



GUIDE

36 POWERFUL QUESTIONS FOR *PHARMACEUTICAL SALES*

The Pandemic's Effects on Pharma Sales

As the COVID-19 pandemic brought on unexpected challenges in life sciences, it also shifted the conversation between sales reps and healthcare professionals (HCPs). Today, sales reps may find themselves engaging and interacting with HCPs in different ways.

Among the changes we're seeing in the current environment are:

- Meetings, when they can be secured, may be face-to-face or virtual.
- Alternative channels of communication may be preferred. For example, personalized email is preferred by more physicians today than pre-pandemic.¹
- More companies and sales reps are communicating around the needs and challenges of HCPs, their practices, and patients—not just providing product information.

In fact, according to research from Accenture, 82% of HCPs reported that pharma companies switched from communicating exclusively about product information to providing support around the HCP's most pressing needs.²

1. Ralph Breuer et al., "Omnichannel engagement in medtech: The time is now," McKinsey & Company Pharmaceuticals & Medical Products Practice, May 2021.

2. *Reinventing Relevance, New Models for Pharma Engagement with Healthcare Providers in a COVID-19 World*, Accenture, May 2020, https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-130/Accenture-HCP-Survey-v4.pdf.



Take a Hybrid Approach

Don't restrict yourself to asking great questions during in-person meetings. According to research from Accenture, 87% of HCPs want either all virtual or a mix of virtual and in-person meetings with sales reps even after the pandemic has ended.³

It's clear the pandemic has accelerated the multichannel trend for communicating with HCPs.

For example, before the pandemic, 79% of physicians preferred in-person meetings with sales reps, but that's dropped to 49%, according to McKinsey & Company.⁴

And while only 7% voiced a preference for video calls before 2020, 38% currently prefer to engage this way.⁵

There's also good news for communicating with email—when it's used appropriately that is (meaning, no spam). Increasingly, physicians prefer it: that stat has jumped from 54% before 2020 to 65% today.⁶

3. Accenture, *Reinventing Relevance, New Models for Pharma Engagement with Healthcare Providers in a COVID-19 World*.

4. Ralph Breuer et al., "Omnichannel engagement in medtech: The time is now."

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.



The Importance of Asking Impactful Questions

To provide support around HCP's needs, you need to ask powerful questions in your sales conversations to first uncover those needs and then to provide insight. And it's not just asking about what keeps them up at night. Questions must be used skillfully and appropriately. When they are, questions:

- Help you qualify the potential of the HCP by understanding their practice, patients, and treatments.
- Help you find out what's going on in the HCP's world.
- Help you connect with HCPs and understand the needs of their patients.
- Uncover challenges you didn't know about. When you understand the challenges facing HCPs, you can address them and position your therapy or product for success.
- Help you disrupt their thinking and change their perception of what's true and what's possible.
- Help you drive the sale forward and avoid pitfalls that can derail the sale along the way.

In other words, great questions—asked skillfully and appropriately—help you win sales.

In this guide, we share 36 powerful questions you can use in your conversations with HCPs.

The questions are broken down into groupings following our [RAIN SellingSM framework](#) for leading sales conversations: Rapport, Aspirations and Afflictions, Impact, and New Reality. We also include questions for insight selling you can use to get HCPs to think differently, and questions to help you drive the sales process forward.

Lastly, while most of the questions we suggest are open-ended to get the HCP talking, there are two other important categories of questions:

- 1. Closed-ended questions.** These questions are brief, but powerful in their ability to get the HCP talking.
- 2. Follow-up questions.** These questions are your power boosters. They help you more deeply understand the HCP's challenges and concerns, which allows you to tailor your approach.

Sometimes you'll just need to ask one question and the HCP will share what you need to know. Other times, you may need to make several lines of inquiry. But don't overdo it. The best sales conversations balance inquiry (asking questions) with advocacy (talking, educating, and giving advice).

Be respectful of the HCP's preferences for engaging and use the questions in this guide to inspire you to lead valuable conversations.

Develop Rapport

Before they'll open up to you about their needs and desires, HCPs have to be comfortable with you.

Comfort (and trust) begin with rapport.

Building rapport is sometimes dismissed as a ploy to make a superficial connection during the sales process. But genuine rapport sets the table for the rest of the conversation. Often, you have just minutes to make a connection.

Here are four questions to help build rapport:

1. **How is the patient we discussed during our last conversation?**

It's all about the follow-up. Patients are at the center of everything we do in life sciences and in the HCP's office.

2. **What are your patients' goals?**

Keeping patients at the center of the conversation will keep the HCP engaged and interested. It creates a common ground for building relationships and trust with the HCP.

3. **What external factors are influencing your prescribing or treatment plan decisions?**

This is a good question to open broad discussions. It can start a discussion about topics such as treatment costs, a health insurer's formularies, and market access. It's a single question that can set the stage for a wide-ranging conversation about what's on their mind.

4. **It was good to hear the short version of [insert topic] that you shared at the meeting, but since you kindly agreed to have me join you in your practice for a lunch in-service, I'd love to know what's the full version?**

People like talking about issues and topics they're passionate about. If you've already done the 20,000-foot-overview talk, asking for additional detail demonstrates genuine interest.

Rapport-building tip:

Whether you ask an HCP personal questions like, "How was your weekend?" or, "Tell me about your background," depends on your level of familiarity. Unless you already have an established relationship with the HCP and an awareness of their preferences, it's best to keep your questions related to their practice, patients, or the HCP world in general.

Discover Aspirations and Afflictions

Most sales advice suggests that you must first uncover the “problem”—afflictions—to help you educate the HCP about therapies that can help their patients manage their conditions.

But this advice may be too simplistic; too often, it drives reps to employ find-out-what’s-wrong-and fix-it thinking.

In addition to identifying challenges, create opportunities to focus on the positives. That includes asking about expectations, aspirations, and possibilities.

Here are 10 questions that help uncover both challenges and possibilities:

5. Patients always come first, and I’m sure you have a full patient schedule. What would you like to accomplish during our conversation today?

This is a great way to open a conversation. You may only have a few minutes to interact with HCPs—maybe more if you have a virtual meeting. That means you may have mere minutes to tap into their priorities. Listen carefully to what they say and use these insights to tailor your approach during the meeting.

6. Help me understand this: why is therapy or treatment plan X not the right fit for your patients?

HCPs entered their profession because they want to make a difference in the lives of patients. Asking this question encourages them to express frustration about a therapy they’re prescribing that isn’t delivering the intended results. It’s important to know what you’re up against, and their responses to this question give you that insight.

7. Emerging Trends in Global HCP Engagement: 2021 Veeva Pulse Report, Veeva, <https://go.veeva.com/l/28972/2021-04-02/94t48z>.



Virtual Meetings with HCPs

19 minutes.

That’s the length of the average virtual sales call with an HCP according to the *2021 Veeva Pulse Report*.⁷ It’s more time than you get for typical in-person meetings.

Also, virtual meetings with HCPs have increased 6X, per Veeva.

These are good reasons to be prepared with powerful questions in your conversations.

7. Many of the healthcare professionals we work with report problems with A, B, and C. How are these areas affecting you? What do you think about them?

This is another great way to establish credibility. It also asks HCPs to think about their challenges in a different way or consider previously unidentified challenges. The idea is to ask specific open-ended questions that show you understand the challenges HCPs navigate every day.

For example, they may not want to have to deal with extra paperwork or the hassle associated with getting the therapy covered by health insurance. Or perhaps they're concerned about the patient co-pay amount. You don't know if you don't ask.

8. What's holding your patients back from reaching their desired outcome? Or, what's holding you back from being able to effectively treat your patients?

Learning about obstacles early in the conversation is imperative. If the HCP believes an obstacle is insurmountable, it's up to you to show them why it's not and how to get past it.

9. (Assuming the HCP set the meeting) What concerns can I address for you today?

You may already know why they set the meeting, but it doesn't hurt to revisit the question to make sure you're on the same page. It's also possible there have been developments since the meeting was set, so asking this question at the start focuses on their concerns.

10. (Assuming you set the meeting) As I mentioned earlier, I'd like to share a few success stories that may help you make a decision regarding

therapy or treatment plan X for your patients. Before we get going, by the time we're done with this meeting, what else might you like to cover?

It's possible the HCP had something else in mind when they accepted the meeting with you. Plus, they're busy and have a great deal of responsibility. This is a good way to check in before you start talking to ensure the meeting is valuable to them.

11. What's your sense of what needs to happen to improve that/make progress here/change that?

Understanding the HCP's perspective on the situation and how they think it can be addressed will show you how receptive they'll be to your ideas and how to frame therapy or treatment plan X.

12. What kind of opportunities do you see for improvement in this area?

This is a great question to uncover aspirations and afflictions. By getting the HCP to speak about opportunities for improvement, they're likely to talk about their vision for what it could be like (aspirations) and problems or challenges they have in this area (afflictions).

13. What have you done in the past to address this issue/reach this goal?

Keep in mind that you don't want to suggest something the HCP has already tried and failed. You want to build on what they're doing or change it altogether, but you can't accomplish either goal if you don't ask this question.

Be specific about the reasons why working with you will lead to better clinical outcomes for patients. Asking this question also helps them see the impact of your work together.

Demonstrate Impact

Help the HCP understand the impact of your work together.

14. If you could prescribe therapy or treatment plan X, how could it improve your patient's life? Or, what do you see as some of the potential impacts of prescribing treatment A vs. treatment B?

When HCPs are fully invested in the end result you're offering, you'll get more buy-in from them—and that translates to their support for you within the practice or the hospital.

The HCP has a personal and professional investment in achieving positive clinical outcomes for their patients. Tap into that motivation.

15. What impact could that have on X?

As with all impact questions, here you're really just trying to get the HCP to think about choosing an alternative and articulate the possible outcome.

16. What's the consequence of not choosing therapy or treatment plan X?

This is a great question, especially when the HCP isn't sold on your therapy or product. It's a powerful question because it forces them to think about the consequences of doing the same thing they've always done. It's one they'll continue to think about after your conversation, and you could get a call within a few days for a follow-up meeting.

Keep in mind that you need to have a level of confidence in asking this question. You also have to get the timing right. A good time to ask it could be at the end of a meeting.



Define the New Reality

One of the greatest difficulties for a rep is helping the HCP understand exactly what they get when they work with you. You need to paint a compelling before-and-after picture of what you'll achieve by working together.

You can only do this when you know what's truly important to them. The desired clinical outcome will be different for each patient and each HCP. You'll only know the answer when you ask.

Here are five questions to help you uncover what's important to the HCP so you can paint the most compelling picture of their new reality:

17. If you could create a scenario that has a positive clinical outcome for your patient, how will things be different?

The role you play in creating a positive clinical outcome for their patient is likely a small one, but asking this question will get them excited about the possibilities.

18. (In early sales discussions) You mentioned you're not having a good experience with the current therapy options. If you work with us, what are you hoping will be different?

You want to know what's not working now to formulate a plan to be different/better. This will also give you an indication of the HCP's expectations.

19. (In later sales discussions) Given all we've talked about, what do you see as being different if you were to prescribe therapy or treatment plan X?

This question gets the HCP thinking about change and envisioning the future possibilities.

20. What does a positive clinical outcome look like for your patient? What can your patient do when their condition is managed well?

Having them vocalize the impact of a successful therapy or treatment plan on their patient taps into why they choose a career in the medical field; it also generates buy-in. Keep in mind: people buy with their hearts and justify their choices with their heads. You need to appeal to both.

21. What does success look like in terms of us working together?

Your primary contact is frequently your "champion"—the HCP who will help you navigate their healthcare setting and introduce you to other team members, such as nurse practitioners, medical assistants, and the medical director. Establishing a strong relationship with your "champion" is essential for success.

Generate Insights

Powerful sales questions can also be used to disrupt the HCP's thinking and get them thinking differently. We call this [insight selling](#).

Many people think insight selling is about educating through presentations. That's about half right, but without the other half, they're missing out on the full impact of insight selling.

The missing piece is asking insightful questions that disrupt thinking. If you can change the HCP's perception of what's true and what's possible, you can influence their decision-making process.

Here are six powerful questions for insight selling success:

22. Why? Or, tell me more.

This is huge in the life sciences world, which is full of scientists, researchers, and doctors who are always curious and asking, "Why?" Plus, by asking why, you're asking them to justify something. If they can do so convincingly, good for them! But sometimes they can't. This opens an opportunity for you to help.

23. How? (For example, how do you see this panning out? How do you think you need to proceed so this becomes a part of how you treat patients? How might you avoid the common challenges like X, Y, and Z?)

"How" questions help HCPs start thinking about the new reality. Sometimes they have strong reasoning for why to do something, but they

don't have a strong plan for how to get it done. When you help them think about the how, it helps them do two things: (1) avoid problems and (2) develop plans that will make everything work better.

"How" questions can be very powerful for generating insight.

24. What therapies or approaches have you tried that haven't worked?

This question will help you understand the HCP's thinking and help you see the gaps between what they know won't work and what you believe will.

25. Have you considered A, B, C, etc.? If not, why not?

You may find out the HCP did consider one of these options, but maybe they didn't approach it correctly. Or they didn't know about a new advancement in the area. Perhaps they didn't know better options existed. You can introduce those better options in your conversation.

26. What do you think is possible in terms of the clinical outcome for your patient?

Whatever you find here gives you the chance to alter the HCP's perception.

27. How do you know that?

Here you're testing the HCP's assumptions. This can be tricky, but engaging in critical thinking together helps to broaden their perspective. It helps both of you consider other possibilities.

Use Closed-Ended Questions

Sales advice often tells you to avoid using closed-ended questions. But closed-ended questions have a time and place and can be very powerful.

For example, closed-ended questions can be great for diagnosis and ruling things out—and that's in alignment with how an HCP thinks.

After any closed-ended question, use one of the follow-up questions to get them to continue talking:

28. Are there other treatment options that haven't been considered yet?

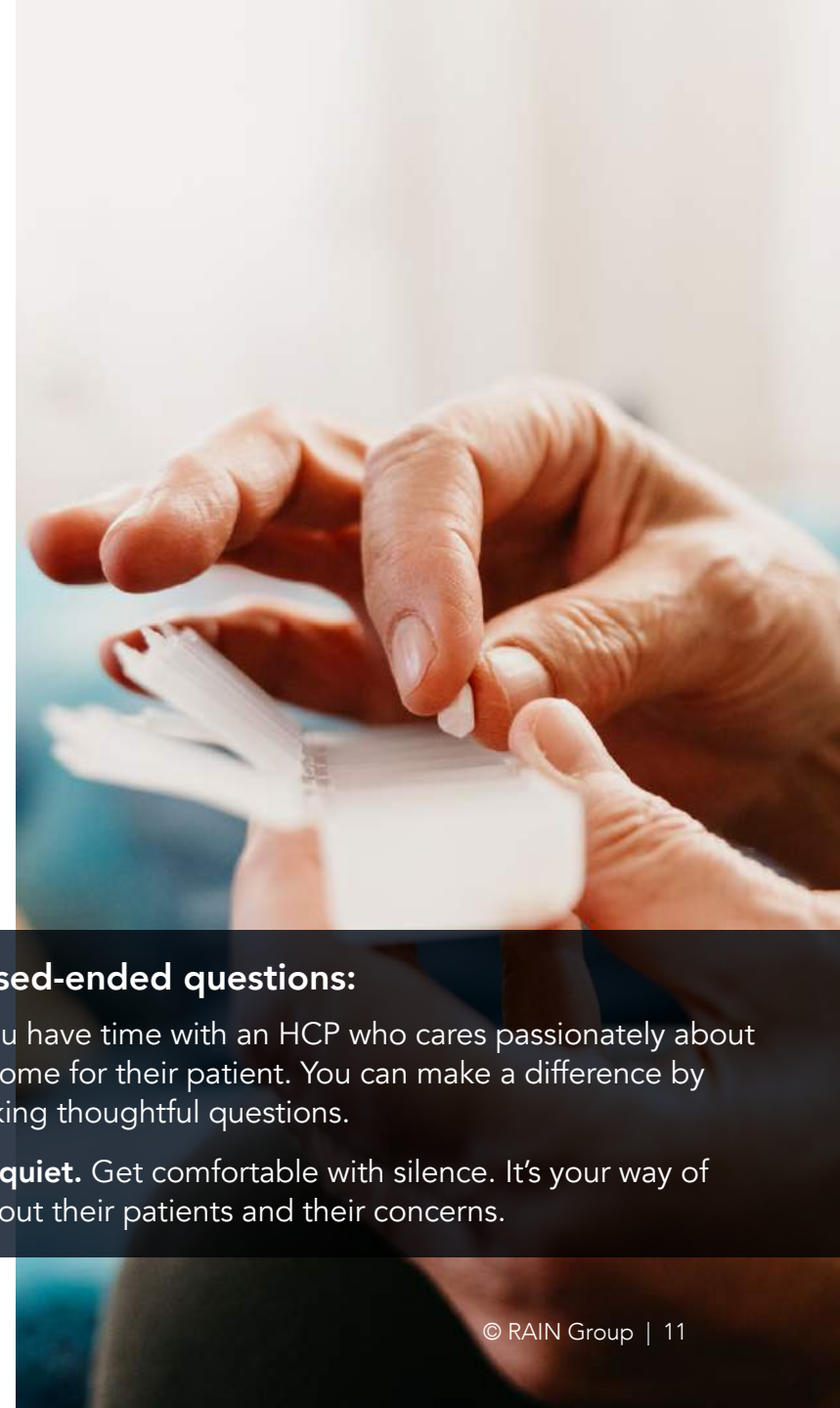
Maybe there are. Maybe there aren't. But this question, coupled with a follow-up question, will challenge the HCP to deeply consider their efforts.

29. Do you think [insert area] is a challenge?

If the HCP says yes, you can explore. If they say no, same thing. You can ask questions that get them to explore their initial response. You've seen the challenges other HCPs have experienced, and this question can establish you as knowledgeable about their industry.

Keys to success with closed-ended questions:

1. **Build your confidence.** You have time with an HCP who cares passionately about improving the clinical outcome for their patient. You can make a difference by being comfortable and asking thoughtful questions.
2. **Ask the question and be quiet.** Get comfortable with silence. It's your way of getting the HCP to talk about their patients and their concerns.



Persistence Helps You Dig Deeper

Follow-up questions provide a power boost to your sales questioning.

These three questions alone can instantly uncover a remarkable amount of valuable information:

30. How so?

Understanding the HCP's perception of a situation will not only give you further insight into how to address it, but also a glimpse into their thought process.

31. Can you tell me a little more about that?

Whether you don't understand, want to know more, or think there's an opportunity in this area, digging a little deeper will give you the clarity you need.

32. Why?

Yes, this is listed twice (see #22). Asking "why" a few more times can open the door for new insights as you get to the underlying cause of the problem. This allows you to create a better, more durable approach.



Don't Stop There

There are four kinds of sales questions: problem and possibility, process, perception, and page. We've already covered problem and possibility. To win sales, you also need to know what the buying process is, what the HCP's perceptions are, and whether or not you're on the same page.

33. (Process Question) If we got to a point where we move forward together, who at your facility would need to be involved to make sure you can prescribe therapy or treatment plan X?

If your contact isn't a decision maker, or is a member of a team, this is where you find out who the other players are and work on getting in front of them.

34. (Page Question) We just covered X, Y, and Z over the last 15 minutes. To summarize the key points: [insert summary here]. Did I capture the essence right or am I missing anything?

This is a good practice for any meeting to ensure that everyone is on the same page, but it's especially important in a clinical setting to confirm you understand the HCP's situation correctly.

35. (Perception Question) Just checking in as we've been working on this for a few weeks now. How are you feeling about how things are going? Are we on the right track?

While you may think things are going smoothly, the HCP may have a different idea of how things are going right or wrong. Asking this regularly allows you to stay on the right track or course correct, if necessary.

36. (Perception Question) Is there anything not sitting well with you? With our process, therapy or treatment plan X, how we're interacting... anything that gives you pause about moving forward?

Again, this will give you an idea of the HCP's perception of how things are going, but it also may uncover hidden objections.

Lessons from the pandemic:

- **Go hybrid.** Ask the HCP their preferred way to meet. Set up video calls where appropriate.
- **Leverage email.** Ask your marketing team for help crafting just the right emails that will get responses and open the door to conversations.

The Best Questions Balance Advocacy and Inquiry

While this guide is about asking questions, don't forget that the most powerful sales conversations tend to balance inquiry (asking questions) with advocacy (talking, educating, and giving advice).

Coupled with strong advocacy, thoughtful inquiry will help you connect with HCPs, uncover needs and opportunities, communicate the impact, and demonstrate your value by getting them to think differently.

These are all essential elements to winning sales consistently.



Transform Your Pharma Reps into Masterful Sellers

Pharmaceutical sales is unlike any other industry. You're selling to time-strapped, highly-intelligent buyers in an increasingly virtual environment. In the midst of the pandemic, your customers are inundated with rapidly-changing safety protocols, patient backlogs, and more.

Your sellers need to be able to gain access to decision makers, develop rapport quickly, and speak fluently about your products and therapies. Your sellers must have an aptitude for science and stay on top of what's going on in the medical field.

RAIN Group has worked with some of the world's leading pharmaceutical companies to help them transform their sales organizations. We can help your team:

- Succeed with virtual selling
- Secure new meetings with HCPs
- Take an insight-based approach to selling
- Grow existing relationships and accounts
- Improve sales management and coaching skills



[Click here to learn more about how we can help transform the sales results of your team. —>](#)



RAIN Group Delivers World-Class Sales Training

- Modular, multi-modal, and purpose-built for the **modern learner**.
- Unique approach to driving **behavior change** through training that we call Execution Assurance.
- Focused on driving the **business results** important to you.
- A **transformational experience** that ensures the development, adoption, and implementation of new skills.
- Action-oriented **coaching** prepares reps for real situations and provides direct feedback.

RAIN Group Unleashes Sales Potential

We help organizations:

- Enhance sales capability with award-winning sales training
- Design and execute strategic account management initiatives
- Increase effectiveness of sales management and coaching

Best IP: We study buying and selling relentlessly through the RAIN Group Center for Sales Research. Our research and field work allows us to create industry-leading intellectual property to help our clients achieve the greatest success.

Best Education System: We use the best education approaches, methods, and technologies to make training work, stick, and transfer to the job.

Best Results: We make it our mission to drive value and achieve the highest client satisfaction through excellence in quality and producing transformational results for our clients.

"We partnered with RAIN Group to help enable our sales team around both consultative selling and key account management. With a mix of virtual sessions, application assignments, and coaching sessions, it has allowed our sellers to take it from the sessions to adoption in their day-to-day activities. RAIN Group also improved coaching for our leaders. This training has had a huge impact for us. We've already witnessed great results and continue to receive positive feedback from our sellers."

Todd Fach, Senior Sales Training Manager, Covetrus



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