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Jansan Expert Explains How to Avoid H1N1

By Brian Slack

This publication and others typically address the needs of paper and supplies distributors with content typically focusing on selling techniques, customer relations, industry trends, etc. This article, however, will not detail effective sales or business techniques, but rather maintaining personal health instead.

This topic of health and well-being is a reflection of the changing times and current shift in business concerns. Ever since the SARS epidemic a few years ago, we have all come to realize that health-threatening diseases and viruses have no borders or discriminations. Worse, these illnesses can spread very fast, make us very sick, and even cause death.

For more than a year, the big concern has been H1N1. Recent reports suggest that H1N1, otherwise known as swine flu, might not be as widespread or as deadly as originally feared. However, some experts say there is still some uncertainty over whether the current outbreak is only a preview of more to come. After all, the 1918 flu epidemic, which H1N1 is often compared with, resulted in only mild cases at first, but became much more severe as the flu resurfaced.**

This means that distributors—in fact, all salespeople who call on various companies, people, and organizations as part of their daily work—must continue to keep their guard up and protect themselves from H1N1. And, looking beyond H1N1, we can learn some preventive measures that will protect us from more common and less serious diseases as well as any public health concern or epidemic that comes along next.

Protective Measures

Before highlighting ways that distributors can stay healthy and avoid cross contamination, we first need to examine how germs are spread.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says germs can be spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with disease-causing germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth. Droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze can also move through the air and spread disease when a healthy person inhales or touches the contamination. Additionally, these droplets can land and survive on surfaces, such as a desk or keyboard, and also cause infection.

In many parts of the world, especially in China and other parts of Asia, people wear masks in public and not only now, with concerns about H1N1, but almost all the time. In fact, it is so common in some localities that it is a bit of a surprise when someone is not wearing a mask.

Should distributors wear masks when calling on clients?

Fortunately, at least not yet, the situation is not as serious in our region of the world. The CDC recommends wearing masks, also known as respiratory masks, in certain healthcare and educational settings.

So how do we protect ourselves? Some ways distributor salespeople can protect themselves from illness include:

- Always wear gloves when working with managers or cleaning crews when demonstrating cleaning techniques or procedures, even if it is for a very short period of time.
- If building occupants in a facility have already contracted H1N1, then goggles should also be worn in that facility when demonstrating cleaning procedures or products.
- Wear gloves when accessing or working with “Common Touch Point” or “High Touch Point” areas. These are surface areas that are commonly touched by many people during the course of a day, increasing the possibility of spreading disease. These areas include paper towel, toilet, soap, and other dispensers as well as door handles, push plates, etc.
- Wash hands more thoroughly and more frequently. Often when washing hands, many people do a quick wash and rinse. Distributor sales reps should spend at least 20 seconds washing hands with soap and warm water and drying thoroughly.
- Use hand sanitizers. Encourage salespeople to keep these products in their car and use them regularly. Select hand sanitizers that can kill 99.9 percent of the most common germs and bacteria and also evaporate quickly and leave no odor. However, it must be noted that sanitizers do not replace hand washing. They are an interim measure until hands can be thoroughly washed.
- Limit close contact with other people.
- If possible, make a phone call to a client instead of a visit. Limiting exposure to customers, especially when there is a public health scare, is a justifiable practice.

Preventing infections and stopping the spread of infectious disease is not something we can ask governments to solve or wait for vaccines and medicine to eradicate. Individual responsibility plays a very important role in staying healthy. Along with these recommendations, distributor sales reps can do something else if they feel sick or experience symptoms: stay home. Staying home, resting, and avoiding healthy people is also part of personal responsibility when and if you or your reps become sick.

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***** As of Dec. 10, 2009, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that one in six Americans have been infected with the H1N1 virus. It has mostly impacted younger people with health effects ranging from mild to very serious cases.***

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About NPTA Alliance: NPTA Alliance (formerly the National Paper Trade Association, Inc.), founded in 1903, is the association for the \$60 plus billion paper, packaging and supplies distribution industry. The mission of NPTA is to actively support the success of its members through the delivery of networking, advocacy, education and research that focuses on the health of the distribution channel.