

# The Care and Feeding of Physicians

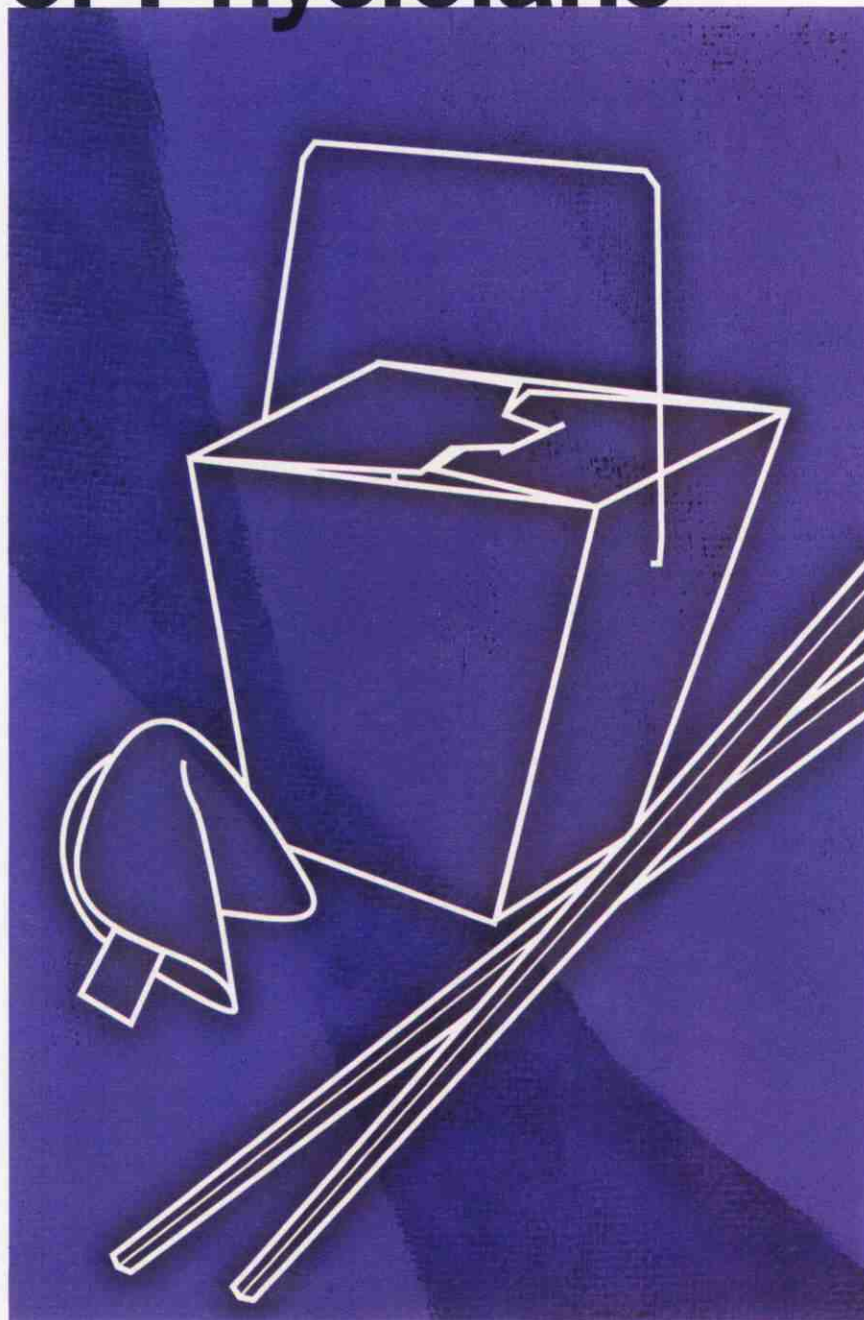
Sales managers see shrinking returns on their reps' lunch-n-learn meetings—are they getting what they're paying for? by Kim Rowe

**L**unch-n-learns, breakfast meetings, speaker dinners—no matter what form it takes, the exchange of food for the opportunity to educate healthcare providers is a significant promotional investment for pharma companies. But are they delivering takeout to uncommitted groups, half-empty break rooms, and mental day-trippers taking virtual vacations in Vegas during the presentation? Sales reps can maximize the benefits of these investments by getting the right people in the room and having them fully present, not just physically but mentally. Preparing reps to make the most of their group meetings requires a new approach to training, one that emphasizes facilitation, listening, and dialogue rather than presentation, telling, and monologue.

## Dollars to Doughnuts

“We have created our own monster,” says Sam Rotella, executive director of training and development at Professional Detailing Inc. (PDI). “At one time, these meetings were cutting edge. Now every cough and cold product on the market is offering educational programs—they’ve become a dime a dozen. To make matters worse, we run scoreboards and compensate on the numbers of programs our reps run, rather than emphasizing the quality of the return on the investment. As a result, we may get nine people in the room—six administrative, two techs, and a nurse—and the doctor is nowhere in sight.”

Educational meetings were originally intended to help reps differentiate



themselves from their competitors by offering physicians or hospital staff an opportunity to learn more about treatments in a relaxed atmosphere. Things are different today. Many reps schedule meetings according to their compensation packages—three per week or ten per month—rather than considering what the company gets in exchange for the program. With more than 90,000 sales reps in the field, each scheduling ten meetings a month, it's easy to see why many customers are beginning to see these meetings as nothing more than subsidized meal plans.

From the company's perspective, the cost of a typical breakfast or lunch meeting involves not just the price of the food, but also the value of reps' time, expenses, and lost selling opportunities. A typical lunch-n-learn might easily reduce a sales rep's productivity from eight to four calls per day. Managers must train reps to think about the return on investment of their time and productivity, not just their promotional budget.

### More Than a Meal

Reps who depend on their culinary offerings to deliver mental and physical access to physicians are off the mark.

"Don't these reps think I can afford to buy my own sandwich?" asks Michael Wasyl, MD, from Skillman, NJ. "They need to offer something of educational importance to me and my staff in order for me to give them my time."

Even when food works as an enticement to get people in the room, it does little to gain true access. Sales reps can't get their message across if the audience is glassy eyed, or if everyone seems to have a pre-planned excuse for why they need to "grab and go." If the key physician is lurking in the hallway, surreptitiously peeking around the doorway to see if the rep is gone and the coast is clear to pick at the leftovers, the rep has not clearly positioned the meeting as something the physician can't afford to miss.

Following are some simple techniques

to increase the value they offer the customer and improve the return they get on their promotional investment.

### Don't Give It Away

"Pharmaceutical representatives have a wide variety of educational materials and services that they can use to support their physicians, including lunch-n-learns," says Jose Fojas, director, hospital sales and marketing at Eisai. "But too often, the representative doesn't place enough value on what they are bringing to the table. We wouldn't offer these educational opportunities if we didn't think we had important information for the physician—information that can enhance his or her practice of medicine. It's most effective when the

another meeting with you."

It is not only appropriate for reps to ask for certain types of commitments in exchange for the opportunity to offer an educational program, but doing so increases the value of the program in the physicians' minds. For example, reps might ask for a firm commitment from a key physician that she will review literature, make introductions to colleagues, take the time to fully consider the supporting documentation for the drug, or agree to a follow-up meeting—all actions that advance the physician-company relationship. Once a physician has committed to taking some action in return for the education provided by the company, he will more naturally perceive the education as something of value.

**It's ethical for reps to ask doctors for commitments to review literature or agree to a follow-up meeting—not to write a prescription or use a product.**

rep is able to set the meeting up as a forum for clinical dialogue, an exchange of information between the company and the physician."

Which is more valuable: the free glass of wine accompanying first-class airfare, or the rare, expensive Cabernet stashed in your cellar for a special occasion? Reps that treat their lunch meetings as a free service without asking for anything in return from the participants are devaluing themselves and their company.

According to Mark Boulding, senior vice-president, business development and legal affairs at PTC Therapeutics, asking for a commitment to prescribe or use the drug presents legal and ethical concerns. "It's much safer to ask the physician to do something else that would help advance your cause—like reading on-label literature or scheduling

"Most pharmaceutical representatives—probably 80–90 percent—never close," reports an experienced sales rep from a major pharma company. "And that's even more true when it comes to asking for commitments in return for the free services we offer. Although you have to be aware of the PhRMA ethical guidelines, it's okay to ask someone to commit to attending a meeting or reading a white paper or setting another appointment with you, to make sure you're not just wasting your time and energy."

### Our House, Their House

Before offering a lunch, breakfast, or dinner meeting, reps should learn to take a minute to step out of their own environment (our house) and think like the physician (their house). When reps take the time to step into the physician's

world, they realize that although getting the company's message out is at the top of their lists, it's unlikely that it made it onto the lists of the busy gastroenterologist or the head of neurosurgery. "I want the reps I see to be real, human, and honest," says Michael Greenberg, MD, a practicing physician in Elk Grove, Illinois and the founder of Second Opinion, an audio magazine for physicians. "I don't want them to waste my time by pretending they don't already know what I'm prescribing, or by asking silly questions that they already know the answers to. Those that focus on establishing an honest and intimate business relationship before trying to sell me something are the ones that get the furthest with me."

You can be sure that physicians consider their staffs' lost productivity when they decide whether to allow time for a lunch or breakfast meeting. So reps should ask physicians and their staff what they hope to get out of the meeting and what specific questions they can answer for individuals or the group. For example: Which lunch or dinner meetings have been the most successful, and why? Those questions allow reps to bring more value to the audience by meeting their criteria for success. Talking to as many participants as possible before the meeting gives reps the opportunity to personalize the meeting and increase its value to the individual attendees.

"A huge number of lunch-n-learns and dinners are really a waste of time," says Greenberg. "The reps come in and start to give us a lecture, the same old pitch, and the doctors are so bored that they completely turn off. My advice to sales people is to lighten up and use the meeting to develop a relationship with us. The best food meetings are the ones where we get to share information with other peers, or the sales rep brings us information about what's going on in the community. When they talk to us about their drugs, they should tell us what we need to know: Why is it better?

Why will my patients benefit? Which patients will benefit most? And why should I use it if it's a 'me too'?"

Successful reps position their lunch meetings as vehicles for bringing critical information to physicians and their staff. Instead of setting up a time to "talk about my drug," these reps give staff the opportunity to "discuss some new clinical research about diabetes."

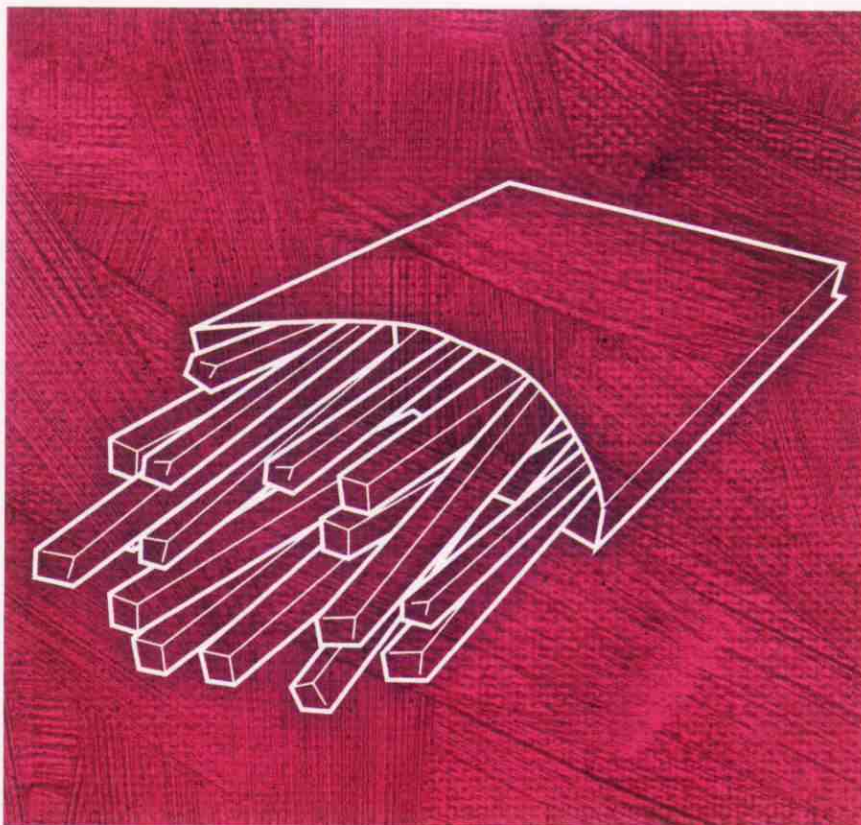
**Reps:  
Don't waste time  
pretending that  
you don't know  
what doctors are  
prescribing—they  
know you know.**

Instead of telling the group about "the patient benefits and efficacy of drug X," savvy reps might give "an update on how other practices are using breakthrough protocols to manage schizophrenia." Instead of inviting cardiology staff to a "presentation about the use of drug Y to regulate arrhythmias," reps who are in the customer's house might invite the staff to "share their experiences and best practices for managing arrhythmias in the cardiac care unit."

#### What's In It For Them?

There is an old saying that captures the essence of conversation: "A person who talks to you about themselves is a bore. A person who talks to you about you is a brilliant conversationalist." A rep who opens a meeting with a statement like, "Good morning. I'm John Doe from XYZ Pharma, and I'm here today to talk

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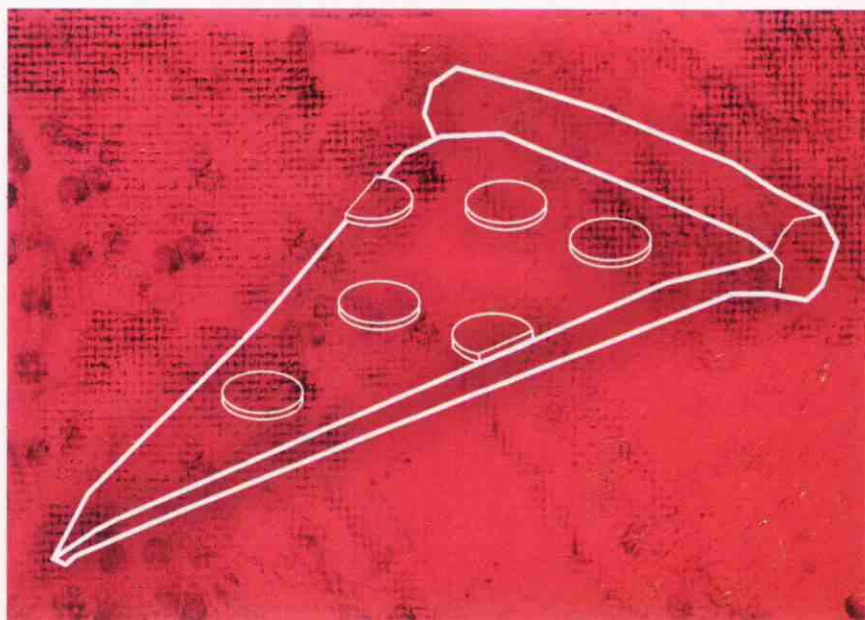


with you about my drug," is telling, not selling. John's next move is to launch directly into his five-minute detail, clinging desperately to his sales aid, never daring to glance up at the audience for fear there may have been a mass exodus from the room while he wasn't looking. John is a bore because he is detailing the group about his drug, his interests, his house. "We forget that our customers attend meetings as adult learners. Instead, we treat them as hostages," says Rotella.

In contrast, facilitation is the art of getting others to talk about themselves. As opposed to detailing or presentation, facilitation focuses the meeting on the group's issues in a structured format that gently guides the discussion to the points the facilitator wants to cover. Clinicians are interested in sharing best practices, talking about medical cases and protocols, hearing from others about how they handle certain medical challenges, and staying on top of treatment trends and research. A skilled facilitator takes those motivations into consideration and opens a meeting with a statement that clearly tells the group what's in it for them, for example, "Hi, I'm John Doe from XYZ Pharma, and we're here today to share best practices about dosing for diabetic patients."

Facilitation is all about asking the right questions. Those that begin with the words, "Tell me," "How often," and "What kinds of," stimulate conversation and elicit interaction from participants, while closed-end questions that are answerable with one or two words can effectively shut down communication. Questions that begin with "Why?" often raise defenses by forcing the other person to justify her position. A "Why?" question can easily be turned into an effective facilitation question by asking instead, "What are the implications of that?"

Effective sales rep facilitators plan their questioning strategy before the lunch-n-learn or breakfast meeting. Starting with the product's benefits, they identify questions that link the



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issues and needs of the audience with the problems that the product can solve. A well designed questioning strategy gives reps the natural opportunity to emphasize key product selling points.

Facilitation through questioning is ineffective unless it is paired with reflective listening. As in any conversation, people want to feel that they are being heard. Reflective listening tells the customer that the facilitator is engaged and interested, and not simply waiting with bated breath for her turn to talk. One way to do this is to restate what the other person has said: "So what I hear

you saying is that you are currently prescribing based on the side effects profile?" If the physician agrees with the reflection, the rep can go on to ask for more information: "Which side effects concern you the most?"

Facilitation, listening, and dialogue are essential survival skills for the next generation of pharma sales reps. As the guidelines for ethical sales behavior become more restrictive, it is increasingly important to use these skills to wring every bit of potential return from the lunch-n-learn promotional investment. Sales reps who learn to identify with their customers' clinical and business challenges—and position their educational programs as valuable opportunities for learning and development—will differentiate themselves from the sea of competitive reps and surpass traditional detailers in the race for increased access and exposure. ●

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