10 ways to make your symposia more effective

A practical guide by Peter Dommett

Medical meetings such as satellite symposia, conferences and roadshows, can take both time and budget resource for the marketer. Used effectively, they can be the most powerful elements of your marketing mix. However, projects involving a live event; rigid deadlines; several company departments; external experts; and an invited audience of important customers, can be challenging and full of potential pitfalls. This short guide identifies some of the most important ways you can ensure symposia success.
1. DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE

So, your predecessor has just returned to an affiliate management position. The communication plan includes major international congress symposia; your budget is allocated for a company-sponsored conference later that year; and your affiliate brand managers are all asking for international opinion leaders (OLs) to speak in their countries. Where do you start?

The effective use of respected OLs and third-party endorsement provides direct benefits that cannot be obtained through other marketing routes. OLs and product advocates can provide valuable information, practical advice and assurance on the use of your product to your prescribers. But what do you want to achieve? Is it to:

- Generate product awareness with a key group of prescribers prior to launch?
- Position the use of your product for specific patient-types?
- Reassure existing prescribers to expand their use of your product or use it earlier in the treatment process?
- Provide a means to a different end – eg, to generate published data or opinion that can be used on a much wider scale?
- Enhance the profile and image of your company within your therapeutic area?

Once you have agreed what you want to achieve and communicate, the next step is to determine content, identify and select speakers. Who will select a venue or liaise with independent congress-organising committees? Who will communicate with speakers to ensure they are adequately briefed, comfortable with what is required, provided with any relevant material, and then maintain this relationship?

If appropriate resources are not available within your company, or you’re unable to source the necessary timely support, consider external assistance. When selecting an agency to work with, base your choice on what they can capably deliver, and ensure that all parties are aware of their agreed responsibilities. If you need your agency to discuss scientific content with the speakers, check that they have appropriate skilled personnel working actively on the project. Remember that your choice of agency is a reflection of your own working standards.

When agreeing deadlines, take into consideration other internal and external factors which may be important. Your selected speakers may be frequently away from their office or hospital and difficult to contact. How busy are you? What other commitments are already in your diary? Ensure all parties know exactly what is required of them, and when

3. SELECT YOUR SPEAKERS CAREFULLY

Once you have agreed what you want to achieve and communicate, the next step is to consider which external ‘experts’ you will be asking to speak or assist at the event. When you are choosing your faculty, consider:

- What needs to be communicated? (eg, pharmacokinetics and mode of action, clinical trial data or ‘real-life’ experience?)
- Who’s the audience? (specialists, generalists, primary/secondary care, clinicians, surgeons, pharmacists, healthcare purchasers?)
- What level of speaker is appropriate for the audience? (an international opinion leader, a national or local advocate, an academic or practical ‘hands-on’ person?)
- What speakers have you used well before? Consider your international speaker database, but also remember that your affiliate countries may have very good contacts and prior experience of appropriate national experts or rising stars.
- Which speakers would you like to be involved? Are there influential individuals that would be your ideal candidates, in terms of reputation and influence, or with whom you wish to build relationships?
- What budget do you have available? In addition to a realistic fee that reflects the amount of time the speaker will be involved with the project, also remember that transatlantic business class flights can seriously damage your budget. The world may be your oyster, or you may need to look closer to home. Select speakers to match objectives, audience and budget

4. DECIDE AN APPROPRIATE FORMAT FOR THE MEETING

The way in which you conduct your meeting can be as important as its message. Consider the event as a training meeting for the attendees, then decide which format/s will have the most effect. Some examples are:

- Didactic lecture – a one-way presentation from the stage. This is the most controlled way of delivering information, ideal for presenting the mode of action behind a new drug, sharing new clinical trial data, or to generally make a statement about a particular subject. However, audience involvement may be limited and if the subject matter is not completely relevant this will limit the impact of the meeting. Incorporating an audience-response method (eg, keypads or yes/no cards) may help if used wisely and sparingly.
- Case studies – highly effective when used wisely and sparingly.
- Panel discussion – particularly useful for presenting new drug, sharing new clinical trial data, or to generally make a statement about a particular subject. However, audience involvement may be limited and if the subject matter is not completely relevant this will limit the impact of the meeting. Incorporating an audience-response method (eg, keypads or yes/no cards) may help if used wisely and sparingly.
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- Case studies – highly effective when discussing practical aspects of a drug profile, and clinical situations that clinicians may encounter daily. The more illustrative and visually appealing the better (consider patient video footage and diagnostic imagery). However, cases should be presented in a balanced manner to avoid being counterproductive.
- Panel discussion – particularly useful for handling contentious issues in a controlled manner. However, the role of the chairperson in these situations is critical. Do not rely on the audience to contribute any questions – discuss in advance with your chairperson and participants who should handle different subjects that may arise.
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In some cases, you may have very little choice in where or when your meeting will be held. A satellite symposium during an international congress may be restricted to specific hours in prearranged rooms. However, if you are involved with the congress at an early stage, you should consider factors such as delegate attendance (if symposium is planned for before the opening of the congress); competing meetings; room size (a full room is always more encouraging than a half-empty one); and visibility (how easily will delegates find your room – is it close to main congregating areas?). If these factors appear less than ideal, discuss your concerns with the congress organisers, or reconsider your attendance at future congresses.

The meeting venue should work for you, not against you

7. ATTRACT THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

The objectives set for the meeting should have included the ideal profile of the delegates attending the meeting. Whether the meeting is a company-sponsored conference or a satellite symposium, there is a certain point at which a doctor will decide to attend or stay away.

So what makes a doctor want to attend a meeting?

- Personal gain – this could be through advancing their knowledge of a relevant topic, continued medical education (CME) accreditation or even the opportunity to network with peers.
- Entertainment – a quality, respected faculty; a novel format; or potentially associated attractions.
- Obligation – if a doctor has an existing involvement with the company, they may feel obliged to attend, for example, a satellite symposium. However, you should ensure that the meeting should justify itself.
- Convenience – an unopposed symposium at a major congress will have a greater pool of potential attendees available. Making attendance as easy as possible will help to boost audience numbers. Or, taken from another perspective, why would doctors stay away?
- Competition – a more interesting offer from a competing event (for example, parallel symposia)
- Lack of interest – an uninspiring programme or irrelevant subject, a poor venue or even a low historical reputation for the organising company.
- Lack of awareness – they need to know about the meeting to be able to attend, so ensure targeted pre-event publicity is planned well in advance.
- They cannot justify attendance to others – for example, the quality of the meeting is offset by the inconvenience it may cause to
the doctor or their colleagues (if their work would need to be reallocated to others).
• Prior commitments – this reiterates the need to plan and publicise the event in good time for delegates to arrange to attend.
Combining these factors with targeted identification of potential attendees will help to ensure the audience is worth having.
**Target your priority delegates and make it easy for them to attend**

8. **MAXIMISE POST-EVENT OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE RETURN ON INVESTMENT**

Considering the time, budget and personal investment in the preparation of a successful meeting, the number of delegates that will attend will represent only a fraction of the total target audience that could benefit from the content of the meeting. Linking back to your objectives for the meeting and expanding these to the broader product communication objectives, determine whether the meeting content could be spread to a broader audience. This can be done via printed materials such as highlights reports or proceedings, a slide CD-ROM, or a website-based presentation.

Can the symposium be duplicated by your affiliates with the use of local speakers using the original slides? For any materials, the sooner they can be distributed the greater the congress-associated value will be. The preparation of post-event materials may have implications on speaker briefing and audio-visual requirements. **Post-event activities can significantly increase the impact of the meeting**

9. **EVALUATE RESULTS AGAINST OBJECTIVES**

The evaluation of whether a meeting has been successful should logically follow from the setting of objectives at stage 1. The nature of those objectives will determine what types of evaluation will be appropriate. If a market research resource is available within the company then involve them at an early stage to ensure that appropriate metrics and evaluation methods are agreed. Some primary indicators of outcome, such as ex-factory sales increases or prescription growth, may be more difficult to identify at an international level. Basic measures such as attendance numbers and simple CME evaluation questionnaires may provide a measure of general satisfaction but will be difficult to help calculate sales increase and Return on Investment (ROI).

With forward planning and agreement on assumptions of sales impact, more in-depth post-event evaluation may allow benchmark ROI calculations to be obtained. Certainly, attentiveness to the ROI impact of your projects will make future budget planning meetings with senior management easier. **Carefully planned evaluation can yield important ROI data**

10. **ALWAYS HAVE A PLAN B**

With any live event, the potential for the unexpected to happen is quite high. A speaker delayed in transit at a snow-bound airport, delayed data from a new study that did not progress on schedule, satellite links at the mercy of the weather or a projector that malfunctions during the event are just a few of the possible hiccups.

During the planning and preparation for an event, the question “What if...?” should be regularly asked. For each question, the meeting coordinator and their agencies should be preparing for the unexpected and putting in place contingency plans that will address each eventualty to ensure that the meeting achieves the pre-event objectives. **Always plan for the unexpected to minimise your risk... and improve your sleep!**

**Author**

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