

HEALTH PROFESSIONS AND PRELAW CENTER

Indiana University Bloomington ■ University Division ■ Maxwell Hall 010 ■ Bloomington IN 47405
812-855-1873 ■ Fax 812-856-2770 ■ hpplc@indiana.edu ■ www.hpplc.indiana.edu

PHARMACEUTICAL SALES

Description of the Profession

"Pharmaceutical sales" includes many possible professions and career paths, including field sales, sales management, market management and market support, and sales training. This handout focuses on field sales, or work as a pharmaceutical sales representative [a.k.a., "pharm rep," "pharma rep," "drug rep," or "detailer"]. An internet search for "pharmaceutical sales" yields plentiful results. Those interested in a career in this industry are well advised to invest considerable time in researching it.

Pharmaceutical sales representatives promote sales through one-on-one and group presentations with prospective clients, during which the pharm rep communicates current information about treatment programs, explains the characteristics and clinical studies associated with the given products, provides product samples, and takes orders. Pharm reps invest much time and effort in fostering productive relationships with prospects, who can include physicians, pharmacists, dentists, hospitals, managed care companies and retirement homes, retail stores (including pharmacies), drug wholesalers, and patient advocacy groups. Reps may also have some quality control responsibilities; for instance, making sure clients do not have outdated or discontinued products.

Pharmaceutical sales is a demanding, highly competitive profession. According to The Princeton Review, pharm reps "spend most of their business time on the road, talking with [prospective clients], increasing the visibility of their company's products and the volume of their sales....[T]he best reps follow any lead, making every possible effort to sell their product. [Many] attend meetings where contact with purchasing professionals is rich, such as an association of pharmacists or a convention of hospital administrators." It should be noted that "[t]his territory-oriented business can be a hard life, particularly for those trying to maintain their family life as well. The need to sell extends to social functions and free time," and often can interfere with family time.

On the other hand, if you are a "people person," want to function with relative independence, and enjoy the kinds of challenges noted above, then you should continue your career research, weighing your academic, career, and personal priorities in terms of what you learn about this profession. The standard wisdom seems to be that, in most cases, pharmaceutical sales is not just a career choice, but also a lifestyle choice. **Skills and characteristics important to this profession:** Strong writing ability (including business and professional writing); public speaking, interpersonal communication, time management, and leadership skills; assertiveness and persistence; the ability to take rejection gracefully and to work under pressure; the ability to work both independently and as part of a team.

IMPORTANT:

This document was prepared for Indiana University students by the Health Professions and Prelaw Center. Please note that specific requirements and policies can change at any time without notice. Students are responsible for obtaining the most current information directly from the application services, and the school(s) and program(s) in which they have an interest. This document details *some possible* ideas to consider, and these ideas should not be taken as specific suggestions or recommendations. Refer to the resources at the end of this document for further information.

Training and Preparation

A wide variety of undergraduate academic programs, coursework, and other experiences can help you develop the skills and background necessary for success as a pharm rep. Majors / minors / certificates / individual courses from different areas could be strategically combined during your undergraduate degree to form this foundation.

Some academic areas of study to consider (Not a complete list of possibilities):

- Advertising or Public Relations (See School of Journalism PDF files on these topics, at bottom of www.journalism.indiana.edu/academics/advising.html)
- Allied health fields (Refer to HPPLC's "Health Professions Descriptions" handout)
- Biology (including human biology, microbiology, etc.)
- Business
- Chemistry (including biochemistry)
- Communication and Culture (especially rhetoric / verbal and written communication)
- Dietetics
- English
- Liberal Arts and Management Program (LAMP)
- Management (KSB, SPEA)
- Nutrition Science
- Pharmacy (A graduate-level degree. See HPPLC's "Prepharmacy" handout)
- Public Health (HPER, SPEA)
- Other health or business-related areas of study; any area of study that can help you develop the skills previously noted

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Some courses to consider (Not a complete list of possibilities):

- Acting courses (THTR-T 120, et al)
 - Anatomy (ANAT-A 215: Basic Human Anatomy)
 - Biology
 - Business (e.g., K201, to learn Excel and Access)
 - Chemistry
 - Communication and Culture (CMCL-C 121: Public Speaking, C122: Interpersonal Communication, C225: Discussion and Decision Making, C228: Argumentation and Debate, and other rhetoric / verbal and written communication courses)
 - Economics (ECON-E 201: Microeconomics, E202: Macroeconomics)
 - Ethics (PHIL-P 140: Introduction to Ethics, REL-R 170: Religion and Ethics, REL-R 373: Religion and Bioethics)
 - Health-related courses (e.g., HPER-H courses)
 - Medical Terminology (CLAS-C 209)
 - Medical Sciences (MSCI-M 131: Disease and the Human Body, M264: Psychoactive Drugs)
 - Nutrition (e.g., HPER-N 231: Human Nutrition)
 - Philosophy (PHIL-P 105: Thinking and Reasoning)
 - Physiology (PHSL-P 215: Basic Human Physiology)
 - Psychology
 - Writing courses, including business and professional writing (e.g., BUS-X 204, CMCL-C 223, ENG-W 231, ENG-W 270), or any course requiring substantial writing
- Pharmaceutical sales training programs do exist. Before making any such decision, carefully research *accredited* certification programs and university-affiliated degree programs (e.g., Rutgers' Pharmaceutical MBA). Whether such programs provide an edge in the job search is debatable. See related article at www.medzilla.com/press81304.html

Some activities and experiences to consider (Not a complete list of possibilities):

- Leadership development courses (e.g., HPER-R 110) and / or leadership development programs (e.g., the Liberal Arts and Management Program (LAMP www.indiana.edu/~lamp/); the Leadership, Ethics, and Social Action minor (LESA www.indiana.edu/~lesa/index.html)).
- Personal development courses (e.g., the Alpine (Aspen) Ski program, HPER-E 296 or 396).
- Take on leadership roles in student clubs and organizations (Visit www.iub.edu/student/#activities for a list. Since the list is incomplete, also ask the advisor in a given area about other opportunities.)
- STEPS computing workshops, many of which are free to students (Visit <http://ittraining.iu.edu/>).
- Internships; sales or pharm industry experience (e.g., find a job as a pharmacy tech).
- Networking: Do you know any pharm sales reps? Do you know someone else who might know any pharm sales reps? Can your family physician or local pharmacist refer you to any pharm sales reps?
- Job Shadowing: Through your networking, see if you can arrange to shadow a pharm rep as they make their rounds. If you can establish a good rapport, ask questions like: How did you acquire sales experience? What were the most valuable of these experiences? How did your undergraduate degree help prepare you for this career? What have you since learned about the industry that has helped you on the job or helped further your career? How has the profession effected your lifestyle? (It is important you ask such questions knowing that you are only gathering opinions. What worked or is true for one person may or may not be so for another, and you may even hear conflicting viewpoints.)

Other Resources

- IUB Career Development Center; the public library; Herman B Wells Library (formerly, IUB Main Library); ASCS-Q 294 Basic Career Development course; a general internet search for "pharmaceutical sales"
- A search for "pharmaceutical sales" on career web sites yields useful information, e.g., www.salecareersonline.com/
- Consult the professional development and professionalism information on the HPPLC web site
- A Day in the Life of a Pharmaceutical Sales Representative, and links to other pharm rep information (from The Princeton Review) www.princetonreview.com/cte/profiles/dayInLife.asp?careerID=110
- American Pharmaceutical Sales Association (APSA) www.apsaonline.org/
- National Association of Pharmaceutical Sales Representatives (NAPSR) <http://napsronline.org/>
- National Pharmaceutical Council (NPC) www.npcnow.org/
- Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) www.acpe-accredit.org/
- American Pharmacists Association (APA) www.aphanet.org
- US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) www.fda.gov/