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Spreading the Word

Healthcare marketing in the modern age

Leading the Way

Neil Kendle outlines how companies should go about smoothing the path for successful long-term relationships with their key opinion leaders (KOLs).



Companies need to plan their opinion leader programmes with a view to developing long-term relationships based on mutual trust, understanding and benefits. Doing this properly is not without its challenges, but the gains for the successful company are enormous.

Only a few years ago opinion leader development was conducted largely on an *ad hoc* basis, with doctors recruited to become involved in individual activities. Whilst companies inevitably knew a few opinion leaders per brand with whom they developed strong working relationships and who worked with them on different activities over many years, the relationships tended to develop in an unplanned way.

Opinion leader programmes have now become integral to strategic brand plans. There is a new recognition that planned, long-term, mutually-beneficial relationships with a reasonably large cohort of opinion leaders in each relevant therapy area

should exist. Long-term relationships develop mutual trust, allow both sides to understand how best to work with each other and enable the opinion leaders to get to know the company and its products in their therapy area.

What does long term mean? It may be a few years, the life cycle of a brand or of several consecutive brands, or even, in some cases, the working life of a doctor.

Preparing for long-term relationships

In moving to planned long-term relationships there are a number of issues for a company to consider. These are detailed below.

When should a company start its opinion leader activities? The company may already have a product, and hence existing relationships, in the therapeutic area, but there must be a first time it gets involved in a disease area. The dilemma is that there are benefits from starting as early as

possible but, of course, the earlier companies get involved, the greater the risk of a product failing and the investment being wasted. In an analysis in the US, almost 90% of pharma companies said they had started their opinion leader management activities by the end of Phase II. Some companies claimed to start their programmes as early as the pre-clinical phase.

Unless the company has several compounds in the same therapeutic area in the pipeline, or has investment in studies at such a level as to put any spend on opinion leader activities in the shade, a sensible approach would be to undertake only some basic activities at a preclinical stage. These would generally be a rudimentary identification of opinion leaders in the area — particularly to find investigators — and one or more advisory boards. However, by Phase I (or Phase II at the latest), the full opinion leader programme should have kicked in.

What happens if development on a product is stopped? This is a hotly debated issue. On the one hand, if the company stops its programme, particularly if it abandons initiatives mid-stream, it risks losing a lot of good will built up over time, generally at great expense. If, however, it continues the programme, the company is spending money where there is no product to support. The decision should be based on a consideration of how long the investment has been going on, how many other products there are in the pipeline, and how soon the next product will be coming on stream.

If the decision is taken to halt the programme, it is essential that opinion leaders are told quickly and honestly.

What does the opinion leader want from the relationship? Opinion leaders need the industry as much as we need them, but they do not necessarily need to work with any specific company. The more successful companies, therefore, look at these relationships as much from the point of view of the opinion leader as from what they themselves want out of it. They ask why he or she would want to get involved with it?

Opinion leaders tend to look for a long-term relationship with clarity from the company about what they can expect and what the company wants from them. What they want specifically will depend on their interests. Reasons for getting involved may be the opportunity to get to know the product early; to participate in educational initiatives; to get sponsorship for themselves or their juniors to attend congresses; or maybe just because it is rewarding to advise on marketing matters through an ad board.

Although for some reason companies are reluctant to do so, the best way to find out what opinion leaders want is simply to ask them, and then record their responses in a place where their colleagues and successors can find it.

What should a company want from opinion leaders and in which activities should they involve each individual? A company will be looking to build and maintain relationships with a number of different types of opinion leader and a number who hold various views about the disease and the product.

Many of them will hopefully be product advocates, but by no means all will or should be. Non-supporters in the opinion leader mix will often be big names who will chair company meetings and give non-promotional presentations designed to attract an audience. They may also sit on advisory boards to balance the advice of product champions.

The company will also want to ensure that they work with each individual in a way that best fits his



strengths, desires and attributes. This will include understanding what his research interests are; what type of research he is best suited for; what marketing and communications activities he is happy to be involved in and is good at. What are they like as speakers? Do they want to be involved in educational activities or like to talk to the media? Again, as much of this information as possible should be recorded but whilst it is fine to record their likes, recording skills and abilities can be difficult in an age when opinion leaders can ask to see what records a company holds on them.

The stage the opinion leader is at in his career should also influence the ways he is involved. They will be more suited to, and more interested in, undertaking particular activities depending on whether they are a rising star, at the peak of their career, approaching retirement or even recently retired.

How to ensure continuity of plans and relationships across functions and geographies? This is the sixty-four thousand dollar question. No one has absolutely cracked the problem although some companies certainly do it better than others.

At any one time many people in a company are likely to have

involvement with a company's opinion leaders. These might differ brand teams in the same therapeutic area, global and the affiliate in which the opinion leaders is located, and different functions. The biggest problem of course, is the disconnect that often exists between marketing and medical. Part of the problem is that there is little joint planning about opinion leaders or sharing of relationships. The most visible failing, and therefore the one that is apparent

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to the opinion leaders themselves, is simply a lack of internal knowledge about the scale of the opinion leader's activities for the company. Less visible, but more damaging, is that no one is planning the optimal involvement of the opinion leader, who will often have a formal or self-imposed limit on how much involvement he or she can have in the company's activities.

The more successful solutions require an audit of what currently happens in the organisation; discussion amongst the various functions to seek solutions that meet all needs; and clear and measurable processes governing opinion leader activities and internal communications.



About the Author

Neil Kendle is managing director of Kendle Healthcare, a consultancy specialising in opinion leader identification and development.