

A meeting of medical minds

As the bio-pharmaceutical marketplace becomes increasingly scrutinized and competitive, it's more important than ever for drug companies to understand the needs and perceptions of their most critical clientele. Access to the thoughts and expertise of the industry's most recognized – and influential – physicians is vital to the success of many pharmaceutical and biotech companies. These key opinion leaders (KOLs) set the pace for industry trends and provide leading-edge exposure for a therapy in the medical community through speaking engagements, articles in medical journals and general practice.

In addition, throughout a product's lifecycle, manufacturers seek valuable information from KOL physicians about a myriad of issues, ranging from clinical science to advertising concepts. For instance, with the right information, drug developers can design clinical trials to focus on outcomes and attributes that will improve patient outcomes and compliance. This influential group can also help companies identify which promotions resonate most with prescribers – both in and out of the expert segment.

For these reasons and more, leading physicians comprise what is often considered to be the single most valuable market segment in the health care industry. It's a perfect example of the 80–20 dynamic: KOLs tend to be the 20 percent of a pharmaceutical brand's customers that account for 80 percent of the market's experience within a therapeutic or product category.

Use medical meetings to access key opinion leaders

Yet engaging this group in meaningful market research has never been more challenging. They tend to be extremely busy and rarely have time to participate in traditional research such as surveys, personal interviews and focus

groups. Nevertheless, they are pursued heavily, often receiving multiple invitations each week to participate in a study.

KOLs attend medical meetings

Medical meetings are an attractive forum for companies seeking face-to-face contact with this hard-to-reach group. These events are educational in nature and typically feature clinical and scientific data presented by a well-known physician scientist. Third-party

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facilitators with a high level of technical and scientific training along with well-developed interpersonal skills are used to manage discussion among participants and generate peer-to-peer interaction among top health care providers, clinical scientists, researchers and pharmaceutical companies.

If developed appropriately, these events are often well-attended, because they provide the following key benefits to KOLs:

- access to the latest information about treatment options or advancements;
- opportunity to respond directly to manufacturers on a variety of issues;
- interaction with peers to discuss their treatment preferences.

Since the hosting company is not blinded to participants and its staff is present, pharmaceutical professionals can directly interact with KOL physicians at medical meetings. This means that manufacturers can gather the most timely and reliable information about significant market issues or events while establishing relationships with those who most influence their products.

For example, if a major competitor withdraws its leading brand from the market or the FDA implements a significant new requirement, the company's response must be swift and effective. Companies can assess the impact of a market change more quickly through the interactive setting of a medical meeting than through a standard market research project.

Encourage and monitor KOL interaction

The most worthwhile medical meetings are designed to facilitate interaction among participating physicians. When KOLs are speaking to each other, the information they provide is less affected by a research setting and, thus, potentially more valuable. So while a

rigid script isn't followed for medical meetings, measurement of these interactions is key. If the peer-to-peer dialogue among physicians is objectively monitored and recorded, then companies discover which issues are truly important to KOLs. Otherwise, the success of accessing the opinions of this important group is wasted.

Methodologies that have proven to be successful with KOLs in settings ranging from small dinner meetings to large events with 500 or more physicians include:

- *Small-group discussions*

A small-group format provides the greatest opportunity for meaningful interaction with select physicians. Small groups often generate the most robust opinions and perspectives among this critical population. Facilitators who are skilled in not only qualitative research but in interpersonal, small-group dynamics tend to maximize the results of these discussions.

- *Real-time polling*

Large-group interactions require some additional tools to achieve the most useful information from an audience of experts. Using keypad technology with groups as large as 500, researchers can generate immediate feedback from meeting participants on issues presented by speakers or discussed with their colleagues. Results can be used to direct further discussion and to identify areas of opportunity or concern.

- *Self-directed small-group activities*

Often, a medical meeting is designed to address issues that require specific decisions or outputs. For example, a company may be seeking design consultation for its clinical trials or treatment protocols. Large groups can be broken into small interactive circles to generate ideas on a particular topic using audio/visual materials and workbooks. These activities typically include a case study, a group discussion and exercise, and presentation of recommendations or find-

ings to the larger group.

- *Pre- and post-meeting surveys*

When a company needs comparative information on the opinions or awareness of individual consultants based on a meeting experience, pre- and post-meeting surveys can be used. Paper, interactive voice response or Web/computer surveys are administered to an audience prior to an event to assess the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors that the group brings to a program. Following the meeting, these perceptions, attitudes and behaviors are again tested to determine the impact of the program.

- *Meeting evaluation surveys*

Successful future programs are built by implementing constructive feedback from meeting attendees. Since meetings can happen within weeks or months of each other, it's important that program evaluation data be collected and implemented quickly. When surveys are administered at a meeting or several weeks after the event, constructive feedback can help identify successful elements of the program as well as areas for improvement for future meetings.

To keep pace with the dynamic nature of these meetings, data collection instruments must remain highly flexible. Research tools - such as discussion guides, surveys and interactive questions - should evolve as the event progresses and researchers learn from participants. This flexibility allows the company hosting the meeting to address issues that arise during the event. It also keeps KOLs engaged, because topics sync with their stated interests.

Invite the right participants

KOLs are categorized most generally by the reach of their influence. The most reputed - and often toughest to reach - are global specialists of a disease state or therapeutic category. However, there are also physicians who are highly influential at a local, regional or

national level. Depending on the objectives of your study and your team's product or treatment area, your medical meeting may target one or more type of KOL. It's not always necessary to access the top specialist of a field.

Limiting a meeting to only the most appropriate participants is critical. As explained above, KOL physicians are highly sought after, and they tend to work with many pharmaceutical companies - and even within several departments of a single company - at the same time. To establish and retain credibility as a medical meeting host, your program should be highly targeted and beneficial to those you invite to participate. It's also important that participating KOLs who do attend have the knowledge and experience they need to effectively advise your company on prescription and treatment protocol.

Adhere to industry guidelines for corporate-sponsored events

Most health care professionals, whether on the corporate or provider side, are driven by a desire to improve treatment options and patient care. To facilitate understanding throughout the industry, pharmaceutical companies have been providing legitimate medical education services and event-based

market research in the health care community for years. Unfortunately though, some organizations have used the forum to promote their brands instead of to gather and disseminate objective and accurate information.

To prevent fraud and abuse related to these events, industry organizations such as the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (in cooperation with the Office of the Inspector General, Department of Health and Human Services) have established guidelines that prohibit promotional efforts by pharmaceutical companies that provide kickbacks, including meals and entertainment, with an intent to influence prescribing behavior. Medical meetings and other manufacturer-sponsored education events must present balanced information about products based on scientific methods generally accepted in the medical community.

To avoid penalty, sound research methodologies and measurement are essential. Companies must appropriately target the KOLs who affect their products and develop a legitimate program that enables company leaders to interact with these physicians in ways that are meaningful and legal. In order to facilitate a stronger understanding of its benefits and shortcomings, a

leading researcher in the disease state will present information about the medicine and science of a product or therapeutic category to colleagues at medical meetings.

Reliable insights

When data collection and reporting is facilitated by a qualified third-party researcher, medical meetings with physician consultants generate reliable market insights in a forum that complies with regulatory standards. A reputable research provider can help eliminate any perceived bias related to a medical meeting event by designing rigorous research interactions designed to address specific business needs. In this way, both physicians and manufacturers can access each other and provide valuable information without raising the red flag of impermissible promotional activities.

Pharmaceutical companies that successfully access and build rapport with KOLs in a legitimate way win a valuable and reliable source of insight about the marketplace or therapeutic category. These companies are able to stay competitive in an increasingly crowded marketplace, because they understand how a specific product can address today's most important health care matters. | Q