

PUBLISHER Lisa Banket

EDITOR Taren Grom

CREATIVE DIRECTOR Marah Walsh

DIRECTOR OF SALES

Darlene Kwiatkowski

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Virginia Kirk

Denise Myshko

Elisabeth Pena

Kim Ribbink

Alex Robinson

Lynda Sears

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by PharmaLinX LLC, Titusville, NJ
Printed in the U.S.A.
Volume Two, Number Six

PharmaVOICE is published eight times per year by PharmaLinX LLC, P.O.Box 327, Titusville, NJ 08560.

Postmaster: Send address changes to PharmaVoice, P.O. Box 327, Titusville, NJ 08560.

PharmaVOICE Coverage and Distribution:

Domestic subscriptions are available at \$106 for one year (8 issues). Foreign subscriptions: 8 issues US\$220. Contact PharmaVoice at P.O. Box 327, Titusville, NJ 08560. Call us at 609.730.0196 or FAX your order to 609.730.0197.

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Letters

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Marketers beware — the public is watching. In an effort to stem abuses by a few, the many unanimously have adopted, and are adhering to, a Code of Interactions with Healthcare Professionals.

Developed in conjunction with the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), CEOs of America's largest pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, and the American Medical Association, the guidelines outline a specific ethical code of conduct between sales reps and healthcare professionals. The new code is comprehensive and very specific as to what is an acceptable interaction between marketers and physicians.

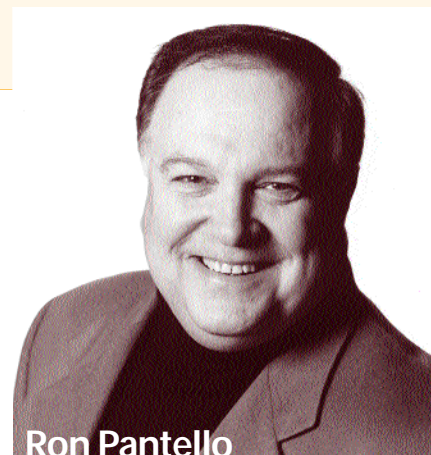
The goal of the new code is to eliminate non-educational communications and interactions, such as dine-and-dash programs, or the even more demeaning gas-and-go tactics. Pharmaceutical executives point out that while by no means were these practices being employed by the industry as a whole, such actions did provide fodder for the media and industry critics.

"It was very important for PhRMA to address this issue," says Ron Pantello, CEO of Lally McFarland & Pantello Euro RSCG, co-chairman, Euro RSCG Healthcare, and a newly elected member of the board of PhRMA. "The transparent abuses by some companies — the dine-and-dash and gas-and-go activities — that were being reported in the press were hurting the image of the pharmaceutical industry, and this needed to be stopped. Further, these types of promotional activities encourage legislation that could negatively affect our industry."

Clearly, abiding by the new code will help tame the perception that pharmaceutical companies are in the practice of buying physicians' loyalty through the advancement of extravagant and lavish trips, giveaways, and consultant fees.

The voluntary code is being lauded by stakeholders as a proactive step to raise the industry's image in the public sector. Executives say this is especially important now in light of the current business environment across all industries.

The impact on the sales rep/physician relationship can only be improved say phar-



Ron Pantello

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maceutical leaders and physicians. The guidelines bring the focus back to scientific and educational information and the benefits of medication, which is where the interaction should be.

According to Medicalliance Inc., which conducted a comprehensive survey to gauge industry reaction to the new guidelines, sales reps, those on the front lines, are relieved. Some have stated that the new guidelines level the playing field and relieve them from having to organize special events. The new code prohibits reps from treating healthcare providers to ball games, sporting events, golf, theater, or concerts. In addition, the code limits the value of gifts at no more than \$100 and should benefit patient care and must be conducive to providing scientific or educational information.

The code does allow for meals, if they are modest, and the restaurant or venue is conducive to discussion, and the sales rep is reviewing educational or scientific themes.

The code prohibits pharmaceutical companies from covering the cost of travel, lodging, or meals for non-faculty attendees at company-sponsored programs. This means that companies cannot pay for spouses or guests.

For companies that do intend to stay within code, the biggest changes will likely be how information is presented to healthcare professionals — and who is watching the presenters.

Taren Grom
Editor

Toeing the guideline