

Pharmacy Purchasing Outlook

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How to Lose a Customer in 10 Ways

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In a recent film, the female protagonist set out to delineate the 10 ways women drive men away in a relationship. This morning, I was blown off by a couple of vendor reps who told me they were going to set up a first meeting, without an appointment, but then got caught up with another person and was completely forgotten. Thinking back to the film, it then occurred to me that there is probably a 10-step program for any relational self-destruction, be it intimate, personal or professional. There are things that vendor reps do, either unknowingly or thoughtlessly, to sabotage their professional reputation or generally make himself or herself an unwanted intrusion. So with that in mind, I came up with the 10 ways a drug vendor representative can self-destruct a professional relationship with their buyer clients.

1. **'Pop in' for just a few minutes**

This is the Cardinal Sin of all violations. Their physician clients won't stand for it. Their Pharmacy Director clients certainly don't tolerate it either. Just because most Buyers do not have an 'R' next to our 'Ph' does not make us any lower on the food chain, or any less due the courtesy and respect of our position. Buyers have responsibilities, schedules and priorities we have to maintain in order to keep ourselves gainfully employed. Having unscheduled interruptions not only inconveniences us, but also puts you, the vendor rep in a negative light, canceling out any good he or she might have wanted to accomplish with that visit.

2. **Make an appointment, but not show**

This violation is almost as damaging to the representative's reputation as the first. With scheduling appointments, most Buyers block out a certain portion of their time to accommodate that appointment. That means duties regularly scheduled for that time get shunted or put off. When the appointment is not met, our schedules have been upset, our time has been wasted waiting for the rep that did not show; and time is a resource most buyers do not have in abundance.

3. **Be late for an appointment**

A variation on #2, if the rep does not make a courtesy call to let the buyer know of a problem that will keep him from being on time, the buyer either does busy work while waiting for the vendor rep to show up or resumes their regular responsibilities, only to be interrupted when the rep finally shows. This is as disorienting as not showing up, if not worse. A simple 30-second phone call can usually smooth over the most ruffled feathers.

4. **Visit infrequently and/or erratically**

A good Pharmacy Director friend of mine once told me that the measure of a good representative is not the first time he shows up, but the next. A rep that visits every six months or less does not appear to be a rep a buyer could trust to do business. Unless the rep has made it clear to the buyer that he can only visit twice a year because of his territory, it is frustrating and confusing for the buyer who has to juggle his roster of reps that visit. This also holds true for a rep that'll be there constantly at the start of a new product, and then once the product is in the hospital, never show up again until there is a lapse in sales. This is the *'Love 'em and Leave 'em'* scenario in the truest sense.

5. **Show up for sales calls only**

Another irritant for buyers is the vendor rep that only shows up when there is something new to sell or when sales begin slacking off. This person doesn't update the buyer on product shortages and/or availability, help with returns or faulty products, doesn't even take the time to phone to see how you're doing and if there are any problems, and basically performs none of the service functions that is expected of a vendor representative. This gives the impression to the Buyer that the vendor representative is solely out for his interests alone, and not the interests of the Buyer or his department.

6. **Discuss Quotas**

Another variation of the sales-call-only rep is the one who shows up at the end of the quarter asking a 'favor' that you purchase heavy on their product so that they can meet their quota for the quarter. If the rep has been straight with you all along, and provided the service you needed when you needed it AND, most important, you can genuinely move the product, there should be no harm in your moral code to help a person who has helped you. BUT, if that rep has violated any of the above guidelines, that would be a reason for pause

7. **Telling the Buyer what he has to do**

This is the kind of vendor rep who thinks his position is so strong that the he feels the usual pleasantries can be summarily dispensed. This type of strong-arm attitude is an automatic turn-off, as the Buyer gets enough pressure from his own administration without putting up with outside 'supervision'. Although this is the one of the most transparent violations to the Buyer, the vendor rep usually doesn't know how irritating that type of demeanor can be, so usually the vendor rep is unaware of his actions and what negative emotions he may be invoking.

8. **Discuss non-pertinent issues**

We as buyers are concerned with the “who-what-when-where-and-how” of a product. Our deciding factors on what to buy for our department usually do not include having an intimate knowledge of the pharmacology of the product. This is again a waste of the Buyers’ time. Of course we need to know enough to have informed knowledge of the product: what the product is similar to, what the product could replace on the Formulary; but unless the Buyer is making a presentation to their Hospital’s Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee or Formulary Committee, detailed clinical information should be relegated to the Pharmacy’s Clinical Coordinator.

9. **Complain**

Buyers get complaints all day long. We get complaints from the clinical staff. We get complaints from the distributive staff; we get complaints from the administrative staff. We sometimes even get complaints from the patients! The list could go on ad infinitum. The last thing we need in our day is a rep that brings the gloom and doom of their existence to your work site. Again, reps that have a good reputation with you can get away with a moderate amount of woe, but watch yourself as you avoid certain reps that tend to bring your mood down with their troubles, be it professional or personal.

10. **Assume donuts can absolve your sins**

After showing up late for an appointment, boring the buyer to tears with the pharmacokinetics of the latest beta blocker, then complaining about his boss, presenting your 30-plus staff a box of donut holes will in no way smooth over all the rough spots in the preceding scenario. As a service-oriented professional, it should be your responsibility to provide what your customer needs. And most of the time, it ain’t donuts.

For phone reps, there is one additional guideline: When dealing with your clients, twice a month contact is great, once a week can be helpful at times. Any more frequent than that, you will be considered having the manners of a telemarketer and will probably be treated as brusquely. With drug shortages being as chronic as they are, being updated on a routine basis is helpful for most buyers to maintain stock levels and to keep abreast on availability issues, be it through a personal phone call, email or faxed bulletin. But, unless there is a specific need for a follow-up call, or calls, the multiple interruptions of the phone vendor are treated as such - an interruption. It is a good practice to set up with your clients a best time to call and more important, ask about blackout times, times when it is the most inconvenient to call. Establishing these guidelines with your clients can make for better dialogue between vendor and client. And if there is a need for a product, the least irritating phone vendor will probably get the business.

As with any set of policies, with the possible exception of the Ten Commandments, this set of guidelines are merely just that - guidelines, subject to both personal interpretation and enforcement. A buyer may forgive a transgression or two if the vendor rep has proven to be exemplary as his or her usual standard of practice. In fact, this set of 'don'ts' is aimed directly at the minority of vendor reps who continually annoy a buyer by doing the preceding. To new rep, this could be a 'bible' of sorts, a list of do's and don'ts to follow if you wish to be successful in making productive contacts with your clients. To the rep who has been out there for a bit, and has forgotten the basics of handling clients, or to hone your 'people skills', this could serve as a friendly reminder. In addition, most hospitals have written policies for vendor reps. A good first impression would be asking your Buyer if there is such a document, and if there is a copy you could have to review.

To the vast number of vendor representatives, these are simple, common sense everyday guidelines that they follow matter-of-factly; the guidelines in this article are the ones they have lived by since starting in retail. Some have added their own code of ethics and behavior to this list. These are the reps that consistently get their foot in the door. More important, these are the reps that the door is always open, even when they are presenting bad news regarding their product. As the *Pharmacy Purchasing Outlook's* 2003 Outstanding Vendor Representative of the Year award rolls around again, the readership that are vendor representatives should go over these 'suggestions' and see which ones they adhere to as a way of doing business.

And which ones they are guilty of breaking.