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Rethinking Sample Distribution: Why Growth Opportunities May Lie Beyond the Highest Deciles

For decades, pharmaceutical sampling strategies have largely followed a familiar formula: allocate more samples to the highest-prescribing healthcare providers and fewer to those with lower prescribing volumes. The logic is straightforward. High-decile providers see more patients, write more prescriptions, and therefore have historically been viewed as the most efficient targets for sample distribution.

However, as commercial teams continue to seek new ways to drive growth, improve resource utilization, and strengthen provider engagement, many organizations are reexamining this longstanding approach. A growing body of thought suggests that an overemphasis on high-decile providers may leave untapped opportunities elsewhere in the provider landscape.

The question is no longer simply, "Who writes the most prescriptions today?" Instead, commercial leaders are increasingly asking, "Where can sampling have the greatest impact on future prescribing behavior?"

The Traditional Sampling Model

Most pharmaceutical sampling programs have historically aligned distribution quantities with prescribing deciles. Under this approach, providers with the highest prescribing volumes receive the largest sample allocations, while lower-decile providers receive fewer resources.

This model is rooted in efficiency. Healthcare providers already familiar with a product are more likely to use samples immediately and consistently. As a result, organizations have often concentrated sampling investments among established prescribers to maximize short-term utilization.

While this strategy remains valuable for maintaining relationships and supporting existing prescribing behavior, it may not fully address opportunities for market expansion.

Looking Beyond Maintenance to Growth

High-decile providers often represent mature prescribing relationships. While continued sampling can help reinforce brand loyalty and ensure providers have resources available for appropriate patient access, incremental gains may become increasingly difficult to achieve.

In contrast, lower-decile providers frequently represent growth potential. These practitioners may have limited experience with a product, may not yet fully understand its clinical profile, or may simply require additional support and engagement before incorporating it more consistently into treatment decisions.

Strategic sampling can serve as an important catalyst in these situations. By providing greater access to samples, organizations can create opportunities for providers to gain familiarity with therapies, evaluate patient outcomes, and develop confidence in prescribing patterns. In many cases, providers with lower current prescribing volumes may represent some of the most meaningful opportunities for future growth.

A More Balanced Distribution Strategy

Rather than concentrating the majority of samples among top-prescribing providers, some organizations are exploring more balanced allocation models that account for both relationship preservation and growth potential.

Under these approaches:

- High-decile providers continue to receive samples that support ongoing patient needs and reinforce established relationships.
- Mid-decile providers receive resources designed to encourage broader product adoption.
- Lower-decile providers may receive increased sampling support as part of targeted growth initiatives.

This evolution reflects a broader shift from volume-based allocation to impact-based allocation. Instead of viewing sampling solely as a reward for existing prescribing behavior, organizations can use it as a strategic tool to influence future opportunities.

The Role of Data and Technology

Advancements in commercial technology have made these strategies increasingly practical. Modern sampling platforms can incorporate provider data, prescribing trends, segmentation models, and product-specific business rules to determine appropriate order limits and distribution levels.

Rather than relying on static assumptions, organizations can tailor sample allocations based on market goals, territory strategies, product lifecycle stages, and growth objectives.

This enables commercial teams to deploy resources more intentionally while maintaining compliance and operational efficiency.

Aligning Sampling with Commercial Objectives

As pharmaceutical organizations continue to navigate competitive markets and increasing pressure to demonstrate return on investment, sample distribution strategies are becoming more sophisticated.

The most effective programs may not be those that simply provide the greatest number of samples to the highest prescribers. Instead, success may come from balancing two critical objectives:

- Preserving strong relationships with established prescribers.
- Creating adoption opportunities among providers with growth potential.

When sampling strategies are aligned with both goals, organizations can move beyond maintaining existing business and begin using sampling as a lever for sustainable market expansion.

The Future of Strategic Sampling

The pharmaceutical industry has long recognized the value of samples in supporting healthcare providers and improving patient access to therapy. What is changing is the way organizations think about where those samples can deliver the greatest impact.

As data-driven decision making becomes increasingly embedded within commercial operations, sampling programs are evolving from simple distribution exercises into strategic growth tools. Organizations that successfully balance loyalty-building among high prescribers with adoption-building among lower-decile providers may be better positioned to unlock new opportunities and maximize the value of every sample deployed.

In an environment where every commercial investment is scrutinized, the future of sampling may not be defined by who receives the most samples, but by where samples can create the greatest incremental growth.

About the Author

Lori Peters is Chief Operating Officer at QPharma, where she oversees commercial operations and client relations. With more than 20 years of healthcare industry experience, she specializes in life sciences commercialization, compliance, and digital solutions. Lori is a trusted advisor to pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, helping clients achieve successful product launches and operational excellence.