Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC

Supercharging Your Sales Effectiveness

By
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Selling reference laboratory services usually embodies a long sales cycle. Sales success comprises several factors: (1) periodic updates of lab operation, competitor analysis, a review of strategy, tactics, and compliance, (2) the rep's innate abilities, good organizational habits, and applying taught concepts, (3) persistence, and (4), if possible, management coaching during co-rides.

Lessons Learned

A key part involves building trust and credibility, and usually, this requires time and effort. However, I have seen some lab salespeople immediately start discussing their lab's services without collecting much (or any) background information from the customer. Assuming the client is satisfied with their current lab, this "jumping in" approach can be a turn-off and cause them to tune out, which leads to disappointment for the salesperson. It's essential to first establish credibility by asking questions about the client and the labs they use, listening carefully, and creating "moments of trust"—small actions and conversations over time that show genuine interest in the client's success.

When I first started selling laboratory services, a doctor once told me before I had barely sat down, "Look—don't give me the same old pitch about great turnaround time, high-quality test results, and excellent customer service. I expect those things, and I already get them from my lab. Tell me what makes your lab different." This blunt remark felt like a bucket of cold water in my face. Being new to the job, I didn't think my lab did anything truly unique—we offered the same basic services the doctor mentioned. I awkwardly described our comparable amenities. It didn't get me very far, but that short encounter changed how I approached my job moving forward.

The following strategies are just a few that salespeople should undertake to become more professional, better position their labs, and increase their effectiveness.

1. Develop a Reason for Every Call

While it may seem obvious, a sales representative must find a genuine reason why the *customer* would value spending time with them. This could relate to a unique test or profile, a new patient service center, a testing algorithm, a relevant medical abstract, or an announcement from USPSTF, FDA, or CMS. Whether dealing with a current client or a prospect, it is best to start the conversation with a relevant, educational handout. Afterward, the interaction offers a chance to ask a few questions about the lab situation. It develops into a natural conversational flow—a quid pro quo approach. I give you something, and in return, you share comments about your lab.

Putting aside practice ownership and political ties, clients consider several key factors when choosing a lab. One important element is the sales experience. When a field representative demonstrates ways to help the client work more efficiently, save time, reduce errors, or improve patient care, they take a big step toward creating *value.* After all, providing value is the main role of the rep.

2. Take Advantage of Comprehensive Relationships

If the marketing person builds a strong relationship with one individual within an account (current or prospective), they should work on expanding that rapport with other employees. Throughout my management career, I often heard comments like, “I have a *great* relationship with Dr. so-and-so’s office. I always see Susie, the office manager, and we get along great. We’ll never lose this account.”

My response: “That’s terrific. But let me ask: who ultimately makes the lab decision? Is it Susie? If, on the other hand, it’s the doctor, what do you think he would tell a friend about you and our lab? What would happen to the account relationship if Susie left her job?”

I’ve heard salespeople say they seldom communicate with the provider (“They’re always busy with patients”). When the rep inherits a territory, they might not know who ultimately decides on a lab. Knowing office politics and decision-making is essential when forming a robust strategy. A close relationship between the sales rep and one staff member can create a false sense of security. A competitor can establish a good rapport with the decision-maker and eventually win the business. There may be no immediate issues, but over time, a skilled rep could outsell the existing lab. Take it from someone who knows. As a *de novo* field rep many years ago, I inherited a region from another rep—and, within six months, I lost an account because of this outselling scenario. I hadn’t built any relationship with the decision-maker. I learned my lesson well and never forgot it.

3. Your Lab’s Basic Differences

I highlighted earlier how important it is to understand what sets your lab apart from competitors. Most people see labs as the same: specimens arrive, reports go out. That’s straightforward enough. Sales reps might tell prospects their lab offers next-day turnaround on routine tests and excellent customer service—but those are just basic expectations. Figuring out what makes your lab unique requires a deep understanding of the entire operation and comparing that knowledge to each competitor’s procedures. Your lab’s uniqueness can mean different things to different people. It's crucial to ask the right questions that lead *to* your lab’s strengths rather than just talking about basic services. People tend to trust their own conclusions more than what others tell them. About 2400 years ago, Greek philosopher Socrates understood this. Instead of lecturing, he asked simple questions, guiding people to their own conclusions. This method has remained a reliable sales technique ever since.

For example, a lab where I once worked had a board-certified hematopathologist on staff who, earlier in his career, was a practicing oncologist. This small detail proved very helpful during a sales call to an oncology office. When I initially asked the office manager her opinion about our pathologist's previous experience, she didn't think it was important. On a later visit, I spoke to the lead physician of the group and asked him, "Would you prefer to work with a hematopathologist who was once a practicing oncologist?" The doctor immediately agreed. I explained our hematopathologist's background and provided him a copy of his *curriculum vitae*. Within a month, I closed the deal.

There was another incident involving our lab's HPLC method for HgbA1c. My competitor used a different method that could falsely produce lower results for patients with a certain type of hemoglobinopathy. My lab's method detected the disease, which led to a note on the report. This difference helped support my case and ultimately secured a new account.

These points show that a field representative's role goes beyond just knowing the basics. Instead of rambling about the similarities of their lab, a rep should take a professional approach by using the Socratic questioning method that is aimed at highlighting their lab's differences.

Conclusion

The topics mentioned—having a valid reason, building broad relationships throughout the account, understanding your lab's unique qualities, and using the Socratic method—may seem obvious. But experience has shown not all lab sales reps are trained to use these proven strategies—concepts that can enhance their success in the field.

*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 website at www.clinlabsales.com for a complete listing of services.*