

The Evolving Role of Sales Ops in Omni

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Digital marketing continues to scale up even after COVID access restrictions eased, to become a core function for life sciences marketers who work in more complex, omnichannel ways. However, the sales rep's role is still central to life sciences sales, as they engage doctors and other healthcare professionals (HCPs). Companies expect sales reps to understand their customers, be problem solvers, and provide a personalized customer experience. To do this, they need to be more tech-savvy, so they can leverage digital channels and analytics, tailor their conversations and change the beliefs of their customers, all while helping HCPs solve problems in an ever-more complex healthcare environment.

Sales operations are evolving to support field teams, and their role has expanded and changed. As Pratyush Kumar, Global Healthcare CRM Manager at Nestlé Nutrition Strategic Business Unit, says, "Field Operations has evolved enormously in the last three years, and the pace at which it has changed is commendable." In addition to their traditional responsibilities, they must integrate field operations with omnichannel marketing programs and help field teams succeed.

We interviewed five senior industry executives and assessed the changing nature of the programs that Atria runs for life

sciences clients to draw out four trends that define changes for sales ops:

1. Sales ops as a strategic role
2. Integration with digital marketing
3. Information overload
4. Agility to handle constant change

Sales ops definition: Sales operations is a team that works behind the scenes as a support function to help the reps do their jobs better, faster, and more efficiently. It is also known as commercial excellence, sales excellence, or field operations in some companies. These roles include medical science liaisons (MSLs), reimbursement specialists, and other non-sales field teams. While the role differs across companies, the most common duties include performance management, compliance processes, CRM management, targeting and alignments, learning and development, field reporting, samples management, and incentives compensation.



Sales Ops as a Strategic Role

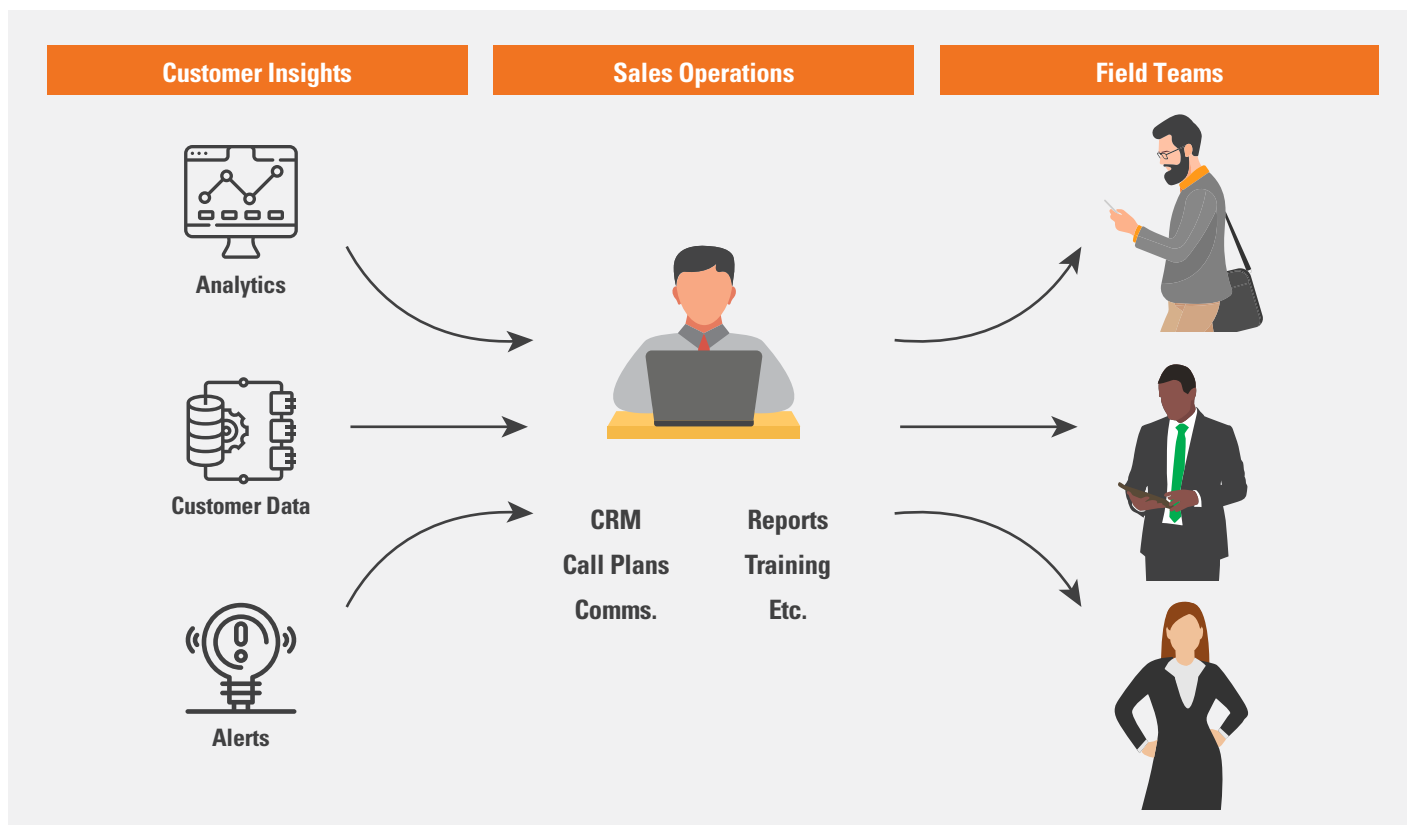
For sales ops, understanding the business is the key to their evolution from a team focused on supporting field reps to a wide-ranging and considerably more strategic role. They need to be sensitive to the constantly developing technologies and processes and be able to learn and adapt to these changes rapidly. From being focused on executing, they must evolve into a force that understands, strategizes, develops, and offers solutions for the problems faced by the stakeholders.

When asked about the key success factors for people in a sales operations role, Grady Sheldon, Executive Director - Field Excellence at Amgen, replies, "Of increasing importance over the past few years is being a 'business person' who understands the strategy and the levers that will move the business. It's changed who we are hiring, taking people with a sales background who understand the role, where before it was much more operational skills."

Analytical skills complement business skills. Sales ops must be able to perform an in-depth analysis of sales data and identify trends and patterns that enable insightful business decisions and not just limit themselves to providing next best action (NBA) recommendations to the sales reps. "They need a deep understanding of the business. I look for analytic skills, a strategic view, and the ability to connect the dots. You can have people with good analytical skills, but if you don't understand how this relates to the business, it can be a trap," emphasizes Hector Herrera Seittiffe, Global Head of Commercial Performance at Grünenthal, while describing the overlapping skills required for the evolving sales ops role.

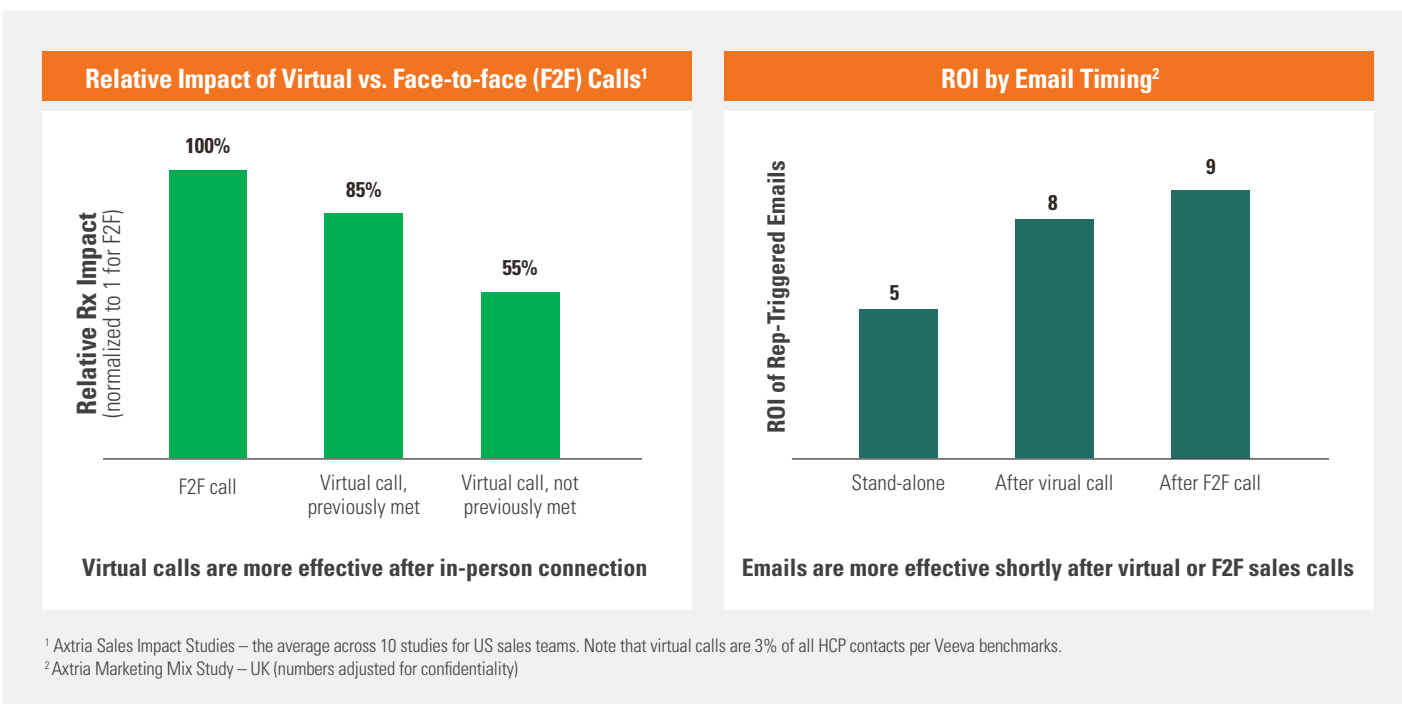
"We need people who can navigate complexity. The world has fewer clear-cut lines. The products are made available in various markets that are very different, and the decision-making is not the same in different countries," stresses Bruno Indelli, Head of Strategic Transformation - Human Health at Merck Sharp and Dohme.

Figure 1. Field ops is the conduit to process the info and insights for the field to help them do their jobs.



Source: Axtia Inc.

Figure 2. Digital contacts are more effective when coordinated with in-person calls.



Source: Atria Inc.

Digital Marketing for Field Ops

Sales has always been an in-person, client-facing role, especially in the pharmaceutical industry, where the sales reps of the past developed and maintained the entire relationship between a pharma company and an HCP. Today, a different strategy is needed. Pharma companies of all sizes realize the importance and necessity of moving with the times and have invested in digital technologies to stay competitive.

Sales reps must upskill, be tech-savvy, and more in sync with omnichannel orchestration, including artificial intelligence (AI) insights, for creating sales leads and better customer interactions. “They need to understand which customers are more in tune with email, digital, and social media. The successful rep will understand their customers and adjust their approach to what the customer needs and prefers. This is where omnichannel comes in to provide intel,” says Mehmet Bozbay, Senior Director Field Deployment, Incentives, and Analytics at Astellas Pharma, US.

This coordination of digital and traditional channels drives sales results. The figure below shows some anonymized findings from promotion response models that prove

virtual engagement is far more effective when scheduled around face-to-face (F2F) sales calls. Many other studies have demonstrated the synergies and benefits of coordinated customer engagement.

All the executives we interviewed emphasized how lines are blurring between marketing and sales to better align activities and strategy across those departments. “We tried to do everything virtually during COVID, and it’s now integrated into our strategic engagement plans. It’s clear that digital supplements the experience in front of the customer,” says Grady Sheldon.

This cross-over of roles and responsibilities and the magnitude of digitalization has made it necessary for sales ops to know how to use digital tools. “Omnichannel in the digital realm can help us reach customers and populations in a way that the sales force never can,” says Bruno Indelli.

This move towards omnichannel orchestration across digital marketing and personal engagement requires sales ops to work much more tightly with marketing as well as sales leadership. As Mehmet Bozbay points out, “It used to be marketing set the strategy, and then sales took over.

Now sales and marketing are a lot more connected in real-time. There's the desire to get continuous feedback. What can marketing do to fill the gaps that sales can't address? They need to talk a lot more than in the past."

Information Overload

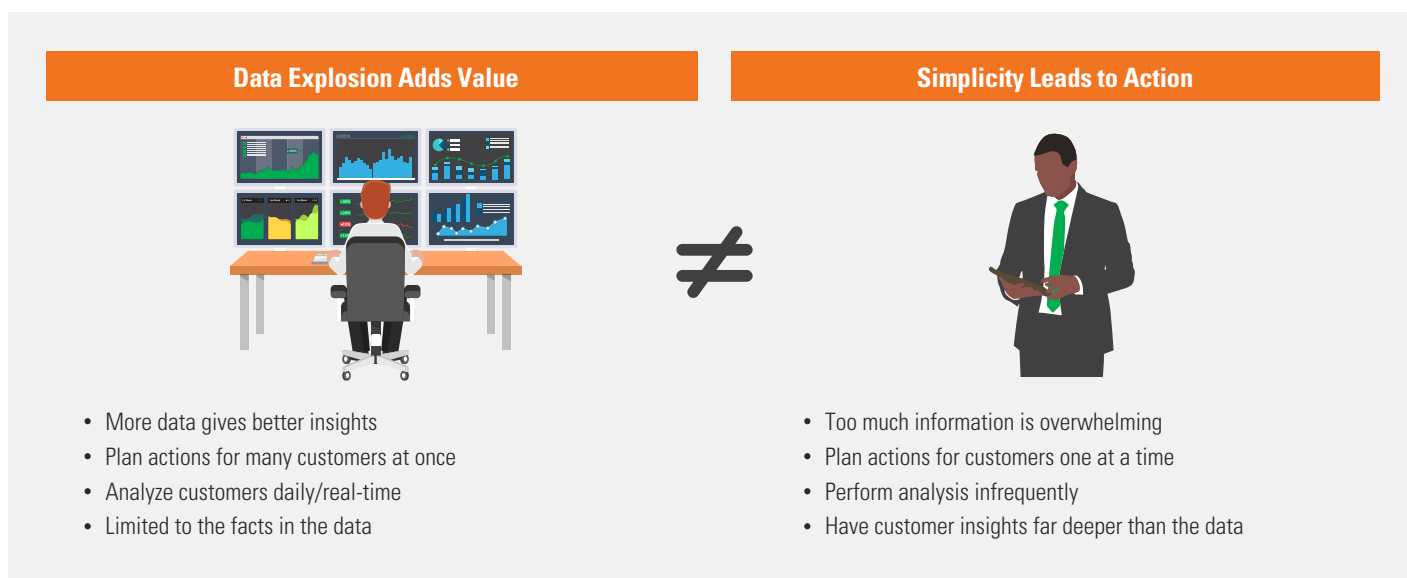
The digital revolution's impact is evident across industries, including life sciences, which is adopting a data-driven business model. Additionally, the industry must navigate layers of regulatory affairs and prioritize data integrity and accuracy. A well-designed data management system is necessary to ensure that data from various sources is consistent across multiple databases. This system requires thorough testing to ensure that it keeps all sources in alignment with one another while creating a 360° view of the customer.

Sales operations teams support their companies' field teams to be more productive and effective when engaging their customers.

Digital marketing and new customer data sources, such as publications, trials, and patient data, have dramatically increased the volume of information companies collect about each customer. This data provides a wealth of information and can create new ways for data scientists and digital marketers to create new insights and actions. But, if this deluge is not handled appropriately, it can quickly overwhelm the end users, who are specialists in engaging HCPs with meaningful conversations.

When dealing with large amounts of data, the role of sales ops becomes apparent. Sales ops is the conduit that uses the vast data set available from various sources, producing valuable and actionable insights in real-time for the field

Figure 3. Companies gather more information about customers than the field teams can process.



Source: Axtria Inc.

teams, allowing them to focus on their other functions. Grady Sheldon states, "Data challenges create a lot of distraction in the field. Ops people need to understand and synthesize the data to simplify it for field users. If the sales teams are doing this, it's distracting from meeting with customers."

The role of sales operations and the technologies supporting it are evolving at a daunting pace. Sales ops

needs to track emerging technologies, such as automated transcription and appointment-making, that let them and their reps do their jobs more efficiently. Apart from enabling sales reps' day-to-day activities, sales ops could also take the initiative in training and knowledge development to guarantee that sales reps have the experience and competence they need to succeed.



“We are throwing a lot at our reps and expecting the rep role to change accordingly. They are not the technical experts — they need to primarily focus on customer engagement,” expressed Pratyush Kumar.

Every company wants to use the treasure trove of insights to be found in their data, and sales ops plays a crucial role for field teams. The key lies in making these valuable insights available to everyone in the organization. “Telling the rep doesn’t just make it happen. The more data you provide, it leads to more confusion, in my opinion. Can we invest in processing this information to provide actionable insights on a timely basis?” challenges Mehmet Bozbay.

Agility to Handle Constant Change

The life sciences industry is changing rapidly, making it necessary for companies to adapt to this change or risk being left behind.

The executives interviewed all said that the pace of change has increased in the past few years:

“Be very vigilant to changes in the customer environment. The moment you think you know it all, it’s probably

changed, and you have lost. You need to be very open to changes in the customers,” says Bruno Indelli.

“Be open to change. We need the agility to learn, and the learning curve is high. There are always new things coming. Now, you can use omnichannel tools to engage better with different actors in an account,” says Hector Herrera Seittiffe.

The ability of businesses to rapidly adjust to shifting market conditions, customer needs, and regulatory requirements will define their future course of success or failure. Sales ops teams must be able to adapt their strategies and tactics in reaction to shifting market conditions and be flexible in their approach to sales, marketing, and distribution.

As Grady Sheldon describes, “It’s become much more dynamic. It used to be more siloed to focus on what the sales team is doing. As the world has changed and the pace of change has accelerated, we need to be more flexible and nimble.”

Life sciences companies can streamline their sales operations, improve data management and analysis, and obtain real-time insights into their sales success by

adopting advanced technologies such as omnichannel on integrated technology platforms with deep analytics. Real-time analytics that offer insights from a broad spectrum of data provide decision-makers unparalleled flexibility and agility while also enabling reps, key account managers (KAMs), and MSLs to customize their customer approach according to each customer's needs and requirements. With flexibility and adaptability, data-driven companies can deliver better customer experiences, and drive growth and profitability.

Future Changes

As we look further into the future, some companies will stay on their current course, and others are already taking more radical steps.

"There's been a discussion for so long about if they'll keep the reps. They'll always remain. For example the car industry still keeps salespeople, even Tesla in their pop-up shops," says Hector Herrera Seittiffe. Life sciences companies need to integrate these sales and other field teams into the broader digital strategy.

More Variation in the Commercial Model

Pharma companies are reorganizing their field teams, to engage more effectively with healthcare systems with complex decision-making processes and find new ways to add value to HCPs and patients, improving the patient journey.

As Mehmet Bozbay says, "It's complicated. We want the reps to wear many hats. The delineation between reps and KAMs is becoming blurred, especially in a specialty business. They need to understand the customer ecosystem: How can we help?"

One large pharma company for oncology in the US organizes teams of different experts (KAMs, MSLs, reimbursement specialists, etc.) assigned to each hospital, aligned by tumor type instead of by product. Another pharma company eliminated sales targets and incentivized the field teams to achieve qualitative goals that are set individually for each hospital or local healthcare provider. Other companies are experimenting with MSL-only field teams without any sales reps, or remote digital-only sales reps. In small countries and for ultra-rare conditions, field personnel may perform the role of rep and MSL, with strict controls over their activities in each role.



Leverage Diagnostics for Patient Experience Orchestration

Despite intense interest, digital therapeutics that combine active ingredients with digital devices and tools that replace medications have failed to transform healthcare. Still, the digital revolution has transformed medical diagnostics. For example, Abbott overhauled the patient experience with personalized alerts, replacement of faulty devices, and other included benefits with the FreeStyle Libre portfolio of glucose sensors.

Some companies have made significant investments to drive integration, such as smart inhalers from Teva Pharmaceuticals and BreatheSuite, and Otsuka's ABILIFY MYCITE®. However, these remain the exception and command a tiny proportion of the overall drug market. More common are partnerships with digital treatments, such as apps for opioid addiction or anxiety. Oncology and immunology rely on ever more precise and niche biomarkers, so companies invest heavily in companion diagnostics. In 2020, Roche signed a 15-year deal with Illumina to collaborate on companion diagnostics.

These programs open new opportunities to leverage patient data at a larger scale and to enhance the patient experience in real-time, the same way companies use omnichannel orchestration programs to enhance the HCP's experience.

Deeper Engagement in the Value Chain to Improve the Patient Experience

Integrated digital diagnostics and companion apps made initial inroads to change drug delivery, but the vast majority of the pharma and biotech companies sell products through traditional channels that keep them several steps removed from patients and caregivers.

Companies could change their business models radically to treat patients directly and better manage the patient experience. The direct involvement of pharma companies in patient treatment decisions is vanishingly rare today. Pharma companies go to great lengths to avoid participating in prescribing decisions and patient care support. For example, home infusion services are



managed via third parties and with strict firewalls for data sharing and commercial influence.

In the future, some pharma companies will likely take the step to employ medical staff and medical infrastructure to deliver their treatments directly to patients for a better customer experience. Companies in therapy areas with high levels of private payment, such as aesthetics, will likely be the first to make this move. This practice could extend to innovative private-public initiatives for interventions that work well as stand-alone services, such as dialysis or vaccination.

Conclusions

All the executives we interviewed highlighted the constant change that sales ops teams must manage to support

more effective and efficient field teams. While some companies have transformed more than others, all of them will consider how to manage the exploding volumes of information and how to integrate digital marketing while keeping their sales ops teams agile and aligned with business strategy.

We close with an optimistic view from Pratyush Kumar regarding how we can drive change: “We always believed that driving change was tough and time consuming, but the recent pandemic proved us wrong. There’s no challenge to driving change, so long as people see the value in it.”

Axtria would like to thank the following executives for sharing their insights in this white paper:

- Bruno Indelli, Head of Strategic Transformation, Human Health at Merck Sharp and Dohme
- Grady Sheldon, Executive Director, Field Excellence at Amgen
- Hector Herrera Seittiffe, Global Head of Commercial Performance at Grünenthal
- Mehmet Bozbay, Senior Director Field Deployment, Incentives, and Analytics at Astellas Pharma
- Pratyush Kumar, Global Healthcare CRM Manager at Nestlé Nutrition Strategic Business Unit



See also “10 Trends in 2023 that Will Shape the Pharma Industry” by Axtria’s CEO, Jassi Chadha

<https://www.pm360online.com/10-trends-in-2023-that-will-reshape-the-pharma-industry/>

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