

Czech Republic

Sales Force Effectiveness (SFE) studies – a hot topic for market research

One of the goals **of a product strategy** is to consolidate the product image. This is achieved by communicating what the product offers and how it is distinguished from the competition. Manufacturers use various tools to do this such as mailings, advertising, presentations at symposiums and conferences, lectures and promotional material. Any and all activities are in compliance with the product strategy and with the intention to communicate the same messages in a uniform way. The sales reps represent one of the most important tools of such marketing communication. Their activities in the promotional and communication fields for the individual products lead, to some extent, not only to the purchase of the products themselves, but also to building up a wider awareness of these products.

The **necessity for "feedback"** with regard to the work of the sales reps leads to an increasing need on the part of the pharmaceutical companies for **Sales Force Effectiveness studies (SFE)** which allow assessment of the sales reps, enabling comparisons to be made. Amongst other things, such as internal information for the sponsor of the study, the research results can serve in the setting of remuneration and other motivational systems or programmes.

In the context of **market research**, this type of project can be approached in **various ways**. The investigation should always be focused on the observation of the work done by the reps across a broad spectrum, especially in relation to the prescription or recommendation of drugs by physicians or pharmacists, so that the use of promotional materials can be assessed and the perception of the pharmaceutical companies per se evaluated. The investigation results should be considered in association with other information available to the study sponsor such as data relevant to the region, its demographics and, above all, the purchasing power of the respondents.

Research studying the sales force can be classified according to various aspects: the chosen methodology, source of target persons, and so on. Several methodologies are often combined within one research project and both GfK and other market research agencies offer their clients many standard branded tools to assure sales force efficiency which can subsequently be adjusted to best suit the target group and drug category in question.

One of the means of observing reps working in the over the counter drugs and food supplements sector is **"Mystery Shopping"** in pharmacies. The method is based on a simulation of a real purchasing situation according to a predefined scenario. The respondents selected for such research act in the role of people shopping for products in a specified indication group. They observe the behaviour of the "pharmacy staff" during the selection and recommendation of the product for a customer and also assess the distribution of the various promotional materials within the pharmacy studied. Research of this type is often included in a marketing plan both before and after promotional campaigns. Comparison of the data from these two waves of research can then provide information about the efficiency of the entire process.

A very interesting approach to observing **the activity of the reps** is investigation in the context of existing physician panels. The individual physicians – panellists – participate in research studies on various topics related to their specialization and also monitor the activities of the sales representatives visiting them on a regular basis. After each visit by a representative from any pharmaceutical company the physician fills in a form describing the

course of the visit. This particularly looks at the preparations and associated data presented by the representative as well as other topics discussed. This regular monitoring also provides data on whether or not the physician received samples of drugs or promotional materials, how long the visit took and time data on presentation of the individual drugs. Studies of this type are often syndicated research designed for several clients who want to map the effectiveness not only of their own but also the competitors' reps by taking advantage of the existing physician panels.

Previously most of these studies have been carried out by a standardised method whereby questionnaires were filled in by the physician either after a specified time period (e.g. a week or a month) or after each visit of a pharmaceutical rep. Hot news in the approach to the examination of the feedback between the work of a sales representative and the behaviour of the physician is the **IVR method (Interactive Voice Response)** which so far has only been used in some western European countries (mainly in Holland). This technique is based on the formation of a physician panel supported by the IVR technology (special recording software for a controlled dialogue with a physician).

What does the IVR method comprise?

- immediately after the meeting with the sales representative the physician calls a dedicated phone line using an identifying PIN code. The questionnaire related to the visit of the sales representative presenting a specific product is then implemented via unique software and the answers recorded
- the voice data with the information gathered is stored on a common server and subsequently processed into a written format
- it is possible to deliver the processed information to clients on a daily basis once the voice data and open answers (verbatim) have been processed.

What distinguishes the IVR from other previously commonly used methods?

- no interaction with the interviewer
- immediate feedback – impressions are captured immediately after the meeting – minimum time interval between the conversation with the sales representative and the subsequent interview (minutes after improves recall)
- exact terminology – the physician's own words convey a better impression of his/her thoughts and feelings, extensive open questions enable deeper understanding and subsequent debate
- articulation – on the basis of voice analysis and selection of vocabulary, one can put oneself in the role of the respondent
- speed – daily/weekly reports, allowing immediate checking and verification of the answers given
- composition of the panel – several surveys have shown that the participants in IVR panels are more likely to be working in large practices than small ones

- more convenient for the participants – freedom to choose time of participation

Currently, the **most common target groups** for the IVR method are physicians for adults, internists, neurologists and psychiatrists, oncologists, allergists and pneumologists in Western Europe. The range of the specializations covered depends, of course, on the specific needs of study sponsors.

However, irrespective of the method or approach employed, all research focused on monitoring sales reps' activities should include certain, specific question groups which form the basis for interpreting the results.

The areas focused on include, in particular:

- prescription habits within the relevant drug category
- reasons for prescribing the most commonly used drugs
- establishing the arguments used by the representatives for individual products
- evaluation of attributes of the reps' work
- evaluation of activities by the pharmaceutical companies

An important part of the evaluation of the research is also benchmarking – comparing the results achieved with the data deriving from other similar research. Such a comparison is very important and provides the study sponsor with the opportunity to confront their own activity in the competitive environment.

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