

REPRINT

Developing Win-Win Key Opinion Leader Relationships

by John Mack

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Developing Win-Win Key Opinion Leader Relationships

By John Mack

In today's health care industry, the competition for the most respected, experienced physicians is heating up. This is true not only for health care delivery organizations, it is also a challenge for pharmaceutical companies seeking key opinion leaders (KOLs) to help them in researching, launching, and marketing new drugs. KOLs offer valuable insights into disease states and patient treatment regimens, in addition to new product exposure through medical literature and their professional circles.

Pharma companies that excel at building relationships with key opinion leading physicians open doors that enable them to disseminate new product information and clinical trial results to the medical community through trusted sources.

"At the global, national, regional and local levels, drug companies not only contend with their competitors for doctors' time," says Elio Evangelista, Senior Analyst at Cutting Edge Information, "but they often compete against themselves when they fail to manage key opinion leader (KOL) relationships from a united, coordinated front."

Thought leader relationships are built upon a single, core characteristic. They must be mutually beneficial to both drug companies and physicians. Pharmaceutical companies wish to gain insight into their markets from a unique perspective – through the eyes of general practitioners, researchers, and medical specialists. On the other hand, physicians seek to expand their expertise and gain respect among their peers as they work with innovative, exciting new therapies. "Linking oneself with a medical breakthrough can skyrocket a thought leader's career," says Evangelista.

Winning Practices

Cutting Edge Information, a pharmaceutical business intelligence firm in Durham, North Carolina, studies winning practices in thought leader management and has worked closely with more than a dozen KOL management executives from industry leaders, such as Pfizer, AstraZeneca and GlaxoSmithKline.

Their research reveals five principles for drug companies to live by:

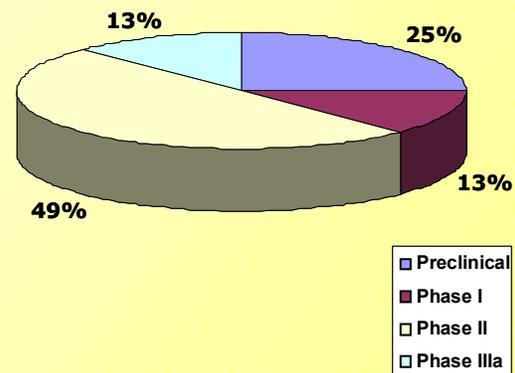
- Build KOL relationships early in the drug development lifecycle

- Establish win-win relationships between medical science liaisons (pharma companies' relationship-builders) and key opinion leading physicians
- Engage local thought leaders to establish a broader sphere of influence
- Define unique strategies for working with each KOL segment (global, national, regional and local)
- Support KOL management efforts with adequate funding

"While no one company has perfected its practices in each of these five areas," says Evangelista, "those that come close stand the greatest chance of winning the support of a key industry segment."

Thought Leaders' Early Involvement

Pharmaceutical companies generally engage key opinion leaders early in the drug development process to provide advocacy activity and key marketing feedback.

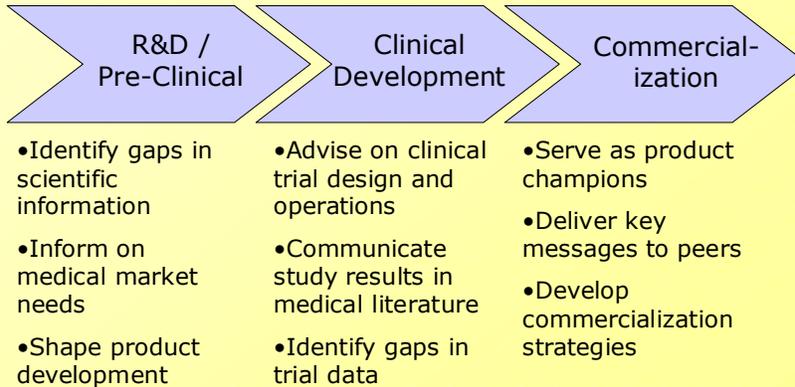


Early Involvement

Most brand teams want to know early those thought leaders they can turn to for critical advice on marketing communications and messages. Brand managers also desire feedback from key opinion leaders on market trends and therapeutic area advancements. "The earlier the brand team has critical market information," Evangelista suggests, "the more it can incorporate thought leader feedback into its marketing strategy." ☞

Involve Key Opinion Leaders Throughout the Product Lifecycle

Opinion leaders provide input and spread the word about new drugs throughout the product development lifecycle.



For example, Cutting Edge Information studied one company whose liaisons monitor opinion leaders' research progress and help plan a post-research publication strategy. As the relationship develops over time, liaisons provide valuable insights on new research within their therapeutic areas, which, when applied, helps build thought leaders' status within the medical community.

"Win-win relationships between opinion leaders and medical science liaisons develop over time and require an open, honest exchange of ideas," suggests Evangelista. According to

Medical Science Liaisons

Over the past decade, pharmaceutical companies have increasingly implemented medical science liaison (MSL) programs as part of their ongoing marketing initiatives. But simply deploying liaisons to interact with thought leaders does not guarantee market success. It is critical that MSLs remain committed to the science behind a product. Otherwise, thought leaders who listen to MSLs' marketing pitches will be permanently turned off from working with them.

MSLs are integral to advancing new research within a therapeutic area, growing market awareness prior to launch, and discovering new indications and market needs for a product. To do so, however, MSLs must focus on developing win-win relationships with key opinion leaders (KOLs). Often, MSLs will work with 25 to 50 thought leaders within a region at any given time – a challenging task, no doubt.

Cutting Edge Information's research found that MSLs who remain scientifically focused and offer thought leaders the opportunity to advance research within their respective therapeutic areas help their companies benefit greatly from increased product awareness. Pharmaceutical companies must also provide thought leaders with research opportunities that could lead to increased influence within the medical community.

one inter-viewed executive, it is important to always "do it right" when working with medical professionals. By this he means things should not be done "half-way."

Company E's KOL Program Structure

Company E's KOL organizational structure combines centralized oversight/coordination with localized/therapeutic area-specific implementation.

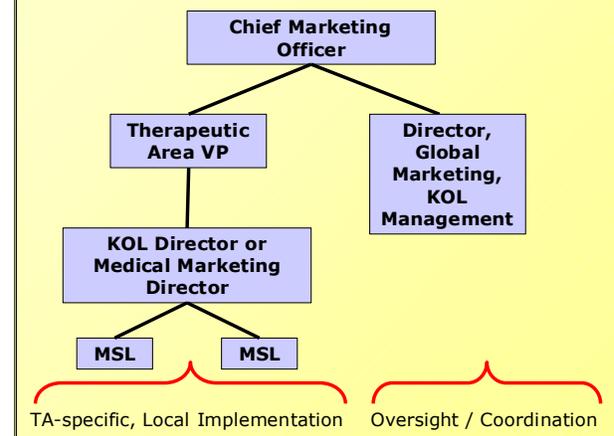


FIGURE: At this company, each therapeutic area (TA) maintains its own key opinion leader management and development group. A director of global marketing, who resides in the global marketing organization, oversees all opinion leader development and coordinates activities across therapeutic areas and brand teams. Compare to FIGURE on next page.

Commercial vs. R&D Oversight

Lasting relationships draw on win-win scenarios for both the company and thought leaders. Company liaisons that act with clear commercial motivation – only working with thought leaders to benefit a drug during launch, for example – tend to isolate most thought leaders. As such, some pharmaceutical companies' medical education groups position themselves as service organizations providing meaningful scientific aid to thought leader contacts. Some also build a "wall" between R&D

Measuring Success

The results of thought leader management often prove intangible or difficult to isolate. Sales success, development progress and marketing impact all require strong opinion leader support – but they also involve a range of company functions whose contributions blend cause-and-effect measurement.

Accurately tracking opinion leader program effectiveness requires creativity. Veteran team leaders craft innovative measurements that reflect the "soft" nature of their employees' activities.

One company may monitor relationship progress to gauge its thought leader managers' effectiveness. Another may use unique criteria to build a matrix of thought leader effectiveness:

- Educational impact
- Product advocacy and knowledge
- Publications presence
- Company research
- Public relations

Looking across a doctor's contributions in these categories provides a snapshot of her role in company success.

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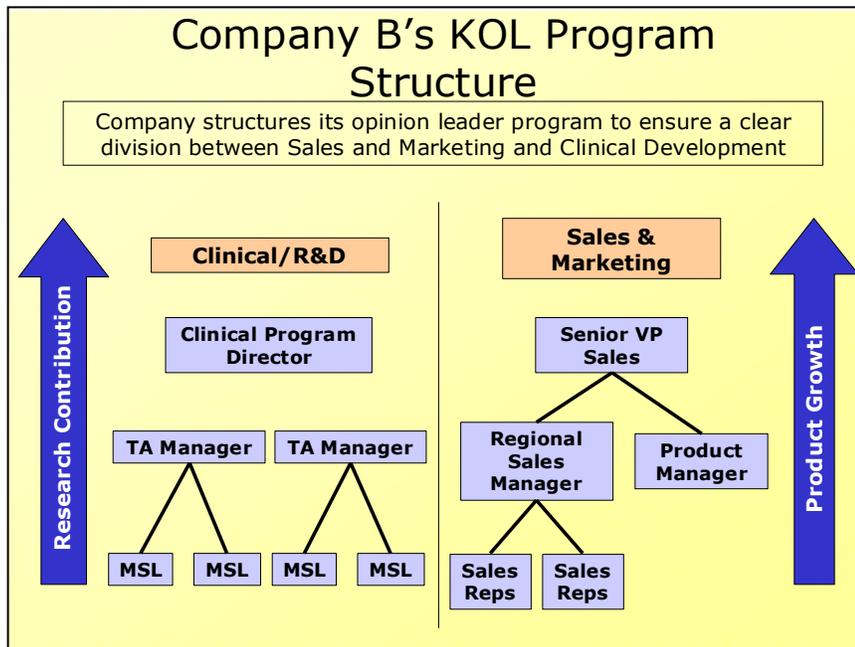


FIGURE: The key opinion leader program at this company clearly separates R&D opinion leader relationships from Sales and Marketing relationships. The company requires a clear delineation to preserve an unbiased approach to its clinical research and development group. Compare to FIGURE on previous page.

and commercial management of KOLs (see FIGURE, previous page).

MSLs continue this relationship by acting as a resource in the field. They may set up meetings for local thought leaders with a respected national-level investigator, for example, or provide information on new research into specific disease states.

Providing such services helps MSLs forge bonds with the company in the long-term. MSLs find physicians interested in clinical investigations through its thought leader relationships. At the next level, MSLs identify candidates for speaker programs and approach these individuals about increasing their involvement in product development and advocacy.

One pharmaco interviewed by Cutting Edge has many teams communicating with thought leaders. To record the many interactions between the company and key opinion leaders, the thought leader relations group created a customer communication database. The database houses information on all the company's interactions and people can determine the current state of each thought leader relationship and what activities they have engaged in with the organization.

The thought leader management database is a subsection of the company's customer database, which is driven by sales data and used by many groups. The thought leader relations group is developing a limited access portion of the database restricted to opinion leader managers.

Source of Figures: "Managing Key Opinion Leader Relationships," <http://www.pharmathoughtleaders.com>