



Going Global: A Paradigm Shift in KOL Management

An increasing number of large and mid-sized companies are recognizing the need for a unified global strategic approach to key opinion leader (KOL) management.

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Science and medicine are now truly international. Global pharmaceutical companies sell their products in countries across the world, while operating manufacturing facilities and research centres in many separate locations. The internet allows thought leaders worldwide to access medical information wherever and whenever they want it. Conferences and meetings — even those that were once the preserve of a particular country's clinicians — now attract cosmopolitan audiences. Medical education campaigns are driven increasingly from global headquarters, reflecting the international nature of publication planning, symposia production and thought leader development.

In this increasingly global market place, a pharmaceutical company must implement a global thought leader strategy that complements its local and regional advocacy programmes.

Global companies, recognizing the need for efficiency and effectiveness, are moving to standardize and align corporate strategy with those of countries and regions. They are looking to a global KOL management process to be able to plan and manage KOL programmes and activities across countries, business units, and functional areas, while also realizing that a fast-paced global environment mandates coordination and transparency when it comes to managing increasingly complex and multi-faceted KOL activities and relationships.

The evolution of a truly global strategic approach to KOL relationships demands a certain paradigm shift from focusing solely on building external relationships on an activity-centred basis to understanding the consequence of not having a well defined, internal process and capability in place to tie activities to strategic initiatives across the entire global organization. In fact, in an unexpected reversal of logic, often the most difficult handshake to achieve is not between the company and a sought-after international thought leader, but rather between internal medical and marketing groups. Successful knowledge transfer requires a transparent business-process driven approach that encourages compliant information sharing between all parties: top down, bottom up, and across silos.

Common hurdles

The effective planning and management of relationships with world-renowned, national, and even local or regional thought leaders is critical to the success of global pharmaceutical companies and brands. The inherent complexities in aligning stakeholders across different functional groups and spanning regional sectors of the organization, as well as those working within differing regulatory environments, must be addressed and overcome.

The global KOL management process	Shared across users	Shared across headquarters, countries & regions	Shared across brands & franchisees
Global strategy	↑	↑	↑
Internal processes	↑	↑	↑
System	↑	↑	↑
KOLs	↑ ↓	↑ ↓	↑ ↓
Communication	↑	↑	↑
Compliance	↑	↑	↑
Learning & best practices	↑	↑	↑

While the need for KOL management is widely recognized, it often "falls through the cracks" between management at corporate headquarters and brand teams within individual countries; most brand plans omit definitive KOL goals and measurements. Ownership of thought leader relationships can be ambiguous or overlapping. Even in cases when there is a single, clearly defined owner who conducts the majority of the interactions with a thought leader, the average turnover rate of 12–24 months within both medical and brand teams results in major difficulties when transferring or continuing company relationships.

To date, few companies have developed a process and capability integrated enough to focus on the entire KOL relationship management process in a measurable way — especially on a global scale. This can be attributed, in part, to a few common challenges:

Differing degrees of regulatory and legal scrutiny amongst different countries. Successful navigation of differing regulatory environments is the number one concern of companies when formulating global KOL management guidelines; however, the issue need not be as complex as it initially seems. The utilization of a Best Common Denominator approach is recommended to ensure compliance and uniform acceptance of recommended actions, especially as health systems and policies in the major developed countries have become more interdependent and frequently reference one another. The Best Common Denominator is derived from a subset of the most commonly accepted practices among those countries with clearly defined legislation and guidelines in place and should be determined in conjunction with a company's internal legal and regulatory teams.

Difficulty in carrying the approach through to country and regional levels. Ownership must be clearly defined and communicated, and standards must be formulated at the corporate level and driven down to the countries. At the same time, the process put into place must be geared towards the workflow of the country-level teams bearing primary responsibility for relationship building activities, and must be flexible enough to adapt to local needs.

Difficulty of sustaining technological solutions. Many companies build or purchase robust technology platforms overrun with complex features, yet fail to engage users even to log-in. In the best of all possible worlds, a global KOL management solution will employ elements of process, technology, and follow-up support that reaches out to relationship managers within the context of their daily objectives and workflows. Additionally, a strong internal champion is needed to support and drive the process.

Global KOL management is more than just managing databases or information using an enterprise-wide software tool. It is a paradigm shift towards a unified, strategic and measurable approach for the entire KOL relationship management process that is built on common and compliant workflows of a global pharmaceutical organization. A holistic approach to KOL management requires a systematic methodology employing six main tenets (*see Figure, below*).



Accurate identification and validation of true KOLs provides the necessary foundation of a KOL management programme but it is by no means the end point of successful KOL management strategy. Proper segmentation and planning is needed from the corporate down to the regional and country levels to define a common shared strategy and approach to collaborating with thought leaders world-wide. While this strong foundation is essential, it is on the management of key relationships that working teams will spend the majority of their time and effort. Having the right tools in place to help prepare effortlessly for a meeting, record meeting outcomes, or access and send approved data and materials adds value to the process by helping relationship managers keep track of and recognize opportunities to engage KOLs for mutual scientific benefit. A well-defined process to collect and share best practices ensures that relationship management is operating in the smoothest possible way.

Few companies have reached the point where they can measure their KOL-related activities effectively. Many companies are caught trying to adapt a model of reach and frequency in their goals measurement. Aside from being a poor measure of impact and value, this approach can also be compared uncomfortably to traditional field sales goals, with an implied focus on solicitation. Instead, companies need to understand how to measure the desired impact and define key performance metrics in a way that is outcome-driven, providing both a quantitative and qualitative view of achievements.

Conclusion

Truly global KOL management is an increasingly important objective for companies focused on moving to the forefront of research and thought in their chosen therapeutic areas.

A global KOL programme should aim to align corporate, functional, and country strategies and allow for the consistent planning and management of programmes and activities across each. More importantly, a global KOL programme should allow for transparency of KOL interactions and compliant information exchange within the workflow of the user. In fact, correct documentation of a global systematic approach to relationship management can provide the necessary due diligence to satisfy corporate compliance programmes and recommendations.

Finally, by being able to measure programme outcomes clearly and share the associated best practices, the global organization is able to ensure the unification of all stakeholders to achieve access and drive effective collaboration and scientific exchange with KOLs and influencers.