

Drug Sampling: An Old Strategy Faces New Challenges



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Sampling drug products has been a traditional marketing tactic. Like coupons in the retail sector, sampling is sometimes a necessary evil that is required in order to compete. However, in some circumstances (such as introduction of a new drug where sampling allows doctors to gain rapid-use experience or where delays in therapy would lead to a lost script), it impacts positively on the ability of the pharmaceutical industry to gain market share and to maximize revenue while increasing adoption of therapy. However, sampling practices need to widen beyond the traditional approaches to allow higher degrees of control and to prevent over sampling and cannibalization of sales. The following are factors that are influencing the evolution of sampling practices:

- Heightened control required because of increased price or complexity of drug products
- Increasing importance of retail pharmacy in drug selection decision-making
- Market saturation and reduced physician availability
- Increasing need internally to demonstrate profitability associated with traditional sampling (as opposed to other marketing approaches)

Traditional sampling practices (*i.e.*, where sales representatives physically carry samples into physician offices) are aimed at leaving the drug in the hands of physicians while the information is fresh in their minds. Physicians also have an opportunity to gain experience in the short term to

determine whether company claims are accurate. Sales representatives generally feel empowered by traditional sampling techniques as they improve access to physicians in addition to being powerful reminders of the messages they deliver. For these reasons, traditional sampling is commonplace largely for low-cost, mass-marketed products.

Shortcomings of traditional sampling include the possibility of over saturating physicians and the lack of information on utilization. Traditional sampling is also the technique that provides the lowest level of control for the manufacturer.

Other more sophisticated physician sampling models are available that provide more control. In the “direct-to-practitioner” sampling model, physicians request samples from representatives, providing them with the necessary authorizations. Sales representatives, in turn, place an order that is shipped directly to the practitioners or patients. This model originated to address needs for specialty products (such as reducing the risks of sampling controlled substances) that require some control systems to be in place for the sampling process.

More recently and increasingly, innovative sampling techniques are being directed at retail pharmacy due, in part, to the recognition of the important role pharmacy can play in affecting prescribing and patient therapy, as well as outcomes. Pharmacists are also clinicians whom patients trust and seek out to gain information regarding medication.

In sampling through retail pharmacy, manufacturers:

- use an existing community and “natural” channel,
- involve pharmacists; reinforce and optimize community pharmacists’ role in patient education,
- inform pharmacists about new products, changes to existing products, new modes of administration, associated devices, *etc.*,
- sensitize pharmacists about product attributes and complementary service networks that are available to support patients and
- deal with products that are controlled substances, bulky, require cold chain or are otherwise unsuitable for sampling directly to physicians.

Controlled sampling at the level of retail pharmacy can be done by offering patients (via physicians with a prescription or at the pharmacy upon presentation of a prescription) a card or certificate with a unique identifier. These are pre-programmable and offer registered patients the opportunity to obtain a one-time sample product or device at the retail pharmacy of their choice.

Other card systems, also assigned on the basis of a unique identifier, allow more sophisticated programming and multiple use opportunities. These cards can be customized to any individual patient’s needs to offer benefits and services for which a particular patient qualifies. This system allows sampling only once or at several points in time (same card) and can also couple sampling with additional integrated services, such as reimbursement assistance or patient support, while allowing fully automated features at the point-of-sale at pharmacy through habitual adjudication channels.

Single-use or multiple-use cards and redeemable certificates are patient-specific. The cards offer many advanced levels of controls, as well as the potential for automation and reporting of administrative processes associated with these channels. These practices also eliminate the need to address the right amount of sampling as is required in traditional channels.

Even greater levels of control can be exerted by offering cards and certificates by order

only, provided there are convenient channels through which these can be ordered. In the case of pharmacy, it is possible to couple ordering of cards through Internet-based habitual ordering channels when pharmacists place their orders. Providing cards strictly by order facilitates the identification of interested niche markets which can help to increase efficiencies in marketing efforts across the board for any given product. Sampling in this way can also be done for multiple products for any particular manufacturer (*i.e.*, for a product portfolio) and would result in the realization of cost-efficiencies as well as a branding opportunity.

Each level of added control is associated with specific service requirements, ranging from setting up an electronic-authorization and ordering system, to the printing and programming of cards, to transactional fees, to administrative systems for reconciliation, to the integration of other value-added services, *etc.* Carefully-designed sampling strategies that reallocate samples to the physicians that are more likely to prescribe and are receptive may yield a 14% profit increase over traditional sampling methods. These increases in benefits may be achieved without increasing the sample budget!

In summary, sampling does not need to be the traditional blunt strategy in today’s marketplace. **CPM**

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