

Account Management: VMC leads with a new sales model

Last year, VMC extended its portfolio to reflect the changing market. The result has seen an increase in the recruitment of Account Managers, inspired by specialist products and the greater autonomy the role allows.

The past twelve months have seen a dramatic shift in the prescribing landscape in the UK. Vast swathes of reform have swept across the NHS, changing the way healthcare services are delivered to patients, and in the process, forcing the pharmaceutical industry to reassess how it communicates with its customers. In some cases, the very identity of those customers has changed, as newer prescribing influences emerge, all of whom have different and evolving needs. The impact of such wholesale change on the sales environment has been severe, and drug companies the length and breadth of the UK have had to restructure their operations to compete in the modern era. Clearly, 2006 was the year when the traditional pharmaceutical sales model underwent some permanent reconstructive surgery.

Perhaps one of the most significant changes in 2006 was the redrawing of the Strategic Health Authority (SHA) map. This was followed, in October, by the reconfiguration of Primary Care Trust (PCT) boundaries and the introduction of practice-based commissioning (PBC), all of which have been designed to develop a 'patient-led NHS'. The modern environment brings with it a range of new influencers outside of the clinician; service managers, prescribing advisers, lead clinicians, supplementary nurse and pharmacist prescribers, payers and commissioners now all impact the decision to prescribe, and precipitate a different communication approach for the industry.

The most radical changes to the pharmaceutical sales model to date have impacted on primary care. The days of very large team builds, as companies seek high volume noise in the market, appear increasingly numbered. Instead, the industry is trying an alternative, more sophisticated approach, deploying smaller teams equipped with different skill-sets from those of the traditional representative. The era of Account Management has well and truly arrived.

The changing approach is not only being felt in the sales environment – the pharmaceutical R&D model has evolved too. The industry is moving away from the blockbuster model that served it so well in the 1990s and is instead targeting niche therapies to drive growth. Consequently, pipelines are awash with specialist products, with the most proactive manufacturers already launching products in niche therapy areas to capitalise on the shift.

So what does all this mean for the medical representative seeking to develop a career in pharmaceutical sales? The exact nature and profile of employment opportunities in the new environment will undoubtedly be different. As a result, the type of individuals pharmaceutical companies are recruiting differs substantially from their traditional predecessors. Nevertheless, the redesigned pharmaceutical sales model of the future does provide exciting opportunities for sales professionals that are equipped with the range of skills required for success. The question remains: how do you find these opportunities?

The Account Manager's Skillset

- Ability to adapt skills to communicate at all levels
- In-depth knowledge of therapy area
- Good relationships with stakeholders on territory
- Entrepreneurial
- Accountable
- Self-motivated

The Vacancy Management Company (VMC), which has previously been best known for its expertise in interim recruitment in areas such as maternity cover, long-term sickness and secondments, has developed its service portfolio to meet the demands of the new environment. Mirroring the industry's evolution, VMC has acted quickly to reposition itself as a specialist in the recruitment and development of Account Managers for the pharmaceutical industry. Furthermore, its client-base deliberately comprises companies that are promoting niche, specialist products.

Sue Birch, General Manager at VMC, explains the rationale: "In the past 12 months there have been serious changes in the NHS, not least the reconfiguration of SHAs and dramatic revisions to the way commissioning works. These changes have had a significant impact on the industry. Back at the beginning of 2006, a high number of primary care teams disappeared, as companies considered their response to the new NHS. That response has now manifested itself in a firm commitment to the concept of Account Management. Here at VMC, our response was to align our business model with the demands of the new market."

The Account Management model

So what is the Account Management model, and what does it mean for professionals keen to tread this career pathway? "Being an Account Manager means being accountable for what you do at all levels," explains Sue. "The traditional approach of sending primary care representatives into the market to call on as many GPs as possible will no longer work. The new environment is not just about detailing, it is about influencing, and the pool of influencers has expanded beyond clinicians. The Account Management model requires a much stronger strategic business focus from an individual. In fact, it requires a different type of individual altogether."

The skills required of a typical Account Manager are varied. The old disciplines of being a powerful communicator and a persuasive presenter remain, but in addition, to succeed, Account Managers require qualities akin to running their own business. "First and foremost, Account Managers need to have experience and to demonstrate vast knowledge of their therapy area," says Sue. This knowledge should not only cover the clinical characteristics of their product and those of their competitors, but, perhaps more importantly, should include strong relationships with key stakeholders within their territories and their therapy areas.

"An Account Manager needs to have good relationships with the key opinion leaders in their

“ This is the best job I've ever had. I am truly accountable, feel valued and the product is amazing. What makes us special is the staff at Enturia and VMC. I hope to stay with them a long time. ”

Jennifer Stebbings, Account Manager, Enturia

region – be that at hospital or primary care level, whether professors and consultants in hospitals, or GPs with a Special Interest in the community. They also need to have links into the PCTs and other stakeholders. Account management is about communicating with all the key influencers in one area, and having complete accountability for developing and maximising those relationships."

The aspect of accountability is fundamental to the role – there is an autonomy to account management that can be exciting, although with it, the stakes for success are raised to new heights. "You



New Account Management Team – Enturia launch

have got to be a little entrepreneurial and have that flair," says Sue. "If you are somebody that wants to run their own business and be in control of what you do and what you are achieving, the role could be tailor-made for you. But to succeed you'll need to be able to develop and work to your own business model, measure your progress and determine your own strategy when things have not gone according to plan. It's a challenging position."

Self-motivation is another key skill. "You've got to be self-sufficient," says Sue. "Account Managers are ideas people who can put things into practice and follow them through. If you need to be hand-held, or have the constant support of a manager, it probably isn't the role for you."

The VMC offering

VMC still offers many of the core services it provided when it first launched six years ago; interim projects to fill short to medium-term resource gaps still exist and continue to play a valuable role for companies and candidates alike. However, the move towards the Account Management model has augmented the portfolio and enabled VMC to partner with many start-up and small-to-medium companies with specialist products. "We are increasingly being asked to get involved in pilot projects for companies," says Sue. "We have also done a number of small team builds for start-up companies, for example, a new team build at Enturia to launch ChloroPrep®. We have helped develop promotional strategies with new companies, and supported and guided them through the process of setting up a company."

Such pilot projects are designed to test products within the market, measure their success and establish whether an expansion of the

promotional effort would be beneficial. VMC has actively sought to partner with companies with innovative products in specialist therapy areas. Its team builds offer candidates initial VMC contracts, with a view to permanent positions within the client organisation at a later stage. These contracts have proven very popular among candidates, who recognise the benefits of such opportunities – not least the autonomy they provide and the career development they can offer.

“ Working for VMC is very rewarding; they allow you a large degree of autonomy but also provide excellent back-up and support when help is required. ”

Penny Shearer, Hospital Specialist, UCB

And so, as the NHS evolves in 2007, it seems likely that the Account Management model will continue to thrive. VMC has carved itself a niche in the provision of resource in this area and is ideally positioned to capitalise on industry movement in this direction. The company has grown significantly since its inception in 2001. Ironically, for a business that began life providing short-term resource solutions, when it comes to Account Management-type positions, VMC is in it for the long-term.

The Vacancy Management Company can be contacted by calling 01420 82202 or via their website at www.vacancymgt.com.

