

Making Every Word Count



By Ian Johnson,
Principal, Commercial
Effectiveness Services
IMS Brogan

Understanding how your number one investment (field force) is driving business is critical to every brand manager and sales director. Your field force's ability to execute the promotional message is what counts most. Getting it right the first time will separate successful strategies from those that fail. The need to get a powerful, concise, easily understood, and unforgettable message out to your customers is what pharmaceutical marketing is all about. Even with the massive reduction in sales representatives over the past three years, the representative's ability to gain access to a targeted physician remains the number one priority for every pharmaceutical organization. Unfortunately, the teams who develop these powerful messages are rarely involved in their direct delivery to physicians. Thus, the organization is left with little direct customer feedback.

With the success of the brand so dependent on message execution, no sales or marketing team wants to wait until the sales numbers are being tallied to get actionable feedback on the impact of their messages. What they really need is a **constant message feedback loop** to understand, word-for-word, what is being communicated to the customer and what is resonating with them.

Message Recall at a Glance

With an overall business need for constant unbiased customer feedback, message recall studies have developed into a mainstay of marketing and have been ingrained into most companies' decision-making processes. Message recall studies are available in a variety of forms, and each one has its own strengths and weaknesses. The three major forms are:

1. Verbatim studies (qualitative)
2. Online message studies (quantitative)
3. Social media monitoring studies (qualitative/quantitative)

Although all three have a place in measuring message recall and retention, the following case study focuses on verbatim studies (qualitative), which have become popular as a means to elucidate promotional effectiveness.

The primary reason for this popularity is that verbatim studies allow physicians to provide a deeper understanding of the representative's detailing message (for both your brand and your competitors). Unlike traditional online message recall studies that are meant to benchmark and measure promotional effectiveness with brief and succinct message capture, the qualitative methodology of the one-on-one phone interview gives an objective insight into the in depth communications with targeted physicians. The verbatim study is designed to allow the physician to fully express his or her interaction with the sales representative. It also allows the physician to comment on his or her perceptions of the product and/or its competitors and the extent to which the representative addressed any concerns, as well as their level of medical knowledge. The insights gained from this type of message recall are not just critical for sales and marketing teams, but also for sales trainers. After all, by measuring the medical knowledge of a sales representative from the expectations of a customer, sales training teams can make the necessary adjustments to basic training programs.

CASE STUDY

How Can a Verbatim Study Help Improve a Message?

The example that follows shows how a **verbatim study** can change the performance of a company.

In the first-half of 2012, a brand manager at Company A commissioned a verbatim message recall study for one of his company's key brands. Company A had two internal

sales teams and one contract sales team (Company B) supporting Brand X. Company A had just finished its mid-cycle sales meeting, and everyone was fired up and ready to hit their year-end targets. Although the sales teams seemed to have understood the message, the brand manager wanted to hear what their target customers were recalling and their perceptions of the promotional messaging. The brand manager also wanted to have the new data from the verbatim message recall study for their upcoming business planning meeting.

During the presentation of the market research results, the marketing team noticed that the message was not always being delivered as they had intended. The message was

being executed with excellence and really hitting the mark in some instances, but in others, it was off-target or not really answering customers' questions. As the brand manager said, "This is not completely unexpected as the science is complicated, but we were really clear in our training. The field force should have been prepared for customers' questions." Following the presentation of the data to senior management, further exploration of the data was requested, as well as a top-line view of any new insights in the next two weeks. Further analysis of the data uncovered that the company B's contract sales team was responsible for a large majority of instances where the message was not being communicated as intended.

Sample Verbatim: Physician Detailed on Brand X

During July, a representative from Company B (contract company) discussed the product (Brand X) for approximately five minutes.

The major point discussed by the representative was that Brand X is more effective with fewer side effects than its predecessor. It was also described as acting much more quickly and having easier dosing, as it is taken only once daily, instead of twice like other molecules.

I asked the representative from Company B specifically about the XYZ issue, and he told me that it is not an issue with Brand X the way it is with the product's competitors. The representative may be right, as I heard this from someone else, but I really wanted to be reassured on the issue. I am not sure what mechanism of action makes Brand X better.

Of the points presented, the most important was that it is better than its predecessor. I have used a lot of the predecessor in the past but have always been concerned about issue XYZ. I was hoping Brand X would fully resolve the issue.

I was provided samples at this visit but am unsure if I will use them.

I'm not sure if I will use more Brand X, as I still need to understand how it is better for issue XYZ.

Key Messages Validity of Product Comparison

- "The representative made comparisons to Brand Y and Brand Z, mainly on the basis of side effects and tolerability in general. The comparisons were valid, because the side effects of these products are always a problem. With respect to the increased tolerability of Brand X, this corresponds to my clinical experience"

(Spec, QC)

- "The representative did make comparisons to other products. He/she compared it to Brand Y based on its efficacy and side effect profile and its ability to address issue XYZ. The comparisons were valid, because I have seen many issues with XYZ with Brand Y"

(Spec, ON)

- "The representative made comparisons to Brand Z saying that there is a lower incidence of XYZ. The comparisons were valid based on my experience in that I agree Brand Y causes more of this issue, and this is confirmed by what I have read"

(Spec, ON)

Key Takeaway

The product comparisons made to Brand X were seen as valid by physicians, as they mirrored their own experiences, which made the detail more credible.

Further to this discovery, both companies performed an investigation into what the issues or challenges were in not being able to deliver the intended message. It quickly became apparent that, in an attempt to cut costs at the mid-cycle sales meeting, Company A decided that Company B's contract sales team would attend only one day of training on the message instead of two. This cost saving measure had a huge impact on the contract salesforce's understanding of issue XYZ. At the time the decision for a one-day training was made, everyone agreed that the second day was deemed not to be of critical importance, and the training department had spent the additional day of training on role playing Brand X's message with Company A's representatives. During the meeting, Company A heard comments that the contract field force was not given as much role playing time, but the basic training programs were fully rolled out as planned. It was also agreed at that time that the sales managers would spend additional time with the contract representatives in the field to hone their objection handling skills.

The managers had indeed spent their time working with the representatives (both contract and in-house) after the sales meeting and felt they were on the right track. They did, however, state in their weekly feedback reports that, "The contract representatives tend to avoid issue XYZ, as it is very difficult to handle." These comments were not seen as big issues at the time but were the main reasons cited by customers in the verbatims for not buying into Brand X's message. Upon further review of the full verbatims from the study, it became apparent that the contract representatives were not conveying or highlighting the strengths of Brand X, as it related to issue XYZ — a challenge that was uncovered and resolved with Company A's salesforces during the role playing exercises on the second day of the sales meeting. As a result of their absence on the second day of training, the contract sales representatives were struggling and were unprepared to discuss the complexity of issue XYZ, and they were unsure of how to handle the objections with physicians.

Action Taken Due to the Verbatim

Within days of uncovering and understanding the issue, both organizations began developing an action plan, and senior management was fully informed. The preliminary action plan was presented and discussed, and both companies embraced the plan. Sales managers, along with sales trainers, were asked to organize a mid-cycle teleconference with all three sales teams. The goal was to remind them of how Brand X's unique mechanism of action made it superior to other products and how they should fully address

issue XYZ. Each sales representative from the contract organization was provided with two additional hours of training, specifically on issue XYZ and how to handle any objections. Sales managers from Company A were also encouraged to have any representatives that they felt would benefit from the training listen-in on the additional training. An online training program initially used at the launch of the product was relaunched on issue XYZ, and every representative was re-evaluated to ensure their understanding and comfort level with the issue was resolved.

To ensure the message around issue XYZ was fully executed, the business cycle meeting was realigned to allow for additional role-playing via a mock-clinic where managers and head office personnel were tasked with playing the role of physicians, and the physicians spent three hours being visited by sales representatives. Each representative was allowed to call on the manager or head office person for five minutes. The representatives were given feedback on the call and provided with recommendations on how to effectively communicate their message.

Outcome of the Action

When asked what the outcome of the situation was, the brand manager's answer was simple:

1. We now have all of our managers and representatives fully trained on our intended message and issue XYZ;
2. We were given additional resources to provide on-going training to the sales teams;
3. In the future, when we cut time at a meeting, it will not be on product message training; and
4. I will be running verbatim studies after each cycle meeting, because senior management wants to read the verbatims themselves and be able to react quickly if needed.

Considering all we know about the industry today, tightening budgets, smaller sales forces, limited access to physicians, and complex messaging issues, executing a message properly and easily to your customers remains priority number one. **Message recall studies**, including **verbatim studies**, remain a cornerstone in evaluating promotional effectiveness at every level of the organization. Do not underestimate the value and impact of reading **word-for-word** what your customers are hearing and remembering. Ask yourself, are they hearing what you intended? Every word counts! **CPM**

For further information regarding this article, please contact your local IMS Brogan representative, or send an email to Fastrack@ca.imsbrogan.com.