

EXTERNAL EXPERTS:

Optimal Engagement Strategies in a Digital Age



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Organizations within the healthcare industry often work with external experts on an array of initiatives. These experts collaborate in a variety of ways, including working as advisory board members, investigators, media spokespeople, and speakers. Once a genuine need for expert engagement has been established, the process of engaging these experts has generally been standardized and limited to in-person meetings and teleconferences, which are becoming increasingly difficult to execute given cost considerations, university hospital restrictions, and experts' often over-extended schedules. While these in-person interactions are invaluable for the sponsoring company and often beneficial for the expert as well, new, more cost-efficient digital solutions are needed to increase interaction and collaboration.

Research Shows External Experts Want More Opportunities for Engagement

Research demonstrates the opportunity for additional engagement between companies and external experts. MedThink Communications commissioned a survey in January 2010 that polled 105 physicians with current or past experience as an external expert for pharmaceutical companies. The survey was designed to assess the process and tools used for improved collaboration between the external expert and the company. The survey found that 60% of physician experts would like additional opportunities to communicate with a company between in-person meetings, and 74% feel that companies are not providing or only somewhat providing them with the means to offer expert advice outside of meetings and teleconferences. Furthermore, 88% of external experts place medium-to-high value on providing guidance via a virtual collaboration tool.

Additionally, 74% would view a pharmaceutical, device, or biotechnology company more positively if the company incorporated a virtual tool into its existing approach to collaboration.

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Recommendations for Optimal Engagement

Companies currently working with experts or those that plan to work with them in the future should consider several factors when determining the most effective methods to engage and collaborate with them.

Evaluate Current Processes. Review current protocol for working with external experts once a genuine need is defined. Evaluate how often and in what forums interaction is taking place. Consider if current processes are allowing for timely and efficient review and exchange of information. Assess what impact new methods of collaboration, including digital strategies, could have on factors including cost and obtaining timely counsel.

Assess Target Audiences. Consider the role of external experts. Talk with them and evaluate what information is most useful and how they would like to collaborate outside of in-person meetings and teleconferences. Learn about their use of digital channels (e.g., websites, smart phones, PDAs), and determine what methods they would embrace when advising your organization.

Consider Digital Strategies. As research has suggested, external experts want digital collaboration tools and have indicated they will use them. Companies that provide methods for optimal engagement will be viewed more positively by external experts.

Tailor Digital Tools. When considering a digital collaboration tool, several factors should be taken into account to ensure uptake and ongoing use by experts:

- Keep it simple for use by experts and sponsoring companies.
- Ensure it is timely by keeping it updated with the latest information, allowing for rapid input.
- Customize it to ensure the various tools are meeting the specific needs of external experts. Put mechanisms in place to allow for adaptations based on changing needs and preferences.
- Be transparent and candid regarding the use of the tool and how input from experts will guide company decision making. Include statements that provide details of how the expert's input may be an extension of their existing contract.
- Capture the information by putting metrics in place to evaluate use of digital tools. These include how often the technology is being used, the quality of the expert responses, and how new insights are being used.

Digital Collaboration Should Be the Rule, Not the Exception

Pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and other healthcare companies should more assertively explore and implement digital strategies to enhance relationships and collaboration with experts. In today's digital age, these approaches are essential to engage and elevate a company's most important customers; allow for efficient, real-time communication; strengthen relationships; and most importantly, answer the needs of experts. ■



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*Research conducted by MDLinx, a division of M3 USA.



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