

# Pharma Sales Bend or Break



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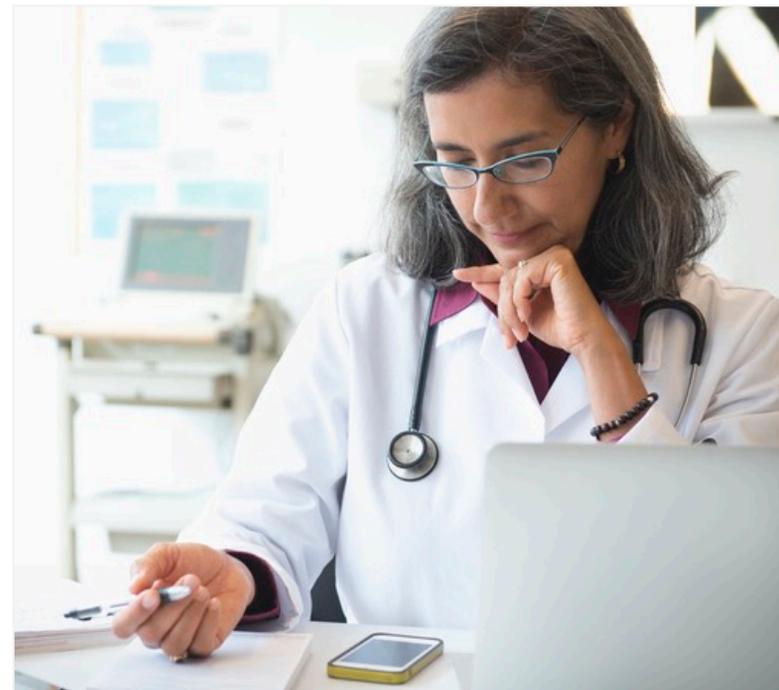
## SALES FORCE IDLING IN PLACE

*“There’s no urgency to their coming in”*

Today’s requirements for social distancing have challenged pharmaceutical companies to achieve their sales goals. Fewer patients are seeing physicians, reserving healthcare visits for the most essential situations; as a result, overall treatment utilization is diminished. During this pandemic, providers’ focus is on maintaining the health of existing patients, e.g. renewing existing prescriptions, rather than accepting new patients, as they may require more extensive, in-person examination and a greater level of monitoring.

Research shows the majority of practices and hospitals have halted in-office visits by pharmaceutical sales reps. Gone for now is the established model where reps meet with healthcare providers in-person. Physicians now look for information on new products and patient support programs, e.g. copay assistance, through digital channels. Physical samples are replaced by direct shipments. Office lunches are limited – but possible with food delivery and rep video conferencing.

Pharmaceutical companies now are faced with the challenging question of how to communicate and continue relationships with healthcare providers in the post-COVID world. Maintaining the existing pharmaceutical sales force is the number one dilemma for commercial leaders.



## FLOODED BY DIGITAL CONTACTS

*“Webinars are the best way so far. I think of it as more of a lecture”*

No longer able to rely on in-person visits with physicians, pharma companies have turned to expanding their use of digital channels. This requires the purchase of physician direct digital contact information, e.g. phone number, email, and an upgrade of customer contact capabilities, e.g. video conferencing systems. With reps delivering their messages via email, texting, phone, or conference calls, they are able to contact many more physicians in a day. Together with the centralized campaigns that continue to be conducted by marketers, high-volume physicians are inundated by electronic communications.

Nevertheless, physicians are finding digital modes of interaction somewhat useful. Virtual lunch-and-learns and webinars still can help providers learn about new offerings; companies are able to deliver most of the important materials virtually. Providers themselves are exploring the potential of telemedicine. Along with the integration of electronic health records (EHRs) into practice, these technological advancements have highlighted the opportunity for greater efficiency in healthcare delivery. This pandemic is accelerating the introduction and adoption of digital platforms across all industries, including healthcare.

The future is digital. We all have to learn how to operate in the digital world. The digital selling model traditionally has less impact than in-person interactions; it thus was used only adjunctively. In the future, the digital channel will dominate communications with customers.

## REIMAGINING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

*“It is doable to do things virtually, but initially, I want face-to-face to know the person”*

The new model must be flexible, balancing preference for digital communications with the value of in-person interactions. Providers want greater online offerings of tools and educational information: patient access programs, disease education, regulatory updates, and trial data. A smaller, more knowledgeable field force, akin to medical science liaisons, could conduct face-to-face conversations with certain providers to understand their preference and address specific clinical needs. With this information, the pharmaceutical industry will need to adopt a tailored, individualized approach based on specialties, geographies, physician preference, and type of practice.

Patients also are more empowered through digital and health engagement. They take more active roles in understanding their and their family’s care needs, including learning about new therapies. Pharmaceutical companies must expand their digital toolbox to include patient-friendly resources, treatment logistics, case management, and financial and reimbursement assistance.

Pharmaceutical sales are in flux, COVID-19 has provided the opportunity for a new model to emerge. Companies have a choice between returning to the status quo or innovating and creating a truly provider- and patient-centric approach that will carry them through this pandemic and future challenges.