The recent BHBIA Members Exchange Forum on Customer Engagement was about as controversial as it gets for healthcare business intelligence. The session laid bare many of the influences contributing to an undeniable decline in healthcare professional (HCP) participation in medical market research.

Despite a personal style given to levity and occasional wit, Steve Curtis of Janssen (a market researcher turned health economist, turned product manager) questioned how representative HCP research samples are, and urged the supply-side not to gloss over any awkward facts. As an advocate for market research, he told delegates he wanted to make major Pharma brand decisions based on our data, but would fight shy of doing so if in doubt about sample quality.
Neil Philips, VP Insights & Analytics at SERMO presented a devastatingly well evidenced paper on the extent of the problem.

"Going out and recruiting more [UK hospital specialists] isn’t an option. The big panels are about as big as they are going to get" (Neil Philips, SERMO)

Neil argued that we are entering a vicious circle, that looks something like this:

Ali Wilson, MR Manager at Janssen Cilag reassured supply-side companies that Pharma does care about these nuts and bolts issues and that research commissioners understand that it is a multi-faceted problem, requiring collaboration. Nicholas Wain, Research Director at M3, endorsed that view, and presented evidence that doctors are motivated by more than just the money - and that we urgently look to revise the model of engagement. Gracie van Kemenade, a Research Director at Cello Health, wondered whether we had lost the art of communicating with HCPs, and implied that in many cases we treat them more as commodities than customers.
Refreshingly, we also had external input - from participants themselves! Dr Michael Lane, GP Partner and Board Member at Wandsworth CCG, suggested that our research demands are often at odds with the demands of his practice, and that it doesn't help when we either don't keep our word, or our surveys simply don't work. Dr Ameet Bakhai, Consultant Cardiologist at the Royal Free hospital, turned up the heat - criticizing the industry for a lazy and often unprofessional approach to the way we approach him and his colleagues. His wider view was that we should see our work as another form of healthcare provision, and his forthright delivery of a few home truths had many squirming uncomfortably in the plush leather seats.

As Chair for the panel session that followed I was certainly not short of questions - the Floor was keen to have its say. Fortunately the chance of free alcohol intervened. Here's what I take from the meeting, and others on the same subject this summer:

- This recruitment / response crisis amongst HCPs is genuine and urgent (having raised the issue at Conference in May, it was encouraging to see this affirmed by the events of the summer, and the level of attendance /engagement at this meeting)
- Qualitative and quantitative research face similar / equivalent crises
- There is shared and common insight into the many issues that contribute to the wider problem (which should, in theory, make it easier to implement solutions!)
- People and organisations from all tiers of our industry need to collaborate over the medium and longer term if we are to solve these problems
- We need to "call out" bad practice, and celebrate good practice
- There are actually four industry tiers (Pharma >> MR Agency >> Fieldwork >> Participant) and all four need to work together more.
It is not all doom and gloom - there are potentially some 'quick wins' to be had - things that companies and individuals at all levels can easily do that deliver a better research experience, and that also represent good business.

As co-Chair of the very recently formed BHBIA Response Rate Task Force (with Melanie Bayley, of deFacto research) I am motivated to make sure we make progress. We want as many BHBIA members involved in this as reasonably possible, in a way that is sensitive to the time that people generally don't have!

We've done the brainstorming - we now need EVERYONE's help to identify the most actionable solutions, and put them in place.

Melanie and I had a chat to introduce ourselves and how we might approach the co-Chair role. It turned out that we both put ourselves forward because - after LOTS of years doing medical market research - we were both genuinely worried about the future of the industry if we don't act now. We both feel that this crisis in HCP response will naturally precipitate into a crisis of confidence in market research if left unchecked.

If you are in healthcare business intelligence / medical market research and rely on HCPs for your data please help us by joining a BHBIA Response Rate working group.

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