Strategies to Take the Stigma Out of Sales—and Get Results

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Often, when we meet with healthcare professionals, we're surprised to find that many of you are afraid to utter "sales" and "healthcare" in the same sentence. In fact, sales still gets a bad rap—it's "unprofessional," "unethical," even a little "slimy" to some.

But selling healthcare has nothing to do with the clichés you may hear. Instead, it has everything to do with building relationships, strengthening your brand and focusing on your bottom line.

That's not slimy at all (although it can at times be a slippery slope, we know). Sales simply put, is matching the needs of the customer with the benefits or the value you have to offer. From here out, when we use the word "salesperson," we're talking about someone who represents your organization professionally, serving as the liaison between the customer (listening and learning about their needs) and the organization (creating a match with the services your organization has to offer).

Know your customer, and your customer's motivation

More than ever before, streamlined economics in healthcare require that you focus on measurable, profitable growth. But to grow your business, you first have to understand who will buy your services.

Take a good hard look at your key customers. Maybe they're physicians, employers or specific consumer groups. These are very sophisticated and discriminating consumers in their own way. And they all have their own personal agendas and issues.

In some cases, physicians have been undervalued and taken for granted in terms of their relationship with healthcare entities. Employers are getting hit with double-triple digit increases in their group and work health plans, and are seeking ways yet again to work directly with providers for improved healthcare costs and services. And consumers are demanding more choices as they become better informed and take an active role in making healthcare decisions.

Show them you understand what they want, need and desire.

It used to be that healthcare CEOs were directly involved in customer relationships. Today, their plate is full with the crisis du jour, many of which aren't easily resolved. And while it's still important for the CEO or the hospital's senior leadership team to be involved in customer interactions and relationships, without a salesperson representing them, their efforts may be off track. They may be inconsistent, send mixed messages or respond only to the most loyal or urgent customers—missing others.

We can't afford inconsistency in our valued customer relationships. It costs us in terms of loyal customers—that trust in bringing the first referral to our new cardiac program, for example—keeping our finger on the pulse of the marketplace and in terms of not delivering on the promise.

Customers are more sophisticated about their healthcare interactions, and jaded about past transactions with healthcare providers. So the salesperson's number-one initiative is to demonstrate credibility and trust. In essence, your organization needs to prove to the customer what makes you different, better and trustworthy to be an effective partner or resource. And you need to deliver that message every time you encounter your customer.

Once you've shown you really will walk the talk, you also need to show an ability to listen. This may sound simple, but many salespeople are so eager to talk about what they have to offer that they fail to connect with what the customer really wants.

Spend some time gathering information about your customer's situation. What's worked? What hasn't? What solution would they like in an ideal world? Take all of this in, and then—and only then—bring some ideas back to them. They'll appreciate your time and your ability to zone in on their goals, as well as the opportunity to experience the difference this type of relationship selling makes.

CASE STUDY: Quad Cities' Work Fitness Center

Sometimes, it takes some reading between the lines—and changing perceptions—to understand what's in a customer's best interest.

As an occupational health provider, Work Fitness Center sees a good share of customers who may require return visits. One such client, a bookbindery whose employees perform hundreds of repetitive actions a day, came to the center for help.

But after sending several employees to Work Fitness, the client was concerned with the number of employees who required rechecks and rehab services, says president Patrick Doherty.

"Our customer service person set up a plan to come back to the client every quarter and review the data," he says. True to the initial perception, the client was correct—of 17 patients, 17 were referred to rehab. But a closer look at the numbers revealed something else.

"Our IT person looked at the data overall and said, 'yes, all of these people have required rehab but we only saw them a handful of times,'" Doherty notes. "We got them back to work without restrictions—and that's a standard across the industry—so it turned out that we weren't overutilizing our services."

The Work Fitness customer service representative presented the data and then took the opportunity to address a deeper concern: What might be happening in the workplace to require the number of return visits for rehab? Work Fitness proposed placing a therapist on site at the client's business—an idea the client is very interested in.

What began as a perception issue has become a case of increased client confidence in choosing Work Fitness as an occupational health provider. And a great example of how digging deeper for information can really pay off.

Take a lesson from best practices models

Believe it or not, there's a lot to be learned from looking at industries that may seem far afield from healthcare. Benchmarking, or using best practices, allows us to improve our own performance, shorten change cycle time, get a better return on our investment, and improve operational efficiencies and internal communication. Here are some examples of those who continue to set the standard:

Retailer giant Nordstrom puts people first. The Seattle-based company is legendary for its focus on the customer experience. How do they do it? Many ways: Through loyalty, where they make sure they optimize the shopper's experience so they came back; through expanding on their current business by calling the customer to let her know her favorite brand is now offering a new line (selling deeper and wider); and through making the first-time visitor a die-hard customer—simply because of the experience. Nordstrom carefully chooses their sales team through a selective screening process. New hires go through rigorous training and ongoing coaching, and enjoy rewards and recognition programs for the Nordstrom style of service and relationship sales.

Lands' End broke new ground for telephone sales. And they're the benchmark for phone-to-phone retailing today. Their telemarketing team does more selling by phone than many businesses do by face-to-face interactions. Sales reps are skilled at excellent questioning and listening skills which are followed by a product match that fits the customer to a T. Combine that with long-term company and product trust and credibility and you've got a winning example that can be applied to your own organization.

Caterpillar's employee culture extends past its own walls. This international equipment manufacturer requires that all of its key vendors (even healthcare providers) embrace similar culture, productivity and customer relationship standards. Currently, Caterpillar requests that suppliers follow the company's "6 Sigma" methodology—a philosophy that believes in taking the collective talents of everyone involved with the company and channeling them into the very best for the customer.

Create a relationship that's different from the rest

In any kind of sales, differentiating is the key. When you positively position your product in a way that stands out from the competition, you breathe life into your brand. Consider the WIIFM perspective of your customer—the "What's in it for Me?"

Differentiation is a positioning statement in itself. It's a way of life for how you acquire and retain customers and grow your relationships with them. What's in it for the customer to do business with you, whether your customer is a physician, employer or member of the general public?

Discover where sales fits in your marketing continuum

There's no such thing as sales for sales' sake. Every sales effort should have a purpose -- a place on your marketing continuum. For example, when you use direct sales or telesales in healthcare, you have a responsibility to track, measure and report the results. The market intelligence you acquire gets put to work to address your organization's strategic initiatives. But if you collect the information and let it sit on a shelf, what's the point? And if you don't respond to the customer's information, at some point they'll stop sharing (or worse, stop doing business with you).

It's sort of like this . . .
Hospital ABC runs an ad for a heart screening, but neglects to tell the call center about it. They're flooded with phone calls and, of course, have no script for managing the calls. The result? Bad service, inefficient use of their staff, a frustrated staff, not to mention that the customer may or may not get scheduled for an important exam. What's more, Hospital ABC just missed out on a cross-sell opportunity for other services.

Or consider the physician liaison who works in outreach markets to build referral relationships into key surgery specialties. But the hospital isn't aware that many of the physicians simply didn't like the key surgeon. On top of that, there isn't a mechanism in place to return the patient to their referring physician with a timely discharge report. In all, it's a big waste of time that could have been prevented with some due diligence.

In your relationship sales strategy, remember that you're doing more than selling. You also have to integrate your strategy with market knowledge, your desired outcomes and the all-important clinical/operational ability to deliver on the promise—every time.

CASE STUDY: Avera McKennan Hospital, Sioux Falls, SD

It wasn't a lack of a sales focus—but rather duplication of sales efforts—that was the concern for Judy Blauwet, regional vice president for business development, and her team.

Indeed, the healthcare system was proactive in selling its products to its customers, but also risking overexposure and non-targeted sales contacts. "We had situations where people were tripping over each other in the customer world," says Blauwet. "It's somewhat of an exaggeration, but we didn't know who was coming and going in our communities."

To solve the problem, Blauwet and her team developed a centralized sales approach, where dedicated salespeople build relationships with an assigned customer group—employers, physicians, community and payers.

Customers now know they can turn to one person when they have questions or need a particular service. Blauwet compares the liaison to the filling in a sandwich. "The bread is what we offer and the other piece of bread is our customer. The peanut butter—or each salesperson—holds things together, taking information out and bringing it in."

The streamlined, centralized strategy has allowed the Avera McKennan team to build deeper, wider relationships and has more clearly defined where their priorities lie.

"We're in a process of evaluating our top product lines by revenue, by where we need to grow in capacity, and where we have and need new physicians," she comments. "We're getting input from the people who represent the different service lines and are evaluating the financial information. We're looking at where we're maxed out and where we have room to grow."

Avera McKennan has positioned itself well to optimize new opportunities and continue to build relationships with its customers. By realizing the value of relationships, rather than just "sales," the system has found a key to its growth.

Take a good look at the face you put on your organization.

Too often these days, people seem to lump all healthcare folks in the same group—especially if they've had a bad experience. Remember the HMO buzz: If one was bad, they all were, regardless if that was the truth.

Salespeople have an important role to play in providing a "credible face" for your organization. Your relationship sales team needs to lend a genuine listening ear and educate the customer about what makes your organization, service or product different—and the best—at meeting the customer's specific healthcare needs.

It starts with recruiting the right people for your sales and service staff. It's no longer acceptable, even in a tight labor market, to just hire a warm body. A new hire can make or break your success in acquiring new customers and, most importantly, in keeping an existing customer relationship.
The right salesperson should positively represent the senior leadership and boards of your hospital. They're not a "gopher" or an order taker: They're an extension of your "living brand" and critical for managing key messages you share with customers.

Get your team on board—that goes for everybody.

It's important to recognize that everyone in your organization, at every level, has a sales job to do. That means we have to work as a customer-focused team, recognizing that at any point, we can risk losing the customer.

While a dedicated salesperson is critical to carrying out your strategies, keep in mind that all the staff should be trained in customer relationship management techniques, scripts, and messages. Everybody on the team needs to understand his/her role in helping the organization achieve its desired outcome. It's not just a job: Their effort and initiative with customers can make or break your organization's short and long-term success.

Here are some tips to get and keep your team on board:

1) Hire the right people. Research and understand the criteria for what makes someone successful in this job

2) Use performance management techniques and tools. Encourage and reward the right behaviors and results.

3) Don't assume people know how to sell or provide service. Train everyone in service, sales and performance expectations. Provide them with real-life learning experiences and ongoing case study discussions to share, learn and grow from. Provide internal and external "experts" for depth to the ongoing career learning experiences.

4) Stay true to your promise. Hold the customer culture and performance expectations as a standard—and don't compromise.

5) Be a role model for service and sales. They will learn by example, follow your lead and feel safe in trying new things. It's up to you to lead the way.

6) Have fun with success. Build ways to enjoy learning new ways to sell and service customers. Find ways to recognize staff's efforts, individually and as a team. It doesn't always require money to reward efforts, so be creative and have them provide you with ideas as well.

7) Educate and motivate internally. There will be a lot of nay-sayers to this initiative—"Been there, done that," "We don't sell here…" "What a dumb idea this is"—so find ways to keep the sales and service messages alive internally. Prove results to the nay-sayers in terms that have value to them. If the CFO thought you'd get that business anyway, find out what your current numbers are, determine a market you aren't drawing critical referrals from and work to increase referrals from the baseline to validate direct results of a sales effort.

CASE STUDY: Columbus (Ohio) Children's Hospital

Like all successful healthcare organizations, Columbus Children's knew it needed to cultivate referrals from physicians throughout the region and maintain long-term relationships with key referral sources. In order to grow and retain its position in the physician market, the marketing team realized it had to re-invent its sales plan—without alienating the internal team who took pride in its existing relationships and without sacrificing service or creating a breakdown in communication.

First, the team did its homework by benchmarking how similar academic- and pediatric-focused programs found success. The research gave VP of marketing communication Donna Teach and her team a solid foundation when it came time to present a liaison-based sales strategy to the internal team.

Next, they developed a plan to hire two full-time liaisons for the physician market. The brand-new positions would help centralize the sales operation and actively solicit business from a 37-county area.

The key priority was to get top leadership on board. The team spent hours of one-on-one meeting time with management and executives. “We called it our ‘sales road show,’” says Teach. “Once we got everyone on board, we worked very diligently to build a collaborative, rather than a competitive, environment with the operational units” who were used to dealing directly with the physicians selling their specific service lines.

“Team selling is crucial, as is partnering with the operational contact that owns a piece of the sale,” she adds. “The liaisons are able to qualify the prospect through a phone call or a visit. For the actual sale, we try to bring in the operational contact with the liaison. We go in to make a presentation, set up a phone conference or bring the prospect in for a tour. Then it’s the liaison’s job to seal the deal. It’s a great partnership and works very well for us.”

By presenting the new sales plan as a team-oriented opportunity, Columbus Children’s has kept open lines of communication and a sense among the entire team that each person’s job is equally important in bringing in new business—and keeping customers coming back.

There’s no time to hesitate — put your plan into action now.

If everything so far hasn’t spurred you to implement a solid sales strategy in your organization, here are some other things to consider:

1) Two words: Increased competition.

2) Think things are ok if your beds are close to capacity? Don’t be too complacent. You need to keep selling your value to your current, loyal customers. Forget about this audience and when you’re perceived as being “too full,” they may go elsewhere. Conversely, you also need to be continually selling in order to attract the “right kind of business.”

3) We still need to educate our customers about what makes our organization and services different, better and more valuable. Present your message not based on a perception of price, but a must have, regardless of price.

4) Maintain a presence in your buyers’ minds, in good times and bad. Healthcare has become the necessary evil—for when something

catastrophic happens. People don't willingly buy a heart attack and surgery, nor does a physician readily change a lifetime referral pattern without cause.

5) As a healthcare leader, you have to prove your organization's worth internally. That goes for any effort that resources are expended on. You can demonstrate results when you faithfully track and measure the effort.

The bottom line: It's about your bottom line

In the light of increased competition, customer sophistication and your markets' demands, it's more important than ever for your organization to focus on strengthening three key areas: market position, value to the customer, and differentiation.

Relationship sales truly is an effective strategy. It serves to retain critical referral volumes, grow key service lines and strategies for your organization and enhance your brand awareness and market knowledge.

Strengthen these areas and you'll strengthen your bottom line. And when you focus on the results of relationship sales, your organization can provide measurable outcomes demonstrating market share, referrals, volumes, revenues and satisfaction.

Make sales part of your organization's strategy for success and you'll be proud to use "sales" and "healthcare" in the same sentence.

Do you have a success story to share?
Let us know how you have put a sales strategy to work in your organization. E-mail us your case study and we may feature it in an upcoming issue or on our website. Send it to CHGonline@corporatehealthgroup.com.

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