

The Breakfast Club “Bottom Line”

Summary of Outputs from the 8th Blue Matter Breakfast Club™ Session

Thursday, 29 April 2021

How can a company focused on rare diseases optimize its customer-facing teams?

A Case Study

Organized by Blue Matter, the Breakfast Club is a group of biopharmaceutical industry leaders that regularly meets by invitation to hear insightful presentations and discuss important issues related to the biopharma industry. Breakfast Club members come from a wide range of companies, and many have a focus in rare diseases.

On 29 April 2021, Breakfast Club members participated in a live “consulting session,” facilitated by Blue Matter, that addressed a key question: **How can a company focused on rare diseases optimize its customer-facing teams?**

During two hours of breakout sessions and discussions, group members pooled their knowledge and experience to provide answers.

In this paper, we share the group’s insights. However, rather than providing a simple outline or summary, we do something different: We present the group’s insights by incorporating them into a case study approach. This should prove more interesting, relatable, and effective in providing rare disease company leaders the guidance they need to optimize their own customer-facing teams.

Case Study Background

The Situation

Laura has just been appointed Head of Europe for Raregenix, a mid-size biopharma company that has two oncology products marketed globally. Raregenix is also preparing for the global launch of rarezumab, indicated for the treatment of Blue Fast Syndrome (BFS), a rare metabolic disease.

Laura’s task is to rapidly expand and modify the European organization and to build the rare disease capability. In particular, her challenge is to optimize Raregenix’s

customer-facing teams to support rarezumab at launch and beyond. However, Laura must manage a challenging range of competing factors and opinions to succeed.

The Product

Raregenix’s upcoming product, rarezumab, will be its first foray into rare diseases. Rarezumab is in phase III of development and is about 24 months from launch.

The product will not be entering easy markets. The current standard of care (SoC) for BFS is being marketed by a large global pharmaceutical company. In addition, there are four potential competitors in various stages of clinical development.

Rarezumab does, however, seem to have some very positive attributes:

- Efficacy profile comparable to the existing SoC
- Unique and new mechanism of action
- Potentially better safety profile (clinical data pending)
- Less frequent dosing
- Subcutaneous injection (vs. intravenous for the SoC)
- Potential for new treatment paradigm in BFS thanks to a pre-filled syringe for home administration

Disease Spotlight:

Blue Fast Syndrome (BFS)

- Well-established rare disease
- Enzyme replacement therapy established as SoC
- Good level of disease understanding
- Ecosystem somewhat established:
 - Emerging network of COEs in place in some EU markets
 - Patient Advocacy Groups (PAGs) established in some markets

The Company

As mentioned, Raregenix is a midsize company with two in-line products (both specialty oncology therapies). Rarezumab will be its first entry into the rare disease space. The company currently has regional roles in place for marketing, medical affairs, market access, and advocacy, but no country-specific roles or field forces yet.

Raregenix has a bold vision to:

- Become the most patient-centric player in BFS
- Provide the best holistic patient support
- Establish rarezumab as a well-differentiated option for the treatment of BFS
- Capture at least 50% market share in BFS by 2026

The People

Laura must work with a team that has differing motivations and perspectives. She will have to navigate these dynamics as she moves forward. The key players are below.

Nick

Chief Executive Officer

One of Nick’s grandchildren is affected by BFS, so he wants Raregenix to be fully focused on patients’ needs and wants. He wants Raregenix to be seen as the most patient-centric company in the space. Nick has challenged Laura to optimize Raregenix’s customer-facing teams for the rarezumab launch.

David

Chief Patient Officer

David was brought in by Nick. He is a rare disease veteran and has vast experience in rare metabolic diseases. He challenges the company to place the needs and perspectives of patients at the center of its efforts. He has very close ties to the leading patient advocacy group (PAG) focused on BFS. His vision is to build an innovative and entirely novel customer-facing team model.

Christian

Chief Financial Officer

Laurence

Chief Marketing Officer

Christian is German and Laurence is French. Both expect challenging access and pricing discussions in Europe. They are interested in managing risk and do not want to jeopardize the success of the oncology business, so they want to limit investment in infrastructure and people until rarezumab’s real commercial potential becomes clearer.

Identifying the Options

Guiding Principles

At the start, Nick and David defined the guiding principles for the customer facing team. They are:

1. Focus on patients’ needs
2. Understand and align the ecosystem to best serve patients
3. Create and foster a patient-centric mindset
4. Build and empower the team to act as one on behalf of the patient

5. Ensure that everything we do will benefit patients

The guiding principles, coupled with the perspectives of the management team, embody several core values: patient-focus, innovation, and “leanness.” To inform her efforts and help her remain true to the company’s principles and values, Laura agrees with Nick to carefully assess the European market environment. Following that assessment, she would provide the board with two design options for Raregenix’s customer facing teams in Europe.

Laura’s completes the market and competitive assessment, enabling her to

- Enhance the company’s understanding of rarezumab’s commercial potential
- Map BFS disease and treatment expertise throughout Europe
- Identify and characterize the PAGs related to BFS
- Improve the company’s knowledge of the patient journeys in BFS

Customer Team Models

Within Europe, Laura recommends an initial focus on four key markets plus a limited set of selected smaller markets with the highest chance of gaining expanded early access and achieving Raregenix’s targeted price. The company could expand its presence via a second wave of launches later. Due to very positive previous experiences, Nick had decided to establish the European organization in Zug, Switzerland.

As a next step, Laura approaches Black Currant, a global boutique consultancy that has excellent relationships with leading global RD companies and significant experience in designing and establishing customer facing models. With the help of Black Currant, Laura engages with a number of cutting-edge RD companies in the area to discuss various options for the customer-facing model.

Very quickly, Laura identifies two potential options: the highly innovative “RD Superhero Model” and the more conventional “RD Pod Model”.

Option 1: The RD Superhero Model

Short Description: In this model, the key customer-facing role can be informally referred to as the Rare Disease Superhero (RDSH). This role acts as a single point of contact for all key constituents in the BFS ecosystem, including patients, healthcare providers (HCPs), payers, PAGs, and others. The RDSH is dedicated to eliminating barriers and to delivering exceptional high quality, high touch services. This person acts as a “concierge” to key customers, tapping corporate resources as needed to deliver value, provide service, and solve problems. The role helps align the ecosystem to support high-quality care for BFS patients.

Responsibilities: RDSHs act across functions and the entire product lifecycle. They might help set up clinical centers, assist with identifying patients and study recruitment, identify and develop centers of excellence, liaise with PAGs and payers, support HCPs, and more. Like a General Manager, an RDSH is empowered to make decisions and quickly escalate issues up the line as needed. Each RDSH deeply understands, provides input to, and executes the product strategy.

Skills and Behavior: The RDSH is a unique role that requires special individuals to fill it. An RDSH must work across functions and combine a strong scientific background with considerable business acumen. An RDSH must also have a working knowledge of all essential elements of the business. This includes clinical development, medical affairs, commercial strategy, marketing, sales, and—importantly—market access. The role also requires excellent communication and relationship management skills. Each RDSH is a “jack of all trades” and is, admittedly, a bit of a “unicorn.”

Benefits: Providing a single point of contact for stakeholders helps ensure continuity of critical relationships and excellent relationship management. It also helps facilitate delivery of high-quality services and value across a range of different stakeholders. RDSHs understand the “big picture,” as well as patient and ecosystem needs. This is instrumental to continuously create win/win solutions. When properly implemented, the RDSH model generates high levels of credibility and trust with patients and customers.

Option 2: The RD Pod Model

Short Description: The RD Pod Model is a bit more conventional. All classical functions such as clinical development, medical affairs, sales, marketing, market access, government affairs, advocacy, and more are part of each highly integrated pod team. The team is designed to act as a unit, with each member sharing the vision, mission, and a transparent set of common goals. Team members should demonstrate an outstanding collaborative spirit, communicate very effectively, understand one another’s roles and perspectives, and be well-aligned in everything they do.

Responsibilities: The team members in each pod have typical, function-related responsibilities. However, the critical success factor for this model is for each team member to understand the responsibilities of all the others and always see the “big picture.” Everyone in this team should understand the business objectives, “own” the success of the entire business and work together in a highly collaborative, non-siloed fashion. This model requires team members to establish strong relationships with their internal colleagues as well as key customers. Constant, high-quality communication in a timely fashion is absolutely critical to success.

Skills and Behavior: This model requires members to possess excellent functional skills. However, they must also bring a more holistic view of the business, with sufficient understanding across the other functions. Also required are excellent communication skills, a strong team-oriented mindset, and the ability to walk in each other’s (functional) shoes and “speak each other’s language.”

Benefits: This more classical model is better aligned with the existing structures in most pharmaceutical companies. It doesn't require a “superhero” that may be hard to find and recruit. Everyone in this team aspires to deliver the

exact same outcome, helping each other in a non-selfish, non-territorial way. Because everyone on the team shares responsibility for the overall success of the business, there's less chance of something “falling through the cracks.”

Table: Comparing the RD Superhero and RD Pod Models

	RD Superhero	RD Pod
Points of contact for customers	Single point of contact	Multiple points of contact (team or “pod”)
Service delivery	Cross-functional, “concierge” service	Functionally focused by team member, but with cross-over if needed
Role requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad knowledge across functions • Relationship management skills • Communication skills • Scientific, medical and business / market access acumen • Informs and executes product strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep knowledge within core function • Relationship management skills • Communication skills • Scientific or business acumen • Outstanding teamwork skills • Ability to see big picture
Key Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can generate very deep relationships with customers and build a high degree of trust • Roles may be harder to fill (may need to find “unicorn” candidates) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligns better with existing structures • Roles may be easier to fill • Requires ongoing cross-functional communication and big picture thinking to achieve alignment

Devising a Plan of Action

The day before her work anniversary, Laura presents the two options to the board. As expected, Nick and David react very positively to the RD Superhero model. Christian & Laurence, on the other hand, do not like it. In their opinion, the RDSH model is untested, expensive, and risky. They also fear that compliance will be a major challenge. Finally, they worry that recruiting will be nearly impossible, as the role calls for a rare combination of skills and capabilities.

Laura explains that there are large, conservative companies that are doing something very similar, indicating that the compliance issues can be overcome. Ultimately, the board decides to avoid making a clear choice initially, opting to test the two models instead.

Testing the Two Models

To structure the test, the team decides on the following:

1. Parallel Pilots in Germany and France: Germany and France are asked to establish both models in parallel (Superhero in Germany and Pod in France). The countries are to select comparable territories for each model, which would enable “apples to apples” comparisons of how each model performs.

2. Free Choice for Italy and Spain: Italy and Spain are given the autonomy to choose the model that works best for them.
3. Superhero model in smaller countries: Smaller countries (such as the Nordics, Switzerland, and the Benelux countries) will have fewer resources and therefore, less available headcount. So, Raregenix opts to use the Superhero model in these areas. The company commits to find the right individuals with “superhero” potential and establish an induction program to quickly develop them into this critical new role.

Successes and Challenges

Six months after the board decided to implement both models, Laura has been asked to return to the board and provide an interim report on the experience and preliminary results. Laura is happy to share with the board that the Superhero model has been a clear success in the places it has been tried.

As expected, the key challenge was finding the right candidates to fill the “superhero” roles. However, once the smaller countries came together and—with the help of Human Resources—jointly defined the profile and key characteristics of this critical role, candidate superheroes

were quickly found. Interestingly, the novelty and the innovative potential of the role appealed to a large number of applying candidates.

Laura explains that it has been absolutely critical to co-create a comprehensive superhero training program that addresses the scientific and medical aspects of the disease, the key functional aspects (including marketing and sales), and behavioral training. While Germany led the development of the training, all countries were very closely involved, co-created, and co-owned it.

To successfully induct and develop the “superheroes”, the new role of the superhero coach was created. This role has been shown to be absolutely critical in bringing candidates up to speed and ensuring their successful operation in the field.

The initial experience with the Superhero Model has been overwhelmingly positive. The customers love having a single point of contact and have come to see their “superhero” as a trusted and reliable partner. Many issues have been quickly flagged and resolved.

Table: Comparing the RD Superhero and RD Pod Models

Rare Disease Superhero Model	
Positives	Potential Challenges
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It provides a greater ability to engage the disease community much earlier and to establish outstanding long-term relationships. 2. Bigger, cross-functional “macro” issues (e.g., disease registry) are identified and addressed much faster. 3. It offers greater speed and agility; greater ability to deliver on the company’s commitments to the community. 4. Customers prefer having a single point of contact: It’s much simpler for them. 5. When properly implemented, it can create very strong relationships between the customers and the company. 6. “Superheroes” can learn and / or develop best practices in their respective territories and share them with others in the Superhero role. 7. The superhero role is very attractive and offers significant personal development opportunities. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recruiting can be difficult, so it is critical to clearly define the desired candidate profile and characteristics. 2. Proper on-boarding and training is key to success, as these roles have complex requirements. 3. Support is needed for the role to deliver on all commitments. 4. A mechanism is required to quickly escalate and resolve issues. 5. Clarifying roles and responsibilities: Due to the multi-faceted nature of the role, “superheroes” can sometimes overstep, provide incorrect information, or make commitments that can’t be met. Training and experience can help avoid this. 6. Since the role is initially more focused on science and medical expertise, business acumen and commercial skills need to be developed and evolved over time.

Remarkably, the superheroes quickly formed their own team, establishing outstanding relationships among themselves and helping each other to learn and solve problems. As a result, they quickly came up with a BFS awareness campaign targeted at the referring specialties that led to dramatically enhanced patient identification and enrollment of patients into Raregenix’s pivotal study.

The RDSH model isn’t perfect however, and there have been challenges. A key initial challenge was that the “superheroes” frequently overstepped their borders, providing functional information that wasn’t entirely accurate and making commitments that weren’t necessarily aligned with the strategy. These problems, however, were seen by most countries as teething problems and likely to fade with time and increasing experience.

In the large countries that established the Pod model,

it has been quite challenging to make the team act as one in a fully integrated fashion. As a rule of thumb, the Pod model works best in the smallest countries with the smallest teams. Team size appears to be the critical factor in determining the success of the “One Team” ethos.

The German experience clearly indicates the attractiveness and early success of the Superhero over the Pod model. All success indicators and business metrics point in a very positive direction.

Notably, surveys indicate a much higher customer satisfaction in the Superhero regions. This has led the German team to focus on the Superhero as its permanent customer-facing model. Even the new General Manager of France is highly intrigued and urgently wants to gain experience with this model.

New Ideas. Better Results.

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