

Clear Communications

Nick Hicks explains how to maintain transparency when partnering with patient groups.

Many companies find themselves uncertain when it comes to partnering with patient groups. This is despite the fact that advocacy relations processes are now established in many pharmaceutical companies and positive, sustainable relationships with patient groups are recognised as long-term indicators of corporate and product performance. This hesitation can lead to missed partnering opportunities, sub-optimal implementation of initiatives and allocation of resources to inappropriate activities. If approached sensitively, after undertaking due diligence, however, the benefits of partnering with patient groups far outweigh any perceived negatives.

Measuring ROI

There is no magical approach for creating an effective patient communications strategy: due diligence, forward planning, realistic expectations, a bit of creativity and, importantly, a flexible approach are the basic tools. Due diligence is, however, often a casualty of the challenges encountered when working with patient groups. The difficulty in measuring ROI with patient group activities, the rigorous regulatory environment and the timescale needed to build and leverage successful collaboration are among the factors contributing to this situation.

Common arguments against implementing ROI measurements in this way focus on timescale and appropriateness: it is difficult to apply standard ROI indices to patient group activity. The timescale is longer than the standard three (or, if you are lucky, six) months factored for activities such as sales promotion. One solution is to



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develop alternative ROI measurements, though there is no one way to measure return from patient group involvement. One method involves taking a key parameter, which the overall commercial programme addresses — for example, raising awareness of a disease concept such as neutralising antibodies — and having senior management isolate and estimate the effect the patient group activity had on this measure. Adjust for potential errors in estimation and then use this ‘conservative ROI’ as the measurement metric. Others exist and measurement indices should be activity-specific.

Shared objectives

At the basic level, regulatory and transparency considerations are addressed by having a written undertaking of both parties’ expectations from the partnering. Time lines, payment schedule and a get-out clause for both parties must be clarified. If one does not exist already, a set of corporate guidelines outlining the company’s policy towards working with patient groups must be established.

Before commitment to action, the starting point is always to identify common shared objectives between company and patient groups; an open

dialogue and transparent working methods are key. Working from a knowledge-transfer and capacity-building approach is often an effective starting platform. First, make sure you have a clear, defined business mission and long-term senior management commitment for investment in the necessary time and financial resource. Successful partnership is based on mutual respect for each other’s agenda, open communication, trust and transparency. The patient group agenda has a different centre of attention to that of the brand teams’ commercial plan; marketers may find themselves in positions where they are challenged on controversial issues, such as lack of research into rare diseases, equal access to medicines and commercial agendas. There needs to be willingness amongst the commercial team to view patient group activities as one of opportunity and possibility; appropriate due diligence plays an important part in this respect before entering into any agreement.

In isolation, partnering is unlikely to achieve maximum return. Providing a newsletter grant is, by itself, unlikely to have a high value impact. Successful leveraging of patient group activity depends on the level of impact the partnering



has on key shared parameters and how well integrated the programme is with wider activity. For example, KOL development, medical education, publication planning, media relations, sales force activity, regulatory strategy, health policy and a lobbying agenda all need to be determined at an early stage to maximise the value opportunity.

Opportunities for collaboration

Consider the five main types of collaborating opportunities currently used by companies:^{*} clinical research, access to drugs, patient information, public policy, and financial support. Depending on which of these collaboration routes is taken, successful partnerships will involve a mix of different stakeholders, such as physicians, professional groups, academic institutions, regulatory authorities, patient groups and others. The patient association is often pivotal in such a relationship. Though due diligence will reduce the overall number of possibilities, it will also create more targeted opportunities with appropriate ROI indices.

- Where are the best commercial and corporate opportunities to be found? Does the partnering opportunity offer potential at local, national, and European levels?
- Where is the patient group in its development? Partnering opportunities very often reflect the patient group life cycle — maximise your return by ensuring that your partnering proposal is appropriate for the life cycle phase and structure of the patient group with whom you are collaborating.
- Multi-partnering initiatives involving several companies are becoming more common; what do the SWOT and risk/benefit analyses show to be significant considerations?
- What is the best way to improve the quality and value of the relationships in your current partnering activity — through better allocation of existing resource or via new service offerings?

- Where can you find new links between seemingly disparate parts of your commercial plan and your current partnering programme?
- How can you improve the existing integration between the different partnering activities and the overall commercial plan?

Over the long term, the patient role will continue to evolve and expand into wider healthcare issues involving policy-forming stakeholders; a few examples give some insight into possible opportunities.

Investment index

A sustainability investment research firm, Innovest Strategic Value Advisors, has partnered with the Access to Medicine Foundation in the Netherlands to create an investment index¹ that benchmarks pharmaceutical companies on their performance in delivering access to medicines in developing countries. The index, available to institutional investors, measures companies on eight criteria. It promises to drive improvements in pharmaceutical delivery of vital medicines, while also helping institutional investors analyse risks of index laggards and capitalise on opportunities of index leaders in their portfolios. With the growing awareness of the problem of patient adherence in the EU market, how long before the financial analysts do something similar and work with a large umbrella patient group and factor in company response to patient adherence as a measure of share value?

Regulatory support

Because the European Commission and other institutions with a Community remit (such as the EMEA) are working far more closely with patient groups, a knowledge transfer and capacity building approach with patient groups can be beneficial in identifying appropriate partnering activities linked to these stakeholder groups. For example, criteria² now exist that ensure that the EMEA works only with patient groups fulfilling certain criteria in

future considerations over new medicines — an important element in any commercial and regulatory strategy. And the health grant competitive tendering programme offered by the EC's Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection (DG Sanco Health) gives companies a new partnering opportunity with patient groups in disease awareness campaigns. Giving patient associations the necessary skills and knowledge to apply for such grants can help address the important question of patient group sustainability and improve transparency on funding.³

A transparent future

This is a time when the industry is measured and judged on its behaviour and long-term business growth is closely linked to enhanced stakeholder perception. Certainly, today's patient has a greater role in the treatment decision-making process and partnerships between patient groups and the pharmaceutical industry provide mutual benefits. Patient communication programmes must be ethical and transparent but also linked to key business drivers. If your products could talk, what would they say about these points?

References

1. www.access-to-medicine.org
2. Developed by the EMEA with input from European patient groups, these criteria comprise legitimacy, mission/objectives, activities, representativity, structure, accountability and transparency.
3. www.ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/index_en.htm

About the Author

Nicks Hicks (nick@commutateuronline.com) is principal of Commutateur, a healthcare communications and coaching consultancy.

^{*}The new EFPIA code of practice on relationships between the pharmaceutical industry and patient organisations will be effective from 1 July 2008.

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