10 ways to maximise your medical communications campaign

A practical guide by Joanne Taylor

You’ve been charged with executing a pharmaceutical marketing campaign and you know that success depends on delivering effective, customised medical communications. A good medical communications campaign is the bedrock of successful pre- and post-launch brand messaging and positioning work, but it doesn’t happen overnight.

At first, this can appear a mammoth task and you will undoubtedly be under pressure to show how you’ve benefited both your product and your company. How do you draw up your plan, how do you check it’s still on track as you progress, and how do you ensure the best bang for your buck?
1. KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE

The first step is to work out exactly what you want to achieve and what resources you have. Be specific and ‘smart’ about setting your initial goals.

2. CHOOSE THE RIGHT MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS AGENCY FOR YOU

When choosing a medical communications agency to participate in your marketing plan, it’s always worth finding an agency whose thinking and personalities resonate well with yours.

There are many agencies from which to pick. Whichever one you choose, it’s important to remember that the best campaigns are forged through a strong chemistry between client and agency. On this basis, consider that it might be a costly decision to select an agency purely on the basis of their experience in the therapeutic area, size, notoriety or other such specific credentials. Ultimately, if you and your agency gel and share the same objectives, aspirations and work ethic, you’re much more likely to accomplish your goals.

The simple fact is that people who like each other work better together, and inevitably it shows.

3. BE HONEST ABOUT YOUR BUDGET WHEN WORKING WITH YOUR AGENCY

It’s important to understand that it doesn’t matter whether you have £2m or £200k to spend on medical communications. As long as your agency knows how much room is available for manoeuvre, they can help you achieve most of your objectives.

If you do have £2m for your campaign, your agency will take your product to the moon. But if not, you can still make an excellent impact, as long as they know what level of resource is accessible. It’s better to do three things extremely well than try to do ten and fail with most of them.

The reason why it always pays to be upfront with your agency about your budget is that campaigns are usually layered in their structure: every activity in the sequence of events has a bearing on every other activity, each one building from the previous one to create a crescendo of communication achievements.

If you devise a comprehensive £2m campaign, but have £0.5m to spend, you won’t get the best out of it by cherry-picking one in every four elements. A bespoke £0.5m campaign will always outperform a compromised £2m plan.

4. TURN YOUR DATA INTO EVIDENCE

Trial data is the foundation of your medical communications campaign. Without evidence, it is much more difficult to elicit positive opinion or alter opinion about your product. With this in mind, remember that the data only becomes evidence once they have been peer reviewed and published. Information that is only available internally will not generate the desired outcome for your drug; it is important for it to be published in the right journals.

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If you’re a product manager, you should go and talk to your medical colleagues at this point. Make the effort to understand your evidence (and that of the competition) inside and out, find out how to gain maximum impact from it and ensure it is used in every possible way – abstracts, posters, papers, review articles and so on. A publications plan that’s been well thought through goes a long way towards establishing your product as one for discussion and appropriate attention.

Again, communicate with your colleagues in the medical department to help you achieve this. Appreciate their challenges, but explain to them what you’re trying to accomplish. Cross that divide regularly and you will develop a fruitful working partnership.

5. TREAT YOUR KEY OPINION LEADERS AS PARTNERS

Once you know your evidence and what it can achieve, you need to know what the opinion formers make of it. You should always bear in mind that your key opinion leaders (KOLs) are often excellent marketers, but you will only benefit from their input if you communicate with them in the right way. Engage them, listen, and then – crucially – act on what they say.

Your KOLs can tell you your product’s strengths, and where it could be stronger, and when truly partnered they are unparalleled sources of advice on what you should do. Use their brains and ask them the difficult questions. They want to help, so don’t shy away from engaging them in every part of the discussion. For example, what do they think is wrong with your product? What would stop them using it? Why might they prefer a competitor product? Challenge them and they will rise to it. This is the feedback you need to improve your campaign.

This is also a point of evaluation for your plan. If awareness of your product is low or opinion is not what you’d hoped, you can return to the stages above, and reassess your publications plan and its alignment with your objectives.
6. GET INSIDE YOUR COMPETITORS’ HEADS

By now you should be confident about how your medical communications plan will start to deliver, but you still need to be aware of what your competitors are doing. Until you are, you can’t truly say that your plan is fully thought through. Nevertheless, your competitors’ strategies should not deter you from pursuing your own ideas.

To ensure you're not overlooking a chance to get the most from everything you’re doing, you need to know which congresses your rivals are attending and what they’re trying to achieve. Who are they talking to, and in which direction are they steering their campaign? Use your networks, talk to everyone and stay plugged in to what’s happening in your therapy area.

However, you must not let this rule your plan. If you steer too close to a competitor’s campaign, you’ll always lag behind. It’s far more effective to keep watch on the activities of others and, when you do find yourself going head-to-head, make sure you do things better. If they create a website, make a better one that’s easier to use and more engaging. If they’re attending the same event, make sure your presence is has a higher profile.

You must at least match or beat your competitor(s) at their own game to give your product the edge and then maintain it. This will keep your drug at the forefront and the quality of your communications activities will be duly reflected in the resulting performance of the product.

7. GET YOUR KEY MESSAGES AND BRAND POSITIONING RIGHT

Assuming steps one to six have been completed to your satisfaction, you should find that the key messages for your product should be relatively obvious at this point. If you have considered your objectives carefully, maximised the use of data/evidence, developed close relationships with KOLs (based on engagement, trust and mutual respect), and you know what your rivals are thinking and where you can beat them, the key messages should be clear.

You obviously want your product to be the very best and are passionate about achieving your aspirations. The best way to do so is to get the messages right, and remain ‘on message’, but these messages must be realistic as well as motivational.

As your data grow in quantity and power, you can of course then reassess and evolve your messages accordingly.

However, this is a pivotal point in the campaign, and there are a million and one mistakes to be made in developing key messages and positioning the brand. Keep both internal and external stakeholders involved in developing your product’s key messages and positioning.

Key communication elements for product success

It is essential to understand that all three elements depend on each other and if one of these is neglected it will ultimately affect the product’s success.
for the impetus to be maintained until (and then beyond) product launch.

It’s crucial to maintain this effort, regardless of how much you have to spend on your campaign. If communication gaps are allowed to seep in, there’s a risk that all the hard work will need to be repeated to drum up interest once again. What’s important here is to maintain consistency of message, to make sure it doesn’t become diluted, and to deliver the message using every available media channel. Think what would capture your attention if you were on the receiving end.

9. DO IT ONLY BECAUSE IT’S RIGHT FOR YOUR PRODUCT AND FOR YOU

One of the most important take-home messages is that a great medical communications campaign cannot result from a plan based on vague objectives, unconfirmed resources, heedless decision-making and a lack of continual re-evaluation. However, if you are clear about all these elements, you will be well on track to achieving all your objectives exactly as you wished.

The key considerations are smart thinking and honesty regarding budgets and expectations. It rarely pays to undertake a certain tactic merely because you think you should. Think it through and think carefully about exactly what you expect to achieve from everything you do. It pays, in every sense, to use your money wisely.

It is also important to re-check the campaign as it progresses. As mentioned in step 3, medical communications programmes are built in layers, each new level of activity resting on the success of the last. You wouldn’t build a house on poor foundations, no matter how good the brickwork was near the roof, and the same applies here. Don’t skip steps.

If it’s not working out as you wanted, maybe it’s because you haven’t got the previous step right. If you ignore that or miss a step, it will always catch up with you later on and is then costly to put right. The secret is simply to re-evaluate as you go, thereby enabling your campaign to evolve and progress, based on sound judgments.

10. AND LASTLY, DON’T FORGET TO HAVE FUN

Just because the medical communications process deals with some fairly heavy-weight elements, such as trial data and hard science, it doesn’t preclude you from having fun and pushing the boundaries of what’s been done before. Every step in the process has a serious element to it, but medical communications campaigns can be immensely enjoyable and you’ll always do better at something if you like doing it.

When you get the opportunity to indulge in your passion and really let a campaign get inside you, there’s a buzz around everything you do, for both client and agency. In all of this, there are also great opportunities to meet and work with some fantastic people. KOLs are renowned for their cerebral capacity, and partnering with people at the top of their game only adds to the enjoyment and gratification of having worked so hard to develop campaigns that make a genuine difference.

Medical communications spans far and wide, reflecting the diversity inherent in the pharmaceutical industry, so dare to break from the norm and your campaign will catch many more eyes than usual.

By following these 10 steps systematically and with a real understanding of the messages you wish to convey, you will create anticipation and a warm reception for your product. Consequently, you can be confident that you’ve done the great job that your product deserves.

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