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Physician Meetings: Education Works Both Ways

By John Mack

Meetings with physicians, whether it be satellite symposia at major medical conferences or “developmental” advisory board meetings with key opinion leaders, are becoming more and more important as tools for physician education as well as for educating pharmaceutical companies.

Educate the Physician, Improve Access

At medical meetings there’s opportunity for education as well as promotion. Pharmaceutical companies typically promote their products at booths in the exhibit halls at major medical congresses. Pharma-sponsored education, however, is usually done at “satellite symposia,” which are held elsewhere on site or nearby off site.

Satellite symposia and dinner meetings help improve access to key physicians, which has declined in recent years. An average physician is called upon by 20 reps per day and a high-volume prescriber may have 50 reps knocking on the door each day. Is it any wonder that reps are turned away 43% of the time or that some physicians are even considering charging for access?

According to Paul Marinelli, president of Alliance Communications, a medical special project agency, “physician meetings are an important part of a pharmaceutical company’s promotional mix, especially when the effectiveness of sales reps is waning.” As sales effectiveness continues to wane, medical meetings will be even more critical to pharmaceutical companies who wish to influence physicians’ prescribing patterns.

Physicians are interested in learning from experts. Meetings—whether they are large congresses or small advisory board meetings—are excellent venues for providing physicians with value-added learning resources, which, in turn help open doors.

“In essence,” says Marinelli, “a meeting is a classroom. Most physicians are in a classroom environment until their 30s. And, of course, they are required to continue to learn current treatment options throughout their careers.” Marinelli suggests that physicians are very comfortable with

the classroom form of learning, otherwise they would not have been able to get their degrees from medical schools and advanced their careers into subspecialties.

“The future,” says Dr. Peter Alagona, MD, FACC, a clinical intervention cardiologist from Florida, “will include more electronic education. But the reality today is that most doctors still want education where they can see their colleagues and ask them questions.”

Essential Ingredients for a Successful Meeting

There are three essential ingredients to creating and managing a successful physician meeting, whether it is a symposium or an advisory board meeting:

1. **Content** – the science, what goes on at the meeting, and who attends the meeting
2. **Logistics Planning** – how the meeting is run, how attendees get there, how they leave
3. **The Budget** – controlling costs so that there is no budget overrun

Alliance Communications, which has worked with pharma companies and key opinion leaders (KOLs) since 1987, and has organized dozens of physician meetings, is involved in both the logistics of meeting planning and the content development for pharmaceutical sponsored medical meetings and symposia. Besides handling all the logistics for KOL meetings, Alliance Communications has 35 years of experience in recruiting critical KOLs in several different therapeutic areas including CNS, pain, cardiology, infectious disease, hematology, HIV, oncology and others.

Educating the Pharma Company

A study that has a poor design or that misses critical endpoints can often kill a new innovative compound in early development. In addition, major costs are incurred when a study has to be changed or a protocol has to be adjusted.

Developmental meetings, such as advisory board meetings, help pharmaceutical companies ensure

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Suggestions from IFPMA on Symposium Sponsorship

"Symposia, congresses and the like are indispensable for the dissemination of knowledge and experience. Scientific objectives should be the principal focus in arranging such meetings and entertainment and other hospitality shall not be inconsistent with such objectives."

When a pharmaceutical company or association sponsors a symposium, congress or other medical/health care or educational programme:

- the fact of sponsorship by the company or association should be clearly stated in advance, at the meeting and in any proceedings. Printed, audio-visual or computer-based material arising from such meetings should accurately reflect the presentations and discussions;
- entertainment or other hospitality and any gifts offered to members of the medical and allied professions should be secondary to the main purpose of the meeting and should be kept to a modest level;
- any support to individual health practitioners to participate should not be conditional upon any obligation to promote any medicinal product;
- if the programme is accredited for postgraduate medical education by a medical or other professional organisation, responsibility for the programme content remains with the organisation responsible for obtaining accreditation for the meeting, and industry support should be disclosed;
- payments of reasonable honoraria and reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses, including travel, for speakers/presenters are customary and proper;
- companies should not pay travel costs of persons accompanying invited members of the medical and allied professions.

– International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Associations New Marketing Code

that clinical studies are done properly so that the drug is more likely to be approved and positioned properly with physicians after approval. Alliance Communications manages about 25 domestic and international advisory board meetings per year.

"Education also occurs at developmental meetings," say Marinelli. "For example, we organize a lot of advisory board and consultant meetings during phase II and III development before the drug is approved and launched." At these "developmental" meetings, pharmaceutical companies inform key physicians about the clinical trial protocol, indications, etc.

The purpose of these meetings is 2-fold: (1) make sure that the clinical research is being done correctly (here the pharma company learns from its physician advisors), and (2) keep KOLs in the loop, which helps later when promotion begins. "This is why meetings with physicians—including advisory board meetings—are such an important part of the promotion/education mix," says Marinelli.

KOL Recruitment and Management

Marinelli emphasizes how important it is to select key opinion leaders carefully. "I see that as a primary role that my company plays in helping companies put these advisory boards and meetings together," says Marinelli.

All physicians are experts to some degree, but not all meet the necessary requirements to be key opinion leaders. "Our expertise comes into play determining who the real key players are and bringing them to our clients. It's where our experience pays off," says Marinelli.

"You really want unbiased KOLs to participate in developmental meetings in order to reap the maximum benefit from your research efforts," says Marinelli. "Sometimes, drug companies are a bit myopic about how its drug should be used. Unbiased KOL input may point to other uses as well. Such meetings can be very important in keeping drug development on track."

Marinelli concedes that pharma companies don't always listen to their KOLs and follow their advice. "A recent phase III study failed key study endpoints vs. placebo controls," he recounts. "The mediocre test results were predicted by the KOLs. Unfortunately, the company executives and clinical directors who did not heed the advice of their KOLs are all looking for new jobs!"

KOL meetings are also critical to a successful drug launch and continued marketing of a drug already on the market. A small meeting where KOLs can

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review a marketing campaign can often reaffirm the market research or reveal problems. “We try to recruit KOLs for such meetings who will be unbiased and give the companies information that they NEED to hear rather than what they WANT to hear,” says Marinelli.

New KOLs are always entering the scene. One way that Marinelli keeps his contacts up to date is by attending most of the major medical conferences every year. “I work personally on every project and baby sit the project and client every step of the way. This personalized attention is what makes Alliance unique among our competitors, I believe.”

Logistics, Meeting Planning Important Too

“Logistics are important because if a meeting is poorly organized, physicians will remember and it reflects upon the company and the product,” says Marinelli. The converse is also true: a well-organized meeting makes a positive impression on attendees. “As with baseball umpires,” says Marinelli, “the best meeting planner is the one that you don’t even know is there.” Although meeting planning may appear seamless and not requiring much work to Alliance’s clients, Marinelli emphasizes that it is a very labor intensive part of the business. “The best compliment that clients pay us is that the project went off without a glitch,” he says.

Visiting Professor Meetings

Another kind of meeting that Alliance helps organize and manage for its pharma clients is what Marinelli calls “Visiting Professor” meetings where expert speakers support the sales effort. These include local breakfast, “lunch and learn” and dinner meetings. Speakers at these meetings are more effective in communicating the science and diagnostics behind prescribing.

“Vocalizing drug features and benefits is the role of the sales presentation, not the role of the expert presenter,” says Marinelli. The dinner attendees know why the presentations are being made: to build trust in the company and enhance sales rep credibility. “When done right,” says Marinelli, “these types of meetings are effective door openers for reps and can improve their credibility with physicians. Of course, the better the science, the better the meeting and the more effective it is.”

CME

Alliance Communications works with third-party continuing medical education (CME) providers when working on meetings with CME credits attached. “It adds another firewall between

education and promotion,” say Marinelli. “We focus on the promotion and logistics for the meeting, the CME provider focuses on the content. When the OIG changed the face of CME I thought it was paramount that the science comes across as clean and unbiased as possible. I don’t see how communication companies can offer both unbiased CME and promotion.”

Summary

In summary, Alliance Communications brings the following benefits and services to its clients for whom it manages physician meetings:

- Two decades of experience in many therapeutic categories
- Ongoing development of up and coming KOLs in many therapeutic categories
- Expertise in the appropriate KOL selection for advisory boards
- Excellent seamless meeting planning and logistics capability

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Experts Cited In Article

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