

Research Question

What are critical competencies associated with Field Sales personnel within the medical device industry that enable making successful transition to operating in virtual environments?

Introduction

Absorb what is useful, discard what is not, add what is uniquely your own. There are many critical competencies common to all successful sales tactics that should be kept, like known soft skills that benefit salespeople. Other approaches such as inefficient mass mails and outdated digital models need to be discarded. Finally, field sales personnel today need a uniquely empathetic and customer centric approach that relies on real time data and insights enabled by digitalization. In the wake of the COVID 19 earthquake, the medical industry is still experiencing the tremors. Out competing other companies in terms of consumer centricism with futuristic skills is the best way to stay on top of the medical sales industry.

Changing Landscape and Expectations

The pandemic has ensured status quo and trends are challenged like never before. At the same time, there is an increasing shift in expectations and readiness to embrace change. Some of the key industry trends include:

Increasing investments towards remote customer engagement: Organizations in general and more relevantly, within medical technology, pharmaceuticals and healthcare have increasingly moved towards mixing personal and digital engagement. There is a need to deliver effectively and consistently across the multi-channel engagement strategy during and after the pandemic. Ability to be agile and lead the pack decides the leaders that emerge from the pandemic. Pharma companies are now working with a remote customer engagement approach, especially so in life sciences. All external interactions experienced by health care professionals (HCPs) are going digital.

Democratize data to re-think customer experience: It is important to glean insights from every interaction and touch point in the sales loop. Technology deployed to do so should be user friendly, delivering *real-time* customized meaningful insights to field sales personnel. Field sales professionals have an enhanced role to play to help organizations re-think the customer experience for HCPs and buyers by personalizing these insights, thereby enabling data-driven sales and marketing¹⁸.

Rate of change in technology- a constant: Technology is continuously changing at a greater speed and businesses are playing catch up²⁰. Within businesses, customer facing functions like sales and marketing have been the early adopters of technology and should increasingly continue to do so. Field sales professionals within an organization *should unequivocally embrace technology* and develop the ability to see use cases for changes in or adoption of technology. They are the organization's receptacles capturing real-time consumer feedback for product and service enhancement.

Changing end user perceptions: According to a research funded by the Medical Science Liaison (MSL) community about the shift in Key Opinion Leader (KOL) preferences to use digital tools to engage. 77% of KOLs surveyed were receptive to use digital tools to virtually engage, 73% prefer to engage at least once a month, and 66% indicated they would like to engage virtually post-COVID. This necessitates the development of a virtual engagement strategy for the customer base¹³. Besides an industry push, there is now a customer pull and hence, a stronger business case to nurture a tech-savvy sales force.

Competencies for Field Sales Professionals

Since the mid-1990s, Grainger had been supplementing branch stores and sales teams with digital capabilities. By 2019, Grainger's purely online "endless assortment" business was 15% of sales and growing. Grainger's

still dominant “high-touch solutions” business deployed a combination of field and inside sales forces, and digital channels against the largest customers¹². Because medical technology organizations rely on in-person sales and are increasingly using the digital format, investing in digital sales capability like Grainger, is important in gaining market share¹.

In addition, virtual Customer Relationship Management (CRM) enables sales to fill the gaps that exist with traditional CRMs such as static information, uni-directional information and difficulty in managing customer information. The biggest benefit is having CRM technology functions at one’s fingertips¹⁶. The critical sales competencies and personalities for field sales in a virtual environment are listed below.

Problem-focused care: COVID-19 has been a stressful time for sales teams and customers equally. In addition to common core soft skills such as empathy, and rapport building, problem focused psychological self-care and problem focused coworker support should be new soft skill requirements that have been needed before,⁹ but are more necessary in present times. A problem focused care model will out-perform emotionally focused care models in professional team mate relationships in terms of mediating burnout⁹.

Change agility: Embracing rather than managing change results positively in business outcomes. This competency includes proactive approach to managing conflicts, facing setbacks, protecting the team during change, continuously keeping abreast with trends to predict and prepare for change. Based on the OCEAN model of personality types the best traits for salespeople to have depends on context¹¹, however, conscientiousness is typically the strongest trait³. OCEA correlates positively with adaptability. N correlates negatively¹¹. However, the degree of customer orientation correlates positively with sales in every context studied, even when factoring different levels of OCEAN¹¹.

Consulting to build relationships: Across demographics, patients are decreasingly seeking physicians⁶. Mentoring or consulting with providers on patient engagement ensures they are provided necessary care. This requires understanding the provider's business and patients beyond just sales. Understanding and supporting customers in navigating crises like the pandemic or change such as the digital transition strengthens relationships and yields long-term dividends. One-on-one communication skills are relevant despite decreasing in-person interactions.

Data, technology and product savvy: Podcasts, webinars, group conferences, blogs, and social media use are replacing traditional channels⁶. Data analysis is a critical organizational capability that helps field sales personnel interpret bidirectional data gained from work and the field. Use of sales technology (ST) generated real-time data to personalize interactions should become second nature across the sales force.

Constructivist Learning²¹: To update or be outdated is an existential binary choice. It is not just important to be learning agile. It is critically important that employees learn together and synchronously through the organization. Critical to the pace of technology implementations is the pace of adoption and use of technology²⁰. Research indicates that with increase in socialization there is an increase in knowledge sharing¹⁷. Research also shows that the relationship between technology adoption and relationship performance with customers is mediated by collaboration or knowledge sharing with peers¹⁶. The capabilities and functionality provided by technology should enable field sales personnel to complete relationship-forging activities and exchange information with colleagues’ immediately¹⁶. Hence, we believe it is critical to create a culture of learning together. This helps create a workforce that has a strong appetite for change.

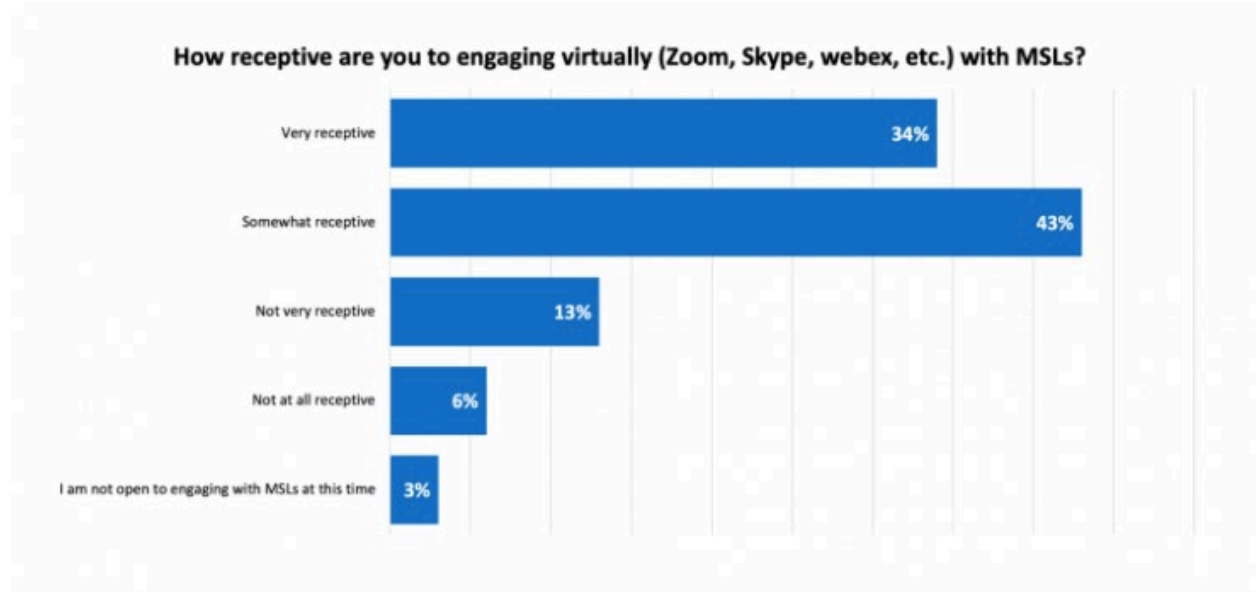
Conclusion

It is important to extensively use data in decision making to create consumer centric organizations that are constantly successful in navigating change. The ideal field sales candidate is highly conscientious, embraces and advocates change and learning, and above all, is customer centric.

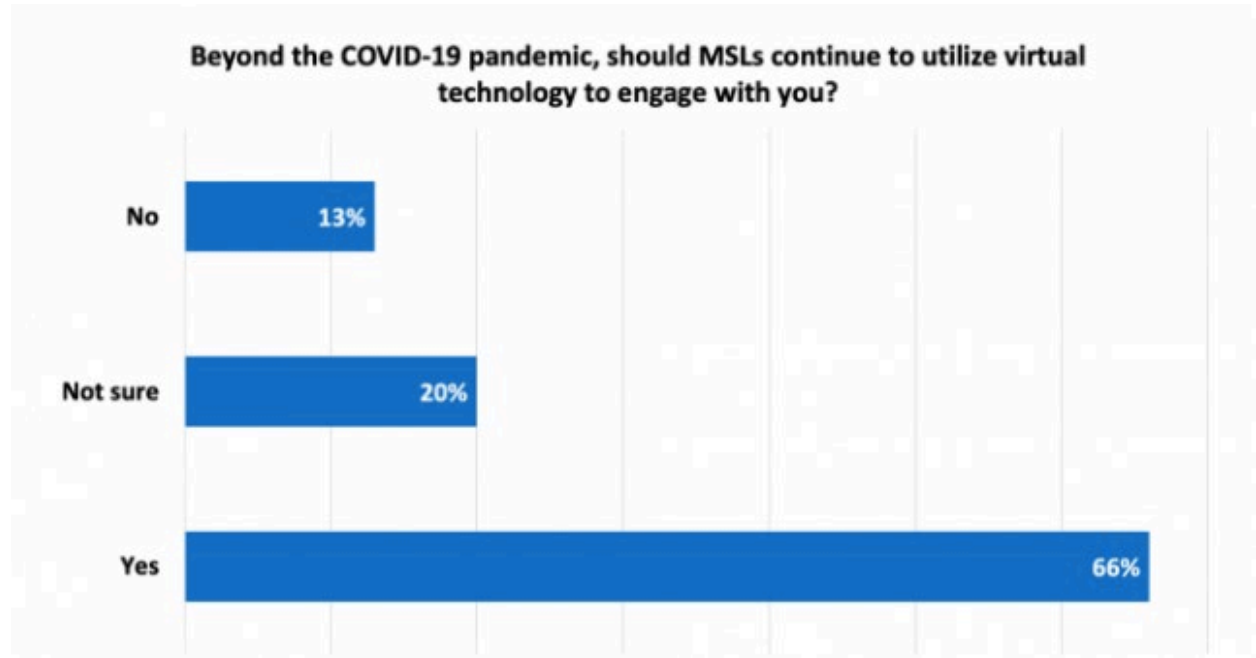
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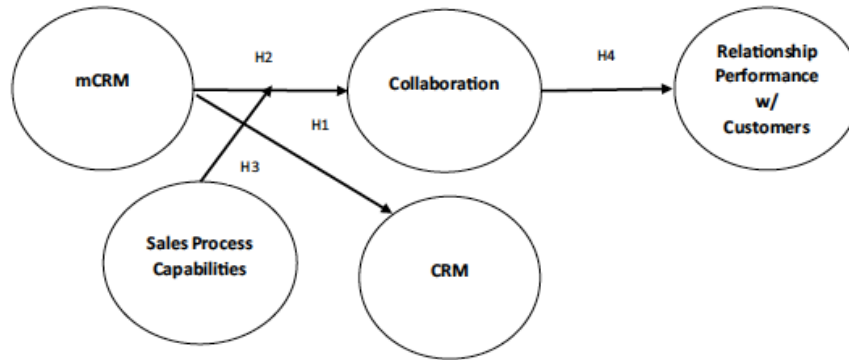
1: Research insights on how receptive are KOLs to engaging virtually with MSLS¹³



Appendix 2: Research insights on how receptive are KOLs to engaging virtually with MSLS beyond COVID¹³



Appendix 3: Impact of mobile Customer Relationship Management (technology) on Collaboration and Sales Performance¹⁶ (Relationship between CRM adoption and relationship performance with customers is mediated by collaboration or knowledge sharing)



Appendix 4: Corridors of influence in customer-centric organization (Increase in socialization there was an increase in knowledge sharing¹⁷)

