Bringing Clarity to Chaos

How Decision Support Programs Can Dramatically Improve Your Sales Results
Your sales force is your greatest asset. But in today’s market, they face more obstacles than ever before. While time with HCPs dwindles, the pharmaceutical industry continues to produce information at an impossible pace. You’ve invested heavily in data, analytics and field sales tools to help reps navigate this increasingly complex market, but many do not make the most effective use of these assets. What’s holding them back from peak performance?

All reps have access to information. The most effective reps know what to do with it and when, delivering the right information to the right person at the right time. With the help of a Decision Support program, you can empower every rep to do the same. By translating the chaotic stream of industry data and sales strategy into straightforward insights and actionable suggestions, Decision Support gives every team member the tactical clarity to be a top performer.

In this ebook, you’ll learn how Decision Support technology works, why it works and how you can implement it across your sales organization. We’ll explore best practices in Decision Support design, discuss how companies can tailor their early initiatives to overcome specific challenges and share advice for driving adoption. Use the Table of Contents to find the section most relevant to your situation, or read on for a complete picture of how Decision Support can work for you.

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FINAL THOUGHTS
Like many in the technology business, we thought the hard part of Decision Support design would be getting the math right. In our first implementation, our algorithms were smart and thorough. We considered practical trade-offs like how far a rep would need to travel to see a customer, what the rep’s schedule looked like (and when their availability matched times their customers would likely be available), and how long it had been since the last interaction.

Room for Improvement

The early results were positive, but the feedback from reps indicated that these initial wins were not sustainable. We had provided intelligence, but not in a way that reps wanted to engage with. We realized reps will only use a tool that understands their environment and workflow.

A Decision Support tool should empower independent decision-making, not override it.

With this new priority in mind, we put together a panel of sales reps to help us redesign our interaction model to be something that was enjoyable, valuable and empowering. With their immensely helpful input, FIVE KEY TENETS OF DECISION SUPPORT DESIGN emerged:

01. **LESS IS MORE**

02. **MAKE IT REAL**

03. **KEEP IT CURRENT**

04. **OWNERSHIP = ENGAGEMENT**

05. **BE EASY**

Let’s take a closer look.
LESS IS MORE

Filter out the noise for high-value information.

What do we mean by Less is More? The key value of a suggestion is the ability to pre-synthesize only what is most relevant to a decision at hand and ignore the rest.

Let’s imagine a large percentage of a physician’s patients were affected by a recent formulary win. You want to bring that information to the surface and avoid cluttering the rep’s mind space with other less important content.

It sounds simple, but it can be incredibly difficult to say no to information. It’s easy to convince yourself that while a piece of information may not be vital, it still might be helpful enough to merit inclusion. Unfortunately, the more data you allow through the filter to become rep suggestions or insights, the less effective those suggestions or insights will be, and the less value you will ultimately deliver.

When value declines, so does usage. Be strict in your synthesis—your sales reps will thank you for it.

Smart Suggestions use intelligent technology to instantly translate complex strategies into practical field actions that guide reps to peak performance.

Harnessing previous user feedback and real-time metrics, Insights highlight the most essential information in a given scenario, helping reps to make better independent decisions.
At Aktana, we believe that Smart Suggestions are those decisions the best reps would naturally make themselves if they had all the information available with unlimited time to analyze it and develop a response.

What does this mean?

To begin with, Smart Suggestions would demonstrate knowledge of a rep’s real-life context — his/her specific activities, challenges, market environment, etc. For example, Smart Suggestions would consider who a rep contacted yesterday or planned to visit tomorrow so they don’t recommend a similar interaction today. Similarly, they would consider geography (likely route and travel time), so that a suggestion to visit an HCP is both intelligent and practical.

Smart Suggestions would also consider the full scope of a rep’s decisions, helping to guide trade-offs between competing priorities (products, actions, channels and messages). Suggestions that only consider one product or action type risk seeming out of sync with what the rep knows to be most important.

The crux of “making it real” is that suggestions must “feel right” to reps.

That may seem obvious, but it’s absolutely critical. A Decision Support program attempts to play a very human role, like a trusted advisor. The moment suggestions and insights “feel” off-target or nonsensical, the rep’s trust in the Support program will erode.

There are too many technical tools purporting to be helpful. If yours isn’t, it quickly goes on the discard pile. But if it delivers, then it just might stay at the rep’s fingertips throughout their day, helping them make consistently better decisions.

Use real-life patterns to make smarter suggestions.
Help reps stay ahead of the game.

If there’s one area where reps most appreciate the assistance, it’s staying on top of information. The industry is producing information at levels never before seen. It’s too much for any one person to monitor regularly. Nevertheless, because that information is readily accessible, every HCP expects their rep to be up to speed.

Unfortunately, rote synthesis and dashboards often miss the mark. The culling of information must be intelligent to fit a rep’s specific situation, needs and workflow. If a rep is engaged in weekly planning, he or she will want information about territory-level priorities—especially which HCPs have increased in importance due to new prescribing behaviors, a formulary win or a multi-channel response. And if a rep is pre-call planning for an upcoming visit, he or she will most value insights that help determine a topic area relevant to that HCP [e.g. content related to a paper that the HCP downloaded recently or knowledge that a competitor product has just started to gain share with the HCP].

Both “Make it Real” and “Keep it Current” strive for credibility with the rep. Why? Because credibility leads to usage and usage creates more efficient, effective reps.
Respect your users and watch adoption grow.

Reps are very knowledgeable and proud of their work. They spend countless hours each year learning the nuances of their territory and their customers. If reps are going to engage with a Decision Support tool, the tool needs to be exactly that—supportive. It needs to respect the reps’ hard-earned, on-the-ground knowledge of their customers. Reps want ownership of the decisions they make, so they won’t engage with a tool that portends to make decisions for them. But when a tool truly delivers on the promise of supporting reps’ independent knowledge and decision-making ability with pertinent, useful information, reps engage.

Another important way to create engagement is to allow reps to make suggestions of their own. Continual, real-time feedback from the field will hone the quality of suggestions and insights, and all reps will benefit from those improvements over time.

This two-way dialogue is essential to the long-term effectiveness of any Decision Support program.

How feedback is collected is also important. Reps are accustomed to tools that require extra work but give little back in return. Recording activity in the CRM can be a classic example. As a result, reps are understandably wary of any additional steps required of them. Therefore, feedback on suggestions should be collected while reps take actions that are of immediate benefit—like dismissing superfluous suggestions or requesting future reminders of others. Once reps see the benefits of feedback, incentives are aligned for them to engage further with both suggestions as well as their CRM in general.
Adapt to user behavior for maximum engagement.

On the surface, this is the most obvious tenet: of course “ease of use” is critical in system design. But what we mean here is not only ease of use, but also ease of access. Reps are often inundated with technology tools. Each comes with the promise of helping them in their work—and a learning curve.

We’ve made it a priority to leverage existing tools and workflows, adapting to the rep instead of making them adapt to us. It’s a simple premise, but one that requires alignment and integration with key CRM partners, especially if suggestions and insights are to be presented according to our five key design tenets.
Putting Decision Support to Work

Model initiatives after common use cases for better results.

Understanding common use cases helps companies looking to implement Decision Support tailor their initiatives towards the specific challenges or outcomes most relevant to their business. The use cases we have seen most frequently fall into the following four categories:

1. Execution
2. Impact
3. Agility
4. Coordination

Execution

Empower every rep to be a top performer.

Suggestions can be used to help reps better execute on their existing plans (call plans, multi-channel plans, etc.), especially where reps have multiple products, high numbers of target HCPs, and/or new channels to use. Complexity is the enemy of reliable execution. A good Decision Support program will help give reps clarity on the moment-to-moment decisions they must make in their increasingly complex schedule.

In our experience, the best reps get a 5% – 10% boost in target achievement by using a Decision Support tool [often by saving research and decision time]. But the greatest impact is seen with the reps who struggle the most. Lower performers receive upwards of a 20% - 30% boost in target achievement, as suggestions mimic what the very best sales rep would do, thereby helping these reps think and act more like the top performers.
Impact

Make every interaction count with strategic, tailored messaging.

Physicians are busier than ever and more judicious in how they spend their time. Consequently, most pharmaceutical companies want to help reps make better use of information in order to have more relevant and valued discussions with their customers. This can dramatically improve the impact of their critical one-on-one time with the HCP, enabling the rep to deliver more relevant, personalized messaging.

For example, a Decision Support program could notify a rep during pre-call planning that the HCP just engaged with ‘efficacy’ content online. As a result, the program might suggest that a specific presentation be used, related to that topic, that the HCP likely hadn’t seen. The rep is now in tune with the HCP’s interests and behavior and is acting upon those in a beneficial manner.

A Decision Support program can also do the hard work of pre-synthesizing what insights are meaningful for each HCP. This can have a huge impact on how effectively reps pre-call plan for discussions with their customers. After all, not all reps know where to find relevant data, how to access it, and how to synthesize and interpret it ... let alone find the time to do so on an almost daily basis.

Agility

Stay sharp in a dynamic marketplace.

“The only constant in life is change.”

It’s unlikely that the Greek philosopher Heraclitus had the pharma industry in mind in 500 B.C. when he coined this famous phrase, but he may as well have. As soon as a new strategy is rolled out in pharma, inevitably, key market conditions change and the strategy is out of date. However, companies often don’t update details of the strategy until much later due to the operational complexity of adjustment and concern over disrupting the field force. As a result, companies are not nearly as responsive to market conditions as they would like to be.

When territories are realigned, targets change, new products launch or any other material change occurs, we have seen how a Decision Support program can help guide reps through the resultant periods of uncertainty and confusion, thereby mitigating the usual negative impact of major change on sales team performance. By synthesizing the most up-to-date information, suggestions and insights can be used to coach reps toward best actions during these times of change and help them quickly return to peak performance.
This guiding hand can also help with more incremental changes in market conditions as suggestions and insights update in real-time based on external events. For example, if a non-writing HCP suddenly starts prescribing, the rep might receive a suggestion to make a visit to understand what’s motivated the change, even if the HCP is not scheduled to be visited for another month. This has the dually positive effect of improving the rep’s ultimate performance and conveying a greater sense of customer service and responsiveness to the physician.

**Coordination**

Deliver consistently across all channels (because timing is everything).

In yesterday’s pharma market, a team at headquarters created a customer engagement strategy and relied upon the field force to execute it. But in today’s more complex market, the field force is either 1) only one of many channels of communication, both personal and non-personal, or 2) the coordinator of interactions across a wide array of personal and non-personal channels.

Physicians have changed as well. They no longer wait to be contacted: instead, they seek out information across channels whenever they feel like it. If, or more likely when, physicians experience uncoordinated communications across their various interactions, overall impact can suffer.

Fortunately, a Decision Support program can be configured to recommend specific timing and messages for reps to use, across whatever channels they control, based on any activity occurring via other channels (including physician self-service inquiries). Suggestions can help guide reps to act in-line with brand strategy and remind them to take specific and coordinated action. And when a company has asked reps to quarterback non-personal channel communications, the Decision Support program can provide much needed guidance regarding how and when to use each channel with which message.

**How can you put Decision Support programs to work for your company?**

In reality, just about every company can find use cases across all four categories of Execution, Impact, Agility and Coordination. All four are important. The two most pressing questions for you to answer are: 1) which use case is most pressing for your organization, and 2) how do you start?

Only you can answer the first question, as brand- and company-specific priorities will drive your selection. To help you answer the second question, we will examine best practices for implementation.
Tips for a smoother roll-out and faster buy-in

Even the best-designed Decision Support program can fail to deliver results if it is not implemented well. In our experience, there are three key practices that your company should follow for the successful implementation of a Decision Support program.

1. Model as a Trusted Advisor

As previously emphasized, without rep adoption there can be no impact, so it’s critical to plan the roll-out of a Decision Support program very carefully.

Several key questions must be considered:

- How do you announce the program to field sales reps and their managers?
- How will they be trained on the tools?
- Most importantly, how will they perceive this latest technical assistant in their work?

We think of Decision Support like a golf caddy to a golfer: the caddy has great knowledge of the course and conditions but remains in an advisory role. Ultimately the rep, like the golfer, will still swing the club [and decide which club to use].

It is imperative that sales leadership recognize and buy into this positioning, and then help carry the message to their entire organization. We have seen Decision Support programs stall during roll-out due to a key misperception: “the tool is here to do my job better than me.”

A good Decision Support program is an invaluable advisor to the sales rep, but only that. It never directs, only counsels. It makes Smart Suggestions that the rep can choose to take or ignore at their discretion and provides insights for their consideration. Proper positioning of this
will influence the success of your roll-out immensely.

2. Think Big, But Start Small

There are many use cases for applying Decision Support technology. It’s natural to see opportunity in most of these use cases and, ultimately, you may want to apply the benefits of Decision Support across all sales and marketing activities at your company. But as with most new programs, **it’s best to start small. Lay the foundation with initial success and build from there.**

Pick an easily achievable goal (preferably one with high visibility across the organization) and lead with a quick win. Once others see the positive impact, it’s much easier to create internal buy-in and expand to other relevant use cases.

For the initial use case, however, be sure to cover the full decision scope [all products, all actions], so the suggestions and insights have the best chance of mirroring what feels right to the rep, considering all of the tradeoffs they need to consider. This will drive faster, greater adoption.

And it’s best to pick a team that that faces challenges typical to your business. Your goal is to eliminate any risk of cynicism where others could say, “that wouldn’t work in my situation.”

The greater the applicability of your pilot program, the faster you’ll build buy-in across the organization.

3. Plan to Learn

Your preparation and design have been impeccable. Your strategy has accounted for every known market variable. You’ve done all you can to plan for success. And yet, it won’t be perfect. It never is. **But if part of your preparation is a plan to learn and iterate, then your path to ultimate success will be much shorter.** Three things help the most:

1. Speed up your learning by using A/B testing to explore variants of a strategy and see what is most effective before rolling the strategy out too broadly.

2. Monitor reporting to see variances in suggestion adoption and effectiveness to determine what seems to be working and what isn’t.

3. Put a connected learning platform in place early on so you can correlate rep actions [whether or not they were suggested] with results. A connected learning platform will allow for continuous learning, avoiding the need to collect and normalize additional data sets. It also makes generating experiments and A/B tests easy. A connected platform ultimately allows you to direct actionable “suggestions” back to those setting the strategy about which configuration changes will lead to increased impact.
The pharma market is more complicated than it’s ever been when it comes to communicating effectively with HCPs. But the truly scary news is that it will only get more complicated from here. **Equipping your marketing and sales teams with an intelligent, customized Decision Support program will leverage the many investments you’ve already made** in data, analytics and sales execution tools, and help your teams add even more value in strategy design, optimization and execution.

We hope this overview of Decision Support design planning, common use cases and best practices for implementation will assist you as you venture down the Decision Support path.

If you have any questions or would like our input on your particular situation, please don’t hesitate to contact us. We’re always glad to talk about Decision Support and provide “suggestions” of our own based on the multitude of data points and experiences we have gathered working with customers over the last several years.