

## Running successful primary care meetings in 2006

The primary care meeting has proved time and time again to be an invaluable opportunity for building closer relationships with customers, addressing local issues and effecting change through providing primary care health professionals with the chance to meet with national and international specialists. With the ABPI restrictions and intense focus on pharmaceutical activities following the Health Select Committee report, it is more important than ever that the meeting itself is truly a quality event (although this *should* always have been the case). The speakers must be of the highest calibre; the programme must offer new information relevant to the audience's area of interest, it must be untarnished by commercial bias, and professional accreditation should preferably be available.

*"The primary care meeting is a crucially important part of our 2006 plan, which we believe can continue to be a success, working within the new ABPI guidance"* Sherry Kerrigan, Senior Brand Manager, Novartis Pharmaceuticals UK

The new ABPI guidance has brought with it significant challenges to the traditional primary care meeting. However, many feel that the changes will not constitute a revolution as they had long been anticipated and the majority of companies had already developed their own standard operating procedures for appropriate venues and levels of hospitality. However, this is the first time that these requirements have been set in stone and there are new issues, such as the fact that competitions, quizzes and prizes will no longer be possible, which go further than had been expected.

But despite these challenges, primary care health professionals are still, and will still be, inundated with invites for events. The age-old problem of attracting the right people and ensuring that they attend remains. So how do you make your event work?

### ***Attracting delegates***

The primary care audience is certainly changing, with greater emphasis on pharmacists and nurses, however the mainstay is still very often the GP. We need to consider at the outset exactly which health care professionals should be invited.

The first stage to consider in running a successful event or series of events is appealing to your audience. Five crucial elements of this are outlined below:

*Outstanding faculty and programme* – confirm your faculty early so that it can be advertised on invites and they can contribute to the programme development. The key thing that the pharmaceutical industry can offer is to respond quickly to emerging educational needs and to facilitate the meeting of health care professionals and leaders in a particular field.

*Offer something different* – It is very difficult to be truly innovative in this area but it's worth getting as many brains together as possible to come up with ideas for making the event stand out. Ideas include the use of keypads to vote on issues throughout the meeting, poster displays, sessions on current political issues, practical workshop sessions, demonstrations and advice segments.

*Develop a strategy for the invitation process early on* – it may sound obvious but spending a significant amount of time planning *how* you are going to invite your audience to ensure you get the right people there is time well spent. This may involve a teaser 'save-the-date' introducing the chair person and theme, followed by subsequent waves delivered via the sales team. Or it may be best to tie this in to the mailing list of a relevant professional body. Whatever the best method is, it generally takes time, so the earlier the better as you ideally need to send the first invites three months before a meeting.

*Involve the sales team early and regularly thereafter* – It is rare in primary care, that the topic will be so attractive to the audience, that the meeting entirely 'sells' itself. The sales team are crucial in driving attendance, so you need to make sure that they are briefed early. Historically, meetings have often been advertised through the quality of the venue. Now we need to make sure that representatives are discussing the quality of the speakers and the programme. And to do this, briefing and training is required. Roll-out packs can be sent out with step-by-step guides to selling the meeting or even off-the-road training made available.

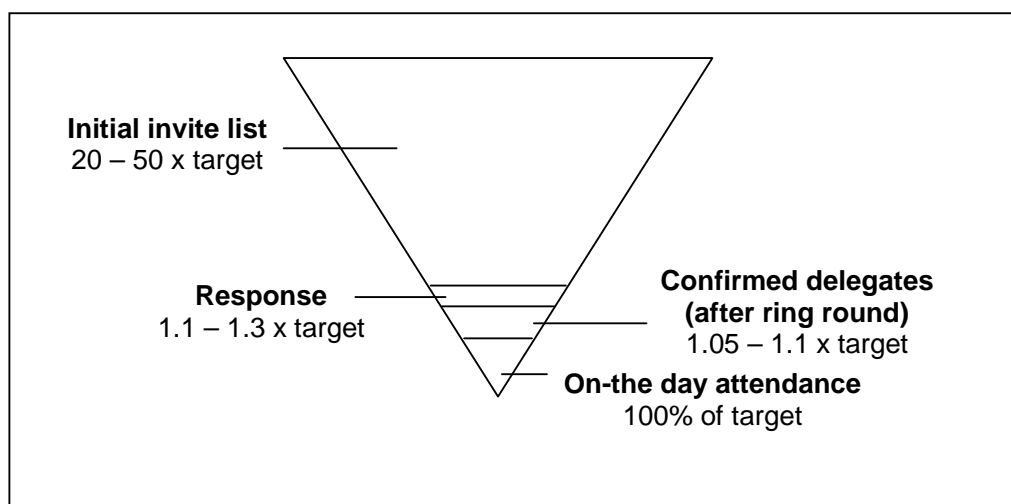
*"The success of primary care meetings is hugely influenced by the salesforce. We routinely brief our salesforce very early on in the process and continue to involve them throughout. This has led to very good delegate numbers."* Sherry

Kerrigan, Senior Brand Manager, Novartis Pharmaceuticals UK

*Make registering as easy as possible* – You have a narrow window of opportunity here. Complicated registration forms will put people off, as will offering only one way of registering. It's best to offer a range of alternatives – web, phone, post and email. Everyone has a preference and provided you make the instructions as simple as possible, you should manage to capture anyone who is interested in the meeting. Providing a phone line and web system also allow the sales force greater flexibility to register interested customers.

### ***Minimising drop out and hitting target***

It is difficult to estimate response rates for any meetings. In primary care, a best guess at the figure would be 2-5% of those invited; however this varies greatly depending upon the method of invitation and the involvement of the sales team. So, roughly speaking, to ensure 100 people on-the-day, you need to invite some 2,000-5,000 people. Allowing for a worst case of 30% drop-out and non-attendance, this rises to 2,600-6,500. The exact breakdown of your targets needs to be keenly examined at the outset to ensure that your target is realistic.

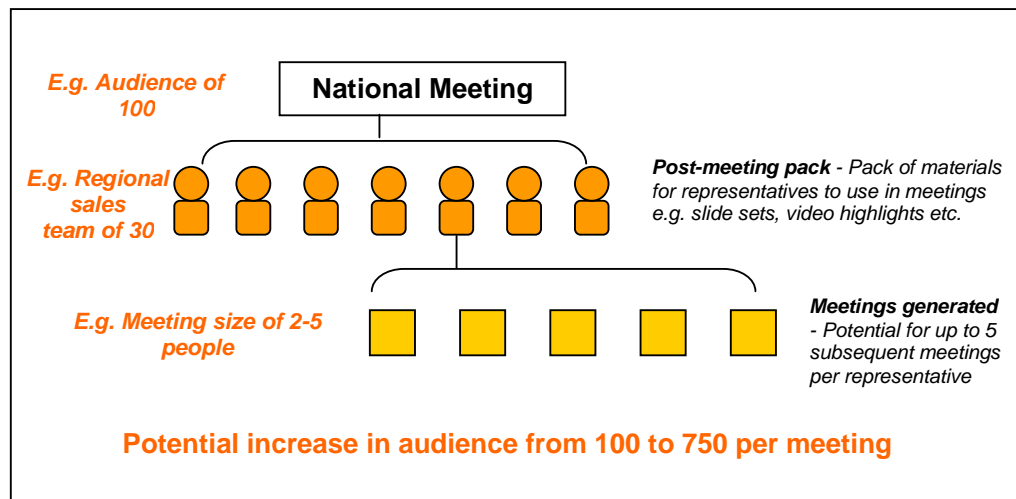


*Typical response rates and targets for primary care meetings*

With the best will in the world, there will be cancellations and no-shows as well as previously un-registered delegates who turn up on the day. Predicting this is nothing short of impossible. Things that can help are to avoid venues that necessitate complicated travel or parking and of course, steer clear of major sporting events. Generally speaking, it is best to drive registrations right up until the meeting. By planning regular contact following registration using a variety of means (web, phone, post and email), you offer all possible ways for delegates to inform you of drop-out. Equally important is being accessible to the sales team and requesting immediate updates from them as they call on registered delegates. Two weeks before the meeting, spend the time ringing around all of those who have confirmed, as this will weed out the majority of no-shows. In a recent series of 6 national meetings run by TVF, the attendance on the day was 97% of confirmed delegates following such ring rounds.

### **Making the most of the meeting**

Having gone to considerable effort and expense in putting together a faculty and programme, it seems criminal not to extend the campaign, but this is so often the case. Not only do you need to follow-up with delegates who attended, but the programme delivered to your delegates should be made available to all of your customers through the sales force. You can exponentially increase the sphere of influence that you have with this meeting by putting into place a post-meeting strategy.



*Scope for maximising the reach of a meetings programme*

There are many easy and speedy ways to do this. A 'key learns' document written immediately after the meeting and delivered by the sales force is the simplest idea and can form the basis of ongoing meetings with customers. If this can be endorsed by, and distributed along with a relevant publication, all the better. If you have more time, a chair person's highlights provide a highly credible alternative to the key learns document. Alternative ideas include meeting slide sets and video highlights, which allow you to more literally bring the meeting to those who were not able to attend. Taking a more long-term approach, another alternative is to utilise the faculty that you have brought together to respond to ongoing questions, perhaps coming together on a web forum at points throughout the year. The strategy, including thorough sales force briefing, should be put in place to manage this post-meeting phase so that each member of the sales force knows exactly what they must achieve and by when.

It is undoubtedly a time of change in this area of medical education but it is also clear that the primary care meeting is as important now as it always has been. However, everyone involved in running these meetings must continue to put more thought into both the planning and execution if we are to achieve the objectives set out for them.

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Published in *Pharmafocus*, 2006