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Optimizing Your Agencies' Role in Prelaunch Planning

New product teams should consider developing an integrated communications plan with the full involvement of their key agency partners to optimize planning, draw benefit from more expertise and experience specific to the communications realm, and share the work burden.

As many industry personnel appreciate, prelaunch planning and execution is a Herculean task. There are literally thousands of variables and activities, all of which must be identified, coordinated, tracked, and completed for any compound to be successfully prepared for regulatory approval and launch. This responsibility is so large and critical that companies commonly form teams of 20 or more people from across different interdependent departments to direct the global prelaunch activity for any compound while managing related budgets of millions of dollars. These internal company teams must navigate individual departmental objectives, which at times seem to be in conflict, in an effort to execute the clinical-development plan and prepare the basis for subsequent regulatory submissions, as well as prepare the marketplace for the launch of the product.

A Communications Plan is a Critical Prelaunch Component

Each prelaunch activity, from deciding on primary and secondary packaging to recommending pricing, can be considered critical to the subsequent commercialization and success of the product. But no one activity is more important than developing a comprehensive communications platform. Through each phase of development, information must be shared with key internal and external stakeholders to better inform, create proper context, and prepare targeted audiences and the marketplace for the subsequent launch of the product. To achieve this major objective, any prelaunch team should consider initiating a structured approach to a macro-strategic communications plan.

Communications Objectives are Wide Ranging

By design, a global communications plan is a strategic and tactical document that defines and coordinates a full range of activities appropriate for all targeted audiences over a specified time frame. Objectives of a global communications plan include: maximizing a successful commercialization pathway consistent with the marketing plan; optimizing planning and inter-relationships between activities; and creating internal company awareness of all activity.

A plan is optimally initiated as early as Phase II of clinical development and incorporates all known and anticipated scientific data, commercialization requirements, and marketing objectives. Core strategies and communications

messages are derived from the initial product profile, the scientific database, assumed positioning, and input from key markets and key opinion leaders. These strategies and messages are, in turn, expressed through such activities as internal commitment campaigns, strategic publications, education, congresses, public relations, and promotion planning, all of which specifically impact the continued interaction with opinion leaders.

If desired, inputs to the plan-development process can be considered and documented via a simple strategic mapping exercise that sets out the current situation and predicted issues and defines communications initiatives (ahead of tactical specifics) to reach the desired market positioning. Further, by developing a comprehensive communications plan, any prelaunch team not only can see all planned activities, their interdependence, and respective timing, but the team also can conduct a gap analysis to better ensure that support for the product is appropriately adjusted throughout the prelaunch phase.

Agency Facilitation is Key To Success

In addition to the company prelaunch team, agency partners are engaged to meet the overall objective of commercializing the product. It is very unlikely that only one agency will be able to execute all components of a global communications plan. Indeed, branding and promotion, PR, and healthcare communications agencies, to name but a few, routinely are added to the prelaunch team, offering their respective expertise to meet the team's objective.

To facilitate the process, companies should consider making one agency responsible for developing the communications plan to centralize strategies and common core messages via a process that secures the respect and buy-in of all agencies. The lead agency also is in a viable position to help coordinate the respective activities and to better ensure that core strategies and messages are applied. But this, too, should be at the discretion of the company's prelaunch team.

Prelaunch and launch experience abound on both the industry and agency sides, and products are only launched after years of very dedicated, hard work. New product teams should consider developing an integrated communications plan with the full involvement of their key agency partners to optimize planning, draw benefit from more expertise and experience specific to the communications realm, and share the work burden. ■

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