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Thought-Leader Management: A Challenge Met
By **John Mack**

Pharmaceutical companies are continually working to establish and maintain relationships with thought leaders—influential physicians who play an important role in communicating a new therapy's benefits for other physicians. Thought Leaders—also known as Key Opinion Leaders, or KOLs—help pharmaceutical companies identify unmet medical needs, shape clinical studies, launch products, and understand critical lifecycle issues.

However, across the pharmaceutical industry, thought leader management programs have not been as effective as internal management would like, particularly in the age of the Internet, when the dissemination of information should be easier than ever, according to John Estafanous, President of Bethesda, Maryland-based Estco Medical.

Indeed, in a recent report from Cutting Edge Information, a business intelligence firm, research found that "[many companies] suffer from industry-wide challenges in thought leader management—challenges that create missed opportunities and result in lackluster performance."

Principles for Managing KOLs
"There are a few important principles a drug company should follow to manage KOLs," says Estafanous, whose company recently launched a Web-based software solution for managing KOLs called Medigent® Thought Leader.

These basic principles include:

- Research and recruit early. Carefully research the appropriate physicians and experts who can act as product advocates, and understand that they must be recruited early in the drug development lifecycle.

- Keep track of the activity of your KOLs within the program and ensure that all are active participants.

- Provide valuable, current, and relevant information targeted to the needs of each KOL segment (global, national, regional and local).

- Provide physicians with easy, fast and appealing web-based programs that advocate your brand.

- Empower physicians to control the frequency with which they can access information, giving them necessary clinical data on the spot.

- Use a specialized Web environment centered on your brand to provide discussions about your product in a centralized location, as well as to keep the facts and feedback up-to-date.

Recruit Early
Pharmaceutical companies view KOL advisory boards as the first and most influential activity in thought leader development, and companies that assemble KOL advisory boards early in the product development phase stand to benefit by forging long-term ties with these experts. The recruitment of physicians and medical experts may begin as early as several years before the launch of a product.

Advisory boards, once established, usually meet on average four to six times per year leading up to the launch of a new drug. It is important within this phase to keep the entire community updated on current best practices and to keep discussions going between face-to-face meetings. The Internet is ideally suited to do this.

But the climate for recruiting, building credibility and maintaining relationships with thought leaders has become more difficult as pharma companies host more clinical trials, thus creating a competitive environment for knowledgeable and influential advisors.

What is needed is an efficient and effective system to manage KOLs. It should be easily deployable, capable of delivering targeted information on demand, and able to attract physicians to your product. Today, that means using the Internet as the channel and Web-based software as the solution.

Medigent Thought Leader

"Managing relationships and building credibility with key opinion leaders are the driving forces behind Medigent Thought Leader, which can keep physicians engaged and increase their productivity," says Estco's Estafanous. The Web-based software is designed to dramatically improve a pharma company's communications with Key Opinion Leaders.

Using Medigent Thought Leader, influential key decision makers can join brand-focused online communities to obtain product education, articles, meeting information, speaker materials, video and

Medigent Imprint replicates the real-world focus group and IDI setting, while offering features and benefits not available with in-person groups.

Imprint replicates the setting of traditional focus groups and interviews by providing a variety of avatars (visual representations of people) and interfaces that demonstrate emotion in order to increase participation levels and elicit better conversation threads.

Imprint provides a comprehensive set of moderation tools to guarantee the discussion is guided appropriately. Group moderators also

FIGURE: Medigent® Thought Leader provides easy-to-use administrative tools, left, for product managers and Medigent® Imprint software, right, uses avatars—or visual representations of people—in an online focus group.

interactive libraries, best practices forums, newsletters and FAQs. Members of Medigent Thought Leader communities are recruited either internally among existing customers or through Estco's panel of more than 12,000 cooperating physicians.

The Medigent Thought Leader software suite is comprised of:

- **Medigent Imprint**, which manages online focus groups;
- **Medigent CMS**, which is a web site content management system; and
- **Medigent Course Builder**, which manages and delivers eDetailing programs.

Focus Groups & Online Meetings

Traditional focus groups and in-depth interviews (IDIs) are staples of market research. By combining proven traditional research methodologies with an innovative interactive interface,

control the content that is available to the group. Whether the content is provided in text or multimedia format, moderators regulate the exposure of the right information to the right audience.

Imprint is not a replacement for in-person contact, but a valuable addition that provides a more effective method for gaining insight into product development and marketing efforts.

Knowledge Management

With Medigent CMS, pharma marketers can efficiently update web site content and online marketing messages and disseminate the information to multiple audiences through a single user-interface. This gives marketers the control that enables them to apply segmented strategies directed to a wide variety of audiences and issues.

Thought leaders can be managed globally and targeted locally so that specific regional markets receive the appropriate regulatory-approved

information. Whatever the format, be it text, audio, video, imagery, archival documents or any other form, custom content can be sent to the right audience and web site areas at the click of a button. Built-in user and group management tools maintain centralized control, and workflow management tools allow for content to be edited, tracked and approved by a number of administrators before publication. All published data is archived and traceable for auditing purposes to meet FDA, DTC and DTD compliance.

KOL online community members can chose what information they would like to receive—clinical studies, published articles, key slide data, speaking events calendar, and more—through a "subscription management" feature of the software. "Physicians sit in the driver's seat," says Estafanous. "They own and control how the pharma company communicates with them." This is the essence of a permission-based communication program.

Brand Managers' Perspective

Product and brand managers should view Medigent Thought Leader as a marketing and educational tool designed to support specific conferences, or serve as an ongoing resource for thought leaders throughout the lifecycle of a brand. Among a range of administrator tools, the software allows managers to measure usage, track program success, and enables multiple brand managers to moderate and track group members.

This technology allows for a comprehensive, central database of KOL profiling information, which is an invaluable resource. Likewise, by using the latest web-based program to deliver key data to thought leaders and speakers, pharmaceutical companies can save time and money, and set the standard for innovative relationship management.

Pharma Marketing News

For more information about Medigent Thought Leader, please contact:

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You may also register at
http://www.medicalthoughtleader.com
for an online demonstration.