


PharmaTimes

# SalesPRO

PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN FIELD SALES

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## THE CARROT AND THE STICK



What do doctors really think about prescribing incentives? With help from an exclusive survey by OnMedica for *PharmaTimes SalesPRO*, Mark Greener investigates.

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# A cultural affair

How to win friends and influence customers.

**W**hen was the last time you attended a course on customer relationship-building skills? Most likely, you know how to use the latest customer management systems, laptops and personal digital assistants inside out, but what about the soft skills needed to deal with the diversity of customers you face each day?

Customers are not homogenous blobs; they're not all the same size or colour, they don't have the same needs, and they certainly don't all behave in a predictable manner. We can't always apply a standard template to make our approach easier and effective. In short, it's like carpet bombing to hit a few tanks: any military bod will tell you

that doesn't work, and it's far better to have precision strikes based on prior intelligence.

If you don't buy into the military example, think about your experiences as a supermarket customer. Your shopping list is particular to you and, whilst it will have some commonalities with others (milk, bread, baked beans, etc), it will also differ. So, if you're a tee-totaller that eats only Kosher food, you don't want money-off vouchers for wine or pork chops! This explains why supermarkets are keen to know exactly what your buying habits are, so they can cater for your personal requirements. Segmenting consumers based on ethnic backgrounds, food preferences, cultural/faith practices and shopping habits

– and then using appropriate channels of communication – is extremely effective. Consumer marketers don't use the 'one-size-fits-all' approach, so why does the pharmaceutical industry?

If you are not prepared for the cultural sensitivities and particular ways of doing business, you could end up making mistakes that will essentially leave you stoking the fire with a chocolate poker.

## A competitive edge

Armed with in-depth product and marketing knowledge – sprinkled with some selling skills on top – you're let loose on the customer base after an initial training course, and are expected to create and build these critical relationships almost instantaneously. But can you tailor your approach, your behaviour and communications to make a better impact on your customers than the armies of other medical representatives descending upon them? Would that not give you a competitive edge? Sure it would, and that competitive edge will help you achieve targets.

Life in the pharmaceutical industry is demanding and meeting targets, especially call rates, is getting tougher. Access to doctors and other National Health Service customers is becoming more challenging; it often requires above-average effort and, indeed, the creativity to be different. So any competitive edge you can get is a bonus.

Cultural intelligence is one way in which you can steal a march over your competitors by building greater understanding of your diverse array of customers, building relationships and making a stronger impact. It's a kind of 'social glue' that generates a 'we-feeling' between people.

But is this relevant to medical sales? The simple answer is 'yes'. In government and public sector organisations, the proportion of employees from non-white backgrounds should not be less than 9% (the government's target) and – in major cities like Leicester, Birmingham and Manchester – the figures are 40%, 30% and 19%, respectively (2001 Census), with the South Asian community making up the bulk of the figures. In the NHS, this figure is 34% and, if you look at a typical sales representative's GP target



list, 50%-60% are from a culturally diverse background. In our industry, it is highly relevant to know as much as we can about these groups of customers. But do we have the skills that allow us to achieve the desired penetration and promotional impact?

### Making an impact

Understanding the social, cultural and faith backgrounds relating to behaviour, human relations and how business is done in different communities is essential to building a competitive edge to our activities. Ask representatives from the same cultural background how they utilise their knowledge and links to gain better access and to develop relationships with these diverse groups. In addition, we need to go beyond the typical customer profiles of prescribing habits, usage commitments and the occasional interests and hobbies to a more in-depth awareness of customers' ethnicity, traditions, festivals, language, customs and relevant faith practices.

According to one experienced



representative: "I am constantly looking for creative ideas and methods to give me a competitive edge. Cultural intelligence allows me to understand the make-up and some of the issues surrounding my customers. Not only do I get more credibility, but I am able to get increased air time and access to key individuals."

Do you know which doctors will be celebrating festivals such as Eid, Diwali and Holi? Which doctors

practices helps differentiate between product features and benefits, for example, the use of animal extracts in products – such as bovine and porcine insulins, or gelatine in capsules – could result in patients refusing medication, since these may violate their beliefs.

Such practical knowledge will enable you to be more professional and show to customers that you have taken the trouble to understand them better, to recognise and respect their values,

## Religious Festivals 2007

### Buddhism:

Nirvana – February 8  
Wesak – May 2 (May full moon)

### Hinduism:

Holi – March 3  
Diwali – November 9

### Judaism:

Passover – April 3-10  
Rosh Hashanah – September 13-15  
Yom Kippur – September 22  
Hanukkah begins – December 5

### Christianity:

Lent begins – February 21  
Easter Day – April 8  
Christmas Day – December 25

### Islam:

Ramadan – September 13-October 12  
Eid-ul-Adha – December 20-23

### Sikhism:

Baisakhi – April 13  
Birthday of Guru Nanak – November 24

Source: [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

## Cultural intelligence is one way to steal a march on competitors.

attending meetings have special dietary requirements, such as halal or kosher, and have you catered appropriately? Is the chosen restaurant for the meeting acceptable for clients on religious grounds? Does a planned meeting or appointment clash with religious commitments, such as Ramadan (one month of fasting for Muslims)?

Furthermore, are you sensitive to the etiquette of no male/female hand-shaking among certain cultures? And did you know that direct eye contact in selling/interviewing situations is considered offensive in Eastern cultures? Think of the credibility you could gain if you made allowances for such factors.

Understanding cultural and faith

cultural and traditional practices, and make your communications more focused and intelligent.

This will separate you from the often careless approaches made by others. After all, one of the key outcomes in sales is to be remembered! Cultural intelligence can give you that extra impact you desire and, not only get you remembered, but also invited back. Remember the old adage: people buy people first! **SP**

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