

# Communications that increase sales – the Pfizer story

*Ahead of the publication of a new study trial for one of its marketed medicines, Pfizer first looked to understand to what obstacles existed to greater sales of the medicine.*

*Its approach to finding out was innovative and highly engaging - and what they found radically changed their approach to communicating with its salesforce.*

In an industry where bringing a new product to market can cost up to \$1 billion and the product has a limited time before patents expire and generic competition starts, it is vital for Pfizer to ensure that all appropriate opportunities are taken. Like many pharmaceutical companies, Pfizer relies on a highly skilled salesforce to work with physicians to communicate medical information.

In late 2009, Pfizer executives at the company's Primary Care regional office in the UK were focusing on a mature Pfizer medicine. The wider class of drugs to which it belonged had had some significant problems some years earlier, although the Pfizer medicine itself had not. Given this, there was a determination to improve the revenues on the product. A crucial piece of feedback from an influential customer had indicated that customer willingness to buy was highly dependent on the sales representative's confidence in the product. The focus was therefore on how to better support and engage the pan-European sales force.

In June 2010, we held a product summit in Berlin for the 900-strong sales force. Its content and agenda were radically different from standard events of this type, the sessions specifically addressing issues that we knew would resonate and post-event feedback

indicated that we had achieved our objectives. How we designed that event is a story in its own right.

### The request to communications

I was approached by the brand director with a request to put together a communications plan to improve the sales force's motivation and results. He and I had not worked together before, so his approach was encouraging - he did not assume he had all the answers.

One of the difficulties that was immediately evident was that it was not clear what the content and messages were - beyond the standard approach of new scientific data briefings, new sales materials, etc. To further complicate matters, we were still settling down following a significant reorganisation - so some country-based brand leaders had only been in place a matter of months and would be unable to give us solid feedback on sales issues in their territory.

We decided that our first step in preparing the communication plan would be to gain a clear understanding of the sales force, their strengths and weaknesses, their experiences and perceptions of the sales environment they worked in. Second-guessing the issues was likely to be, at best, counter-productive.

While standard approaches would include focus groups, we were concerned that focus groups tend to become a battleground for opinions - and only the most dominant opinions survive. As the medicine was launched a few years ago and sales forces had ridden a roller-coaster of success and emotions, we believed focus groups would be only partially

effective. While opinions are useful, we recognised the human tendency to filter out examples that contradict strongly-held opinions - something we did not want to happen. We wanted people's day-to-day experience and we wanted lots of different perspectives on that experience - from there we would be able to get a better picture of the overall situation.

Another approach, questionnaires and surveys, was unappealing too. Direct questions would not have given us the underlying belief patterns that we needed to understand the complex journey. We wanted the real life context of the sales force.

Earlier in 2009, however, we had been talking about using narrative approaches to various projects, going so far as to hold conversations with Tony Quinlan of Narrate. One approach we'd discussed was using "anecdote circles", a technique to draw out lots of stories from groups in ways that didn't allow single voices or viewpoints to dominate the group.

Using anecdote circles seemed like a practical way of gaining a clear understanding of the salesforce's experience. One of the difficulties would be gathering stories in different languages - given that people generally share examples in their mother tongue - and analysing them in English.

Why stories and how do we analyse

Conversation with Narrate raised an interesting potential way round the language issue - one that brought significant other benefits with it. The use of specialist software,

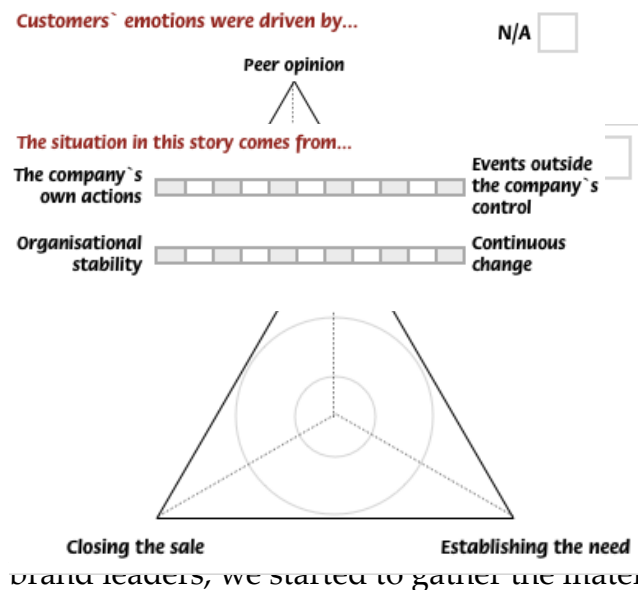
SenseMaker™ designed by Singapore-based Cognitive Edge, would allow us to collect the stories in local languages, but give us powerful analysis capacity in English.

Further conversations with the brand team ensued - their focus was pragmatic: they needed to be confident of real business results. A project that delivered them useful results was the only thing that mattered – and would translate into greater trust in the communications team for further projects.

The route we took then revolved around a simple process, but with a single twist to it. We would collect stories and narratives from the core audience, but use “signifiers” to allow them to show us what those stories meant. (For more on signifiers, please see sidebar [included at end of the article]) This was crucial - we needed to make sure that experts elsewhere in the company didn’t re-interpret the stories. A set of signifiers would be built for the project and then these would be translated into the different languages. This would allow us to analyse the stories without having to translate them all first - keeping translation costs down.

We decided that, to ensure a decent cross-section of opinion and experience, we would gather material from six countries – our key target markets - and 11 cities. And would do so in a short timeframe - just two weeks to gather all the material and a further two weeks to analyse and report back with the results.

Working with colleagues from across Europe in marketing, sales, communications and product training, we started with a workshop to explore what suspicions and assumptions people had about what might be influencing sales reps. That, coupled with other historical material, allowed us to develop the “signifier set” for the work. Topics addressed included the sales process, customer trust, success factors and more:



, “Customers emotions were driven by”,  
uation in this story...”]

11 workshops arranged through the local

brand leaders, we started to gather the materials.

## Collecting the stories

Anecdote circles are social events - they are designed to be as natural as possible, a coming together of people who then naturally share experience. Narrate’s approach was to create an informal environment, with a formal collection system within it. With the help of local training support and country brand leaders, the Narrate facilitators started an intensive two-week collection process.

What we had not anticipated was that, within 48 hours of the first session taking place, the country brand leaders were getting feedback on the events. And all of it very positive - our diagnostic event was a positive engagement intervention in its own right.

Country brand leaders too found the experience enlightening - many were new to the post and learned about pragmatic local issues that otherwise would have taken months of field research and relationship-building.

The process itself was straightforward. Whoever wanted to share an experience did so, then everyone in the group filled in a signifier sheet to illustrate how they saw that experience. And then the next person who wanted to speak would do so. The whole session was captured on voice recorders, with everyone's understanding and permission that these stories would be shared.

Different countries handled the arrangements in different ways – southern Europe needed cigarette breaks, others wanted to serve food during the process. Adapting the process to fit these differences worked wonders – the important element was a social environment, from which material would naturally emerge. Some of the groups also asked how many stories the teams in other countries had told - and set their sights on delivering more!

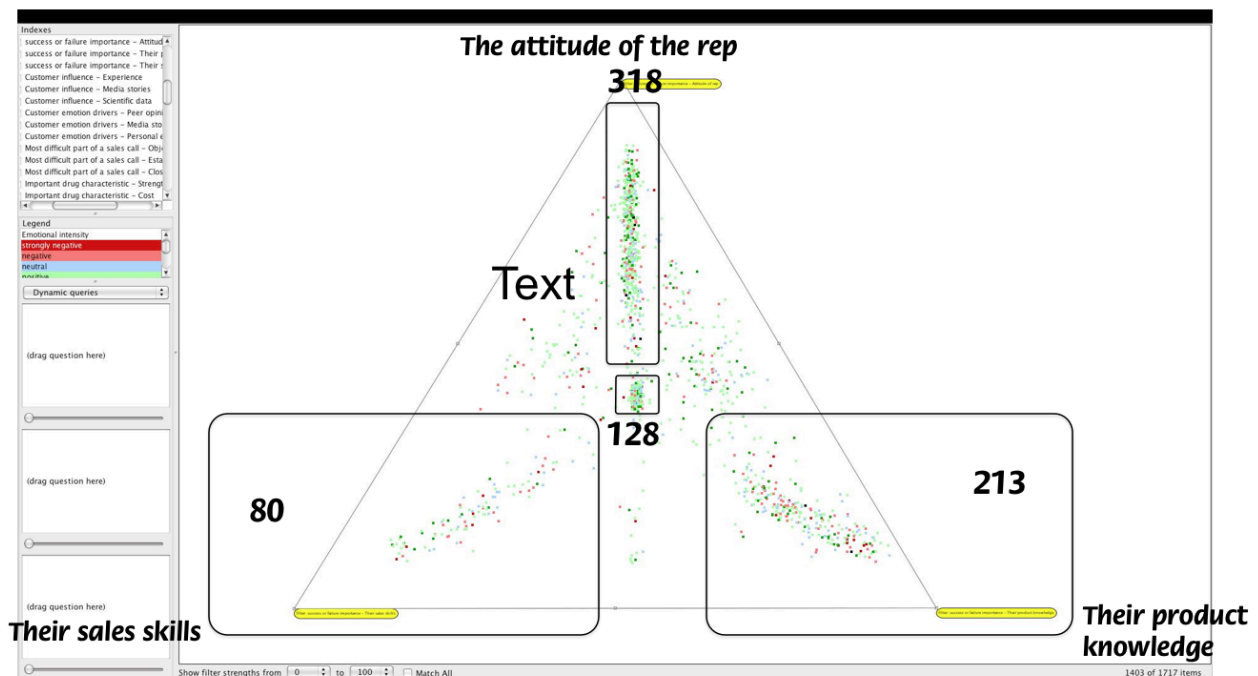
With this competitive spirit, at the end of the two weeks, we had seen 94 sales representatives across 11 cities and collected almost 200 stories. More importantly, we had 1700 different perspectives on those stories - giving us a clear picture of how the sales force viewed the product and the experience of selling it.

## Analysing the material

Having collected the material, we started to analyse it. The choice to use signifiers in order to be more open and objective rather than simply testing our initial suspicions proved well founded.

The first step - looking at the overall patterns that emerged - started to show useful conclusions immediately. For example:

### **What was most important in the success or failure?**



[Figure: "Results – what was most important"]

From this, we could see that while we had thought that product knowledge was the most important element, it was secondary to the sales rep's attitude. Indicating that, while we needed to ensure that their product knowledge was good, we would derive greater benefit (and sales revenue) from focusing on their attitude.

Sidebar: Understanding the results [included at end of article]

As we looked at the initial patterns and correlations between issues, we came up with more theories and questions - ones that were quickly checked by the Narrate team using SenseMaker™. In a short space of time we had identified areas for improvement that crossed boundaries with other departments. There were implications for training and development, business leaders, internal communications and brand marketing teams.

Yet the narratives behind the results made a huge difference – instead of large, intensive programmes, the implications were easily implementable. Where new content was needed, examples were already available in the stories – stories of failure to share and learn from, successful examples for the communications team to disseminate.

One issue that became clear was that sales representatives saw the most difficult part of the sales process was handling customer objections. This was understandable given the complex history and high market visibility of the product and its class of medicines. We were able to identify 18 stories strongly indexed to objection handling and seen by reps as being either positive or strongly positive. These stories were then translated and used in the briefings around the new clinical study data for the sales reps.

## Results

The outcome of the overall process was extremely illuminating and useful. Factors that emerged included:



- Sales representatives' attitudes were all important.
- Examples of personal experience were strong influencing factors for GP (General Practitioner) doctors. From our detached perspective, we had expected media stories and scientific data to be more important, but the data was clear.
- Investment in objection handling would pay strong dividends. Given the size of the salesforce, any investment would be significant, so we needed to be sure there would be a return.
- Sales representatives who had started before the problem with the overall class of drugs were less defensive than those who had joined later. This was the opposite of what we had expected. We had anticipated that those who were around at the time would be more negative, but in fact they remembered what life had been like before and that the problem was with the **class** of drugs, not our product. People who had joined later had been swamped by the negativity of the time. We would have struggled to find this out by another route.
- Results on targeting confirmed what we suspected - that it played little part in most reps' experience.

### Taking action on the results

This information fed directly into our Berlin event to introduce the study data - we gathered over 900 sales representatives from across Europe, with an agenda driven by the results from the survey. We ran sessions on targeting, objection handling and attitude.

We invited customers - both doctors and patients - to talk about their experiences of

prescribing and taking the drug - a major departure from our usual approach of presenting scientific data. (Of course, the data was presented but not as the primary focus of the summit.)

Content for the event came from the stories themselves, making it easier for the communications team. Each country now also has available a set of all the stories in that area - a real asset as they look to improve results in their geography.

The summit also gave sales representatives a much greater sense of control over their own destiny – better results were available through their own actions, not waiting for the organisation to cure their problems. They now feel that there is a lot to be gained for doing a few notable things - all easily within their grasp.

By the end of the project, there was a greater engagement with the audience just by dint of the process. Country-based brand leaders were better informed – and induction of future brand leaders will be made easier and more relevant to the local context. The Regional marketing team were able to re-direct their efforts to meet evolving market challenges.

The Narrate approach of gathering stories paid dividends - sitting in on some of the sessions myself, I could see how cathartic the process was. It was also obvious that, by signifying their stories, the sales force was giving us more information than they realised - at no extra effort or cost. The subsequent analysis gave us insights no other method would have.

And, crucially, my pragmatic brand director had the results that he wanted which has helped to build trust and value for my advice. He is already talking about repeating the process in 2011 to measure how much salesforce beliefs have shifted. And with my communications colleagues, we are talking about how we might use the anecdote circles methodology, including SenseMaker™ to measure communications effectiveness.

# Signifier sidebar

## The signifier framework

As stories are collected, participants “signify” their stories to illuminate and add meaning to them - but using a method that allows for analysis through specialist software.

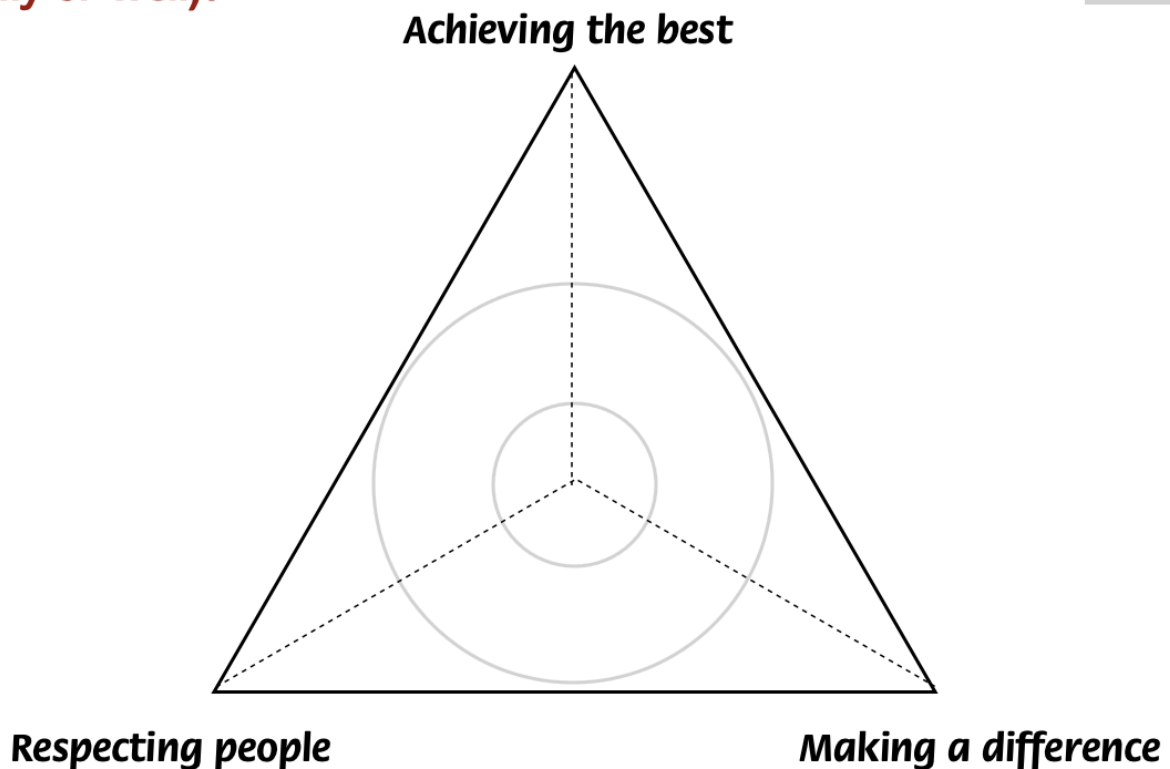
The signifiers for a project can be developed through:

- Workshops to explore the main issues arising
- Literature review (including values, newsletters, etc)

**For example: Respondents simply make a mark where they think their story sits on the signifiers – examples include triangles (below) and polarities (bottom):**

**What values does the story address most (whether badly or well)?**

N/A

☐

[Figure: "Large sample triad..."]

**On hearing this story, how would customers feel:.**

**Worried** ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ **Excited**

[Figure: "On hearing this story..."]

Sidebar: Understanding the results

*In the triangles, each dot represents one set of indexes from a rep – i.e. their response to a particular story.*

*The overall pattern, therefore, gives the relative strengths of perceptions on each issue.*

*Boxes have been drawn around major clusters, with the number of data in each shown*

Weight goes *weak*.....*strong* across the page

