AMERICAN HEALTH CONSULTANTS

Occupational Health Management™

A monthly advisory for hospital-based occupational health programs

GUEST COLUMN

When you go marketing, listen before you diagnose

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Suppose a physician walks into an examining room to see a patient complaining of pain. Without questioning the patient about other symptoms, problems, complications, previous history, or treatment options, the physician arrives at a diagnosis, develops a treatment plan, and prescribes medication for the patient.

What are the chances that the physician accurately diagnosed the problem and developed an appropriate treatment plan? And what are the chances, no matter how good the physician truly is, that the patient will be left feeling the treatment was adequate? Probably not great.

While it is unlikely that an occupational health physician would treat a patient in that manner, a similar scenario occurs every day when occupational health program marketers and salespeople call on clients and prospects. The sales representative visits the client who has a general complaint of workers' compensation "pain," for instance, and quickly makes a "diagnosis" of what is wrong and how the occupational health program can fix the problem.

Health professionals double as salespeople

All salespeople can make that mistake, but the risk can be much greater in occupational health because many health care professionals must act as ad hoc "sales representatives" of a sort when they visit a client or prospective client, or when they act as a reference source for designated sales representatives. Additionally, some hospital cost-cutting initiatives have forced the elimination of dedicated occupational health sales positions, with marketing responsibility falling on the director of the occupational health program.

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In other cases, health care professionals who are displaced from other jobs within the hospital system are hired as sales representatives for the occupational health program. Some programs even purposefully hire health care professionals as marketers, rather than experienced sales professionals.

While health care professionals can be successful sales professionals for the occupational health program, either as designated sales representatives or otherwise, special care is necessary to make sure clients and prospects benefit from their medical background instead of suffering from it.

Listen more than you talk

To make a health care background an asset rather than a liability in sales encounters, follow these steps:

1. Cultivate strong, active listening skills.

Resist the temptation to showcase knowledge that is not helpful in identifying the client's needs. Remember that the client will be more impressed if you accurately identify his or her problem and a workable solution than if you just prove that you are knowledgeable about health care.

Learn to integrate active listening skills to identify the areas of opportunity with a prospective buyer. Sales professionals know that "when you're telling, you're not selling." The medical professional who spends an hour talking to the prospect has not been listening.

Informing the other person about your program is important, but remember, the goal of a sales call is to know more about the prospect at the end of the session than they know about you. When the meeting is over, you should know:

- what constitutes value in the mind of the buyer;
- under what conditions the prospect will buy;
- what the next step is in the sales process.

Learn first, then propose a solution

2. Never propose a solution without adequate knowledge.

Ninety percent of the sales call should be directed to intensive assessment and developing an understanding of history, symptoms, and goals, and outlining acceptable treatment plans and options. Never predetermine a prospective buyer's needs. Never assume that the solution that worked for one employer will work for another employer.

Employers want to work with providers they believe understand their particular problems. A monologue presentation will not accomplish this goal, but an interactive exchange between the provider and the employer will.

Like a good medical diagnostician, a good salesperson asks general, open-ended questions that are confirmed by a series of closed-ended questions in order to isolate the symptoms. Common symptoms that occupational health programs can address are:

- escalating workers' compensation expenses;
- losing track of injured employees once they enter the medical system;
- getting the injured party back to work in a timely manner;
- identifying a quality medical provider whose staff understands and practices occupational medicine;
- managing paperwork and data tracking;
- developing a proactive strategy to reduce the number of injuries;
- receiving medical communication and follow-up information upon which employers can make appropriate decisions.

Ask questions, then more questions

3. Use questions as the basis of your sales platform.

Telling prospects what you know is never as effective as asking questions to allow them to deduce the same answer for themselves. To help prospects reach the right conclusion, present a series of targeted questions that help create an interactive exchange. Ask questions whose appropriate responses would play to the strengths and competitive advantages of your occupational health program.

Consider this example of a sales representative who represents a program whose major competitive advantage is 24-hour coverage:

Sales representative: You mentioned that your company operates three shifts. What percentage of your employees are represented by each shift?

Prospect: Our corporate staff work typical business hours. Because our business provides overnight package delivery, most of our hourly employees work between 5 p.m. and 5 a.m.