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Tips from Real Pharmaceutical Sales Reps on How to Break into Pharma Sales

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Professional Summary
 Successful sales professional with 10+ years experience in large scale food and retail environments. Implement cost control measures to ensure operations remain within company targets. Maintain bottom-line performance through P&L, merchandising, and management loss control and inventory management initiatives.

Skills

- Executive team leadership
- Inventory report generation
- Client/Vendor relations
- Market analysis
- Sales management
- Staff training and development
- Customer relations
- Process improvements

Experience

District Manager, OC2000 to Current
Varian Medical - San Francisco, CA
 • Directed new/renewal/loss prevention initiatives to maximize productivity and revenue potential through development of a sales team.
 • Successfully increased employee retention by creating a positive work environment in 18 stores.
 • Administered daily operations to ensure policies were followed to and understood by sales staff.

Operations Manager, District to District
Walgreens, Inc. - San Francisco, CA
 • Directed operational/loss prevention for a \$1 million annual revenue store in compliance with current company policies/procedures.
 • Managed operational costs by reworking inventory control and buying/shipping department activities as well as setting targets.
 • Administered financial processes including accounts payable/receivable, managing an accounting office and updating customer service files.

General Manager, District to District
Wendy's Restaurant - San Jose, CA
 • Successfully managed a team of 20 direct reports and reduced store turnover by 80% from previous management.
 • Developed the association strategy and secured the \$10,000 store remodel while open for business.
 • Directed departmental alignment on strategies to create strong sales.
 • Implemented process improvements to increase guest loyalty and customer satisfaction.

Education
 Master of Business Administration (Operations Management), 2009
 San Francisco State University
 Bachelor of Arts Business Management
 University of San Francisco

Certification
 Certified Retail District Manager, Varian Inc., July 2009

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Compiled by Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.

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In this article, three pharmaceutical sales reps have generously offered their top tips for breaking into the pharmaceutical sales field. They are Meaghan Mandli, growth hormone therapy manager with Novo Nordisk, Inc., Los Angeles, and Stephanie Milner, and Lisa Wheeler, both pharmaceutical sales specialists for Sepracor Pharmaceuticals.

Advice for new college grads

While many pharmaceutical firms won't hire new graduates directly out of college, Milner advises trying the larger organizations — Pfizer, Merck, Novartis, Johnson & Johnson, and GlaxoSmithKline. "They are most likely to hire directly out of college," Milner says.

All three reps suggest, however, getting a couple of years of sales experience before trying to break into pharmaceutical sales. "If you are a new college graduate," Mandli says, "try to get at least one to two years' sales experience with a company that provides a structured sales training program." Mandli got experience from ADP, the payroll company. "I learned how to prospect, identify a customer's needs, and create a sales presentation after attending a two-week training class at the corporate headquarters," she recalls. "If an individual can experience success and demonstrate a proven track record in an entry-level sales position, they will do well in pharmaceuticals. They have experienced rejection, can manage their time well, and have a basic knowledge of the sales process."

Wheeler adds: "Get a job (selling anything) in outside sales first. Two reasons: A sales job is not for everyone, and you would want to make sure that sales in a general sense meshes with your personality and style. Second, very few pharmaceutical companies are willing to hire without some record of success in a previous sales job; this experience will make breaking in a little easier."

Milner advises one to three years of outside business-to-business sales

experience, which she says are often necessary to even get an interview in pharmaceutical sales. Milner suggests not worrying about a huge salary; instead new grads can consider “a smaller one with the possibility of good commissions.” Milner recommends a sales job in the medical industry, such as at an MRI center.

Research about the Field

“Do a preceptorship,” advises Wheeler. “This is common industry jargon for spending a full day in the field with a seasoned pharma representative.” This ride-along will give the job-seeker “the opportunity to ‘bend the ear’ of the rep all day and ask as many questions as you have. Come prepared with some questions and do some research via the Internet first,” Wheeler says.

“Additionally, you will get to see what typical interactions with a doctor looks like. The average sales call lasts about 45 seconds to one minute.”

Wheeler suggests that this type of job-shadowing is also a good way to tell if pharmaceutical sales is really right for you. “The job of a pharmaceutical rep can be rather lonely for some people,” she says. “Think about it ... you have a home office, multiple, brief, interactions, and then you go back home. You may not see another person from your company for several months at a time. A preceptorship is a good way to see what your job may look and feel like without having to jump in head first.”

“Do your homework!” Mandli advises. “Google the companies that interest you and check their Web sites for open positions in your area. The competition for the open positions is tough, so it is important to set yourself apart from others by researching the industry.”

Your Resume

“Make sure your resume stands out!” cautions Milner. “You can expect that there were at least 1,000 resumes sent in for one position. You must stand out. Change the format up a bit. Add color.”

Networking

Wheeler advises, “Get in from the ‘inside.’ Internal referrals are always treated with higher priority than a submission from a Web site. If you do not know any

pharmaceutical reps ask your doctor, your local pharmacy, or hospital for some business cards of the representatives that they consider to be their favorites or the very best. CAUTION: Pharmaceutical reps are bombarded with people we do not know asking us for help to get in. You may have to be extremely persistent to get a call back, but this is a key personality trait of a good rep, so show that early on.”

As for a good venue for both networking and learning more about the industry, Mandli notes that “most major cities have a Pharmaceutical Representative Association that meets monthly. These meetings are a great way for medical service liaisons and future liaisons to network with colleagues and listen to current topics facing the industry and profession.”

“You can find the directory on the [Pharmaceutical Representative Web site](#),” Mandli continues. “Once you locate an association, contact the president and ask if you could attend a meeting to help you better understand what a pharmaceutical representative does. When attending a meeting, you will have the opportunity to network with the people currently employed by major pharmaceutical companies. Many of the pharmaceutical companies will give their current employees a finders fee for referring a candidate that gets hired on. If you meet someone who is aware of an opening, and they are impressed with you, they may recommend you to their manager. This eliminates the fees that the company would have to pay a recruiter to fill the open positions and puts a bonus in the representative’s pocket.”

Mandli also suggests asking personal physicians about the drug representatives that visit them on a weekly basis. “If your physician feels comfortable, they may give you the contact information for a representative that is working for a company that you are interested in,” Mandli advises. “It isn’t always what you know, but who you know. Create an advocate that could recommend you, and you will see several doors open.”

A Forgotten Technique?

Mandli notes that “[newspaper] classified sections are an option that many people have forgotten about when it comes to open positions. In smaller cities this is one of the best ways for the pharmaceutical company to advertise a

recently vacated position or expansion.”

The Interview

“When you get an interview,” Milner says, “know the products, know the company, know the pipeline. You can access most of this on the company’s Web site, but asking around is very helpful.”

Milner notes that “most pharm companies are now utilizing behavioral/situational interviews.” [See our article, [Behavioral Interviewing Strategies](#).] “You need to show that you can handle conflict well. You need to show that you can think out of the box.” Milner adds that “some companies will give you product info, let you review it, and have you detail (sell) it to them. You must be on your game for every interview.”

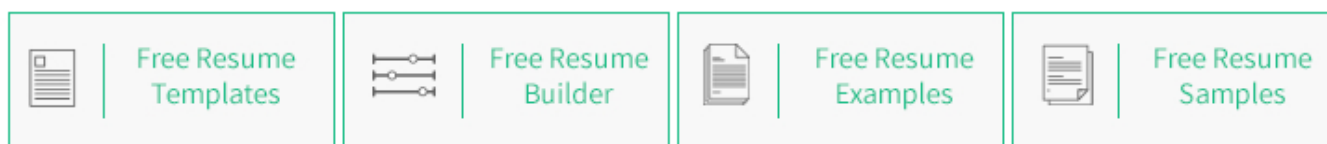
Persistence

“Be persistent!” exhorts Mandli. “If you really want to be a pharmaceutical representative, you have to be tenacious, so don’t give up if it takes awhile to get your foot in the door. Remember to follow up on all correspondence that you send to someone for an interview. The more that you can personalize the cover letter that you include with your resume, the better. You can usually find out who the local manager is by contacting the company directly and being resourceful.”

Echoes Milner: “Be positive, speak intelligently, do not give up! It took me nine months to break in to the industry. I had second interviews left and right, but someone with experience always beat me. Just persevere. Be confident. Sell yourself!”

Be sure to read our article, [So You Want to Get Into Pharmaceutical Sales...](#)

*Katharine Hansen, Ph.D., creative director and associate publisher of Quintessential Careers, is an educator, author, and blogger who provides content for Quintessential Careers, edits **QuintZine**, an electronic newsletter for jobseekers, and blogs about storytelling in the job search at **A Storied Career**. Katharine, who earned her PhD in organizational behavior from Union Institute & University, Cincinnati, OH, is author of Dynamic Cover Letters for New Graduates and A Foot in the Door: Networking Your Way into the Hidden Job Market (both published by Ten Speed Press), as well as Top Notch Executive Resumes (Career Press); and with Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D., Dynamic Cover Letters, Write Your Way to a Higher GPA (Ten Speed), and The Complete Idiot's Guide to Study Skills (Alpha). Visit her **personal Website** or reach her by e-mail at **kathy(at)quintcareers.com**. Check out Dr. Hansen on **GooglePlus**.*



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By Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

I have been empowering people my entire adult life -focused on

helping them lead better lives.

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