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Effective Physician Marketing at Medical Meeting Exhibits

By John Mack

Imagine hundreds of physicians assembled in one location, away from the stress of the office, eager to learn about the latest drugs and advances in their medical fields, and enjoying some R&R. I'm talking, of course, about physicians attending medical conferences. What better time to get in front of them with your marketing message?

Many pharmaceutical reps feel fortunate when they get 90 seconds of a physician's time during office calls, with the average visit being five minutes or less. Imagine, on the other hand, physicians spending 12 to 20 minutes at your exhibit at a medical conference. Studies by Exhibit Surveys, a tradeshow research group, also indicate that attendees at medical conferences will, on average, spend seven (7) hours on the show floor. The industry norm is that they will typically visit between 21 and 35 exhibits during this time.

With about 80% of physicians planning to attend at least one medical meeting a year and meetings being among the top three sources of product information for physicians, it is no wonder that

marketing to physicians at medical conferences is an important part of a brand's marketing mix – especially soon after launch.

Booth Performance Measures

Physicians may spend hours roaming through the exhibit hall, but what can you do to get them into your booth? Are the right physicians coming in? And once inside your booth, will they get the right message or be turned off? How effective is your exhibit anyway? Does it deliver a return on investment (ROI)? How should ROI be measured?

Marketch, a 20 year old company that offers exhibitor staff training and performance measurement, provides answers to these and other questions about the effectiveness of a drug company's medical meetings exhibits. Over the past three years, Marketch interviewed more than 2300 US physicians and healthcare professionals at 26 healthcare events across all disciplines. Intercept interviews and visual audits for specific clients were conducted at both pharma and medical device meetings, such as: ACCN, AAO, DDW, and ASCO.

Marketch does visual audits of staff performance, customer journeys through booths, visitor reach analysis, and on-site and post-event surveys. "We measure how the staff at an exhibit engages and negotiates with visitors," says Jane Lorimer, Marketch's Research Director. "We also measure how long people stay in the booth, visually track where they are going in the booth, what touch points they visited (e.g, product kiosk, poster, product demonstration, etc.) or if they are coming in to just get a giveaway or coffee, or to participate in a promotion or interactive presentation."

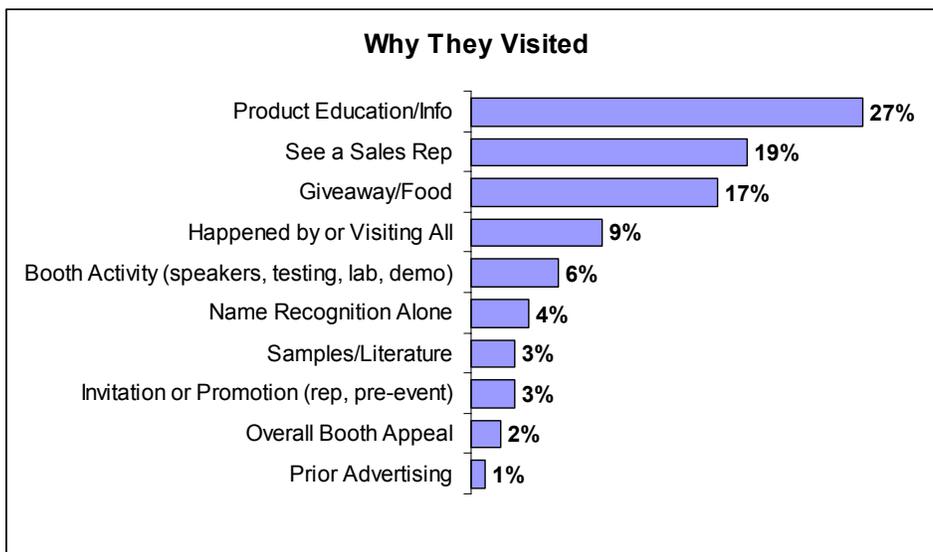


FIGURE 1: Understanding what motivates a physician to stop helps in the creation of an exhibit strategy to selectively attract a targeted audience. [Source: Marketch]

The challenge for marketers is to selectively attract the right audience to the exhibit and to measure success. Traditional ROI can be measured by Rx's written. However, that is sometimes difficult to do and always very expensive. Marketech's approach provides much more insight into what is and what is not effective in your medical meeting marketing plan.

Getting Physicians into the Booth

According to studies by Marketech, the number one reason physicians and other medical professionals visit a specific exhibitor is to get specific product education or information (see Figure 1, pg. 1). "This is not surprising," says Marc Goldberg, Marketech Partner, "physicians attend medical events for the conference program and other educational opportunities. They are primed, therefore, to learn about your product as well."

Marketech's findings also point to the importance of relationships in the buying continuum. Talking to a sales rep, for example, was the second most often cited reason for visiting a specific exhibit. This, of course, is how physicians are used to getting product information and relates back to the fact that physicians often lack the time in the office to interact with the sales rep.

It is clear from this research that exhibits at medical conventions afford more quality time with physicians and health professionals than do many of the rep calls at the field level. Moreover, Exhibit Surveys also found that over 80% of the health professionals who attended shows reported they had not had a sales call within the previous 12 months. This becomes a tremendous advantage or benefit to exhibiting companies and the sales reps in terms of gaining opportunities for face-to-face communication with physicians.

The Message is the Real Giveaway

In the past, when most exhibit professionals were asked what they thought made their exhibit memorable the answer was the giveaways. Marketech's research, however, found that visitors remembered staff interaction as the first and product information discussion as the second most memorable part of their experience at the exhibit. This research also supports the hypothesis that

physicians come armed with specific questions about products and that they want to talk with experts – "experts" being your staff.

Although the primary reason attendees visit meetings as well as specific exhibits is to get education (eg, CME and product information), Marketech's research found that slightly over half (51%) of the healthcare professionals interviewed said they had learned nothing new during exhibit visits. "Does this mean, as exhibitors, we have failed?" asks Goldberg. "Yes and no. In some cases, there simply was nothing new about the product and in other cases the rep is doing a great job keeping them informed during the year through regular contact."

The way visitors remember products and services is to create an experience. It might be through an

Giveaways

Getting a giveaway item five years ago was at the top of the list of reasons why visitors stopped. This reason is now in third place. The data suggests that the attraction of giveaways is still important in the minds of the attendees, but is no longer the overriding reason that visitors stop.

This is due, in part, to the stricter PhRMA Code regulations which have changed the former practice of handing out significant or expensive giveaway items to one of handing out "reminder" items of low intrinsic value such as candy, pens, note pads, or giving away items with more value that relate to patient education such as CD-ROMs containing product information, slide kits, and laser emblazed pens that physicians use everyday in their practice.

Pharmaceutical companies also face a significant challenge complying with state laws such as the California Health and Safety Code, Section 119402 and Vermont law 33 V.S.A. § 2005, which require at least some kind of accounting by pharmaceutical companies for free gifts given to doctors practicing in those states (see "[What Pharma Companies Spend on Gifts to Docs](#)," PMN Reprint #52-02).

Keeping track of the value of gifts given to California or Vermont doctors at an exhibit booth at a national medical meeting may not be practical. One way to handle this is to determine the percentage of meeting attendees who were doctors from these states and calculate value of gifts as a percentage of total gifts dispensed rather than keeping track of specific gifts given to each physician. Marketers are urged, however, to consult with their legal/regulatory people regarding their own company's policies regarding accounting for gifts to physicians.

exhibit activity or it might be the pure relevance of information that is being transmitted. It can be new information or it can be 'old' information presented

in a new way. The overriding objective is to create an event experience that is remembered when it is time to buy, use, recommend or prescribe.

Approximately 83% of physician visitors to a drug company's booth are already familiar with the product. That being the case, why exhibit?

"To answer this," says Goldberg, "let's consider the remaining 17% who were not familiar with the products prior to visiting. Even if only a portion of these were in a high decile target group, the exhibiting company still benefits. Additionally, some of the ones who were already familiar with the products also learned something new, which reinforces positive exposure to the brands."

Impact on Prescribing

The bottom line for brand marketing efforts, however, is sales. Marketech's research found as a result of visiting an exhibit that two-thirds (67%) of physicians indicated they will be either very likely or fairly likely to prescribe or recommend the exhibitors' drugs or medical devices (see Figure 2.)

"The important finding is that nearly a third (29%) of booth visitors to specific exhibits said they were more likely to add to the exhibitor's top line by prescribing more," said Goldberg. "When respondents said 'not at all likely' it was typically because the drug was not yet available in their area or they did not have authority to prescribe or

recommend," claimed Goldberg.

A brand is the sum of all the associations a prospective customer has about a product or company. For medical exhibits, the key to being distinctive and memorable is education, education, education. It is important to present the information in a variety of learning formats (seeing, hearing, interacting, and take-away) that appeal to physicians and healthcare professionals.

Best Exhibit Marketing Practices

Enhance product information via a knowledgeable staff, graphics, and demos or hands-on activities.

A well-trained staff is the most important element of the booth. An interaction with a physician in a booth is much different than a detail call at the doctor's office. "The staff needs to know how to engage the physician in the booth," says Lorimer. "The selling environment is different at a trade show. Healthcare professionals, for example, tend to spend more time discussing specifics of a drug than during an office detail."

Most importantly, ensure that exhibit staff understand the value of longer face-to-face communication on the floor and the resulting impact on prescribing or buying attitudes in the next twelve months.

FDA physicians regularly attend meetings and visit drug company booths. The staff needs to be well aware of any laws pertaining to product discussions with physicians (eg, off-label promotion) so they do not violate any PhRMA codes, OIG guidelines, or FDA regulations.

Use the convention venue to promote an outstanding roster of in-booth speakers at a speaker theater or demo lab to attract a solid audience. It addresses the attendees' desire for continuing education as well as to see, hear and learn from and be in the presence of industry knowledge leaders.

Select giveaway items that physicians will find of value in their practice and that communicate a reminder message about your product. Giveaways within the OIG guide-

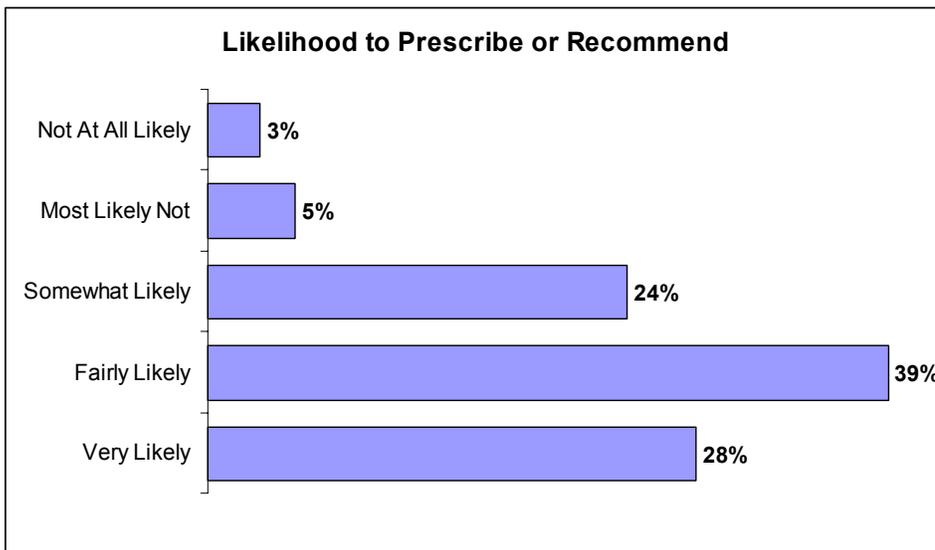


FIGURE 2: The bottom line of the exhibiting experience is whether it motivated the physician to prescribe or recommend. [Source: Marketech]

lines that create a link in their minds about you and are ones that serve as a reward or motivating element for spending time in your exhibit.

Encourage sales reps to personally invite their physicians to the specific meeting of interest to stop at the booth, learn what is new, or hear KOL's (key opinion leaders) on topics of interest.

Be prepared to deal with U.S. vs. international visitors. Both language and legal issues come into play. Consider having separate areas in the booth for US and international visitors. This helps when there are country-specific product offerings.

Conclusion

Physicians like hands-on exchanges with knowledgeable professionals. They like meaningful giveaways and interactive displays. They want credible information that increases their fair and balanced knowledge about the products and services. They want information that will allow them to help their patients.

Pharma Marketing News

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