

OPINIONS

Industry conferences — to attend or not to attend is the content question



According to Biomedical Market Newsletter Inc., there were more than 500 medical events already scheduled between Jan. 27 and Feb. 28, 2003 (444 for just the month of February) — and more being added every day. On average, the company has estimated that there are approximately 17 conferences every business day over the course of one year. In addition, more than 3,000 medical industry events were scheduled for calendar year 2003, with about 4,000 to 5,000 total events projected to be held at some point during 2003.

With so many events pulling you in every direction, PharmaVOICE asked what makes a conference, symposia, seminar, or event worthwhile to you. And having attended an event did it fulfill your expectations?

Subject relevance

At RxCrossroads, attending industry conferences is a functional part of our sales and marketing process. Presence at the right conferences allows for networking with key decision makers while also serving marketing and public-relations functions. In evaluating which conferences to attend, of obvious initial concern is the subject matter relevance — not only topically, but also in the depth of information to be presented.

Additional criteria include: Is an opportunity available for an RxCrossroads executive to present at the conference? Who are the target conference attendees? Does the conference have a track record, or is this the initial program? Consideration is also given to conference logistics (date, location). Do presentations provide industry insight into “hot” topics? Who is the conference organizer?

Conferences that have fulfilled our expectations have a number of positive common threads. The conference is well attended, reaching the proposed target audience. Ample opportunity for networking with conference attendees is provided. Presentations and speakers provide a different perspective on a common theme.

David Hileman, R.Ph.
VP, SALES AND MARKETING
RXCROSSROADS AND MDI

Physicians want quality

My experience is that clinicians select meetings based upon the following criteria:

Quality of faculty: Clinicians want to interact with leading academics who are involved in valuable research to improve patient care and/or are sharing solutions to practice challenges.

Peer-to-Peer interaction: Clinicians learn from content presented at educational meetings, but more importantly, they learn from peer-to-peer interaction. We refer to it as “metacognition.” Sharing issues and resolutions are a mainstay in clinician learning.

Location: As organizational budgets are slashed and the quality of local meetings are increasingly on par with national meetings, clinicians are turning locally to access information. The number of local meetings scheduled each month may account for the large number of meetings quoted in the Biomedical Market Newsletter data. On the other hand, when clinicians do travel, they desire quality locations in which to combine business with travel, often including their families.

Quality of online medical education: Even though online medical education has made great strides, it still cannot deliver on the priorities listed above. As such, it has done little to stem the desire for “live” meetings.

Rich Bavasso
EXECUTIVE VP/CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER
PHARMEDICA HOLDINGS LLC

Good to go, sometimes

Conferences, like all events, vary in quality and usefulness. As an Internet advertising sales and service company, Choice Media generally looks for meetings with an e-Health focus.

Many e-Health conferences — particularly those run by objective, third-party management companies — recruit top-notch speakers who offer insights into what’s happening in the industry. Many of these include practical workshops and panel discussions that offer some interesting food for thought and help attendees rethink various aspects of their businesses.

These conferences are valuable, not just for the information imparted by speakers, but also because they help attendees learn more about new products and services, gain insights into the competition, meet new and often hard-to-reach prospects and of course see, talk to and often entertain existing customers.

However, we have also had the unpleasant experience of attending conferences run by companies with specific agendas. At one of these meetings, executives promoted as “speakers” got up to make what amounted to a sales pitch — alienating many of the attendees. We’ve found that this is not unusual, and now approach these conferences with greater skepticism.

We hope that falling attendance will send a message to conference managers, encouraging conferences that offer the kind of objectivity and professionalism that make the investment worth the effort.

Robert Cecere
EXECUTIVE VP, SALES AND MARKETING
CHOICE MEDIA

Disappointing results

I’ve been disappointed in the last several conferences I’ve attended mainly because there are too many vendors and not enough clients. Also, I feel that there’s a lack of case studies and too much commercialism. Even though Harte-Hanks is a so-called vendor, we would love to see more client speakers to see what keeps them up at night and to understand what they perceive to be the major challenges today.

Julian M. Parreno
SENIOR VP, SALES AND MARKETING,
PHARMACEUTICALS
HARTE-HANKS

Year in Preview

Year of the Sheep

It's 2003. Now what? If this was the start of the Chinese new year (which is actually Feb. 1st), we would be talking about the "Year of the Sheep." So I asked myself, as our new year begins, what year should this be for us in the life-science business? Being bold and ambitious, rather than "sheepish," I came up with several possibilities:

- Year of Collaboration
- Year of Compliance
- Year of Data and Content Integration
- Year of Ethical Behavior
- Year of Commitment

Year of Collaboration. First and foremost, I am hoping that we all recognize that teamwork and collaboration are needed to deal with the challenges of a difficult economic climate and lean product pipelines. All of us who make our living by improving the lives of our fellow men and women know that more can be accomplished by cooperation than isolation. We need to break down barriers between organizations within our own companies, nurture closer collaboration with our business partners, and build better and closer ties with a smaller number of preferred vendors. To accomplish this requires just one key decision, the recognition that you can't do it all by yourself.

Year of Compliance. On a different front, this should also be the Year of Compliance. Our clients have told us that compliance with a variety of government regulations adds up to one giant headache. In fact, we are now getting a pretty consistent message that the cost of 21CFR11 compliance alone will be orders of

magnitude more expensive and time consuming than initially thought. Why should this be? Let me suggest one key reason. There is a tendency in the industry to evaluate the issue only internally and make assumptions about what is required. This normally leads to a very conservative and thus elaborate and expensive solution. May I suggest that we take a different approach and work together with our peers in other companies, get advice from third-party firms on the most efficient way to proceed, and, perhaps most importantly, pick up the phone and get advice from and make a deal with the FDA. Believe it or not, they can be pretty helpful and will cooperate with you if you have a viable plan.

Year of Data and Content Integration. Now that we have SOP management and submission publishing down to a science, it's time to turn our attention to the integration of data and content. After all, the collection and analysis of the former leads directly to the generation of the latter. So far, and for very practical reasons, we have effectively kept data and content apart. We know, however, that leveraging them together will lead to better decision making and increased productivity. In addition, we need to pay more attention to the aggregation of data from diverse sources. It does not matter whether the data come from discovery or development or from inside or outside the organization. Both need to be leveraged better. Both need to be standardized (e.g. CDISC) to allow pooling and subsequent analysis, mining, visualization, and reporting. Your company, the medical community, and patients will all benefit from this. It's needed and it's possible.

Year of Ethical Behavior. This one is close

to my heart. For close to 30 years, I have watched a few "bad apples" spoil things for the entire industry. No sooner than we show some great medical stride or benefit to society, some misdirected individual or company does something marginally legal, completely illegal, or utterly contemptible to tarnish our image. This should be no more acceptable in our industry than it is in others. What is dumb-founding to me is that I believe that such behavior usually takes lots of creativity, a trait that can be used to devise something good as easily as something bad.

So what can we do about it? Two things in particular. First, when the temptation strikes to do something self-serving, just ask yourself if it will harm anyone else. If yes, don't do it. Second, if you see someone else being led into temptation, speak up and stop them. Ethical behavior, like charity, begins at home.

Year of Commitment. If you are like me, you have the tendency to concentrate on the tactical. Day-to-day work consumes all your energies. You don't get the chance to step back, take a deep breath and evaluate what you are doing. You don't have the time to get off the treadmill and do some critical thinking.

What's best for me and my company? What can I do that would make the most difference? What can I do to help my colleagues and company do better this year? If you take the time, you can actually answer some of these questions. You just need the resolve to stop, think, decide, and act. Then commit yourself to making it happen.

So why am I telling you all this? Well, I know that the past year was pretty tough. Terrorism, recession, dot com meltdown, corporate malfeasance, Mideast instability, lousy pipelines, dashed hopes in biotechnology, pricing pressures, increased regulatory oversight, and many other problems took the joy out of life. As Scarlett in "Gone With the Wind" said, however, "Tomorrow is another day." How tomorrow turns out is in many ways up to each one of us. And as one day the next, our cumulative over the remaining days of 03 will determine whether next January 1st feels better than this one. I'm betting that it will.

George Laszlo
DIRECTOR,
LIFE SCIENCES,
GLOBALHEALTHSOLUTIONS
COMPUTER SCIENCES CORP.
(P.S. THEOPINIONEXPRESSED
ARE MYOWNANDNOT
NECESSARILY THOSEOF
COMPUTER SCIENCES)

What's Your Opinion?

MENTORING, IS IT A LOST ART?

For the past two years, January has been designated as National Mentoring Month (NMM). Led by the Harvard Mentoring Project and MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, NMM also was supported by President George W. Bush, the U.S. Congress, state governors, and mayors across the country. During these 31 days, attention was focused on how mentoring benefits the child, adult, and society, as a whole. It was also a time to thank those mentors who are "everyday heroes" to their mentees and to encourage others to share the experience and become a mentor. Mentoring in the workplace is as important to facilitate career and personal development.

PharmaVOICE wants to know: Who has played a role in your professional and personal development? And does your company have a mentoring program?

WHAT'S YOUR OPINION?

Please e-mail your comments to feedback@pharmavoices.com.

