

Medical sales trainers find niche market

BY ALISON LEE SATAKE

Most pharmaceutical and medical companies have an in-house department that trains new employees about products and sales. But when it comes to teaching more seasoned sales reps about technical information on how products work physiologically or how to have a medical conversation with a physician about disease states, Wilmington-based training specialists, Proficient Learning steps in.

“The training that goes on in pharmaceutical companies is very intense, because we are talking about patients’ health and well-being,” said Pamela Marinko, founder and CEO of Proficient Learning.

“We focus on specialty pharmaceuticals and sales to [medical] specialists.” After 25 years of working in the pharmaceutical and medical industry – first as a sales representative and later as the director of training for AAIPharma – Marinko observed an unmet need for specialized sales trainings in the pharmaceutical and medical industry. She launched Proficient Learning in Wil-

ington in 2005 to fill that niche.

Since then she’s grown the company to seven full-time staff in Wilmington (including three UNCW graduates) and eight additional staff around the country, who have helped the company reach about \$2.5 million in revenue this year. Proficient Learning works with eight of the top 10 pharmaceutical and medical companies with the largest revenues in the country, she said.

Other clients include small to medium size companies that specialize in areas such as oncology or dialysis. Because most Wilmington pharmaceutical companies are in the early research and development phase instead of the product marketing and sales phase, none of their clients are local. At any given time, Proficient Learning is working on 10 to 15 projects, she said.

In their specialty trainings, participants will learn not only about their company’s product, but also about other products on the market so they can have a deeper understanding of how the drugs differ. “Al-



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Pamela Marinko: CEO of Proficient Learning

ways sales is the end goal. But only sales for the right patient,” she said. It’s important for sales representatives in the health care industry to fully understand their product when they are explaining it to physicians, she said. And Marinko takes that responsibility seriously.

The company writes curriculum and leads trainings for sales representatives and managers. The company also provides a training program that develops sales reps’ business acumen in the medical industry. Participants learn how hospitals and medical providers run their businesses and how decisions are made. But Proficient Learning is known for delivering the information in a fun and interactive way, she said. In one workshop they developed about vaccines, participants competed in teams to answer and articulate questions on immunology in a format based off the tv show, “Survivor.” In another work-

shop about multiple sclerosis, they gave participants glasses that simulated the various degenerative side effects of the disease, such as colorblindness and blurred vision.

Since Marinko launched the company, the whole industry has been changing. “The pharmaceutical and medical industry is moving towards more specialization,” she said. Because of the high cost to develop drugs, companies are now focusing on developing therapies for rare diseases.

To sell to these medical specialists, companies need a specialized sales force. Marinko said she could see this happening three years ago and chose to fashion her company to train people for that niche. In the next five years, her goal for the company is to expand the company’s footprint in five target areas – oncology, neurology, infectious diseases, vaccines and diabetes. “We want to be at the top of people’s minds,” she said.