The Pharmaceutical Industry and External Experts: Optimal Engagement Strategies in a Digital Age

A MedThink Communications White Paper
Healthcare Companies and External Experts

Organizations within the healthcare industry often work with external experts on an array of initiatives. These experts collaborate with pharmaceutical and other healthcare companies in a variety of ways, including working as advisory board members, investigators, media spokespeople, and speakers. Once a genuine need for expert engagement has been established, the process of engaging these experts has generally been standardized and traditionally limited to in-person meetings and teleconferences, which are becoming increasingly difficult to execute given cost considerations and experts’ often over-extended schedules. While these in-person interactions are invaluable for the sponsoring company and often are beneficial for the expert as well, new, more cost-efficient digital solutions are needed to increase interaction and collaboration.

The relationships sponsoring companies have with external experts are often critical to the success of an organization, helping to secure feedback and make informed decisions. The healthcare environment is changing at a rate never before seen. Healthcare reform, fierce competition among companies, increased regulatory scrutiny, and the speed at which information is disseminated means experts may need to be engaged at numerous times between formal meetings and teleconferences.

In today’s digital age where rapid information exchange is a necessity, additional opportunities exist to improve communication and collaboration between experts and the sponsoring company. Providing digital collaboration tools, particularly for experts, can further help an organization meet key objectives, including

- Addressing urgent issues in a timely, organized, and efficient manner
- Providing an environment to engage in ongoing, more frequent communication
- Briefing on specific topics or issues (eg, disease state, scientific study, product information)
- Building a “community” atmosphere
- Improving the sponsoring company’s overall reputation among experts
- Continuing to build and enhance relationships

Physicians want to engage online. According to recent research, 60% of physicians are using, or are interested in using, online physician communities.¹ Ninety-nine percent of physicians are online daily for professional reasons.²

This white paper provides insights, suggestions, and strategies for healthcare companies to further engage and collaborate with external experts.
Research Shows External Experts Want More Opportunities for Engagement

Recent research demonstrates the need for additional engagement between companies and external experts. MedThink Communications commissioned a survey in January 2010 that polled 105 physician experts with current or past experience as an external advisor for pharmaceutical companies.* The survey was designed to assess the process and tools used for improved collaboration between the external expert and the company.

Research was conducted among physicians from 7 areas of expertise: primary care, oncology, surgery, neurology, cardiology, infectious disease, and gastroenterology.

Key Findings

• **60%** of those polled would like additional opportunities to communicate with a company during the time between in-person meetings

• **74%** want additional opportunities to provide input
  - 37% feel that companies are not providing them with the means to provide expert advice outside of in-person meetings and teleconferences
  - An additional 37% feel companies are only somewhat providing opportunities for additional interaction

• **89%** would be interested in participating in a virtual collaboration tool
  - 88% place medium-to-high value on providing guidance via a virtual collaboration tool
  - More than 86% would participate in or use a virtual environment to efficiently provide expert opinion at least once per quarter

• **74%** would view a pharmaceutical company more positively if the company incorporated a virtual tool into their existing approach to collaboration

• **58%** feel that they do not have easy access to all relevant information needed to provide their best advice and that having this information in a central location will be helpful toward fulfilling their responsibilities
  - Physician experts want easier access to information, including protocols, abstracts/posters, slides, archived presentations, meeting minutes, and media materials

*Research conducted by MDLinx, a division of M3 USA.
Recommendations for Optimal Engagement

Companies currently working with experts or those that plan to work with them in the future should consider several factors when determining the most effective methods to engage and collaborate.

• **Evaluate current processes**—Companies concerned about engaging external experts (eg, advisors, investigators, spokespeople) in the most efficient manner should start by taking time to review their current protocol for working with these experts once a genuine need has been defined and agreed upon. Evaluate how often and in what forums interaction is taking place with experts. Additionally, consider if current processes are allowing for timely and efficient review and exchange of information during periods between in-person meetings or teleconferences. Finally, assess what impact new methods of collaboration, including digital strategies, could have on factors including cost and obtaining timely feedback and counsel from experts.

• **Assess target audiences**—Consider the role of external experts. Are they advisors or investigators? Speakers or participants in media relations activities? Talk with them and evaluate what information is most useful to them and how they would like to collaborate outside of in-person meetings and teleconferences. Learn about their use of digital channels (eg, web sites, smart phones, PDAs), and determine what digital methods they would embrace in their role as an external expert advising your organization.

• **Consider digital strategies**—The manner in which experts interact and exchange information has evolved, and companies need to adapt their approaches to these changes. As research has suggested, external experts want digital collaboration tools and have indicated they will use them, irrespective of their number of years in practice. Additionally, there are reputational issues to consider. Companies that provide methods for optimal engagement will be viewed more positively by external experts.

• **Tailor digital tools**—When considering a digital collaboration tool, you should consider several factors to ensure uptake and ongoing use by experts. These include:
  - Keep it simple for use by experts and sponsoring companies.
  - Ensure it is timely by keeping it updated with the latest information and allowing for rapid input.
  - Customize it to ensure the various tools are flexible to the specific needs of external experts. Put mechanisms in place to allow for adaptations based on changing needs and preferences.
  - Be transparent and candid regarding the use of this tool and how input from external experts will guide or influence company decision making. Include details of how the expert’s input may be an extension of their existing contract, including how they will be compensated for their expert opinions.
  - Capture the information by putting metrics in place to evaluate utilization of digital tools. These include how often advisors are utilizing the technology, the quality of the expert responses, and how new insights are being utilized.
Companies Reaping Rewards of Enhanced Engagement

Several global pharmaceutical companies have already adopted digital approaches to increase collaboration with external experts. These include top-10 global pharmaceutical and specialty biotechnology companies. Their goal is to engage external experts on a more frequent basis to supplement in-person meetings in an effort to continuously guide their decision making. One organization has engaged the highest level experts across the globe regarding a rare disease state; others are concerned with experts’ over-extended calendars and their desire to obtain much-needed input; and a third large pharmaceutical company desires to break out of the box with external experts and match the pace of change in a specific disease area.

Conclusion

Pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and other healthcare companies should more assertively explore and implement digital strategies to enhance relationships and collaboration with experts. In today’s digital age, these approaches are essential to engage and elevate a company’s most important customers; allow for efficient, real-time communication; strengthen relationships; and most importantly, answer the needs of experts.
About MedThink Communications

MedThink Communications is a healthcare communications agency where insight, creativity, and common sense make the most sense for our client partners. With a team of senior-level practitioners with a unique blend of industry, agency, and academic expertise, MedThink provides full-service offerings with a focus on scientific and promotional communications. Our Scientific Communications Group offers scientific platform development, publication planning and execution, and expert engagement services. Our Promotional Account Services Group is instrumental in brand development and management, advertising and promotions, public relations, digital engagement strategies, advocacy development, promotional education, and sales training. At MedThink, we pride ourselves in developing innovative solutions to solve our clients’ most difficult challenges.

About MedThink Connect

MedThink Connect provides the healthcare industry with the means to optimize engagement before, between, and after face-to-face meetings. MedThink Connect was developed as a custom business solution utilizing MedThink strategic thinking and digital expertise to improve efficiencies and optimize collaboration among investigators, spokespeople involved with communications initiatives, speakers, and other external experts whose input a company values.

For more information, please contact

Steve Palmisano, VP, Medical Communications
MedThink Communications
3301 Benson Drive
Suite 400
Raleigh, NC 27609
919.786.4918 ext. 140
spalmisano@medthink.com
www.medthinkconnect.com
www.medthink.com
www.medthinkscicom.com


©2010 MedThink Communications. All rights reserved.