



Dining with Drug Reps Proves Unappetizing

November 9, 2011 by [Patrick A. Malone](#)

As the saying goes, keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Not that we know for sure that behavioral economist Dan Ariely considers pharmaceutical manufacturers “enemies,” but we know he’s onto their practices that are not exactly in the best interest of patients. He and a colleague recently had dinner with a few pharmaceutical sales representatives to find out the **tricks of their trade**, which is getting doctors to prescribe their companies’ drugs.

Trick No. 1: “One of [the reps] told us a story about how he was once trying to persuade a reluctant female physician to attend a seminar about a medication he was promoting. After a bit of schmoozing,

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she finally decided to attend – but only after he agreed to escort her to a ballroom dancing class.” A fine example of, Ariely says, if-you-scratch-my-back-I’ll-scratch-yours.

Trick No. 2: “[B]ring meals to the doctor’s office. ... [O]ne office even required alternating days of steak or lobster for lunch in exchange for access to the well-fed doctors.”

Trick No. 3: “When the reps were in the physician’s office, they were sometimes called into the examination room (as ‘experts’) to inform the patients about the drug directly. And the device reps experienced a surprisingly intimate level of involvement in patient care, often selling medical devices in the operating room, while the surgery was going on.” (Comment by Patrick Malone: What’s really shocking is that these sales reps have at most a bachelor’s degree and a few weeks of training from their employers.)

So, Ariely asks, what should be done about this shocking insinuation of commerce into medicine? “[R]ealize that doctors have conflicts of interest. ... [P]lace barriers that will prevent this kind of schmoozing, and keep reps from accessing doctors or patients.”

And have dinner with somebody else.

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