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## **The pharmaceutical and medical device industries' roles in professionalizing management of medical associations and conferences – a privilege and responsibility**

***Thomas A. Reiser, Institutional Healthcare Section Leader, MCI***

**While in today's for-profit world "return on investment", "corporate governance" and "benchmarking" are common terms and are practiced routinely, only few not-for-profit associations have started to conduct their activities following trusted business principles, the trends of competitive environments and striving for effectiveness and efficiency in achieving their mission, considering their obligations to their stakeholders.**

**Many (particularly international) medical associations are still run in the "traditional way" – volunteer driven, mainly focused on organizing a conference and publishing a journal. Members and other stakeholders get little actual value from their involvement. Volunteers focus strongly on management rather than strategy, missions (if existent) are on paper only and are rarely consciously pursued and revenues from activities are often stashed away in bank accounts for the "rainy days" rather than invested in programs that help pursue an association's mission to benefit the respective communities.**

### **Changing pace: taking associations to the next level**

Only few organizations have started to understand that they can have a much greater impact, like contributing proactively (and not by chance) to new discoveries, treatments, education, awareness, shaping policy, etc. in which activities like conferences, journals, and others are tools in pursuing a greater mission, strategy and leadership, rather than the mission itself. And the members – scientists, physicians, patients or other constituencies - are at the focus of their attention, knowing them, understanding them, and catering to their specific needs to make a difference and take an association to the next level of being (pro)active and serving a well defined community and cause.

Likewise, and with professionally managed organizations, the pharmaceutical and medical device industries can and should become true allies. Mutual goals are identified, synergies created, activities pursued and plans made together – for the benefit of all parties involved.

Today's legal, regulatory, and business environments require the pharmaceutical and medical device industries to become more and more hands off, require much speedier development processes because of shorter patent terms, price pressures, generics, etc. and it is becoming increasingly important to align with partners among the medical and patient organizations that understand these changing times, position themselves, and deliver superior quality and unbiased activities and programs that benefit the respective fields at large.

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While there are clearly exceptions, the key to such a dynamic association and conference management approach, focused on aspects like “return on investment/objectives”, “synergies”, “long-term relationships”, etc. is typically the involvement of dedicated professionals in planning and executing the activities of an organization in close relationship with the volunteer leaders.

## **Focus on content, outsource the rest: how to optimize an association’s impact**

The last few years have seen some significant changes in how well-organized associations conduct their business. Many started to rely on the services of Professional Congress Organizers (PCO) when running their meetings. While the initial model of these local PCOs provided some additional professionalism, it had the limitations that by moving meetings between different cities, the PCOs would change and the quality, continuity and professionalism could differ greatly, making a true progressive development difficult.

This prompted the emergence of “Core PCOs” – professional congress organizers that became trusted partners of organizations independent of where the meetings were held, typically only relying on changing “Destination Management Companies” (DMCs) in the relevant host cities to handle local logistical arrangements. This already provided an important step up in terms of consistency and the ability to consider and proactively shape long term developments of a meeting, its content and partnership/sponsorship programs and therefore making associations more progressive and professional.

However, even this trend has the limitations of only addressing one aspect (the meeting) of an organization’s “raison d’être”.

In other areas – and while still not widely utilized - organizations have started to rely on professionals to run public affairs, communications, or other individual aspects of an organization’s business, yet not addressing the entirety of an association’s full scope of activities – particularly not seen holistically.

So what are really professional and successful organizations doing?

Really forward-thinking organizations have started to understand the importance of combining and complementing the power of their volunteer leaders who set the overall direction (mostly in terms of content) for an organization with the talent of professionals who take care of the overall business aspects of an association on a continuous basis - ideally in a most holistic way. These professionals focus on all aspects of the association and the management of its programs and activities following business practices, ethics, and governance as they are known in the for-profit world. Their permanence, typically spanning various terms of office of different elected leaders adds continuity and stability.

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## **Towards professionalism and greater accountability**

Apart from using professionals for individual services in a rather isolated way, this set up can have many faces and is either achieved by setting up an own and independent office and staff structure or by outsourcing the management to an “Association Management Company” (AMC) – or a mix of all these, depending on the stage and development of an organization and its resources.

As setting up an own structure and office is beyond the resources of many organizations, the AMC model can be a very affordable and flexible model. Little known outside the United States, where AMCs have helped countless organizations make the transition from inconsistent volunteer organizations to professionally run and successful groups, the AMC set-up can provide the resources, financial and staffing flexibility for organizations to start harnessing their full potential.

When organizations become professionally managed, their impact on the community starts to increase, they look at strategy rather than tactics and take a professional, proactive and long-term approach to their programs, activities, partnerships and ultimately play the important role they should be playing and providing a much greater return on objectives for all stakeholders (especially the members).

## **The role of the industry: responsibility to associations**

Pharmaceutical and medical device companies have an increasingly important stake in this development and can (and should) play a particularly crucial role. With the changing legal and regulatory environment which limits their direct influence on what organizations do with support they receive, and the increasingly competitive business environment with the need to achieving more with less and in shorter time, companies are increasingly challenged to find the best allies and partners in order to have the appropriate and ever more important “return on investment/objectives” (whether this be direct financial return, building awareness, changing behavior, etc.).

While the pharmaceutical and medical device industries have the privilege of picking and choosing their preferred partners among associations simply by selecting those that provide the greatest ROI/ROO; industry also has the responsibility to hold organizations accountable for a providing a structure that allows for a greater effectiveness and efficiency – for the benefit of all stakeholders, most importantly the physician/scientist members, the patients and healthcare budgets.

The models for professional association and conference management are available, but many organizations have not yet understood that there are set-ups available to bring continuity and strategy and drive their activities more professionally. The role of the pharmaceutical and medical device industries in this respect can reach from educating associations about the possibilities to proactively supporting the review of their current structures and providing support to making the necessary infrastructural changes.

**It is the privilege and responsibility of industry to help and encourage medical associations to create their own better future and assist them in making a difference for their respective fields and all stakeholders involved (including the volunteers, member, society).**

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