

Service Review

Sales Rep Assessment: Shoot the Messenger, the Message, or Both?

By John Mack

Getting sales representatives in front of doctors is still the most effective way to present the "story" of a drug, according to Hank McKinnell, CEO of Pfizer. The story is the marketing messages contained in the detail aid and talking points that sales reps use when calling upon doctors. Getting the story right and delivering it effectively is more important than ever and it is crucial that sales reps get proper training.

Metamorph Doctors, a company formed by doctors, assesses pharmaceutical marketing messengers and representative competencies in real calls with real doctors who give real feedback. The methodology allows pharma and biotech companies to determine if it is the message and/or the messenger that needs improvement.

Assessments performed by Metamorph Doctors are based on their standardized 16 key performance indicators that were developed in concert with doctors, sales managers, and sales trainers at pharmaceutical, biotech and medical product and device companies. The performance indicators fall into three groups: (1) selling skills, (2) interpersonal skills, and (3) product and clinical knowledge. These indicators are designed to cover everything that sales and marketing managers are looking for and, perhaps more importantly, what doctors are looking for.

"What makes our assessment process unique," says Michael Kessler, MD, VP of Metamorph Doctors, LLC., "is the training our doctors get on the key performance indicators and how to score the representative on each one. This gives us a highly standardized approach that allows us to establish benchmarks against which each company can measure its performance internally or externally across the industry."

Assessments are done on site whenever the company chooses to have it. Usually these are done in concert with corporate, regional or national sales training meetings. Over the past 6 years, Metamorph Doctors—which contracts with about 800 doctors in all specialties—has performed over 50,000 assessments. One assessment equals one rep making one call on one doctor in a one-on-one controlled environment. The doctors act the same way they would in their offices and ask the same questions. The only difference is that at the end of the call, they give the representatives supportive

and instructive instantaneous feedback. Each doctor then fills out an evaluation form and scores the rep on the 16 performance indicators.

Each representative is given a mini CV of the doctors they will be calling on. From this CV, the rep should be able to become familiar with the doctor, the specialty, the demographics of the practice, what percentage of the practice is formulary based, and the prescribing habits of the doctor.

Traditional marketing tools such as focus groups, expert panels, and data-base analysis have played a central role in evaluating marketing messages. Dr. Kessler emphasized the difference between focus groups and what Metamorph does." One of the issues with the focus group approach," says Kessler, "is that the facilitator delivers the message as opposed to actual sales reps. The rubber meets the road, however, when the message is delivered by the sales rep and that is where our methodology differs from focus groups. The dynamic between the rep and the doctor yields real-world information."

Benchmarking Benefits Marketers, Trainers, Reps

Another difference—already mentioned above—that the Metamorph Doctors approach offers is the ability to benchmark. There are two ways to look at a benchmark: (1) according to individual key performance indicators, or (2) according to a "metascore" which is a weighted average of the score across all key indicators. The metascore is an indicator of the overall effectiveness of a representative viz-a-viz getting the doctor to change his/her clinical behaviors and prescribing habits.

Benchmarking—either internally or externally—using a standardized set of key performance indicators allows sales and marketing to identify short and long-term trends. In addition, marketing managers can observe sales messages being delivered to the doctor and gauge the response from the doctor.

Benchmarking data can also be used by sales training managers to analyze the effectiveness of the training curriculum and make appropriate adjustments. It can also identify gaps in skills of individual reps and help evaluate training needs of different individuals.

The reps benefit from the feedback and can readily see how they measure up to their peers in the industry in each performance category. This helps them focus on improving their skills and can give them up to 3 months of field experience in one day.

Rep Skill Trends

According to Dr. Kessler, “representatives, in general, are scoring lower in their ability to communicate clinical information in a way that is palatable and understandable to the doctor.” Perhaps doctors are more demanding these days and despite efforts to standardize assessments, they are less forgiving in judging this skill. Nevertheless, this decline in an important indicator is a worrisome trend in light of recent commitments by the pharmaceutical industry to ensure that

doctors become more knowledgeable about new drugs, especially before DTC campaigns are launched.

“We also see an across-the-board lack of knowledge of competitors’ products or the lack of ability to speak about competitors’ products in a comparative way,” says Kessler. On the other hand, there is an apparent increase in interpersonal skills, which are not necessarily going to change doctor prescribing habits. Because of this, in our assessment, interpersonal skills are not given as much weight in the overall score as selling and product knowledge skills.”

Case Study

Dr. Kessler cited a case study of a project Metamorph Doctors just completed with a leading pharmaceutical company. This was an assessment for a drug that was on the market for 5-6 years and was losing market share to the competition. Marketing was convinced that the reps were not as effective as they could be delivering the message while sales was convinced that the message was a problem.

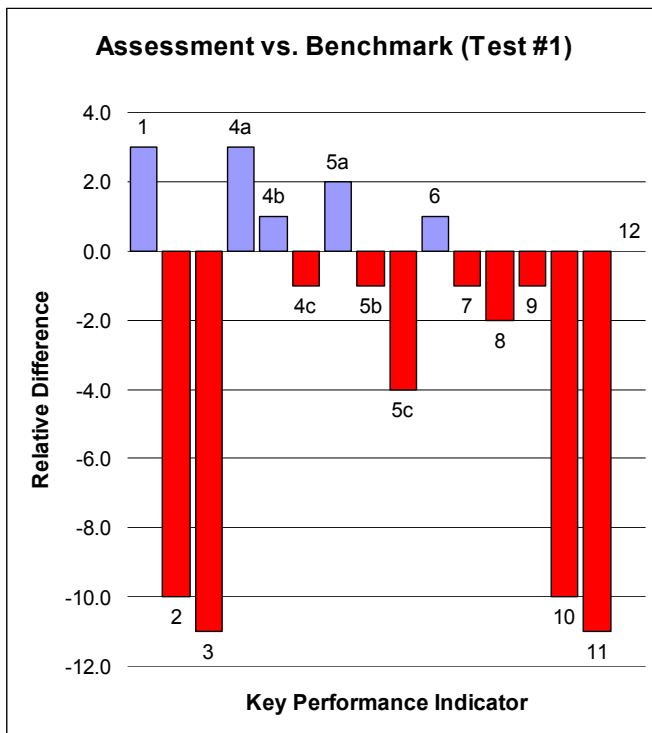


Figure 1: This chart represents an assessment made prior to changes in the messaging and selling skills of reps. Here the relative difference between assessment score of each of the 16 key indicators is plotted compared to the industry-wide national score. A blue bar indicates a score higher than the national benchmark. A red bar indicates a score lower than the benchmark. No bar means the assessment score equaled the national average. Note that performance indicators #2 (building rapport appropriately), #3 (introducing the subject), #10 (the representative’s professionalism), and #11 (influencing prescribing habits) were significantly lower than the national average.

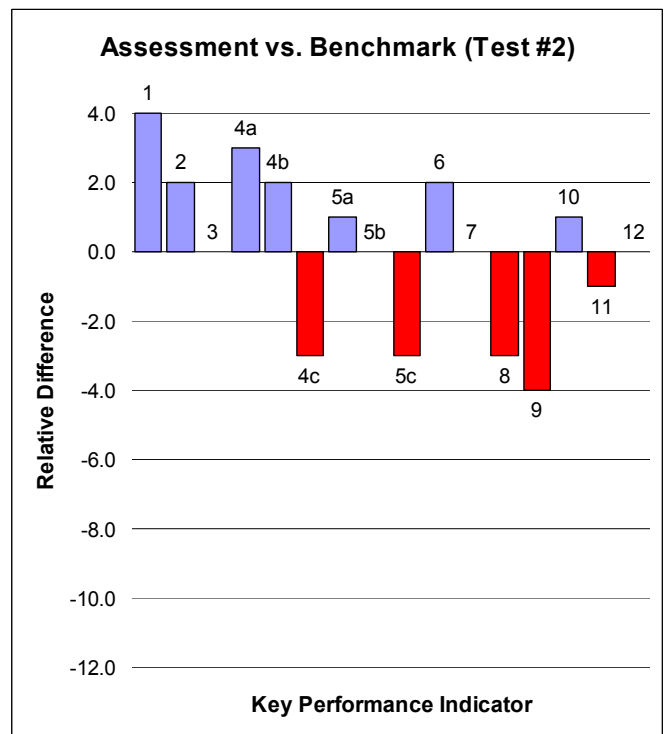


Figure 2: This chart represents an assessment made after appropriate changes in the messaging and selling skills of reps. Note the dramatic improvement in performance indicators #2, #3, #10, and #11.

“Our job,” says Kessler, “was to (1) use Metamorph Doctors to assess the reps ability to deliver the message and (2) measure the effectiveness of the message – that is, what parts of the message were delivered and what parts were not. This helped the company determine if there was a problem with the message or the messenger.”

In this particular case, several key parts of the message that were not being delivered were deemed to be very important by the majority of the doctors (see Figure 1 on previous page). In addition to problems related to the message, it was found that reps were not focusing the call to the needs of the doctor – a significant number were coming in a doing a data dump. This is a problem with the messenger.

Reviewing the doctors’ comments showed that most specifically referenced the core message and leadership statement. Further debriefing with the doctors found these to be both irritating and patronizing and that they had a major negative impact on the effectiveness of the call no matter how it was delivered.

An adjustment was made and the assessment scores increased significantly (see Figure 2 on previous page). Half of reps were assessed first and the second half assessed after adjustments made.

“We were able to dig down into the data and target for the company those representatives who performed better,” says Kessler. “The testing was also done in 12 different territories with local doctors, which allowed us to identify better performing territories.”

A Fresh Approach

Metamorph Doctors offers a fresh, viable alternative to the market research methodologies that are traditionally used in the pharmaceutical industry. Individual pharma companies may recruit doctors and run their sales reps against them in mock sales calls, but Metamorph Doctors can use an assessment database that allows them to do industry-wide national benchmarks and quantitatively understand what competencies are important and effective in changing doctor behavior.

Also, pharma companies may employ agencies to follow reps on calls to doctors in the field and rate rep performance. However, these studies lack the controlled environment, the doctor training, and the standardization of metrics. Metamorph doctors are also trained to give immediate instructive and supportive feedback to representatives and that is extremely educational for the rep and helpful for the company.