

CHALLENGES IN THOUGHT LEADER MANAGEMENT

DATA ANALYTICS AND TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP



The pharmaceutical industry has been reshaped by many changes over the past decade, including the emergent power of managed care, the declining use of sales representatives, and the explosive growth of data and digital platforms as marketing tools. **One key aspect of the business that has remained constant, however, is the need for pharmaceutical companies to engage with thought leaders.**

Also known as key opinion leaders, or KOLs, these experts influence medical practice and patient care regionally, nationally, or globally. Pharma and biotech companies collaborate with thought leaders at every phase of drug development and commercialization to ensure that patient needs are being met. The importance of engaging with the right thought leaders is reflected in the increased attention placed on them by pharma and biotech companies, who have not only expanded the role of medical science liaisons but have also dedicated staff to manage thought leader relationships. These changes are necessary because of the increased competition for thought leaders' time.

Thoughtful engagement planning and tracking, along with more clearly defined roles for relationship owners, are becoming increasingly important.

At the same time, recent shifts in the pharma landscape have made thought leader management in 2021 a complex task rife with challenges, including:

- The **globalization of the industry**—companies are engaging thought leaders to consult on activities all over the world
- The **increased compliance requirements** that accompany such geographic expansion
- The **demand across functions** within companies to work with the same thought leaders
- The **pending retirement of the “baby boomer” thought leaders** and the need to identify younger, up-and-coming experts.
- The shift to **virtual** or **hybrid** engagement given COVID restrictions.
- The increasing importance of **Digital Thought Leaders**, HCPs who are influential on social media or other online channels.

Pharmaceutical companies that have created internal operations dedicated to managing thought leader engagement are finding that solutions to these challenges lie in data analytics and technology.

THOUGHT LEADERS A “MUST-HAVE”

Although these companies may have varied approaches and different issues to address, the professionals in charge of thought leader management agree that seeking the guidance of these medical experts remains a high-value imperative for the industry. “It is one of the core pieces of strategic and launch readiness plans,” says Marina Tribble, Brand Director at Janssen Pharmaceuticals. Thought leaders, whether they are extensively published researchers or “worker bee” physicians who see patients five days a week, are important to the product development process. The industry needs to rely on the medical experts out there who are dealing with patients. Pharma companies are trying to make patients' lives better, and the best way to do that is to get advice and information from the experts. Thought leaders are consulted by companies on nearly every aspect of the product lifecycle, with optimal patient outcomes as the goal. Their input is sought on trial design and execution, dosing, delivery, compliance, publications, patient communications, and more.



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Patti Hogan, Adviser, Thought Leader Management, at Eli Lilly and Company, sums it up, “The patient’s journey through the health care system is now at the core of everything we do in drug development. Every point on that journey is what we call a moment of truth. These moments of truth really need to be validated by thought leaders. They are the core strategy to understanding the evolving scientific and clinical landscapes, and to ensuring that we understand the patients we serve.

The industry definition of a thought leader hasn’t changed in the past few years. “An individual who is accepted and acknowledged by his or her peers as a qualified expert within a particular subject matter, such as a disease state or payer space,” says Hogan. “They influence thinking beyond their local market.” Thought leaders are experts in a field where the industry is trying to get a better understanding and seek advice.

The way companies interact with these experts also hasn’t changed. “We engage thought leaders very early in the product development process to shape the commercial strategy, product profile, and lifecycle management plans,” says Tribble. Thought leaders are frequently involved with both the medical and marketing sides of a company, again at all stages of a product’s lifecycle. Tribble adds, “We try to translate insights from thought leaders into strategies and tactics.”

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IS COMPLIANCE

New to thought leader management in today’s environment are those aforementioned challenges that have arisen from other industry changes. As one professional relations executive puts it,

“Without a doubt, the biggest challenge is compliance.”

And the issue is not just the Sunshine Act, the U.S. law that mandates disclosure of the financial relationship between companies and consultant physicians. From a global perspective, there is a **surfeit of rules and regulations** for engaging physicians depending on the country you’re in, and the **guidelines are different in every country**. Pharma companies have to ensure they’re following all of the policies within each of the countries.

That makes it challenging, for example, to gather 10 different physicians from 10 different countries for an advisory board meeting on a particular product.



Companies have to follow not only their own global guidelines but also each of the country guidelines, and make sure they use the one that is the most restrictive as the least common denominator so that they don’t inadvertently have a compliance issue.

Adding to the complexity of thought leader management are the university medical centers and hospitals with which the thought leaders are associated. These institutions have started to impose legal and other requirements that must be factored into consulting contracts with thought leaders.

Overall, the process is more complicated and timeconsuming, and companies must understand all aspects of the policies to ensure they’re doing everything correctly. Fortunately, data and technology have come to the rescue. Some companies now have databases of information about the thought leaders, their countries, guidelines, and other details that are built and set up to advance compliance and ensure that everything is done the proper way.



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BE CONSISTENT, TRANSPARENT, AND RESPECTFUL

Thought leaders are the rock stars of medicine.

They conduct and author studies, treat patients, attend conferences, are constantly sought out by colleagues, and often work with multiple companies and brands

The good news, Tribble believes, is that “in this fast-paced environment, physicians are becoming thought leaders quicker than we saw in the past, and the digital networks have been enablers of these changes.”

The other news is that, while the number of thought leaders may be on the rise, the number of internal stakeholders at global pharma companies who want a piece of these experts is increasing.

They may include R&D, Medical Affairs, Marketing, Sales, and Public Affairs/Relations. Can you lead this trial? Author this study? Serve on this advisory board? Speak at this conference?

Such enthusiastic and time-consuming demand for a thought leader’s expertise may be irritating to that physician when he or she is constantly subjected to phone calls and emails, answering the same questions from numerous different people, and speaking to new individuals who are unaware of the existing relationship and history with the company.

Professional relations executives agree that treating thought leaders with respect is paramount. Hogan stresses that, “We need to be the company that thought leaders want to work with. We need to be trustworthy, and foster loyalty and respect. We must be compliant and transparent; the thought leaders expect it. And we need a consistent approach to who the thought leader knows to contact. We need to present as one voice.” In other words,

companies need to be on top of things, punctual, precise, and correct in their communications with thought leaders.

When they ask a question or respond to one, get back to them immediately. That’s the key to managing, sustaining, and strengthening the relationship.

GET A PLAN



—professional relations people agree that these are the watchwords and hallmarks of a successful thought leader management program. Hogan says the situation calls for “a comprehensive plan designed to proactively and collaboratively build lasting and enduring thought leader relationships so that we can all synergistically meet the needs of patients.”

Many companies do have plans in place, supported by data and technology platforms. At Lilly, Hogan says the medical organization leads and drives thought leader engagement at all stages, even as the relationships transition from early drug development to and beyond product launch. “As scientists and health care professionals, the thought leaders want to be talking science early on,” explains Hogan. “Our medical leadership will transition them to the brand team when it comes time to plan for marketing.” Lilly has a “thought leader capabilities office,” an umbrella organization that supports all parts of the enterprise in thought leader engagement planning across business units, therapeutic areas, and geographies. The office implements a global thought leader engagement process that includes defining business needs, identifying the right thought leaders (who meet those needs and are qualified and interested in participating), planning, logistics, feedback, education, and training. A governance committee looks at thought leader engagement from compliance, legal, and privacy perspectives. Hogan maintains that “having a consistent organization that drives a consistent process with procedures, tools, trainings, and resources certainly helps drive good behavior across the globe and provides a good, consistent experience for these important thought leaders.”



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“DATA IS BIG”

Thought leadership managers have a lot to juggle, but here again, technology steps up to the plate. “We have innovative external business partners who help us map and understand the thought leader networks, and also implement platforms to help us manage those relationships,” says Tribble.

Lilly uses a platform called AUCITY to manage thought leader engagement, “and keep our people internally coordinated and communicating with each other,” notes Hogan.

The software tool houses thought leader information and data, helping internal stakeholders plan for thought leader engagements compliantly and track all thought leader activities and interactions, which include advisory boards, speaking engagements, ad hoc consulting, and clinical trial participation.



“It’s one place to house all that info so a line of sight across geographies and functions is always available to people, and the right hand knows what the left hand is doing,” says Hogan.

“A lot of thought leaders are older and retiring,” Hogan says. “We need to foster the up-and-coming experts.” Getting new and integrated data about thought leaders and their networks is a focus of thought leader management professionals. “Data is big,” stresses Hogan. “New, different, and creative ways to look at that data are extremely important to determine

who’s influencing who and identifying the up-and-comers.”



Tribble maintains that “understanding the network can be a source of competitive advantage for a product or company. It’s well known that building the right advocacy network cannot only inform resource allocation but also help inform payer perceptions about new products, impacting adoption rates.”

THE FUTURE

The dynamic pharmaceutical business will surely evolve in the years ahead as new trends, challenges, opportunities, and technologies emerge. Thought leader engagement, however, looks to prevail as a much needed and valued mainstay of the industry.

Thought leader management professionals are thinking about that future. In addition to keeping an eye out for new thought leaders waiting in the wings, “we need to understand how they prefer to **engage** with us, how they prefer to **communicate** or **interact** with us,” says Hogan. “There’s an ever-growing environment of new, innovative and creative ways to engage with people in different electronic media, changing every day.”

Lilly is about to launch an internal market research survey of “how we’re doing with thought leaders,” notes Hogan. It’s an effort to establish thought leaders’ personal preferences about industry activities, further streamline communications, logistics, and touch points, and “make the experience of working with us more exceptional and easier for them.”

As for the next big challenge for companies in thought leader management, Tribble believes it may be “breaking down the barrier between medical and commercial functions.

That way we can work as a team to share insights, work better with thought leaders, and find opportunities for collaboration to improve patient outcomes.” Technology will be an important means to accomplish this process and ensure compliance, and stakeholder management platforms are helping to make this happen now.

81qd’s proprietary technology helps biopharmaceutical companies uncover objective data and find the right experts for their next engagement. Recognizing the importance of integrating expert voices into clinical development and commercial promotion, 81qd helps organizations manage thought-leader relationships within a pharmaceutical company, while placing a premium on transparency and compliance.



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CASE STUDY

One large global biopharmaceutical giant recently found itself behind the eight ball in terms of thought leader engagement. The company, a well-established leader in diabetes with a portfolio of products for types 1 and 2, had not conducted an objective assessment of thought leaders in over 5 years. There was no brand-specific segmentation of targets, the entire diabetes franchise was working with the same set of thought leaders, irrespective of product, and there was no coordination between teams and geographies on thought leader utilization.

As a solution, 81qd proposed and implemented a comprehensive academic identification and verification program.

Designed to objectively identify and profile academic thought leaders previously unknown to the company, the initiative involved creating brand-specific topical searches to match individual thought leaders with specific products within the diabetes franchise, housing the information in a customizable, cloud-based thought leader management system to allow the company to track events and interactions involving those thought leaders. As a result, the company now has an orchestrated thought leader engagement plan across all its internal stakeholders, thus optimizing its marketing and medical initiatives.

