

# Meet 'rep of the future'

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**Pharma sales reps must become virtually savvy and harness the power of artificial intelligence as COVID-19 forces a major reinvention of the role, the Reuters Pharma 2020 conference has been told.**

The days of "running down corridors finding physicians" are gone forever, according to Novartis Oncology brand manager, Paul White - to be replaced with highly sophisticated, data-driven bespoke interactions.

He predicted artificial intelligence will drive how reps work - telling them what information to deliver, how to deliver it, right down to what to say, depending on the individual personality of the physician - their needs, their attitudes and their behaviours.

"That's the dream of AI to get to that point where someone in a customer facing role can wake up in the morning and be told, this is what you said last time, this is what you should say this time and this is the type of material that is recommended you use," White said.

"This is something that's very exciting because ultimately it means we've got a physician who is part of a long story, they're part of a narrative that makes sense around what they need in their environment based particularly on their attitude or their behaviour.

"It's not just dumping and running with regards to messaging, it's actually getting them involved in that narrative."

White advised sales reps to turbo-charge their skills urgently.

"I truly believe that the customer facing role of the future is not something we're talking about in the next five years in our strategic plannings - they're now, they're absolutely now," White said.

"They need to be virtually savvy. They need to understand the multiple channels that we have available to us and how can they ensure their particular physician is actually receiving the most appropriate information to fulfill their true needs.

"What content is relevant to that physician, how do they like to receive the content, what words and what ways are going to enhance that interaction - and importantly what makes them want to come back for more?"

"How do they like to engage? Do they open-up emails on a Monday morning at 9am or do they open them on a Thursday afternoon? This is all information that feeds into an AI tool."

## Seismic shift

It's a seismic shift for pharma reps who have traditionally spent much time in the field building personal relationships through face to face contact.

"There's been a shift in thinking. Typically, we'd be opportunistic in the ways we interacted with GPs or any of our secondary care physicians when we're in their environment - finding them in the corridor, having a coffee with them - that has significantly changed. I truly believe we're never going to go back to what we knew last year," he said.

Fears that the Covid-forced changes will make sales reps obsolete are unfounded, according to White, however he predicts the role will change enormously, becoming more like a "project manager" with data and artificial intelligence driving interactions.



"This information is only relevant if the rep at the beginning inputs the appropriate data," he said.

"Garbage in, garbage out, that is truly the case in this new era, so this is why the customer-facing role is pivotal in this new world, this new relationship. The data that goes in will help us ultimately enhance the relationships with our physicians.

"Of course with AI, I think the big stress in the customer facing role in this environment is where do I sit, how credible am I in this interaction with my customer and how stable am I in my role? Am I relevant anymore?

"I am here to tell you they are absolutely relevant if not more relevant than before. To get that situation where a customer facing role is truly pivotal in the relationship between the organisation and the customer, what we need to do is look at enhancing their skills.

"And the big thing is to be a storyteller."

**Christine Spiteri**

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