



# **The Ultimate Lab Sales Machine**

## **Part 1**

By Peter Francis  
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The Bavarian Motor Works (BMW) has a tag line that says, “the ultimate driving machine.” Indeed, their automobiles are usually highly rated in car magazines. So, what does this have to do with selling a lab service? Managers of successful salespeople may refer to their superstars as “machines” due to their consistent positive achievements. These marketing reps have been trained not only well, but also consistently. They have diligently studied the taught concepts, they have documented specific strategies for each competitor, and they have honed their tactical skills by role-playing with a colleague. But, when I ask reps about these activities, I hear them frequently say things like, “....kind-of comes intuitively. It’s like riding a bike. I don’t set aside specific time to review strategy or role-play with anyone.” And, to that point, I haven’t witnessed many HR departments or those in lab management consistently mandate these activities, either.

When it comes to hiring a field rep, labs typically favor people with the following backgrounds: (a) lab sales experience, (b) medical sales or (c) no sales familiarity but experience within the healthcare sector. Interestingly, and as incongruent as it may seem, the person’s background doesn’t matter as much as someone with inherent abilities. As a side point, this author had military experience, majored in music in college and taught the subject for several years prior to marketing laboratory services. Even though I had no sales familiarity, I possessed a strong appetite to learn about the sales process, my company consistently trained me, my boss coached me, I had an endless desire to study (and strategically understand) my competitors, and I appeared to hold certain intrinsic personality qualities that—when sculpting all these things together—helped me become successful.

### **Developing Situational Fluency**

Clients and prospective customers appreciate a rep who (1) understands the healthcare and lab business, (2) keeps them current with relevant information, and (3) helps them solve lab-related problems. Clients become irritated by overly aggressive marketing people that vigorously attempt to close business when the rep discounts the client’s comments and circumstances.



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Equally frustrating are those that waste a client's time by not having anything relevant to discuss that the *customer* would find interesting (e.g., vacuous "howdy" calls). These situations are 180° from those marketers that listen carefully and want to manifest a collaborative and value-driven approach.

Collaboration, from the position of a field person, requires individuals to possess a foundational selling competency called *situational fluency*. This phrase translates into an amalgamation of knowledge and skills—constituents that make field people very effective because of their ability to easily and professionally transition within different settings.

Let's examine the two primary areas of situational fluency, as well as their significant subparts.

1. **Knowledge.** This bifurcates into situational knowledge and capability knowledge. Situational knowledge decodes to the awareness of a client's circumstances: hospital or other political ties, industry trends, key players, competition, challenges, tests of interest to specific specialties, etc. Field marketers that don't understand the client's business reduce themselves in status to mere vendors—*not* the valued and collaborative support people they should be.

The second part, capability knowledge, entails having a sophisticated knowledge of their lab's operations. This converts into multifarious topics: compliance, test names, methodologies, connectivity, specimen logistics and processing, reports, supplies, billing, etc. To confound the subject further, it also means learning as much of these same details of each competitor as possible. This illuminates the topic of differentiation—and it pierces a conventional thought: labs are basically the same. A representative's capability knowledge—and the effective presentation of connecting the dots—can significantly influence the buyer's belief in a lab whose focus resides in adding value.

2. **Skills.** This separates into selling skills and people skills. Let's first reject a common phrase: "He/she is a born salesman." Parents do not look adoringly at their sleeping newborn child and whisper, "Just look at her. What a talent! Mary will become such a great salesperson." Hah! No! On-going classroom training in product knowledge, strategy, tactics and individual coaching contribute to developing a great salesperson. It's not something genetically inherited.

The second one, people skills, speaks for itself. The following are four basic—but vital— components:

- a. They understand themselves and how their behavior impacts others.
- b. They control their responses, are less impulsive and think before acting.
- c. They have a collaborative, professional, and empathetic attitude.
- d. They want to build business relationships based on trust, respect, and productive interactions.

An excellent resource about people skills is a book from 1936: *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. It should be mandatory reading for all salespeople.



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### **Preparing Reps**

With the above situational fluency components in mind, it highlights the fact that *everyone*—including those with previous lab sales experience—should have initial and on-going classroom sales and operations training. By doing this, you:

1. Set a standard for your expectations
2. Take a proactive approach
3. Provide a safe environment to practice
4. Create a company culture that demonstrates a willingness to develop professional, prepared and productive employees

Today, most professions—financial planners, pilots, attorneys, healthcare providers, etc.—have mandatory continuing education, because they found that, without it, people would not keep current with necessary industry information and trends; they couldn't sharpen their tools-of-the-trade and be accepted as a professional in their respective field. In the lab industry, laboratories provide newly hired sales reps with on-board training: meeting lab supervisors and reviewing sales forms, test menu, logistics, EMR reporting, transport supplies, compliance, etc. However, many labs mistakenly assume (especially with reps that have had sales experience) the newly hired salesperson arrives with miraculous talents of how best to market a lab service. But, it's quite possible these employees may have accrued past sales techniques that do not match the culture and reputation upper management wants displayed in the field. Reps that previously marketed medical devices or pharmaceuticals may have enjoyed past success selling a product, but they are typically unprepared for selling a service that requires numerous employees to flawlessly perform their respective jobs. Human error easily enacts Murphy's Law where there exists the vicissitudes of specimen collection, processing, logistics, testing, resulting and billing.

### **Repositioning the Competition**

Labs may use the MALDI-TOF method in microbiology for species identification and/or tandem mass spec for certain hormone analysis. A lab may offer next gen sequencing for a variety of applications. A lab may employ algorithms for certain test results. It may use dual EIA technology for Lyme disease screening and confirmation. A lab may have created patient information sheets for educational purposes. A lab may provide a rapid multiplex nucleic acid assay for detection/differentiation of influenza A & B. Field reps and management have a dual responsibility to review *all* of their lab's features (tests, methods, general services, etc.) and compare them against each competitor's capabilities. This stands as a tall order. But, through proper training and practicing, the marketer can bring these differences to life during a client discussion by using questions that lead to competitive differences (the significance of the preposition "to" is important in this context: you lead *to* differences—you don't lead a conversation *with* differences). The rep explains the benefits, and, preferably, corroborates with third-party or company-issued documentation. This exists as an essential part of strategy and tactics that propels the conversation toward *repositioning* the competition—and it avoids the adverse appearance of denigrating the competition.



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The focus directs to shifting the customer's current lab perception of, "They're OK—and I'm not experiencing any issues" to "Wow, I understand this lab's differences and uniqueness—this is something to consider." It's the *marketing person* that transforms into the principal force of displacing the client's opinion of their OK, basic, transactional 1.0 lab and replacing it with the eminence of a value-driven 2.0 lab.

### Summary

Field reps need to continually endeavor to practice and advance in all four situational fluency elements via self-improvement and through their employer's education/training. Emphasis should be tailored to describe how his/her lab: (a) improves healthcare, (b) saves healthcare dollars and/or (c) provides clinical decision support to the provider. In short, it comes down to maturing into The Ultimate Lab Sales Machine: a person that markets *value* and steers clear of promoting a me-too, pick-up-and-delivery lab service. After all, if you were a prospective customer, which sales rep would you be interested in talking to?

*Peter Francis is president of **Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC**, a unique training and development company dedicated to helping laboratories increase their revenues and reputation through prepared, professional and productive representatives. Visit the company's web site at [www.clinlabsales.com](http://www.clinlabsales.com) for a complete listing of services.*

