

changing the conversation with customers



the challenge : achieving better sales outcomes

Over the past few years, commercial interactions between the pharmaceutical industry and their customers have become increasingly strained. Healthcare professionals and managers are under significant pressure to deliver quality targets within tightly constrained budgets and are re-evaluating how they invest their scarce time with suppliers.

Our client is a UK subsidiary of a global pharmaceutical organisation and was experiencing flat or declining growth in a number of its core markets. One of the key reasons identified for this loss of competitiveness was the lack of impact salespeople were having when interacting with customers.

The organisation recognised that salespeople had had little formal capability development over the past few years. The incumbent sales approach had been around for over 10 years, was inconsistently used and was considered to be out of date for the realities of engaging healthcare professionals in the 21st Century.

We were asked to help the organisation to achieve better sales outcomes by improving the quality of the conversations salespeople were having with their customers. The primary aim of our work was about changing the behaviours of salespeople to be more collaborative, more challenging and more commitment-focused when interacting with customers.

Our view was that salesperson behaviours would only change if individuals were supported through their interactions within the broader organisation. We therefore focused our attention on four key areas:

- **individual salespeople:** training on the new collaborative sales approach
- **sales managers:** provision of coaching and development support for individuals
- **marketing & other colleagues:** using the new approach in strategies & materials
- **customers:** evaluating the quality of the salesperson's conversations

The client's primary objective was to achieve better sales outcomes by improving the quality of their conversations with customers.

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our approach : individual and organisational focus

The initial focus of our work was to design a more collaborative sales approach that would help salespeople have more productive conversations with customers. This approach was based on good selling practices from the organisation and from other industry sectors and focused salespeople on six key areas:

prepare: planning and preparing for the customer interaction

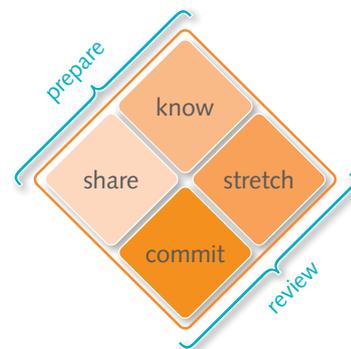
share: framing the customer conversation around patients

know: sharing assumptions and asking powerful questions about the customer's current practice

stretch: encouraging the customer to think differently about their practice

commit: gaining the customer's commitment to do something different after the conversation

review: learning from the customer interaction and generating insights to act on



A series of regional training workshops were arranged to introduce the new sales approach to over 400 salespeople and managers. This provided participants with an opportunity to learn more about the approach and engage in role play practice.

The collaborative sales approach was well received by salespeople - it encouraged them to have more 'flowing' conversations with customers and felt like a natural approach. Feedback from the training sessions was that the new sales approach was easy to learn and comprehensive enough to challenge salespeople's current ways of working.

Sales managers played a pivotal role in ensuring the new sales approach was being used in customer conversations. A support tool was created to help managers' capture observations and provide clear feedback on how their sales team members were engaging customers. Managers received specific development support to improve their sales coaching skills so they could more effectively develop their team members.

Organisational reviews of the quality of customer conversations indicated that salespeople needed support to improve their ability to stretch the customer's thinking and gain commitment to action. A series of brand-specific support materials were created to help salespeople work through what a stretching, commitment-focused conversation could look like. Practical workshops were held to share these materials and understand colleague's personal experiences.

Work continues to embed the new sales approach across the organisation. An advanced programme of coaching support is currently being designed to further improve manager's coaching capabilities. A series of qualitative and quantitative metrics is being designed to evaluate how well the new sales approach is impacting salespeople's behaviours and sales outcomes.

the outcome : a qualified success

Our client had two clear measures of success for this project:

1 What difference has the collaborative sales model made to customer interactions?

This measure was largely based on gathering feedback from salespeople, sales managers, other observers and customers. Feedback from salespeople has been very

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new approach is easy to
learn and comprehensive
enough to change current
sales practice.

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changing the conversation with customers

Those salespeople who are consistently applying the new approach to their customer conversations are achieving the best sales outcomes.

positive. The new sales approach allows them to be more natural with customers and enables them to focus on the content of the conversation rather than on a mechanical process or set of sales techniques.

Customers have felt more engaged in conversations and many have commented that they have gained more value out of those interactions where the salesperson has really stretched their thinking about their practice.

Feedback from managers and other observers confirms that the more collaborative customer approach feels more effective and efficient and builds stronger relationships through mutually respectful and stretching conversations.

2 What difference has the collaborative sales approach made to sales outcomes?

The strongest evidence that the new sales approach makes a difference comes from observations gathered from across the organisation by managers, training and development colleagues and external observers. This evidence strongly demonstrates that those salespeople who are consistently applying the collaborative sales approach to their customer conversations are achieving the best sales outcomes.

Feedback from these salespeople suggests that the natural flow of the conversation builds a strong foundation for them to stretch thinking and gain commitment to action. It also seems that some salespeople are finding it difficult to stretch their customers thinking, particularly those who have a long established pattern of reacting to customer requests. How these these individual's behaviours can be shifted from a more reactive to a more proactive stance is part of the ongoing work.

our thoughts

Achieving sustained behavioural change is a challenging proposition for any organisation and this work has highlighted how important it is to consider individual change as part of a broader system of influences. Undoubtedly, our approach to change was more iterative, organic and emergent than we have portrayed here and we were, at times, overwhelmed by the complexity, uncertainty and immensity of our undertaking.

We were and are also excited about the prospect of starting to change some of the long established and often unhelpful patterns of interaction between customers and the industry.

“ different business have become our partner for thinking differently and they have actively demonstrated how important it is to blend external views with a real understanding of how organisational change really happens. ”

— Regional Business Director