers and the patients, for the organization and for themselves.

ABOUT INTEGRITY SOLUTIONS

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