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BEST PRACTICES, CASE STUDIES AND STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATORS

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East meets West: SCM Asia Special

Coaching managers to create open
dialogue at Flextronics

Driving cultural change at BASF

What does the future hold for
internal comms?

Using stories to increase sales at
Pfizer

Focus on value-adding at Kraft Foods
Nordic

MELCRUM

Global research and training for internal communicators

Using stories to increase sales at Pfizer

How “anecdote circles” led to an engaged sales force and improved business results

BY NIGEL EDWARDS

Ahead of the publication of a new study trial for one of its marketed medicines, Pfizer first looked to understand what obstacles existed to greater sales of the medicine. Its approach to finding out was innovative and highly engaging, and what it found radically changed its approach to communicating with its sales force.

In an industry where bringing a new product to market can cost up to US\$1bn, and the product has a limited time before patents expire and generic competition starts, it's vital for Pfizer to ensure that all appropriate opportunities are taken. Like many pharmaceutical companies, Pfizer relies on a highly skilled sales force to work with physicians to communicate medical information.

In late 2009, Pfizer executives at the company's Primary Care regional office in the UK were focusing on a mature Pfizer medicine. The wider class of drugs to which it belonged had had some significant problems some years earlier, although the Pfizer medicine itself had not. Given this, there was a determination to improve the revenues on the product. A crucial piece of feedback from an influential customer had indicated customer willingness to buy was highly dependent on the sales representative's confidence in the product. Focus was therefore on how to better support and engage the pan-European sales force.



Pfizer is a leading pharmaceutical company employing approximately 90,000 people in 180 countries.

In June 2010, we held a product summit in Berlin for the 900-strong sales force. Its content and agenda were radically different from standard events of this type; the sessions specifically addressed issues we knew would resonate, and post-event feedback indicated that we had achieved our objectives. How we designed that event is a story in its own right.

The request to communications

I was approached by the brand director with a request to put together a communication plan to improve the sales force's motivation and results. He and I hadn't worked together before, so his approach was encouraging – he didn't assume he had all the answers.

One of the difficulties immediately evident was the lack of clarity around what the content and messages were, beyond the standard approach of new scientific data briefings, new sales materials, etc. To further complicate matters, we were still settling down following a significant reorganization. Some country-based brand leaders had only been in place a matter of months and would be unable to give us solid feedback on sales issues in their territory.

We decided that our first step in preparing the communication plan would be to gain a clear understanding of the sales force, their strengths and weaknesses, their experiences and perceptions of the sales environment they worked in. Second-guessing the issues was likely to be, at best, counter-productive.

While standard approaches would include focus groups, we were concerned that focus groups

tend to become a battleground for opinions – and only the most dominant opinions survive. As the medicine was launched a few years ago and sales forces had ridden a roller-coaster of success and emotions, we believed focus groups would be only partially effective. While opinions are useful, we recognized the human tendency to filter out examples that contradict strongly held opinions – something we didn’t want to happen. We wanted people’s day-to-day experience and lots of different perspectives on that experience – from there we would be able to get a better picture of the overall situation.

Another approach, using questionnaires and surveys, was unappealing too. Direct questions wouldn’t have given us the underlying belief patterns that we needed to understand the complex journey. We wanted the real life context of the sales force.

We’d been talking about using narrative approaches to various projects, going so far as to hold conversations with consultancy Narrate. One approach discussed was using “anecdote circles”, a technique to draw out lots of stories from groups in ways that didn’t allow single voices or viewpoints to dominate the group.

Using anecdote circles seemed like a practical way of gaining a clear understanding of the sales force’s experience. One of the difficulties would be gathering stories in different languages – given that people generally share examples in their mother tongue – and analyzing them in English.

Why stories and how do we analyze

Conversation with Narrate raised an interesting potential way round the language issue – one that brought significant other benefits with it. The use of specialist collection and tagging software, SenseMaker™ designed by Singapore-based Cognitive Edge, would allow us to collect the stories in local languages, but give us powerful analysis capacity in English.

Further conversations with the brand team ensued – their focus was pragmatic: they needed to be confident of real business results. A project that delivered them useful results was the only thing that mattered, and would translate into greater trust in the communications team for further projects.

The route we took then revolved around a simple process, but with a single twist to it. We would collect stories and narratives from the core audience, but use “signifiers” to allow them to show us what those stories meant. (See box, right.) This was crucial – we needed to make sure that experts elsewhere in the company didn’t re-interpret the stories. A set of signifiers would be built for the project and then these would be translated into the different languages. This would allow us to analyze

the stories without having to translate them all first – keeping translation costs down.

We decided that, to ensure a decent cross-section of opinion and experience, we’d gather material from six countries – our key target markets – and 11 cities. We also had just two weeks to gather all the material and a further two weeks to analyze and report back with the results.

Working with colleagues from across Europe in marketing, sales, communication and product training, we started with a workshop to explore what suspicions and assumptions people had about what might be influencing sales reps. That, coupled with other historical material, allowed us to develop the “signifier set” for the work. Topics addressed included the sales process, customer trust, success factors and more (Figure One).

With these translated into six languages and 11 workshops arranged through the local brand leaders, we started to gather the materials.



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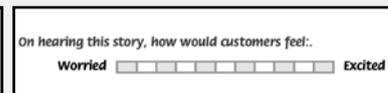
THE SIGNIFIER FRAMEWORK

As stories are collected, participants “signify” their stories to illuminate and add meaning to them, using a method that allows for analysis through specialist software.

The signifiers for a project can be developed through:

- Workshops to explore the main issues arising
- Literature review (including values, newsletters, etc).

For example: Respondents simply make a mark where they think their story sits on the signifiers – examples include triangles (below, left) and polarities (below, right):



KEY POINTS

- Following the need to improve revenues on a mature Pfizer medicine, the company endeavoured to find a way to better support and engage the sales force.
- The communication team decided to gather stories from the sales force and analyze them using “signifier” sheets to determine how they viewed the product and the experience of selling it.
- In June 2010, the product summit agenda was driven by the results, with sessions on targeting, objection handling and sales rep’s attitude.
- The entire process provided a greater engagement with the audience and reps gained an increased sense of control, encouraging stronger sales of the medicine.

“THE APPROACH OF GATHERING STORIES PAID DIVIDENDS...THE SUBSEQUENT ANALYSIS GAVE US INSIGHTS NO OTHER METHOD WOULD HAVE.”

◀ **Collecting the stories**

Anecdote circles are social events – they’re designed to be as natural as possible, a coming together of people who then naturally share experience. Narrate’s approach was to create an informal environment, with a formal collection system within it. With the help of local training support and country brand leaders, the Narrate facilitators started an intensive two-week collection process.

What we hadn’t anticipated was that, within 48 hours of the first session taking place, the country brand leaders were getting feedback on the events. And all of it very positive – our diagnostic event was a positive engagement intervention in its own right.

Country brand leaders too found the experience enlightening. Many were new to the post and learned about pragmatic local issues that otherwise would have taken months of field research and relationship-building.

The process itself was straightforward. Whoever wanted to share an experience did so, then everyone in the group filled in a signifier sheet

to illustrate how they saw that experience. Then the next person who wanted to speak would do so. The whole session was captured on voice recorders, with everyone’s understanding and permission that these stories would be shared.

Different countries handled the arrangements in different ways – southern Europe needed cigarette breaks, others wanted to serve food during the process. Adapting the process to fit these differences worked wonders – the important element was a social environment, from which material would naturally emerge. Some of the groups also asked how many stories the teams in other countries had told – and set their sights on delivering more.

With this competitive spirit, at the end of the two weeks, we had seen 94 sales representatives across 11 cities and collected almost 200 stories. More importantly, we had 1,700 different perspectives on those stories, giving us a clear picture of how the sales force viewed the product and the experience of selling it.

Analyzing the material

Having collected the material, we started to analyze it. The choice to use signifiers in order to be more open and objective rather than simply testing our initial suspicions proved well founded.

The first step – looking at the overall patterns that emerged – started to show useful conclusions immediately.

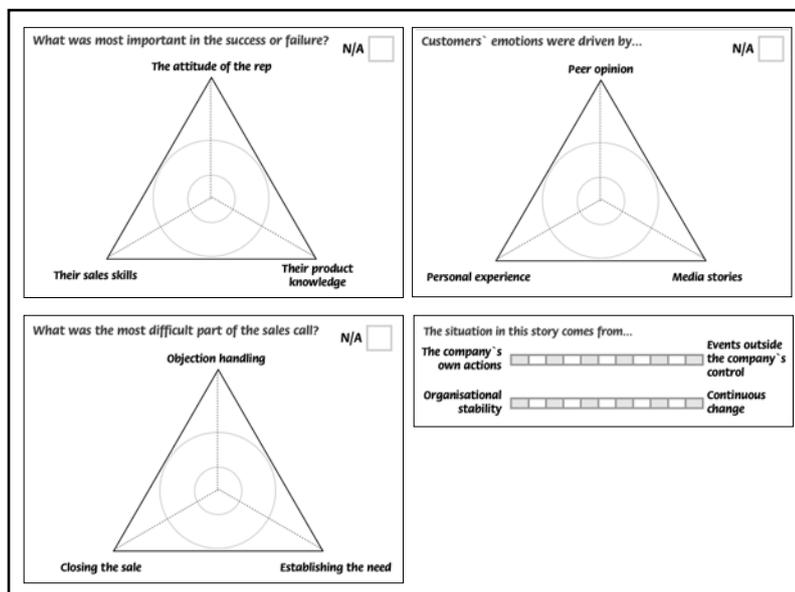
From this, we could see that while we had thought that product knowledge was the most important element, it was secondary to the sales rep’s attitude. Indicating that, while we needed to ensure that their product knowledge was good, we would derive greater benefit (and sales revenue) from focusing on their attitude.

As we looked at the initial patterns and correlations between issues, we came up with more theories and questions that were quickly checked by the Narrate team using SenseMaker. In a short space of time we’d identified areas for improvement that crossed boundaries with other departments. There were implications for training and development, business leaders, internal communication and brand marketing teams.

Yet the narratives behind the results made a huge difference – instead of large, intensive programs, the implications were easily implementable. Where new content was needed, examples were already available in the stories – stories of failure to share and learn from, successful examples for the communication team to disseminate.

One issue that became clear was that sales representatives saw the most difficult part of the sales process was handling customer objections.

Figure One: Examples of the “signifier sets” developed through a workshop and other material.



This was understandable given the complex history and high market visibility of the product and its class of medicines. We were able to identify 18 stories strongly indexed to objection handling seen by reps as being either positive or strongly positive. These stories were then translated and used in the briefings around the new clinical study data for the sales reps.

Results

The outcome of the overall process was extremely illuminating and useful. Factors that emerged included:

- Sales representatives’ attitudes were all important.
- Examples of personal experience were strong influencing factors for GP (General Practitioner) doctors. From our detached perspective, we had expected media stories and scientific data to be more important, but the data was clear.
- Investment in objection handling would pay strong dividends. Given the size of the sales force, any investment would be significant, so we needed to be sure there would be a return.
- Sales representatives who had started before the problem with the overall class of drugs were less defensive than those who joined later. This was the opposite of what we’d expected. We had anticipated that those who were around at the time would be more negative, but in fact they remembered what life had been like before and that the problem was with the class of drugs, not our product. People who joined later had been swamped by the negativity of the time. We’d have struggled to find this out by another route.
- Results on targeting confirmed what we suspected – that it played little part in most reps’ experience.

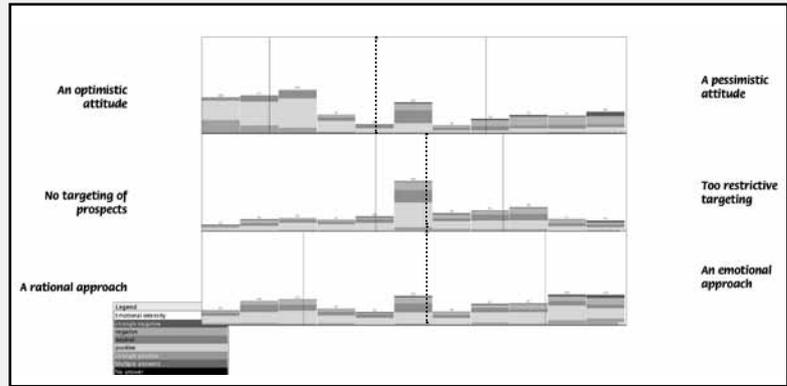
Taking action on the results

This information fed directly into our Berlin event to introduce the study data – we gathered more than 900 sales representatives from across Europe, with an agenda driven by the results from the survey. We ran sessions on targeting, objection handling and attitude. We invited customers – both doctors and patients – to talk about their experiences of prescribing and taking the drug. This was a major departure from our usual approach of presenting scientific data. (Of course, the data was presented but not as the primary focus of the summit.)

Content for the event came from the stories themselves, making it easier for the communication team. Each country now has available a set of all the stories in that area – a

UNDERSTANDING THE RESULTS

In the histograms, the dotted line indicates the mean of all the data, the figures at the top of each bar indicate the number of datasets within that bar. Weight goes weak.....strong across the page.



real asset as they look to improve results in their geography.

The summit also gave sales representatives a much greater sense of control over their own destiny – better results were available through their own actions, not waiting for the organization to cure their problems. They now feel that there is a lot to be gained for doing a few notable things – all easily within their grasp.

By the end of the project, there was a greater engagement with the audience just by dint of the process. Country-based brand leaders were better informed – and induction of future brand leaders will be made easier and more relevant to the local context. The regional marketing team was able to re-direct their efforts to meet evolving market challenges.

The Narrate approach of gathering stories paid dividends – sitting in on some of the sessions myself, I could see how cathartic the process was. It was also obvious that, by signifying their stories, the sales force was giving us more information than they realized – at no extra effort or cost. The subsequent analysis gave us insights no other method would have.

And, crucially, my pragmatic brand director had the results that he wanted which have helped to build trust and value for my advice. He’s already talking about repeating the process in 2011 to measure how much sales force beliefs have shifted. And with my communication colleagues, we’re talking about how we might use the anecdote circles methodology to measure communication effectiveness. scm

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