High-quality, focused, well-planned events that are evaluated for their success and return on investment (ROI) are demanded in today’s fast-moving, cost-conscious and increasingly regulated environment. Essentially, all events have the same top-level objectives regardless of their type, size or subject. These are to change behaviour, educate and motivate in an environment conducive for this process. Events are an excellent way to communicate your messages. But, it takes a considerable amount of time and effort to ensure the successful execution of any event, so the following should be taken into account.

10 ways to manage your international events more effectively

A practical guide by Mark Saxby
1. BUSINESS RATIONALE 

AND OBJECTIVES

At the outset, ask yourself what it is that you want to achieve from this event? Are you giving the audience information, training, guidance, feedback or assessing performance? Are you aiming to educate your key customers, motivate your sales force or, perhaps, raise your profile in a specific therapeutic area? Whatever your aim, you must have a clear vision at the outset of any single event or programme of events, as to what you want to achieve at the end.

If you set down this vision for all of your events at the beginning, in agreement with other stakeholders involved, it will then make the process much easier in choosing the right type of event to succeed. A review of this vision should be scheduled on a regular basis to assess progress made to date and to take into account any unexpected variables that have arisen. Your rationale should include follow-up elements to ensure that once the meeting has taken place the momentum isn’t lost and continues long afterwards. Each event should maximise any follow-up opportunities, to disseminate the information to others who did not attend.

Your ultimate goals will drive the timing of your programme, chosen format, audience and speaker selection, allocation of internal resources, destination/venue, content and agenda. It is important to ascertain that all objectives and aims are clear, realistic, credible, consistent, relevant, competitive, measured and motivational.

2. BUDGET

Hand in hand with devising an event programme strategy that achieves maximum impact is the intelligent allocation of the available financial resources to each event. Few companies today have unlimited funds to support their event programme. The careful assessment of how monies should be allocated on this type of activity needs to be considered in conjunction with the more traditional marketing spend on advertising and PR, with consideration to ROI.

The key to successful budget planning is preparation with some built-in contingency. It is critical that the budget is realistic for the scope and scale of the event. If budget is tight, it is much better to produce a smaller high quality event with a carefully selected audience, than a less memorable event for a wider audience.

If you are using an agency, do ensure that you set them an initial budget to work within, even if it is only a ballpark figure, as this sets the tone for the whole meeting. There are certain aspects of any event, AV for example, on which spend can range hugely from a few hundred pounds to several hundred thousand. Without some guide on budget, your suppliers will find it difficult to gauge your expectations and may revert to options that are not suitable, wasting time and resources. Agreeing a documented method of recording budget variance and change, both pre-event and on-site, can prevent any discrepancies in the final reconciliation.

3. REGULATORY CONSIDERATIONS

The new European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA) Code of Practice has forced national bodies to integrate the EFPIA requirements into their national regulatory codes. As the national codes may be more stringent, but not less stringent than the EFPIA Code, it is crucial that every event takes any applicable regulatory code of practice in that country into consideration.

In the UK, the ABPI Code of Practice (updated in January 2006) applies. This is a self-regulatory scheme introduced in 1958 that incorporates UK Law and European Directives. This means that in many instances, if your event breaks the Code in the UK, it also breaks the law. The new Code identifies that companies should avoid venues renowned for their entertainment facilities. It also enforces restrictions on permitting companies to sponsor Health Care Professional’s (HCP) attendance at overseas meetings, unless the location can be logistically justified, for example, a visit to a state-of-the-art research facility.

Many companies now have their own self-regulating guidelines to clearly define to internal organisers the standard of hotel that is appropriate to certain types of meeting and the clear educational content that should be incorporated. Companies are keen to distance themselves from persistent allegations of providing lavish trips in order to maintain close contact with HCPs. The content of any meeting should be assessed to ensure it is relevant and of sufficient quantity and quality to the invited audience.

To comply, many companies are considering initiatives, such as Continued Medical Education (CME) to provide an independent educational programme.

4. TYPE OF EVENT TO BEST COMMUNICATE YOUR MESSAGE

The type of event that you require will often be fairly obvious, for example, a large UK-based residential event for a sales conference or a set of regional symposia for a group of HCPs. But, within these broad areas there are many options that can be taken to produce the most beneficial results.

Setting a clear objective for the role of events in your marketing mix will determine whether a one-off event or a series/roadshow are most appropriate. Single events should be chosen when your objectives are short-term or when you need quick results, for example, a product launch or clinical trial results. Multiple events should be undertaken when the target audience group or the message is the same, for example, an advisory board meeting when the purpose is to share information and build relationships between your company and your key opinion leaders.

5. WORKING WITH PARTNER AGENCIES

Once you have decided on the best type, size and style of meeting that you wish to organise, now is the time to assess the resources available. If the meeting is relatively small, such as an advisory board, you may only need the support of your colleagues to devise the content, source speakers and make the necessary logistical arrangements. This is very dependent on your internal resources and the timescale of the event.

For large-scale events, you will need to put
6. SPEAKER SELECTION

Firstly, you must ensure that you are clear about what you want from the speakers you are sourcing for your event. Be open and honest with them throughout the process, as this will result in them tailoring their sessions appropriately. Once you have decided exactly what it is that you want in terms of a speaker, whether it be knowledge about your product, therapeutic area/disease or simply someone whose reputation alone will attract your audience, consult with others within your company. Also, take advice from external advisors to your organisation. Use internal resources to investigate whether potential speakers have published on your chosen subjects and also check that their opinions are in line with your messages.

If your company or you personally have not used the speaker recently, try to meet them and take the opportunity to sound out their views and to be sure that their image is right for you. It is important that, regardless of their expertise on the subject matter, they be a confident public speaker and have a ‘presence’ on stage in order to make that lasting impression to your audience. Once you have satisfied these criteria, take the time to talk to them about your meeting. Discuss any possible areas of conflict or politically sensitive subject matter that they might be required to cover and resolve these issues at this stage.

Once this is complete, a formal invitation should be issued. This should include the topics you wish to be covered, the length of the presentation and information on the audience they will be speaking to, timeline for production of the slides, off-site rehearsals and their fee/honorarium.

At this stage:
- Keep the speaker well informed as to the whole agenda and content
- Provide any relevant information, eg. key product papers
- Provide a slide template to the speaker
- Set a strict deadline for the submission of presentations for review
- Check presentations are ‘on brief’ and set a final date for revisions and formatting
- Stay in contact with the speaker
- Arrange, if possible, an off-site rehearsal at your offices
- Book speakers’ travel arrangements to attend rehearsals
- Instruct how to operate any of the technical equipment.

After the event, write a letter of thanks to the speaker and ensure that they are paid promptly, so that any future requests are received positively.

7. MESSAGE DELIVERY

The key to the success of your event is bringing your message to life. There are many opportunities available to you to ensure that the message of the event is presented effectively. As audience expectations increase, you must make sure that your approach is proactive, utilising a combination of both tried and tested methods and the latest technological advances. The attention span at any traditional meeting is only 20 minutes, so it’s crucial to maximise the impact of this time.

When devising the entire meeting agenda, care should be taken with the structure of the sessions, the mixture of interactive presentations, breakout sessions and networking opportunities. Consultation with an experienced event/AV company can provide interesting communication methods, eg, web-based, CD-ROMs and ideas for teaser campaigns to build anticipation and start communication before the event takes place.

Reinforcing a message can often be done in a fun and engaging manner through the use of creative social events, business related team-building activities and meeting ice-breakers and energisers. Particularly in the competitive environment of clinical trials, it is vital to ensure that all external attendees quickly become part of the trial beyond the requirements of purely a generator of data. All types of meetings can benefit from the inclusion of team sessions to drive home objectives or refresh teams to tackle the challenges ahead.

It is important that whatever methods of communication you take, a consistent approach to event branding, printed materials, signage and pre-event communication should be used to reinforce your messages.

Agencies have a wealth of knowledge and venue experience so they may be able to negotiate better rates for you

When working with an agency, ensure that you provide them with a brief so they can be clear about your requirements.

The types of meeting include:
- Advisory board meeting
- CRA/monitor meeting
- Investigator meeting
- Press briefing
- Training meeting
- Business unit meeting
- Sales conference
- Launch – customer or sales force
- Sales force incentive meeting
- International congress
- Satellite symposium
- Exhibition
- Medical symposium – GP, hospital or pharmacy
- Roadshow.

together a dedicated project team who are willing and able to incorporate the additional work on top of their current role. If you do not have all the job functions to cover branding, PR, medical communications, event logistics and travel, it is recommended that an agency’s expertise is utilised to support you.

Agencies will provide a dedicated team of experienced individuals and specialist services when your internal resource is not available. It is prudent to remember that every event that you undertake is a very public reflection of your company’s values, brands and your employees and must be carefully executed to maximise the commercial opportunity it provides. Employing the services of a reputable agency will ensure that your event achieves the maximum positive effect and guarantee that you meet your objectives.

Agencies can bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to your event. They have extensive venue experience and may be able to negotiate better rates on your behalf. Most agencies can provide a ‘one-stop shop’ solution to you, covering:
- Travel
- Venue sourcing
- Ground transfers
- Delegate registration
- Print and design
- AV/production
- Speaker management
- Social events
- Meeting materials.

When working with an agency, make sure that you provide them with a well-devised brief. This may take time to produce, but it will ensure that you are clear about your requirements and that their response meets your objectives.
8. VENUE SELECTION

The choice of venue and location can have major impact on the success of your event. The right venue needs to be attractive to your target audience, achieve your expectations in terms of service and cost effectiveness, yet meet any guidelines. Marrying all these different elements can often be a challenging undertaking, notwithstanding the fact that if your event has a short lead time, your choice of available venues for meetings above a certain size and duration may well be limited.

A well thought out brief should be constructed whether you are using an internal resource or an agency. Before contacting any venues, consider the positives and negatives of any previous venues. Take the time to contact a potential delegate and external speaker/chairperson and assess what their likely response would be to your invitation based on your shortlist of destinations.

Make sure that you match the venue to the event. For example, an academic venue, ie, university, institution or hospital, can prove to be a cost-effective venue solution and may also present a more credible image of your company. Organising a regional event at a hospital can build relationships and enhance your reputation in a specific location.

The next stage is to draw up your venue selection criteria, which must include:

- The date and dates to be avoided
- Preferred geographical location
- Number of attendees and accommodation requirements (including AV crew and agency staff)
- Agenda
- Transport links
- The style/tone of the venue
- Social event requirements
- Regulatory requirements
- Budget.

You may need to be flexible and assess which of these criteria are most important, as few venues will be able to fulfil every one.

Once the brief has been distributed and the proposal has been provided, the shortlist should be visited by representatives of your team alongside any external agencies involved.

Once a final decision is apparent, do take the time to consult with all interested parties before signing any contract. The budget spent on the venue aspect of a meeting is a significant element of the overall spend, and it must be considered wisely.

9. EVALUATION AND ROI

Every budget, large or small, that is spent on event activities should provide significant and measurable ROI. Pharmaceutical companies require suppliers who recognise this and can prove that a return is made.

The speed of business today and the unpredictability of the industry are resulting in a higher demand for bigger results from increasingly smaller event budgets. There are a few critical decisions, which if addressed appropriately, can help deliver better ROI. For example, your internal team should identify its target audience and then focus its activity to invite the top segment of the audience to the event. Securing a quality speaker/chairman with real credibility can increase the attractiveness of the event to its audience and can often justify their fee.

Evaluation should be conducted prior to the event (by whatever method is suitable for the audience, ie, traditional paper-based or electronically on-line), during the event using interactive audience voting and after the event with market research or sales rep feedback to provide valuable information on opinions, understanding, expectations and the success of the event from a logistical and content perspective.

10. INDUSTRY TRENDS

Procurement

Increasingly, the whole area of event communications, when utilising any external agency, is being driven by a structured procurement process. There are many positives that result from having preferred supplier companies who have been thoroughly vetted and have formal agreements with regard to their service levels and fees.

Continued Medical Education (CME)

Accredited training, such as CME that provides convenient high-quality lifelong learning opportunities for healthcare practitioners, is proving to be an influencing factor when attendees are choosing between the many invitations they receive.

Smaller, focused events

The focus for today’s meetings is on the quality of the delegates, not the quantity. Pharmaceutical companies are being transparent with their customers and the hard-selling that once took place at meetings is becoming rare as companies do not want to be over-promotional. Events are being designed to include all topics relating to a certain disease area rather than focusing on one particular drug.

Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s)

KPI’s are being used by more companies as a way of assessing the performance of their agencies. The most common areas where they are employed to measure whether objectives are being achieved are in the following areas:

- Client communication and interaction
- Evaluation
- Schedules and reports are delivered on time
- Customer service surveys meet or exceed your goals and show period over period improvement
- Agreed turnover rate for personnel
- 100 per cent adherence to time lines and budget.

Consult a potential delegate and external speaker to assess what their response would be to your invitation.

Every budget, large or small, that is spent on event activities should provide significant and measurable ROI.