

## **Forging Key Opinion Leader Relationships: Developing the Next Generation**

### **Introduction**

Key Opinion Leader (KOL) involvement in a therapy area, drug class or product is an essential component of any pharmaceutical marketing campaign. They have the expertise and the authority to convey information to healthcare professionals and patients in a way that marketers simply cannot.

Successful working relationships with KOLs can deliver a wide range of benefits including improved credibility and third party endorsement for a product's characteristics. But it is absolutely crucial that KOLs maintain their independence and avoid being seen as supporting one brand or company over any other. It is equally important for a pharmaceutical company to avoid repeatedly using the same KOLs as this can damage the reputation of the KOL – weakening the messages being communicated.

### **So what's the solution?**

Part of the solution is working with a broad spectrum of KOLs, and part of that process involves nurturing the KOLs of tomorrow. At TVF Communications, we work with our clients to identify and develop a wide range of multidisciplinary healthcare professionals who can bring a fresh perspective that complements the vision of established KOLs. These 'rising stars' all share similar characteristics: outstanding clinical expertise, professional drive, a passion for and commitment to what they do and, ideally, an appreciation of the opportunities and constraints facing the pharmaceutical industry.

### **Identifying the KOLs of tomorrow**

The next generation of KOLs can be identified through various sources. The sales force can be an invaluable ally, as Simon Lem from Biogen Idec notes: "One of our most powerful tools

is the sales force as they see customers most often... but good guidance and collaboration with the marketing team is essential to ensure the sales force know what they should be looking for and what questions to ask”.

Keeping an eye on congress attendance, trial authorship and who is being quoted in the trade press will help identify the up-and-coming professionals who are communicating messages in line with your brand strategy. Your existing KOLs can assist in recommending them, and might even play a part in their development. As Simon Lem suggests, these are opportunities that pharma companies often miss; “Sometimes we are so focussed on getting our KOLs to say the right things that we miss other rising stars who are already endorsing”.

### **The changing face of KOLs**

However, the changing face of the NHS – including the introduction of foundation trusts, practice-based commissioning, payment by results and the advent of polyclinics – is encouraging a new breed of physician to emerge, and the KOLs of tomorrow will need to reflect these developments. This group will include not just clinical specialists but also those in planning and management, those that influence guidance and purchasing at various levels, as well as new prescribers.

Adam Boucher from Bristol-Myers Squibb feels this is one key area where the commercial sector, which already has a wealth of experience in areas such as business planning, marketing, funding, acquisition, business proposals and project management, can really bring value to the NHS customer – particularly the highly important ‘next generation’ of consultants and opinion leaders. Recent BMS research identified that customers were particularly seeking support with publishing papers and guidelines, managing and motivating teams, change management, HR legislation, NHS policy update, negotiating with managers and presentation skills.

Commenting on these findings, Adam Boucher said: “The consultants of tomorrow will need more than their clinical skills to survive in their new roles. By understanding our customer needs from the very beginning, we as an industry have the opportunity to provide a valuable service to our HCP customers to further develop their clinical, management and commercial skills”.

## **Building long-lasting partnerships**

To ensure the success of KOL development programmes it is essential there is commitment from both parties. Ben Lucas, from Roche Products, asserts that “If KOL development is to be truly effective then both company and customers alike have to ‘buy-in’ to the process. Changes to the ABPI Code enable companies and customers to ‘sign-up’ to contracts and development plans that will clearly structure the expectations and commitment from both sides.”

Advisory boards with a combination of both well-known KOLs and ‘jobbing’ professionals provide a classic networking opportunity that enables rising stars to meet more of their peers and start profiling themselves. Inviting rising stars to participate in medical education and PR activities will encourage them to communicate disease awareness messages while avoiding overt product promotion. National or regional speaker meetings are also highly effective at building presentation skills and increasing confidence. Ben Lucas believes that “finding innovative platforms from which to draw value for both customer and company is the critical element to the long-term success of any KOL development programme”. Simon Lem adds that involving less well-known clinicians in areas such as patient materials or educational activities is a good way to develop relationships.

In summary, to build long-lasting partnerships with the next generation of KOLs the industry will first need to decide what that next generation looks like. It is important to use a broad set of criteria to identify potential KOLs and then to involve them in exciting and innovative projects, as well as helping them tackle the challenges they are likely to face throughout their careers.

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