

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Pharmaceutical Partnership: Educate, Communicate, Innovate

By Mathias Posch, International Conference Services, Vancouver

'Compliance'... it's a word that makes professionals in the world of medical meetings cringe these days. The relationships between medical associations and pharmaceutical companies have never been more complicated. For quite some time, it seemed that it was easier for an association or a congress with the right following to get money out of companies than it was to steal candy from a child. In many cases, these relationships were uneven and the associations were clearly in a position of power, just like many of their members themselves.

First-class tickets, boutique meetings in resort destinations and lavish hospitality were the tip of the iceberg, and unfortunately made for much better headlines than the millions of dollars that went towards education, research and development. As a way of illustrating the point a little better, picture the relationship as a pendulum. For a long time, it swung further and further in one direction, until it basically flung itself back to the other side as a result of tighter scrutiny, bad press and billions of dollars in fines. This is where we find ourselves today – with the pendulum stuck on the other side. Pharmaceutical compliance was primarily self-imposed by companies to



regulate the market before it was done for them by the lawmakers. As almost all companies were faced with the same challenges, but came up with very different solutions, their representative bodies such as the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA) have tried to formulate an industry code. In itself, that is fantastic; however, in general these codes are no more than an overview on compliance, as specific compliance guidelines can vary immensely among different EFPIA member companies. In addition, the issue of cultural differences comes into play – what works well in North America might not work at all in Asia.

As if self-imposed regulation wasn't enough, governments have imposed a string of new regulations relating to the funding of physicians' activities. One of the most significant changes was the "Physicians' Sunshine Act", which was passed first in the United States but has quickly been copied within the European Union. Its purpose is to protect patients' interests by assuring them that physicians are acting in their best interests rather than on behalf of a pharmaceutical company that has paid them. Nobody could disagree with that aim; however, the details into which the

Sunshine Act goes, and the difficulties of its practical implementation, make it increasingly problematic to obtain funding for educational activities such as medical conferences.

Regulations differ from country to country, from company to company (as well as between company locations), and from year to year. It is up to us to keep the lines of communication open and active with our key sponsors in order to get the best possible benefit for our conferences and our delegates... which in turn will create the greatest benefit for our sponsors. The key to improving understanding in this area is constant dialogue.

Not all changes that have come our way in the past few years are bad. Bringing some transparency, and the focus on education and science, back to medical meetings is actually a good thing. However, it remains desirable that attitudes change regarding funding of

physicians to attend meetings, as well as the perception of needing to exclude the social element of meetings.

Networking is important – anybody who has attended a meeting in their field will admit that many of the best 'take-aways' come from dinner conversations with like-minded people from the same area of expertise... The value of such interactions will hopefully will be rediscovered.

Until then, the keys to success when seeking pharmaceutical partnerships for an association's activities are as follows: **Educate** – educate yourself and your team about the latest changes in terms of compliance regulations; **Communicate** – keep an open line of communication with your sponsors and corporate partners; and **Innovate** – be ready to change your approach to comply with all regulations and to fit the needs of your stakeholders.

PCOs: easing the pain for Associations

By Oscar Cerezales, MCI Group, Asia

The role of associations is to create, manage and evolve communities; as a result they play a fundamental role as platforms for the exchange of content, knowledge and opportunities. Moreover, with relevant exceptions, their mission, vision and purpose has been stable for a long period of time. However, all of that is changing – and fast...

Associations are now having to deal with various 'pain points' due to current economic, technological and generational macro trends. To ensure a sustainable future, they must develop adaptable strategic and tactical plans and address specific questions associated with these pain points, including:

- How should associations manage multicultural and multigenerational communities with different needs, different expectations and different objectives?
- What strategy should associations adopt in terms of sponsorship plans, taking into account that sponsors are applying increasing pressure when it comes to return on investment?
- How best can associations ensure their future sustainability – e.g. via revenue channel diversification, innovation, new markets, new ventures, maturity, efficiency, outsourcing, etc?
- What can associations do in terms of the right positioning, reach and brand awareness to ensure they become the content curators and thought leaders in their specific fields, given growing direct and generic competition?
- How should associations maximise their profits and delegate experience of their conferences?
- Finally, what should be measured, and how should success be tracked – e.g. number of members, engaged audiences, finances, etc?

With all associations, regardless of geography (e.g. an Asian association or a European), size (big or small), and speciality (e.g. medical or technical), needing to address these pain points, the role of PCOs is becoming increasingly crucial. In the past, PCO value propositions were transactional – i.e. it was all about the outsourcing of congress organisation. However, today – because of the trends mentioned above and the pain points being dealt with by the associations – PCO value propositions are all about business solutions. These are not only anchored in congress organisation, but also incorporate the whole outsourcing model – for example, contracting the right PCO should provide an association with support and benefit in the following ways:

- The Association can retain its focus on the core services to its stakeholders
- The PCO will represent a better proportion of variable versus fixed costs
- The PCO will bring innovation to the Association in terms of technology, products and services
- The Association and the PCO will become true partners – and through a higher-level partnership model, new business models may appear.

Through such benefits, a new era of partnerships awaits for Associations and PCOs.

On a mission to Hong Kong



With the anticipated growth of European economies as well as growing interest in Asian meetings markets, it is essential that PCOs are kept up to date with the latest developments from the destination branded as 'Asia's World City' – Hong Kong. The ongoing partnership between IAPCO and Meetings and Exhibitions Hong Kong (MEHK) ensures that IAPCO members are provided with first-hand information on Hong Kong and enables them to raise the profile of Asia as a global meetings destination.

As part of this collaboration, MEHK hosted its inaugural IAPCO Study Mission to Hong Kong on 2–6 December last year, an event that provided PCOs the opportunity to inspect the city's infrastructure, meeting facilities and hotels. In addition, they had the chance to experience Hong Kong's visitor attractions, shopping and dining options, with the Aqua Luna Harbour Cruise and the helicopter tour of Victoria Harbour providing particular highlights.



Delegates were given the opportunity to reach out to local clients and partners in Hong Kong, and a highlight of the Study Mission was the Hong Kong Business Forum, at which the PCOs received the latest updates on the convention industry in the city. Industry insights were presented by Sabrina Chan, Executive Director of The Hong Kong Association of the Pharmaceutical Industry, and Irene Law, Business Development, MEHK. Following the success of this first event, the next Study Mission to Hong Kong is scheduled for 2–7 December 2015.

"A sincere note of thanks to you and the team for the wonderful hospitality shown to us in Hong Kong over the last few days," said Jean Evans of MCI Dublin. "I got a real flavour for what the city has to offer, what type of client the destination would be suitable for, and how we could sell it well in the future. And I look forward to identifying future opportunities for business and collaboration. Thanks again for your support, your dedication to making our trip seamless, and for facilitating a thoughtful and educational programme for the IAPCO members."

In Memoriam: Annick Debels

It is with sadness that IAPCO acknowledges the recent death of industry friend and colleague Annick Debels on 2 January. An elegant and very professional lady, Annick was the face of the meetings industry in Belgium for many years. She started her career in the industry working for a Belgian PCO. She subsequently became Assistant Manager and then Manager of the Belgian Convention & Incentive Bureau. In 2005 Annick became the Director of Ghent Congress, where she remained until her retirement in March 2014.

