Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC

Habits

Understanding Their Role in the Sales Process

By Peter Francis

April 2024

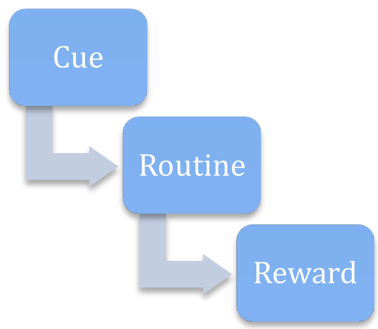
Those who sell laboratory services should become familiar with a part of our anatomy—a golf ball size lump of tissue in the center of our brain filled with multiple nuclei. It's a plural medical word called the basal ganglia. For many years, scientists didn't understand what this "thing" did, except for suspicions it played a role in certain diseases such as Parkinson's. As it turns out, in the early 1990s, researchers at MIT discovered the basal ganglia are integral to how we develop habits. Habits? What does that have to do with selling a laboratory service?

Of the countless number of clients and prospects I have visited over four decades, several things have been consistent when it comes to conversations. One of the most conventional from a medical assistant is a statement like this: "It's very easy to use XYZ Lab; everything is automatic." From the perspective of the client's lab field rep, they love hearing this because they feel, at least on one level, the business relationship remains firm and copacetic.

What most don't understand—from a scientific standpoint—is the basal ganglia have unleashed their prodigious powers. This multi-component lump makes it easy for people to store habits. Naturally, there are hundreds of routines we rely on every day, some of which are very simple (brushing our teeth) and others more involved (driving a car). You can't debate the fact we humans are inherently lazy, and the brain constantly seeks ways to save effort by avoiding decision-making. So, unless you deliberately wrestle with a habit—and find a new routine—the pattern will unfold automatically.

Three Step Process

In Charles Duhigg's book, "Habits", he writes about those MIT researchers and how they discovered a simple neurological loop at the core of every habit that consists of three steps. Step #1 is the *cue*. In the case of laboratory testing, the *cue* equates to the provider wanting a test result. Step #2 pertains to the *routine,* such as creating a test requisition, obtaining/preparing the specimen, and ensuring it gets to the lab. Step #3 is the *reward*—receiving a quality result in a timely fashion. This Routine and Reward process becomes easily programmed and develops into the status quo. As a side point, it is important to remember—presuming the client stays satisfied with their lab—the status quo is *the* most formidable competitor for any sales rep. Marketers are constantly battling this, because human bias begs us to avoid changing habits when things work just fine. But once you understand how habits evolve via a loop system (cue-routine-reward), a salesperson can "fiddle" with the Routine and Reward gears. In other words, explain (better yet, show) the differences your lab offers in contrast with the current status quo.



Understanding how the *cue* works remains straightforward when it comes to ordering lab tests. However, for the competing sales rep, it's possible his lab has differences in the Routine and Reward, leading to a significant opportunity within the sales process. Asking questions surrounding these two umbrella headers is where the rubber meets the road.

It's interesting to note that field reps rarely inquire what occurs after the doctor generates a test request (although many clients may follow a similar process, it's important not to make assumptions). Your lab may have distinct options contained within the Routine that make it faster and/or easier for the client—and even the patient. The word *convenience* folds under the Routine heading. The rep needs to do a deep dive by asking the question: What does my lab offer that could make the routine easier vs. the incumbent lab? To get your ideas flowing, ponder the following areas: specimen collection supplies, local patient centers (including appointments, registration, and wait time), lab location, courier pick-up time, test production schedule, billing (including in-network insurances, uninsured patient fees), barcode printer, client and patient education material, phone wait times for customer service, client-specific monthly data reports, patient lab portal, etc.

The Reward may frame some portions from above, but it primarily targets qualities directed at the provider: state-of-the-art methodology, test algorithms, turnaround time, interpretive comments on reports, esoteric risk assays, unique disease panels, timely professional consults, relationship with a lab employee, report format, etc. It takes training and diligence to fully understand one's own lab operations, services, and reporting vs. the competition, but this is what separates the winners into a distinct category.

Are Labs a Commodity?

From a general perspective, many clients have predictable opinions when it comes to labs because lab services are fundamentally the same. Right? Uh-uh-uh….No. Unfortunately for some salespeople, they may also hold a commodity feeling about their employer (admittedly as I first did), and their sales presentation devolves into a me-too and lackluster scenario. When prospects express frustration with some facet of their lab, it's like hitting a gold mine for a competing marketer, and he/she employs the standard Solution Selling technique. However, when it comes to satisfied clients (of which there are the majority), the rep has binary options. One translates to stopping in occasionally to check if the incumbent lab has made egregious mistakes that trigger a tipping point to consider an alternative vendor. In this setting, the field person plays a waiting game—an event brimming with happenstance and fortuitous luck. May the force be with you.

The second choice is for a sales rep to make a visit with a valid reason the *client* would appreciate. Sales winners use education handouts (clinical abstracts, government health website info, specific test descriptions, lab newsletter, etc.) to increase their credibility and ask to speak with an influential person. After the rep sees the targeted employee and briefly reviews the material, he/she can bridge the conversation and ask several lab background questions. Early in the sales cycle, one auspicious query is, "What are a few things you like about your lab?" A typical response involves ordinary items: good turnaround time and quality reports. The reason this vanilla response is notable is because it reveals the de facto Rewards as perceived by this individual. If someone told me those conventional items, my next statement would be, "All labs need to offer good turnaround and quality, and my lab provides that too as evidenced by the number of our satisfied clients. However, there are other aspects we afford that separate us from our competitors." This is where I would ask questions that lead to my lab's Routines and Rewards and then follow each response with my lab's differences.

Summary

So—the ol' basal ganglia. It's our beloved "lump" for our satisfied clients. But it plays a devilish protagonist role when we're trying to commandeer business from a competitor.

Everyone agrees we're all creatures of habit, so sticking with the status quo is the easiest thing to do*.* When it comes to selling reference lab services, habits appear insuperable unless four things occur: (1) there's been significant deterioration in some aspect of the lab service, (2) a hospital or corporate owner has mandated a change to a specified lab, (3) a personal relationship exists, or (4) the customer likes some compelling points a competitor describes (i.e., outsell the competition). To this last point, I suggest using questions that coalesce with your lab's Routine (e.g., convenience factors) and Reward elements. The client's answers will offer a more thorough grasp of how your lab positions itself against the competition and—very significantly—allow for differentiation.

Postscript: As a former sales representative, I would be remiss if I didn't mention this: what you want to see happen is you, the field rep, become part of the client's Reward. After all, in most business-to-business sales situations—and not to be forgotten—the client's *first* decision rests with the field person.

.

Peter Francis is president of ***Clinical Laboratory SalesTraining, LLC****, a unique training and development company dedicated to helping laboratories increase their revenues and reputation through prepared, professional, and productive representatives. He is the author of over forty-five articles about laboratory sales. Visit the company's web site at www.clinlabsales.com for a complete listing of services.*