

The Augmented Rep:

A practical field force guide for Omnichannel



Contents

Overview	3
A new engagement landscape	4
Welcome to the digital transformation	5
Welcome to the age of the Augmented Rep	9
The augmented rep's evolving role	15
Contributors	17

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Overview

Pharma's rapid adaptation to a digital-first field force model was admirable but, necessarily, reactive. There was little opportunity to think or strategize.

Now, companies are stepping back to recalibrate. And there is an opportunity to re-evaluate everything. In the cliché of the times, now is the chance to build back better, leaving behind data and operational artefacts of the prior era including data silos and the costly and sub-optimal aspects of the face-to-face model.

This is now a truly omnichannel world in which interactive tools and videos enable the field force to present content seamlessly and facilitate remote collaboration with healthcare providers to help them serve patients better and drive better outcomes. In the digital-first world we all find ourselves in, pharma now has a great opportunity to help them do this with even greater flexibility, more responsively and at their convenience.

Helping HCPs do their jobs more effectively will entail changes in how pharma engages, the workforce makeup, employee retraining, new technology, better use of data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI), digital innovation, and research on what is driving sales in the market.

In this report Reuters Events Pharma explored these themes with eight pharma thought leaders about their projections for the industry, particularly Sales. Several key themes emerged:



Accelerating change. If you don't acknowledge the need for a systemwide makeover and evolve quickly as a team, you'll get left behind.



Customer centricity. Understanding individual HCP preferences and values is now a priority. One-size-fits-all approaches won't do. But this is a great opportunity to support them in their work and help them serve patients better.



Digital transformation. It is now clear that to succeed you must invest in technology and experts with a deep understanding of how to optimize data, analysis and AI to achieve the best results. More than ever marketing and sales supported by medical and scientific affairs will have to work as one team.



Change management. The disruptions of the last two years have left the field force worried about the future and uncertain about its role and skillsets in this new era. Leaders have to create and share a new vision and business plan. Employees need support, training and resources to move forward. Employees need support, training and resources to move forward. Winning hearts and minds means giving a clear direction about 'why we need to do this' and how, specifying the What-Is-In-It-For-Me? factor for all roles.

A new engagement landscape

COVID-19 forced the industry to change the way it engaged with customers, “from a push strategy to a pull,” says Dmitry Schourov, Biopharma Quality International Developed Markets Lead at Pfizer. In urgency mode, pharma companies raced to obtain virtual and online meeting software.

And a funny thing happened on the way to the Zoom meeting. Both pharma companies and HCPs liked some of the adaptations.

Pharma enjoyed the cost savings on travel, dining, hotels, and room rentals for training rooms, for instance – all while remaining connected with their teams and customers. They discovered that video content could broaden audience reach at a fixed cost, too.

“Companies going virtual for the first time saw they could balance cost and outcome. Less spending and similar results. We’ll never return to the past,” says Julio Mota, head of international sales training at a global pharmaceutical company.

The pandemic also accelerated HCP interest in virtual platforms, says Donna Booth, director of Field Medical HTA and Policy for U.S. Medical Affairs, GSK. “This is how they want to engage. They want more information at their fingertips.”

This includes different types of data than the rep has shared historically, she notes. “There’s more need for real-world evidence in rare diseases and oncology today,” she offers as an example.

External factors driving behavior have changed, too. “Payors have exclusion lists now,” says Matt Portch, senior vice president, Sales and Market Access at Sunovion. “There are more systems and delivery networks that limit physician autonomy. The rep must understand what the doctor can and cannot do,” he says. Portch also points to the evolving payment model --outcome vs. fee for services.

HCPs are looking for personalized insights and value-driven services -- not collateral or sales pitches about the brand. They are steeped in digital content and want the rep’s help in cutting to the chase with data-driven insights. Plus, doctors want all this when they want it. That is driving the development of omnichannel as well as advances in collecting and analyzing data efficiently.

“What stays the same are the relationships,” says Suzanne Giordano, vice president and head of field medical for Sunovion Pharmaceuticals. Reps need to establish trust and credibility with customers, she says.

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Julio Mota, head of international sales training at a global pharmaceutical company

Welcome to the digital transformation

Compared to other industries, digital marketing in pharma had been lagging. Adopting more digital healthcare tools and services had been on pharma's agenda but was fast-tracked by the pandemic.

Sales reps' rapid adoption of digital tools quickly became the norm but now pharma must address how these new ways of doing business require it to adapt existing organizational approaches and structures to better fit the new engagement context.

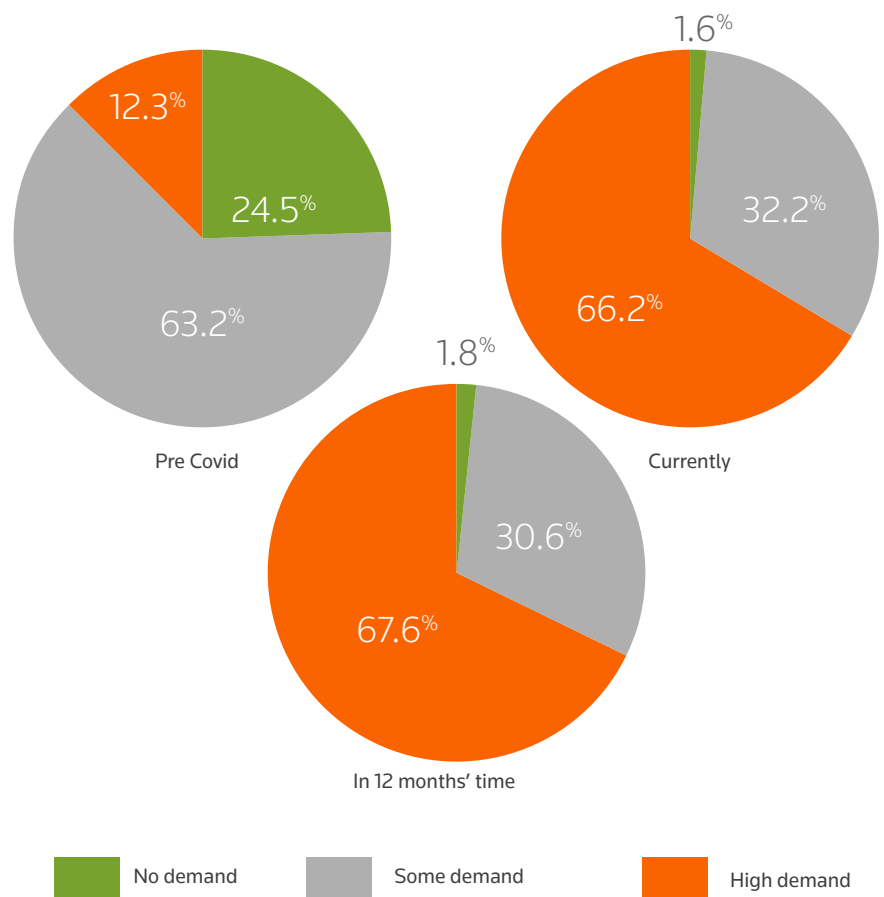
Bringing in advanced technology demands resource planning as well as execution strategies. The latest data and software processes are less effective in an organization that is siloed, for instance.

Companies only committing to incremental modifications will not adapt well, says Mota. "Expectation of the future has to be different. In depth, fundamental change is necessary. If you don't recognize, this, it will be a nightmare." Execution strategies as well as resource planning is required, he says. Bringing in advanced technology without changes to archaic structures and foundations will ultimately be less effective and more expensive.

Leaders should be prepared to make a substantial investment in digital transformation, he says. "If leaders are not involved, none of this will happen and you've lost the game already."

Beyond virtual engagement, business processes such as compliance and approvals must be automated to remain competitive, and integrated offline and online. Old systems need to be reset to accommodate omnichannel where every customer is connected, says Schourov.

How has the demand for digital engagement from your customers changed? And what do you predict for the future?



Source: Reuters Event Pharma industry survey 2021

"Omnichannel orchestration can provide recommendations for the rep's next action," says Vandana Singh, principal of commercial excellence for Axtria. The rep, AI, and data should work together to create a feedback mechanism, she says. "The future is headed toward a central data warehouse," says Singh, so reps require training to become digitally savvy.

The goal is to choose tech that simplifies staying in touch with customers and managing product orders for the field force and that also help physicians rather than burden them with more details or complexities.

New opportunities need to be explored and exploited, such as virtual discussion rooms, which may attract and add value for HCPs who didn't engage online before.

"The expectation is that more technology can increase the breadth and depth of [customer] engagement," says Giordano. This includes the use of advanced databases and network technology to map and connect potential customers, she adds.

To some extent, field force teams will have to feel their way around the new digital landscape, learning from other industries already experienced in virtual engagement and telesales.

Ideally, the engagement platform should be enjoyable, like a live conference. "Technology and human relationships have to be integrated," Schourov says.

The supremacy of omnichannel

The overarching aim is a true omnichannel capability that integrates multiple channel touchpoints into a single cohesive view for the field force that also enables HCPs to learn, get in touch, find medical information, purchase products or access data.

Through multiple channels, HCPs can access microsites, webinars, podcasts, content on demand and patient resources. The contact is fast, easy and can be done at the HCP's own pace, on the go with a mobile device or on a desktop.

Omnichannel capabilities have the potential to add exceptional value for HCPs and so deeper brand loyalty, says Abeel. "Providing data in one place with a link positions the company as a top-of-mind solution provider," he says. "It

"Technology and human relationships have to be integrated."

Dmitry Schourov, Biopharma Quality International Developed Markets Lead at Pfizer

also brings marketing and sales together in the same space united by common metrics in delighting our customers and their patients."



Omnichannel offers an opportunity to deliver the right content through the right channel at the right time to time-pressed physicians. “Doctors and health systems want what’s easiest for them on demand,” says Giordano.

Most organisations are still in the early phases of building these capabilities, which will take time to complete. “We have a three-year plan to achieve [omnichannel] integration – to crawl, walk, and then run,” says Portch.

“Omnichannel is a big transformation that can seem daunting. Break it into small initiatives that keep the customer in the center,” Singh advises.

Field force leaders need to plan their strategies for each channel and how these will all fit into the new engagement model, says Schourov. Customer research, cross-departmental planning, sequencing and orchestration are all considerations.

Deeper collaboration will be required between functions in the omnichannel era. Marketing, for example, may be more involved than Sales in developing and integrating channels, Mota comments. Marketing will also be using omnichannel to promote webinars, publication distribution, brand news, and videos.

What’s important to recognize about omnichannel is that it adds new channels without taking the old ones away. Remote engagement, face-to-face, and physical congresses will remain as important channels.

The Value Proposition

In a competitive business environment, there’s a stronger imperative than ever for the field force to provide more than information to attract and keep customers.

Physicians are devoting any extra time they have now to patient backlogs, not viewing slides with a rep, says Chris Mann, Head of Commercial Excellence UK & Ireland at Amgen.

Companies need to be asking ‘How do our medicines and services address the [HCP’s] challenges?’ says Mann. Partnering with customers who are tackling macrolevel challenges is one strategy, he suggests. Addressing health care disparities for minority and low-income patient is a high priority, for example. Can pharma contribute to that agenda in any way? he asks.

Likewise, reps can pay attention to the increasing medical interest in preventive care and interventions.

In the past, reps answered questions about how a product worked and its risks. Today, patient satisfaction is the customer’s priority, says Portch. This means the value proposition must take the patient into account. Reps might help HCPs here by helping them serve patients better by emailing a timely report, connecting them to a peer who might be able to help, or adapting patient materials for digital use during telehealth appointments.

Reps can show genuine interest in providing value by taking a need-based approach. “Ask questions to better understand their challenges and how you can support them,” says Abeel, who emphasizes the value of active, empathetic listening to clarify what value the rep can add and to offer insights into how relevant content can be weaved into their omnichannel experience.

Mann says his company sought ways to solve specific problems for HCPs during the pandemic. “Amgen worked with healthcare providers on alternatives to suspending or postponing treatment,” he offers as an example. “Was there a different way to create a safe environment for immunocompromised patients to receive treatments?”

Amgen was able to help develop an alternative modes of administration for its drugs that didn’t require a hospital visit. The company provided guidance, trained nurses, addressed safety issues, and coordinated everything with the customer. “We helped hundreds of patients,” says Mann.

“Omnichannel is a big transformation that can seem daunting. Break it into small initiatives that keep the customer in the center.”

Vandana Singh, principal of commercial excellence, Axtria

Towards a new hybrid model

Few doubt the permanence of the change to a digital-first engagement context post-pandemic. According to Accenture research, 83 percent or more of HCPs want reps to maintain an all virtual or hybrid engagement model permanently. By contrast, before COVID-19 struck, 95 percent of business was conducted face-to-face, Giordano estimates.

Since the pandemic, the convenience, practicality, and efficiency boost of virtual meetings has become undeniable. "It was clear this year that we could accomplish [our work] with virtual engagement. Getting on a plane was a waste of time, Giordano continues. "And HCPs do not want to wait for face-to-face meetings. We didn't have this flexibility before."

Indeed, reps have been able to conduct several virtual lunches per day and save driving time to appointments. Virtual presentations and post-event recordings have provided broader access to HCPs who couldn't attend events in the past.

The key is to determine which functions are better performed in person or virtually, or through email or omnichannel. And the answer won't be the same for every customer. Primary care providers may lean toward face-to-face engagement, for example, while ER physicians would not. Pharma may be looking at a set of models based on field data.

"We've relied on drug reps for 20 years, dividing districts and territories to cover hospitals. In a hybrid model, geography stops mattering."

Christopher Mann, head of commercial excellence, Amgen

Abeel maintains that face-to-face is best for a first and maybe second contact, discussing sensitive patient cases, or when trying to engage with a skeptical customer. But the uses of e-learning, digital content and webinars are all now self-evident. A sales rep will need to develop this sensitive skill to deliver a seamless experience to the HCP across all relevant channels.

"People are more open to virtual engagements and saw the value during the pandemic but they miss the personal connection and engaging at medical conferences," says Booth. In-person meetings, conferences, congresses and dinners will continue to be useful for sales and marketing. So striking that balance between in-person and virtual will be important for future engagements.

Schourov envisions that reps will send HCPs regular updates by email. "They will be brief but provide vision and understanding about what's going on. [The briefings] will keep products at the top of their mind."

Reps can invite customers to webinars in these emails or share publications which are relevant to them.

"The evolved model will take time to play out," says Mann. "We've relied on drug reps for 20 years, dividing districts and territories to cover hospitals. In a hybrid model, geography stops mattering."

As such, companies need to ask questions about how best to resource its operations for a hybrid world. "What are the implications of a hybrid model on resources and talent management?" Mann continues. If rep call volume is increased in a virtual model, what consequences does that have for cycle planning, sequential selling models and manager coaching? "We haven't figured that out yet," he says.

Key takeaways

- ➡ To make the most of the opportunity omnichannel presents to build loyalty by helping HCPs serve patients better, reps need to be equipped with the tools they need to help HCPs gain insights fast and conveniently
- ➡ The sudden advent of the omnichannel world demands deep investment in new tech and in profound operational change. Incremental improvement will not be enough
- ➡ New technology will not work if legacy operational and data silos are not addressed
- ➡ Omnichannel orchestration is everything in this new responsive, customer-first world and as such all processes in a sense become mission critical - it is essential therefore to align them all including compliance and approvals

Welcome to the age of the Augmented Rep



What is clear is that omnichannel transforms the sales model as well as the responsibilities of the traditional rep.

Enter the Augmented Rep, who is more customer service specialist than sales conduit. The augmented rep is an empowered rep, according to Singh. This rep understands each HCP's priorities and desired outcomes. He or she is a partner and trusted advisor who helps the HCP navigate data, logistics, subject matter, decisions, and resources. "By understanding the customer better, you can provide the right service," says Singh.

This reframing of the rep's role includes problem-solving, understanding how the HCP's workplace operates, and having the knowledge to discuss a patient case meaningfully. Reps help the HCP find the best treatment for patients; in doing so, the need to recite product benefits may disappear. The rep instead becomes "a sales enabler," says Abeel.

Flexibility and a deeper sense of differing customer contexts will become as important as therapeutic and product expertise for the rep to succeed in this complex environment. Engagement dynamics may vary, for instance, according to how physicians or patients are reimbursed.

The augmented rep may be dealing with four customers at the same time: The physician, the payor, the health system and the patient. "The rep needs to get over each of these hurdles," says Portch. In some cases direct messaging to patients is even a consideration because patients are bearing a larger portion of drug co-pays and so are getting more involved in use and purchasing decisions, he notes.

Mastering the right blend of hard and soft skills is important. "Reps need to understand the account and get the right information to people...How can I leverage the resources across my

company to bring what [the customer] needs?" says Giordano. This includes orchestrating how to deliver marketing and medical information and relevant data, as well as coordinating logistical support for data access and sending post-launch studies after the sale.

HCPs do not have as much time as they used to, especially for sales talk, Giordano adds. They now look instead to the rep for data to help understand their patient population and information that is relevant to their health system. "Otherwise," she says, "they won't continue to meet."

Being innovative and adaptive will be important qualities of the augmented rep. "We can't do the sales call in the same way," says Mota. "Reps have to experiment with what is best."

How much time to allocate for virtual presentations or webinars? Should you start a pitch with video stories?

Schedule a webinar for a breakthrough? E-mail marketing materials? And what's the smart approach for selling several products?

"It's a continuous cycle of learn, plan, execute and seek input," says Booth

Leveraging Data and Analysis

Data and data analytics are essential for driving value by helping reps unearth valuable insights from data that can help lead to new solutions but the oft-cited issue of the data needed to capture new insights being trapped in different silos throughout the organization remains a barrier for many.

"[Pharma] has to get the data points connected to get actionable insights," says Abeel. This requires data specialists who can bridge business and technical concerns, he says. "They can identify recurring patterns of what's working and what's not. They bring suggestions to the forefront and give insights to the sales team on connecting with HCPs."

Ultimately, the ability of reps to tap into insights from sophisticated data analysis will reshape the sales model.

Portch stresses, however, that reps cannot be expected to be the data churners. "Specialists make the data digestible. Then they explain to reps how to use the data for insights," he says. In this way reps can be helped to assimilate omnichannel data to support physician decision making about patient therapies.

GSK has an internal data analytics team that also works closely with external consultants depending on the analysis required. Smaller companies may opt to use consultants for sophisticated data collection, analytics and user-friendly tool development.

Giordano says Sunovion has used a combined approach – upscaling its technical teams and also bringing in consultants to work with them.

Advancing knowledge through Artificial Intelligence

Pharma's application of AI to transform data into useful insights for doctors and patients, while growing rapidly, remains in its infancy.

But Booth thinks the pandemic will accelerate the adoption of AI and ML for research and customer analysis. AI has great potential to generate insights for reps to share with their customers and to provide reps with analyses on HCP behavior that helps them engage more meaningfully and in a more targeted way, for example segmenting customers for specific kinds of messaging. AI can also direct the rep to products the customer is most likely to purchase.

"AI provides an engagement model specific for each customer – which channel to use, what content they prefer, when and how to interact with each customer," says Schourov. "The system guides you to the right choice."

AI and ML can make suggestions to the rep about the next best action, says Singh. "With the huge amount of data, you figure out a predictive pattern about whether a customer prefers a channel or message or face-to-face followed by email. It's historical information-- another way of augmenting reps and making them more informed."

Machine learning to improve rep performance and reliable modeling is a "must-do," Abeel agrees. "It enables [the model] to move from prescriptive to predictive."

The power of AI to track and measure impact is another tremendous opportunity to drive sales that needs to be harnessed. Mann predicts that rep interactions and health care solutions will be driven by AI engines in the future but we're still in the experimentation phase and exploring different benchmarks and scores. "We haven't figured out where the opportunities sit."

Virtual reality, with the potential for richer and more immersive remote engagement, will also play an important role in training the next generation of more tech-savvy reps, Mota predicts.

Together with AI, it will be possible to analyze faces and expressions, he explains, and build scenarios for reps to practice role-playing. "You can analyze your own performance according to the feedback system."

"AI provides an engagement model specific for each customer – which channel to use, what content they prefer, when and how to interact with each customer."

Dmitry Schourov, Biopharma Quality International Developed Markets Lead at Pfizer

The rep as account orchestrator

In response to the disruption to the engagement model and to more rapid change in the way Healthcare systems operate, pharma is now pursuing the concept of a collaborative cross-functional team (a much-discussed prospect prior to the pandemic) with urgency.

Cross-functional partnerships will be of increasing value to the big accounts. "Account management will become more important than individual planning," says Booth. Not only will this help build the company brand, but this holistic approach will provide greater support for customers.

The sales rep, often with the most all-round and also nuanced view of the customer, may become the account manager and orchestrator, integrating offline and online components. "The rep has a 360-degree view. They work seamlessly for the customer's benefit," says Singh. "They have touchpoints with MSLs, Marketing, and medical conferences. They stay aware of all interactions." Essentially, the rep figures out the best use of the customer's limited time, deciding what meetings need to be set up and with whom.

Greater collaboration between field sales and medical liaisons is also going to be more common feature, says Booth. In this sense there may also be circumstances in which, while holding the role of conductor, the rep may sometime still play second fiddle to the MSL, with the ultimate goal of meeting customer needs and putting the patient first.

While the sales force once led external engagement, it might make more sense for the MSL to engage more with the customer, says Booth. "Companies need to meet the customer needs with the most appropriate field resource and not let roles get in the way. In essence it goes



back to the planning and understanding what the customer needs and who can best deliver that need. Teamwork is critical for success."

In an account-based, more customer-centric future, such flexibility and fluidity is desirable. Different functions cannot operate in silos that can hamper workflow and slow down delivery of value to the customer.

This new collaborative spirit must cross organizational and hierarchical borders to be effective. The commercial side of the business will collaborate with software developers on the most useful way to collect and analyze data. Rep will meet with the data analytics team for guidance on the most meaningful data to send the customer.

"Hierarchy doesn't help us," says Abeel. Sales and Marketing have the same goal and should be having discussions together to develop an integrated approach focusing on what customers and their patients really need, he says.

"Insights from Sales must flow into Marketing – which messages are working, what's the value proposition," echoes Portch. "Getting out of silos will give reps a greater understanding of what resources the organization can provide to customers and how to direct them." When working together, Portch says, Marketing, Sales, Science and IT can capture insights that can be mined to create more successful strategies.

"Teamwork makes good things happen quicker," Mann sums up. An example might be a virtual product launch for a new therapy. "The commercial team can't go out yet but Medical can answer questions before the product is widely available on the market."

As an integrated, account-based team, pharma can provide a more cohesive customer experience and ultimately improve patient outcomes by leveraging cross-functional support in this way. "Pharma has been siloed, not interconnected, so this is a new concept," says Singh.

Customizing for the customer

The augmented rep is well placed to capture insights about what's working across omnichannel, social media and microsites so they can be tailored to the customer's needs. New processes for recording customer data can also help reps identify and respond to customer needs more astutely. "Magic happens when you customize. The whole ecosystem could be different for each sales force, depending on your value proposition and your customer base segmentation," Abeel says.

This customization extends to how and when HCPs want to engage, whether it's via email, digital content or over lunch. Are they looking for data, academic papers or the opportunity to discuss a particular patient's needs?

The savvy sales rep will suss out customer particulars and accommodate them with only

information relevant to them, their patients or health system. Staying as close to the customer as possible on a regular basis is the only way to accomplish this since customer needs will evolve, says Portch.

Some companies may find that a segmentation model is useful if there are groups of customers where the same strategy makes sense. Segmentation could be based on geographic areas, for instance. The California market is driven by the limited formulary of the Kaiser health plan, says Portch, compared to Texas with a traditional market where the physician has more control, he explains.

Retraining and the learning curve

While restrictions at many hospitals have lifted in 2021, protocols and logistical issues for in-person access are still in place. That means reps still have to adapt their sales skills to remote mediums and fine-tune communication materials for the virtual world.

The core skills and abilities needed by the rep are the same but the way they engage has changed. Old skills may not open doors anymore and soft skills must be tweaked for online encounters.

Mann says they prioritized training around mindset, psychology and attitudes to change during the pandemic, before taking on virtual communication tools. Tackling "self-limiting beliefs" in the sales force in the midst of the crisis was a hurdle, he explains. Reps wondered whether HCPs, under pressure in the midst of crisis, wanted to hear from them and if they should back off. "They needed reasons to believe that engaging was the right thing to do," he says.

In fact there was plenty that HCPs needed help with that reps could deliver with the right approach.

Understanding the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between in-person and virtual engagement matters when helping reps engage and deliver information on virtual platforms.

The rep loses several cues in engaging remotely, says Mota, such as when a customer looks at their watch. Your voice also projects better when standing, a disadvantage of Zoom, he adds.

Most companies are conducting internal education and training through webinars and virtual venues. Mota offers these tips for improving the rep's virtual game:

- Look up to the camera to make eye contact.
- Your voice is especially important so make it lively.
- Storytelling is critical.
- Teach with your voice and eyes; use face, not body language.

As an augmented rep, training should encapsulate instruction about new channels and guidance about when to use each. "It's a new way of working, requiring a change in job descriptions," says Schourov.

Anticipate that some are more comfortable working with the technologies that enable these new ways of working than others. Giordano says to expect resistance from reps about changing the sales model and being asked to retrain. "[Managers] need to think about all these things before customers," she says.

Abeel stresses that managers need to listen to the anxieties of the team and reassure them that they will receive training on new technology and business processes – and that they will not be dropped.



Leading change in the field

Change management is always painful, says Schourov. "Everybody has to get out of their comfort zone."

Senior managers must have an open discussion where they think broadly about financials, products and business structure. They must develop a strong vision with no disconnect – a direction that is compelling and inspiring to employees while also supportive of customers.

"[Managers] can no longer just think about how many reps they need and how to structure the sales forces by product and franchise," says Abeel. Moreover, they need to reconsider how the role of the augmented rep is evolving, redefining their work accordingly, as well as adjusting how teams will work together. Short-term and long-term goals should be assessed and clarified.

Knowing how to ease employees through a major transition is a task that may require more attention than the change itself. Leaders also have to be coaches and change mindsets before asking people to learn new skills.

"Be transparent about where [the company] is going, why, and how reps will be supported," adds Abeel. The emotional side is important, he says about the need for listening, reassurance and hand-holding during this uncertain time. "This is a huge wakeup call for everyone. The change will be there forever," he says. "In order to let people embrace this change as an opportunity for the good we need to give them a clear What Is In It For Me? factor."

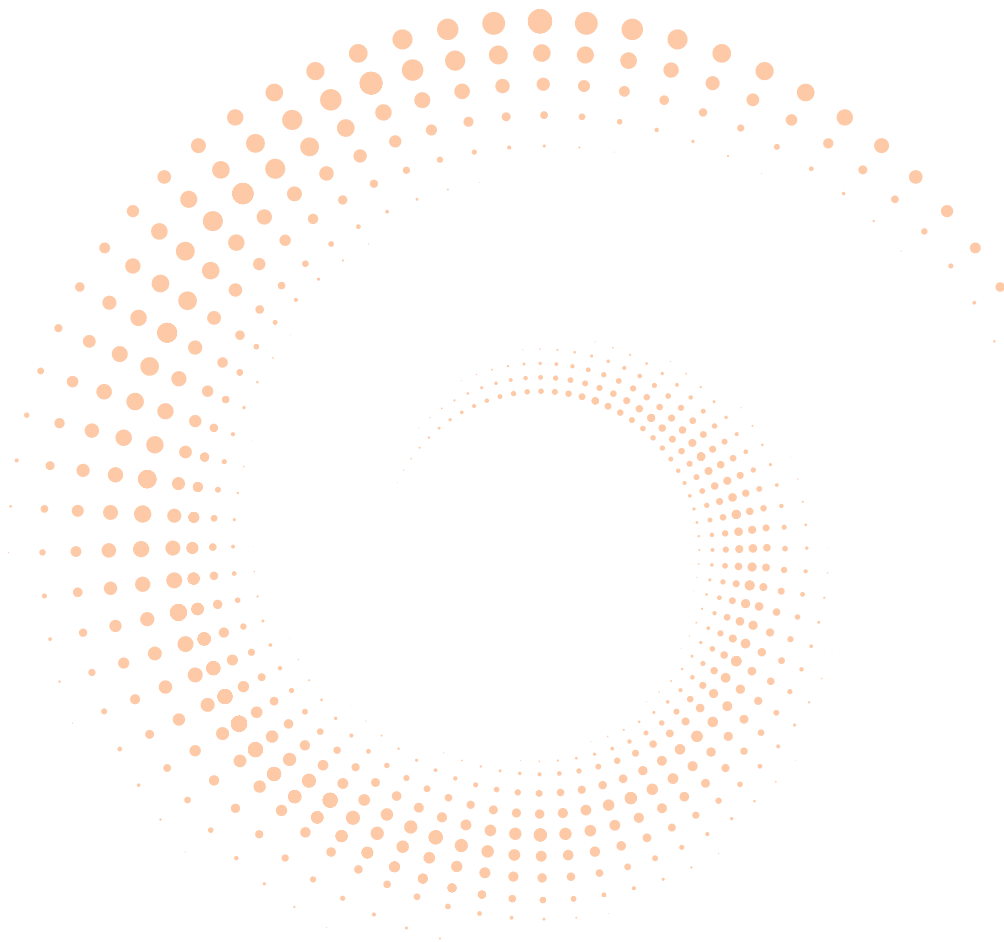
"You can't talk about new models if your reps are anxious."

Christopher Mann, head of commercial excellence at Amgen

Explain to the team why you are revamping the sales model or business structure, whether it's to be more customer centric or due to a shifting marketplace, says Portch. Once people understand why the change is necessary, provide the supportive tools and resources to help the team acquire new competencies and capabilities, he adds, "There will be people who opt out but make sure you give them every chance to be successful."

Leaders have to dial up empathy and emotional intelligence to motivate people to do the necessary teamwork, learning and training, says Mann. "You can't talk about new models if your reps are anxious."

Take things slowly, listen to feedback, celebrate successes and applaud people who take a risk, he advises. Present the change as an opportunity that will impact the whole organization not just Sales, he suggests. Above all, "Don't let the short-term prevail," he cautions leaders. "If you are afraid of change, it will squash you."



Glitches in the matrix

The challenges for pharma range from the immediate COVID-19 workarounds to long-term planning in an as-yet-unknown normal. The highly departmentalized structure of most companies also don't lend themselves to any holistic vision.

"Changes are happening so fast and [the corporate systems] need time to transform" says Schourov, who believes that adopting new ways of doing things will take years. "We're changing to new ways to communicate. We're reeducating marketing teams and the field force. Compliance and regulatory are involved as well to enable content acceleration."

Singh says reps have not shifted to a holistic mindset yet. "Reps are still operating in the old mold. Bonuses are still tied to the old method and mindset. They haven't yet adopted the omnichannel."

The biggest challenge is the field force, Schourov observes. "There is a lot of pushback. Many reps believe the current situation is temporary. That [their old job] will magically come back. But with time, nobody will work as before. We're working in a new world. If there is no change, we won't succeed."

In terms of Sales, "If reps don't have a standing relationship with a customer, it will be more difficult to get those relationships," Giordano points out. Without the opportunity to relax over dinner, for instance, discussions will be more formal with less opportunity to gain insights, she says.






Technology kinks and shortcomings are wanting for solutions. "Tools in hospitals belong to the institution with their security control. Reps can't access the system," says Mota.

Many data platforms lack interoperability, Booth agrees. "We need better ability for patient data to be shared across different platforms. [Patient data] doesn't always connect across all healthcare systems."

Another challenge for executives is the possibility of a looming talent gap. Mota suggests that future reps may need to be trained or hired for highly specialized knowledge and skill areas. Executives must anticipate specialization needs so their teams have the talent or training resources ready to be competitive.

Portch stresses the ability to be adaptive—to seek feedback and respond quickly. "I've seen more changes in the marketplace than ever in my 40 years being in this business. We're in a continuous improvement cycle and the feedback loop is irregular now."

Key takeaways

-  The augmented rep should be many things - problem solver, adviser, concierge - as well as a sales enabler. This requires flexibility and an ability to understand different customer contexts
-  AI has great potential to help by providing richer insights and suggesting the next best action
-  The augmented rep will be an orchestrator with a wide set of different internal and external stakeholder engagements, able to find solutions with a range of colleagues to serve a range of customers from payers to patients
-  The rep will increasingly need to engage with the data, working with internal data specialists to create actionable insights that help HCPs serve patients better and operate more effectively
-  Flexibility will be key for the augmented rep, with an ability to listen, learn and adapt

The augmented rep's evolving role

"In a stable world, it's best to be data-driven. In a changing world, it's better to be data informed," says Adam Grant, organizational psychologist, author, and professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

"Data can reveal patterns from the past. It takes judgment to predict how those patterns will evolve in the future," Grant elaborates. In other words, organizations should use data to inform decisions and long-range planning, but the onus is on leadership wisdom to guide and direct.

From Mann's perspective, a focus on customers should be at the top. "We need to invest heavily in understanding customers," he says. The value and insights gained through grounded customer relationships will drive success, he believes.

Supporting this view, Accenture research conducted in 2020 confirms that physicians value the information they get from sales reps about drug therapies and manufacturer support services. In-person or virtual, physicians want their relationships with reps to continue.

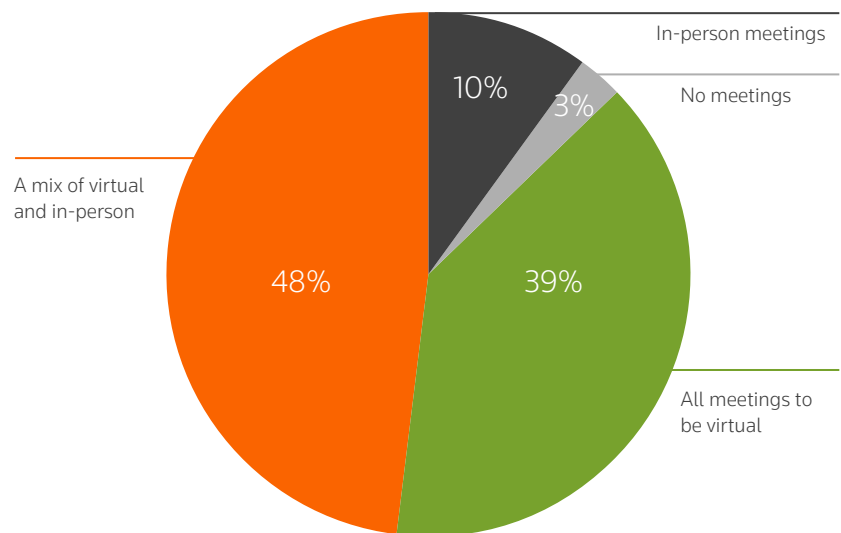
"We're seeing an inversion of the industry but the human factor will always stay important," Abeel. In fact, he's observed that people have become more sensitive since the pandemic. "It will be business as usual but with a reactivated human factor," he says of the coming years.

Reuters Events Pharma thought leaders are optimistic about the emergence of omnichannel along with increased data and AI capabilities. "Covid exposed both our challenges and our willingness to change," Mann observes.

HCPs want the human connection with sales reps in the future, but in different ways.

87% of HCPs want either all virtual or a mix of virtual and in-person meetings even after the pandemic ends.

Only 10% of HCPs want to go back to pre-COVID norms for in-person meetings.



Source: Accenture Survey | Reinventing Relevance:
New Models for Pharma Engagement with Healthcare Providers in a COVID-19 World

The short-term changes pharma has experienced have been dramatic but they are temporary, Mann continues. Pharma will need to address the longer-term realities of providers who will be dealing with the consequences of long-haul Covid, he says.

Legislation and pricing trends will influence the future of pharma, too, says

Portch. He suggests that responsible pricing and greater price transparency will improve the reputation of the industry.

Pfizer saw a surge in goodwill because of the COVID-19 vaccine, says Portch. Other drugs are making a huge impact like that but they aren't getting the same publicity, he points out. "We've been playing more defense than offense," he says about the industry. "We need to get credit for bringing value to the marketplace."

The agility to shift gears may be a company's greatest asset in riding the wave of an uncertain business landscape. Being prepared requires strong and unified leadership. Thoughtful planning about how each change will impact various sectors of the organization. An execution strategy that reinforces teamwork, not siloed steps. And always a Plan B and a willingness to pivot if circumstances change or an approach is not proving effective.

The role of the augmented rep will evolve as the digital transformation becomes the industry standard. A new hybrid model seems certain but trial and error is part of the package along with the willingness to innovate and risk mistakes along the way.

Companies need to be making smart investments in technology and people who understand how to apply it to enhance the business. Then, reps need be trained to tap the value of greater data and AI capabilities, and teach their customers how to access this information on omnichannel.

Above all, the companies who succeed will be those who have mastered the art of listening to their customers and using that essential feedback to improve product value, service delivery, and loyalty to the brand. This requires a consolidated team approach in which every sector of the company is in the loop and the customer is at the center.

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