10 ways to run an event within the ABPI guidelines

A practical guide by Andrew Winterburn

In the increasingly regulated environment faced by the pharmaceutical industry, we need to think more than ever about our events, both in the planning of them and the execution stages. Everyone in the pharmaceutical business must be familiar with and keep within the ABPI guidelines when planning events. Here in summary are the key aspects of the Code to help ensure that from the first concept of your event you are complying with these important guidelines.
1. THE PRESCRIPTION MEDICINES CODE OF PRACTICE AUTHORITY
The Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority was established by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) in 1993 to operate the Code of Practice for the Pharmaceutical Industry independently of the Association itself.

The Code covers all aspects of the promotion of medicines to healthcare professionals involved in the prescription of medicines. This ETO Ways special supplement is predominantly focused on section 19 of the Code, relating to meetings and hospitality, although it needs to be recognised that meetings and hospitality will cross over into other areas of the Code – particularly promotional material and information, claims and comparisons.

It is important that you use the ABPI Code as your reference point in the planning of your events to ensure compliance at every stage. A number of pharmaceutical companies have internal medical affairs teams who are responsible for compliance and some larger companies have a dedicated ABPI Code of Practice officer.

You may also have your own company self-regulating guidelines to clearly define to internal organisers the parameters they can work within when organising an event involving healthcare professionals.

2. MEETINGS AND HOSPITALITY
“Companies must not provide hospitality to members of the health professions and appropriate administrative staff except in association with scientific meetings, promotional meetings, scientific congresses and other such meetings.

“Hospitality must be strictly limited to the main purpose of the event and must be secondary to the purpose of the meeting, ie, subsistence only. The level of subsistence offered must be appropriate and not out of proportion to the occasion.”

At the outset, ask yourself what it is that you want achieve from this event? Are you giving the audience information, training, guidance and most importantly education to comply with the Code?

It is vital you set down your vision for all your events at the beginning of the planning process in consultation with other stakeholders, including medical affairs. This will ensure your programme of events is in association with the guidelines and will help you achieve an integrated programme to meet your business objectives.

Your overall goal(s) will drive both the type of event that will best suit your objectives and also the timing of your programme. It is quite common for educational events to be linked to medical congresses in the appropriate therapeutic area. Such congresses usually take place annually in either the UK, Europe or globally.

It is important that all objectives and aims are clear, realistic, credible, consistent, relevant, competitive, measured and motivational. The ABPI guidelines do not stop you achieving your objectives but by understanding their parameters, they should allow you to focus on the educational content and to keep that at the front of your mind throughout.

"Pharmaceutical companies may appropriately sponsor a wide range of meetings. These range from small luncheon audio-visual presentations in a group practice, hospital meetings and meetings at postgraduate education centres, launch meetings for new products, management training courses, meetings of clinical trialists, patient support group meetings, satellite symposia through to large international meetings organised by independent bodies with sponsorship from pharmaceutical companies."

If a pharmaceutical company is sponsoring a meeting, this must be disclosed in all papers relating to the meeting and in any published proceedings. The declaration of sponsorship must be sufficiently prominent to ensure that readers are aware of it at the outset.

3. BUDGET
"The costs involved must not exceed that level which recipients would normally adopt when paying for themselves."

The key to successful budget planning is preparation, and to have some built-in contingency. It is critical that the budget is realistic for the scope and scale of the event. If the budget is limited, it is much better to produce a smaller, high quality event with a carefully selected audience. You should always take into account that the content of the meeting is the most important aspect of the event.

When setting your budget you will need to set your own parameters so as to work within the ABPI Code of Practice. If you have an internal company Code of Practice it is likely this will give you definite costs for a number of the elements shown, eg:

- Hotel category, including maximum room rate
- Reasonable cost for meals
- Transportation/transfers
- Economy class airfares (if the event is overseas)
- Generic printed materials
- Technical and production costs so that they reflect the tone of the meeting
- Promotional aid, eg, £6.00 +VAT (perceived value).

"Funding must not be offered or provided to compensate merely for the time spent by health professionals in attending meetings."

If you are working in partnership with an agency make sure that you set them an initial budget to work within. This becomes even more important when organising an event involving healthcare professionals.

4. VENUE SELECTION
"The venue must be appropriate and conducive to the main purpose of the meeting; lavish or deluxe venues must not be used and companies should avoid using venues that are renowned for their entertainment facilities."

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You should always take into account that the content of the meeting is the most important aspect of the event.
The venue selection is an area where companies often come under the most scrutiny. It is vital that you select the venue very carefully and it does not compromise the professional integrity of the event, or more importantly, the company.

Always consider the following criteria:

- No use of lavish or deluxe venues
- Avoid using venues that are renowned for their entertainment facilities
- Business must be the primary purpose of the chosen venue
- What is the perceived value of the venue you intend to use?
- Avoid resort or spa venues
- Is the venue in keeping with the objectives/style of the meeting?
- How practical is the venue in terms of facilities, location, etc?

Some companies apply the “red face test” to the events they are organising, where they ask the question, would you justify the event to a TV crew or a journalist and would you pass the red face test? This becomes particularly relevant if the media are asking you the question in a deluxe country estate with a fabulous golf course and wonderful spa facilities!

The era of flying UK delegates on a trip to, say, Barcelona for a product launch are by and large a thing of the past, but it’s worth noting at this point that events outside the UK are not totally precluded. As well as abiding by the ABPI or the respective country’s Code of Practice (see page 4), you need to consider whether your audience will take the time out of their own schedule to attend an overseas event.

“Meetings organised by pharmaceutical companies which involve UK health professionals at venues outside the UK are not necessarily unacceptable. There have, however, to be valid and cogent reasons for holding meetings at such venues. These are that most of the invitees are from outside the UK and given their countries of origin, it makes greater logistical sense to hold the meeting outside the UK or, given the location of the relevant resource or expertise that is the object or subject matter of the meeting, it makes greater logistical sense to hold the meeting outside the UK.”

5. TYPE OF EVENT TO COMMUNICATE YOUR MESSAGE

“The meeting must have a clear educational content.”

Having decided the objectives of your meeting you will need to consider the appropriate format for the event and the timing of the programme. The type of event you will require will sometimes be fairly obvious, for example an advisory board for specialists in the therapeutic area or educational grants for opinion leaders to attend a medical congress.

Events involving healthcare professionals (HCPs) must be driven by the educational content; you will need to spend the majority of your time on the scientific programme ensuring it is balanced and relevant. The length of the programme is also important as you will have to make sure the balance between the science and free time is correct. For example it is not usually acceptable to have a two-hour meeting in the afternoon and then invite HCPs to a dinner with overnight accommodation.

The balance and pace of the meeting is still an important factor in the delivery of the event to enhance how you communicate your messages clearly. Make the programme engaging to the audience, asking for their input where appropriate. There are a number of ways to achieve this – from having a facilitator, breakout rooms, interactive audience response systems or having a debate format – to name a few.

You may wish to look to getting the meeting accredited as part of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). If so, you must still comply with all aspects of the Code.

“The fact that a meeting or course has CPD approval does not mean that the arrangements are automatically acceptable under the Code. The relevant provisions of the Code and, in particular, those relating to hospitality, must be observed.”

6. THE AUDIENCE

“Any hospitality provided must not extend to a spouse or other such person unless that person is a member of the health profession or appropriate administrative staff and qualifies as a proper delegate or participant at meetings in their own right.

Administrative staff may be invited to meetings where appropriate. For example, receptionists might be invited to a meeting in a general practice when the subject matter related to practice administration.”

The Code is quite clear regarding the attendance of spouses/partners to an event. When planning your meeting you will need to communicate clearly to your invited audience the protocols for the event and what is and is not appropriate.

Healthcare professionals now have a better understanding of the Code but there are still situations where spouses arrive unannounced at the event. This can put you as the organiser in a difficult situation which will need to be managed very carefully. Always refer back to the Code of Practice and to make sure the event is not compromised, explain to the HCP that you have to comply with the relevant Clauses.

“Spouses and other accompanying persons, unless qualified as above, may not attend the actual meeting and may not receive any associated hospitality at the company’s expense; the entire costs which their presence involves are the responsibility of those they accompany.”

In other words the HCP must pay for all the costs associated with their spouse/partner. If you have decided to work with any agency in the management of the event, they can be a great asset in this type of situation as they can manage the situation on your behalf and avoid any direct embarrassment or impact on the relationship with your customers.

7. SPEAKER SELECTION

The selection of speakers does become more complicated to ensure you comply with the Code of Practice, particularly if you are inviting a key opinion leader from outside the UK. The issue you might face is that the Code of Practice in the country that the KOL is invited from may have different guidelines to the ABPI Code, and therefore you will need to take their Code of Practice into consideration when planning your event.
Once you have selected your external speakers a contract will need to be drawn up covering the services the KOL will be providing, with the scope of work and the recompense they will receive. It goes without saying that the speaker(s) will require a detailed brief on the objectives for the day in terms of the scientific and educational content for the meeting.

The basic rules you should always comply with when working with speakers are:
• Keep them well informed as to the whole agenda and content
• Provide relevant information, eg, key papers
• Provide a slide template
• Give clear deadlines and parameters
• Make sure the presentation is ‘on brief’
• Stay in contact with the speaker
• Ideally arrange an off-site rehearsal
• Definitely arrange an on-site briefing and rehearsal.

8. WORKING WITH PARTNER AGENCIES

Once you have decided on the type, size and style of meeting you wish to organise, now is the time to assess the resources available. Whether it is at this point or at the conceptual stage earlier on, enlisting the input of a pharmaceutical industry agency will provide you with a dedicated team of experienced individuals and specialist services. Agencies can bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to your event – after all it is their specialist subject. As they are likely to have extensive venue experience and be in regular contact with suppliers, it is likely that they will also be able to negotiate better rates on your behalf.

There are a number of dedicated pharmaceutical industry agencies who have the background and trained staff to support you in making sure you comply with the ABPI Code of Practice. It is important when you are considering a partner agency that it has relevant experience and the staff have undertaken the ABPI training. They will then understand the wider implications if your event was in breach of the Code in the planning stage.

9. CERTIFICATION OF MEETINGS

The Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority arranges for meetings to be regularly monitored. Always remember...

“Pharmaceutical companies must ensure that all meetings which are planned are checked to see that they comply with the Code. Companies must have a written document that sets out their policies on meetings and hospitality and the associated allowable expenditure. In addition, meetings which involve travel outside the UK must be formally certified as set out in clause 14.2 of the Code.”

(See below)

“When certifying meetings which involve travel outside the UK, the signatures should ensure that all the arrangements are examined, including the programme, the venue, the reasons for using the venue, the intended audience, the anticipated cost and the nature of the hospitality and the like.”

(ABPI Code of Practice Clause 14.2)

10. EUROPEAN EVENTS AND THE EFPIA

You may consider researching centres of excellence in a particular therapeutic area in other European cities where the educational content of the programme would be enhanced. This would be relevant when there is some practical experience in terms of R&D that the HCPs could not have access to in the UK.

The European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations are presently reviewing a discussion paper regarding honoraria and advisory boards. Once the papers have been ratified they are expected to be incorporated into the ABPI’s own Code of Practice.

Speakers will require a detailed brief on the objectives for the day in terms of the scientific and educational content.

Pharmaceutical companies must have a written document that sets out their policies on meetings and hospitality.

Where to find details for non-UK events

If you need to find information on the respective Code of Practice for a particular country the guidelines are available on the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Association website at www.efpia.org.

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