

Make it matter

The divide among pharmaceutical market researchers, brand teams and the sales force is almost a cliché. Market researchers should have a bigger voice in brand strategy but they often don't make it to that proverbial table.

To improve your chances of getting there, take a closer look at the impact of how you're networking and functioning within the teams you support. Consider the level of service you receive from your external agency and how their competencies and insight reflect on you as a professional. You might find that your internal-access issues are less about the importance of your studies or data and more about how you interact and communicate with research stakeholders.

Expectations have changed

Performance expectations for pharmaceutical market research have changed. As resources shrink and industry regulation and scrutiny reach historic highs, brand managers and others who rely on market research are overwhelmed with responsibilities. Few have the time to sift through data and consider its implications. There are just too many balls in the air.

Marketing and sales people - and the other departments and agencies supporting them - look to market research for answers and insight that give them an edge over competitors. Market researchers working inside drug companies seem to get this.

They say, according to an independent study conducted by G & S Research, that the true test of value for market research is how useful it is when making decisions. (The study was based on an Internet survey fielded in November 2006 among 35 client-side market researchers with an average 10.4 years industry experience.) Many even indicate that market researchers should be held account-

able for the impact of the studies they conduct. Yet 75 percent of respondents reported that many market research projects don't reach their potential of positively impacting their brands.

So what can we do to improve the usefulness of research? At the heart of usefulness is relevancy. To generate relevant insights that are

Develop and deliver pharmaceutical market research that improves brand strategy



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used to make smart decisions, it's critical that you and your agency are acutely familiar with the range of market dynamics that may be impacting product performance. This includes major regulatory events and shifts in public opinion along with competitive developments in the market, especially any new compounds and promotional strategies. As well, consider the following elements:

The impact of managed care

Know how managed care is impacting prescribing trends. Are generic alternatives less expensive for patients and thus generating a high volume of callbacks to prescribers from pharmacies? Are patients required to "fail" on one or more agents before they can be reimbursed for your product? If so, the brand team needs to know how they can help prescribers overcome formulary constraints and value your product over alternatives.

Treatment algorithms

Particularly for brands that target conditions that have previously had risk-prohibitive - or no - treatment options available, physicians must be educated to think about treating the disease. They need to understand the benefits of your product and how it can be used effectively for specific patient groups. Thus, the brand team needs to know how to engage physicians and compel them to prescribe it to qualified patients. An educational program like this is especially important if your product is perceived to be cost-prohibitive or presents strong concerns about patient compliance.

Regulatory influences on prescribers

Increasingly, physicians are operating within an array of legal and regulatory parameters. It's critical to understand how these influences are impacting prescriber behavior. For instance, when recruiting a sample of physicians, researchers need to know that recent legislation in some states requires physicians to disclose income from market research or ad-

visory board participation. As a result, prescribers are becoming more selective about the activities in which they participate to avoid negative perceptions.

Evolving sales model

When designing research that's intended to affect frontline strategy, you and your market research agency must understand how the sales force functions - within your company as well as in competing companies. One cannot assume that yesterday's model is today's reality, because the role, structure and expectations for pharma sales are being reconsidered. For example, some companies are evaluating scenarios that include fewer reps who have formidable expertise in a therapeutic category - not just their own product(s) - and who call on prescribers less frequently than reps today to discuss the total disease state.

Availability of data

Pharmaceutical companies have come to rely on access to prescribing information to determine who is writing prescriptions for what and to identify trends in prescription choice. This secondary data helps companies target prescribers for future promotions or certain kinds of information. However, increased scrutiny and other factors have led to questions about the appropriateness of prescriber information being used for commercial purposes. Be sure your market research agency fully understands these and other limits of industry data sources and processes.

Identify and involve

To deliver hands-on value to the teams you support - and earn their respect as a strategic contributor to the organization's success - you need to perform consistently as a leader and expert. Aside from being tuned into marketplace realities, strategic market researchers must identify and involve the people and groups that potentially share a stake in the research results before, during and after

the project is conducted.

Getting buy-in from sales and other frontline personnel makes all the difference in the world as to whether or not a new strategy based on your research will be successfully implemented. Especially for potentially game-changing studies - such as segmentation, positioning or messaging - time and capital are often wasted on research to support plans that are not executed in the field. In many cases, marketing initiatives fall apart during execution because too little thought goes into involving the implementers and bringing them on board. When serious conversations about the logistics of implementation never take place, hundreds of thousands of dollars are wasted on dormant data and unworkable strategies.

To get a project moving and keep it on track, determine who needs to be involved at each step and how much influence they should have. Think about anyone who shares a stake in the research results: your boss, the marketing team, sales management and the field force, and pertinent external partners, including your market research agency, the ad agency and any co-marketers. Then determine whose input and buy-in is needed at each step of the project's progression.

Of course, the more people who are involved, the more difficult it will be to move the project forward. So, while general input may be appropriate for framing the target business decision, a more focused group can typically handle reviews of research design, data collection and analysis of results. Implementation planning should be led by those with direct responsibility for these activities. The larger group will likely reconvene to discuss and develop specific execution tactics.

To ensure that the right people are involved at the right time, ask yourself at each step:

- Whose insight might improve this effort?
- What buy-in will help move the project forward?
- Who is likely to sup-

Table 1: Elements of a Communications Plan

Approach	Tools	Format	Frequency
Corporate culture	E-mail	Written summary	Frequent
Business decision	Telephone	Informal conversation	Periodic
Stakeholder support	Voicemail	Voicemail script	Milestones
Interest/Expectations	One-on-one meeting	Detailed report	Final results
Personal style	Live presentation	Slides	By request

port/sabotage the research results?

- How might an individual or group's involvement affect implementation?

A variety of factors can influence how and when you interact with project stakeholders. If more involvement ensures success, then just anticipate a longer timeline. Involvement considerations include but are not limited to:

- Corporate culture: What is the standard way of doing business within your company?
- Significance of the business decision: How will the research results affect the company's bottom line and strategic planning?
- Individual interests and expectations: What impact does the project have on a stakeholder's direct responsibilities, professional reputation and ability to succeed?
- Personal style: What are the individual characteristics of various stakeholders: formal/casual, stern/humorous, etc.?

These factors vary by company, so if the dynamics of your organization make it difficult to formally group a cross-departmental project team, use informal channels to communicate and gather perspective. Talk to people in other departments and find out what they are thinking, what they need, what they're trying to accomplish and what obstacles they're facing in the field or their area of responsibility. Whatever it takes, just be sure to communicate and get a sense for what's happening in the real world. It'll keep you relevant.

Communication plan

Establishing a good flow of information with your project team and research stakeholders can foster a strong working relationship. Your communications plan should encourage internal constituents to

voice their needs and include a process for providing information to external partners.

Understanding the needs and preferences of various groups and individuals is essential. Find out, up front, how often and in what ways a person wants to receive information and provide input on your project. Some individuals will want to be more hands-on than others and it's important to respect and respond to these preferences and stay cognizant of the time you require of them.

Explore the considerations outlined in Table 1 to develop your communications plan.

Be strategic about your project communications as well. Before moving too far forward, examine the level of support that each stakeholder provides for your project. Identify advocates and critics and develop a plan for dealing with each. For instance, if your boss is a strong supporter of your project, while the brand manager seems determined to poke holes in it, you'll want to approach each party separately and differently. Your boss may sign off on your recommendations in an e-mail, while the brand manager may require a lengthy meeting to discuss his/her concerns and ideas.

In some cases, it may become necessary for market researchers to get creative with communications planning to ensure key constituents are informed and actively engaged the research process. Some ideas:

- Schedule a phone meeting for the commute home. Since the standard one-on-one meeting can become laborious - and often get cancelled when pressure rises on competing projects - it may be helpful to use this otherwise-unscheduled time to catch up.

- Post a "burning questions" white board outside your office. This may be a convenient forum for marketers to voice concerns, issues and questions to your market research team in a minimal amount of time. It also gives you time to respond with relevant materials and information. The board could include basic status information of various projects as well.

- Use e-mail to issue a periodic project summary. Depending on the size and communication structure of the organization, this format might be used to document and communicate the primary objectives of a study in context of marketing strategy and other considerations. It could also include a timeline of project milestones (e.g., data collection start/end, topline report delivery, final report delivery, presentation of results) to ensure that the needs of end users are being met.

No matter the format or style, what matters most is that communications are regular, open and responsive. By implementing a flexible communications plan and responding to the needs and preferences of stakeholders, you can eliminate unnecessary delays and maximize the mileage of your research.

Actively involved

If your extended project team communicates appropriately at the beginning of a research initiative and remains actively involved throughout the study, then research results should be spot on. Your market research agency, if you've used one, should deliver solid research conclusions and strategic recommendations that require only slight tweaks from you as an insider.

And while the report may reveal a range of interesting findings, it's critical in the presentation stage that you stay focused on the business issues and communicate only results that matter to specific audiences. There's simply no way - or reason - for brand teams and other constituents to absorb all the results from every study. Instead, present only the findings that help a specific audience

make imminent decision(s).

Stay focused by adopting the following practices:

- Provide several small presentations of results - possibly by objective - rather than a single large one. This helps focus the delivery of results and related discussion on relevant topics.

It also minimizes the possibility of missing a significant insight due to limited time. By presenting too much information to a general audience, you risk losing the attention of key constituents who want insight to their immediate area of focus.

- Following a presentation, the market research team should hand out a brief - possibly single-page - summary slide of the “aha” findings that address key business objectives. This becomes a meaningful tool that the brand team and other constituent groups can reference from meeting to

meeting.

- Set a limit to the number of slides allowed in the full report deck that your agency provides. This will improve the odds that results are prioritized and consolidated before they even reach you.

New metric for value

How well a researcher - inside or outside of the end user’s organization - can help push results through the extended team and impact change with them is the new metric for value. This is a more specialized skill than delivering competent research.

Make sure that your market research agency puts as much thought into your influence planning as it does to a study’s design. Find a partner that understands your world, fits culturally with your team and organization and has

the capabilities and interest to help you succeed as a professional.

Given the unique business environment of health care, make sure your external partners account for the one-to-one marketing approach of this industry. As well, they must be able to strategically address how to approach, message and apply programs designed for specific audience groups in health care - all while observing the rules, tools and channels that need to be considered when conducting research with physicians, patients and other system stakeholders. Admittedly, this may seem like a tall order, but for agencies specializing in health care, it should go with the territory. Don’t settle for less. | Q