The emergence of increasingly powerful PCTs imposes new boundaries on pharma’s traditional customers and individual prescribers. Practice-based commissioning (PBC), although in some areas still a sore point, is being recognised as the way forwards. As such, a new phase of much more sophisticated relationship building and retention has begun, which could and should be mutually beneficial for both pharma and the NHS.

Many companies look at tried and tested ways to try to engage PCTs. Some of these efforts are reasonably successful, but others fail at various stages – not being able to get appointments, not seeing the correct person, the complexity of trying to sell individual products and more. There is a need for alternative business models of engagement within the NHS – traditional ‘sponsorship’ will produce nothing new or beneficial over the long term.

This guide highlights ways in which, regardless of the size of your company, you can create a mutually beneficial working relationship between pharma and PCTs.
1. UNDERSTAND THE MARKET
The NHS is constantly changing. It can be difficult to keep up with new legislation, and expensive and time consuming to alter marketing strategy every time something new is introduced. However, key policy drivers, such as PBC, provide a clear indication of the direction that the NHS is moving in and have a significant impact on your key customers.

The Department of Health defines PBC as: “Engaging practices and other primary care professionals in the commissioning of services. Through PBC, front-line clinicians are being provided with the resources and support to become more involved in commissioning decisions.

Under PBC, practices receive information on how their patients use health services. This information can be used for the redesign of services by front-line clinicians for the benefit of patients.”

To fully understand your customers, it is necessary to focus on the following points that, although obvious, are often forgotten in the confusion:
- There is an increasing pressure on PCTs to deliver cost savings and balance accounts
- Clinical effectiveness and patient care must not be compromised
- PCTs are overworked and under-resourced
- Industry access to PCTs is restricted and competitive
- Target audiences are likely to be finance, heads of medicines management, prescribing advisers and lead GPs.

2. DON’T SHY AWAY FROM MAKING CHANGES
Whether you already work with PCT/PBC and want to improve your effectiveness, or simply want to start working with this customer base, it is essential that you understand how PCTs operate. A clear understanding of these key customers will allow you to implement whatever internal structural changes are necessary to ensure that an effective working relationship can be developed.

One structural change that you may wish to consider is the creation of a dedicated and experienced team to work with PCT/PBC. These teams are becoming increasingly common throughout pharma and healthcare and are often referred to as local account managers, healthcare development managers or similar. Whatever they are called, it is important that they are distinctly different from your sales team. Your sales force may be very effective with GPs but PCTs have very different requirements and market research repeatedly demonstrates that PCTs do not respond well to a ‘sales approach’.

Similarly, it is of paramount importance to make whatever changes are required to the creation and implementation of your brand strategy. Look at your new PCT customer base, as it is likely your messages and offerings will need to change. The promise and experience derived from your strategy is also likely to change.

At this stage you may not know what your messages and offerings need to be, but realising that they need to be different from those used by your sales force is the first step forward. After that you really need to question what it is that you want. What do you want your PCT customer base to do? Change their formulary? Will that make the difference you need? Will GPs listen?

Is something else required – something more radical that has never been done?

Research shows that PCTs have very different requirements to GPs and do not respond well to a ‘sales approach’.

You may wish to consider in structuring your team having a dedicated and experienced team to work with PCTs/PBC.

Look at your new PCT customer base, as it is likely your messages and offerings will also need to change.
Defining your brand strategy

Designed to help build and strengthen the brand connection between organisation and PCT/PBC customer

3. PROFILING PCTS

There are now 152 PCTs split across 10 Strategic Health Authorities. Whilst there may be some similarities between them, there remain large areas of regional variation. Some PCTs, for example have clear policy documents and guidance for achieving specific health outcomes; others will not have these or the policy contained in them may be radically different. Understanding the patient demographics within each PCT is paramount to any marketing materials.

Similarly, PCTs will be at different stages in their uptake of PBC. Despite last year’s figures showing that three-quarters of all PCTs had signed up for PBC, there still remains a wide variation in the degree to which it is being implemented. Knowing which PCTs are proactive and which are non-starters can be gained through effective market research.

Different companies will have different techniques for this research. Regional advisory boards are one way, or using quantitative methodology, such as telephone or on-line questionnaires, are alternatives. Different methods have been used effectively, depending on the research objectives.

Understanding the profiling of PCTs with specific tools can help you ensure your marketing activity is correctly positioned. There may not be that one specific answer you crave and your research may determine you need various different marketing tools. However research like this will be invaluable both to your teams who are working with the PCTs and your agencies who are providing you with marketing collateral. The strategy you decide to embark upon will ultimately come from some form of research.

4. DEFINING YOUR BRAND STRATEGY

Defining your brand strategy is always the critical stage in any type of marketing. It sets the foundation for all other activities – identity, management, experience. You need to analyse your company, your PCT/PBC customers and what is happening within the NHS.

In defining your brand strategy you need to consider the following:

- Company
- Market
- Customers
- Offerings
- Messaging
- Category and position
- Promise and experience.

This is where any market research you have commissioned will be invaluable. PCTs have different thought patterns about different therapy areas. You need to ensure you can provide each of these three propositions:

- A differentiated position in the marketplace
- A hierarchy of messages for PCT/PBC customers
- A distinctive brand promise.

5. THE VALUE PROPOSITION – YOUR OFFERING

The thrust of what you should be promoting is what you are offering – in essence what your value proposition actually is. Do not sell, do not purely talk about clinical effectiveness and your brand does A, B and C. Your sales force has that backup information; your account managers need to promote the full portfolio (if you have one) – ie, the full value proposition.

This should start with your company – who are you, what do you do? You don’t need to make it sound polished and fancy, simply state the facts. Then look at your business and therapy areas, find your competitive differentiation – do you have a novel product, is your product overall more cost effective? Look at NICE guidelines within therapy areas; consider QOF points.

Think about your customer base – PCT/PBC – what are their drivers in your therapy area. Think outside the box but keeping within the ABPI, about what your teams can do to help PCT/PBC. There is a need for alternative business models, and these can and do exist in pharma.

If you do look outside the box at different ways to engage PCTs, remember to promote a service and not to promote your product. All actions must benefit patients. You want to become a partner and not just sponsor something – one way is to get on board early and generate an idea.

6. YOUR LOCAL ACCOUNT MANAGERS

Local account managers are a resource for PCTs. They should help, clarify, influence and develop partnerships and engage customers at the highest level. If this team comes across as credible with a value proposition, they are more likely to be seen. Freebies are of no interest – facts, data and ideas to help PCTs achieve their objectives are what are

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10 ways to engage PCTs more effectively

A practical guide by Melanie Z Kirk
needed. There should be a clear divide between local account managers and the sales force to ensure that there is no confusion. A clearly defined set of values can be created if necessary.

Local account managers should be able to assess local needs and find positive solutions. Ideally they should know the area, know the demographics, and know how one PCT differs from another. This may take time but you should provide adequate resources to help your teams highlight how they can help PCTs address PBC clusters.

To make the most of your local account managers, it is important to provide them with adequate training and updates, such as monthly e-bulletins. It is critical that they are fully versed in PBC legislation as well as the publication of any amendments or guidance. Only by being fully informed will they be able to speak the same language as their key customers and communicate with them effectively.

7. MARKETING MATERIALS
Producing the correct materials to help your account managers engage PCTs is paramount. Sales aids and leave pieces probably won’t cut it with payers, heads of medicines management or prescribing advisers.

There is an ever-increasing pressure on PCTs to reduce costs. This in turn increases pressure on pharma to demonstrate viable pharma-economic data. You don’t have to have the most cost-effective product but if you can demonstrate clinical effectiveness with overall cost effectiveness over a portfolio of products, you are in a winning scenario.

You may have to produce a full set of resource materials for use with PCTs, these can include:
• PCT presentation
• PCT success case studies
• Cost calculator
• Ease of implementation documentation.

Ensure that your materials both represent and compliment your company, product and service as a brand. Don’t simply go with the cheapest or most eye-catching concepts but choose and produce materials that best promote and reflect both your company and product. Run with what will make a lasting impression on your audience – they are the ones who matter.

8. UNDERSTAND YOUR COMPETITION
It is essential that you are aware of what is happening in your competitive environment, and that you anticipate reactions and responses to your efforts and identify factors that will enable you or in some cases disable you from competing. Competitor understanding is a determining factor of corporate success. Providing and gaining information on competitor strengths, weaknesses and strategy can only be advantageous in influencing your moves and approach in engaging PCTs.

Local account managers are best placed to communicate what is happening in their immediate surrounding, but it is vital that you prepare them and anticipate what situation they are about to enter and receive. Learn from what your competition are doing, and what the market leaders are achieving and how they are achieving it. How and what are they communicating? And who are they communicating to? There are valuable lessons to be learned from this. Learning from rivals doesn’t necessarily mean following them.

9. PUTTING IT ALL INTO ACTION
With your teams and activities planned, remember things can change. The NHS is constantly evolving and so should your brand strategy – in line with PCT/PBC thinking. As a quick check, look through the following on a quarterly basis and check your strategy is still working:
• Target correct PCTs – and specific target audience within PCTs – with set objectives
• Provide strategic direction to help teams work direct with PCTs and PBC clusters
• Audit and reposition existing structures and resources in line with issues affecting PCTs
• Help promote a real value proposition to key PCT personnel
• Provide teams with adequate resources – pharmaeconomic data/evaluation questionnaires, etc.

In addition to this your account managers should be:
• Promoting your company, its heritage and success
• Shaping the environment – therapy area guidelines and policy where appropriate
• Promoting the value proposition to key influencers and decision makers
• Promoting to senior personnel
• Portfolio brand champions with proactive account management.

10. BE POSITIVE
With so much written about the difficulties facing PCTs and PBC and the increasing restrictions on accessing these customers, it is easy to become pessimistic about the future. However, it is important to remember that where there is change there are opportunities! With such fundamental changes taking place at the moment, the next few years will provide enormous opportunities for companies who adopt the right strategies now.

It is important to think big and remember that the old ways of doing things may not be the best solutions in today’s market. Focus on your customers and what they need. Know your USPs and emphasise them. Your brands may not always be the most cost effective but will have other benefits that you can call attention to. Be bold, be brave and don’t be afraid to explore different models and methods of thinking.

Discover clarity… explore your brand from the inside

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