

Navigating the New Era of KOL Engagement and Activation

Welcome to the PharmaVOICE Webcast Network. In this episode, I meet with Dave Heckard, EVP at HRA – Health, Research and Analytics, a part of Truth Serum Network. We talk about KOLs, how to find them, recruit them and utilize them for your life sciences products. For more information, visit hraresearch.com.

I'm Dan Limbach, your host and producer of the PharmaVOICE Webcast Network.

Dan: Welcome to the podcast program, Dave.

Dave: Thank you. It's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Dan: It's my pleasure. What are some of the trends that you're seeing in terms of how companies are working with key opinion leaders or KOLs?

Dave: It's similar to the way that they have worked in the past with some minor exceptions. Obviously, the current environment that we're in has limited some of the traditional things that pharmaceutical companies were able to do, but there are some things that they can do virtually that can kind of really help augment what they've done in the past.

Traditionally, there's two phases or two ways that pharmaceutical companies or other companies have dealt with KOLs from the medical affairs perspective where they're working with the KOLs to create content around their product, and then in the field traditionally people like in the roles of MSLs have been responsible for engaging KOLs in their point of practices, working with them around clinical trials and really engaging in that way. Those mechanisms still exist, but there have been limitations in that with in terms of field forces having challenges getting into doctors offices, hospital restrictions, COVID restrictions, etc., which really kind of limits that perspective.

There's a couple of other things that I'd kind of like to touch base on that are trends, but overall that's kind of the landscape I would say. Additionally, many pharmaceutical companies in the past couple of years have expanded into having positions called thought leader liaison, business relationship managers, market development managers. Those people have been responsible on more of the local and regional level to engage with thought leaders and the KOLs and they're impacted by COVID restrictions and hospital access as well. So again, looking from more virtual and online ways to engage has been really paramount.

Our organization has a professional affairs team and their job is really to develop relationships with KOLs in order to work with us on live meetings, panel discussions and market research and it's really helped us from a competitive perspective to have people in those roles. But the engagement strategy is really the piece that's changed, and so having options that are virtual to engage is really an important piece, I would say.

Dan: Dave, what are some of the ways that people are engaging virtually with KOLs?

Dave: I mean ultimately you want your KOLs to become an extension of your medical affairs and your marketing team. One thing that one of our clients has done was really to create a virtual community for their thought leaders, and what they did was they, in addition to meeting regularly via conference calls, they created this community to allow them to provide insights that were gleaned from clinical trials that they've done, white papers, slide decks, poster presentations, minutes from prior meetings. They've also created a discussion feature on the community platform where they could post questions to doctors and have them respond in real time like really at their own pace. These KOLs are very busy. Their time is important to them. They already have a meeting once a month with them, but they need to engage them throughout. So it's important to have these types of virtual communities where you can again, post content, create discussions and get thoughts and insights from the KOLs as it can be limiting to get them on live meetings.

Additionally in terms of virtual, there are a lot of these live meetings have been converted to virtual meetings and so there are even greater opportunities for KOLs to be in front of end users. Traditionally, physicians have to attend a live event. They have to pay. They have to take time off to go to these association meetings and they have limited access to KOLs. But with virtual meetings the access is, they can attend some of the sessions at a national meeting. Again, they don't have to leave. They don't have to shut down their practice to go to an association meeting. And again, it creates more opportunities for these doctors to be in front of the end user and for a pharmaceutical company that's really key to get your message out to them.

Dan: Very good. It has certainly been a very challenging year, year and a half with the pandemic and it's affected really all areas of the industry. So let's talk about KOL recruitment. What approach do you recommend for recruiting KOLs?

Dave: So when you think about KOLs, you need to think in terms of national, regional and local, and your top tier KOLs are really going to be the ones that work most closely with your medical affairs team, your marketing team to develop the content that you use to promote your brand. They will be the ones that are the experts who will speak about the product really on the largest stages and they'll also participate in clinical trials. And of course, you want to find KOLs who are recognized as experts in therapeutic areas, but you also want to make it sure that KOLs are available. So sometimes the top tier KOLs in the therapeutic area may speak for multiple companies and you might have limited access to them. So it's really important that they're available to work with you.

As I said, the biggest stars are the busiest and sometimes there are some up and comers or rising stars that they're talented, they're respected, you're starting to see them emerge as thought leaders and those can be very good targets to add to your KOL database.

When you're recruiting KOLs, you don't just want to rely on their reputation; you want to get time to talk to them, speak with them, make sure that they fit in with your culture, so really recommending

kind of viewing their presentations, seeing what they're like in terms of a speaker, talk with your industry colleagues, conduct some market research with people that are in the field to understand who those top KOLs are and really you want to have a long relationship, so you want to make sure that the people that you're working with fit into your model, if you will.

Dan: Absolutely. So you mentioned there are times when you're new to a therapeutic area, so how do you even find the KOLs in that situation?

Dave: Again, I think you're doing exploration in terms of people that you know within the industry. Oftentimes you have an existing sales force that may be calling in and around an oncology space or an oncology office. They're going to have some contacts that they know that can give them referrals. And at the local and regional level you're going to want to have KOLs that kind of help support the business units that are there.

Ultimately, the best way is to conduct market research where you can do it in a number of different ways. You can do what's called desk research or secondary research where you're really checking the databases, seeing the number of publications and citations that physicians have. You can see who's speaking in certain therapeutic areas and you want to interview physicians that are out in practice. So we would conduct primary research where you set up maybe a survey or interviews. You ask physicians questions about who they've seen speak, who they would refer a patient to for a certain disease state or a certain condition, what medical centers or academic centers do they refer patients, and really, from that type of insights and research you can craft and see who those KOLs are in that space.

Dan: So you mentioned that there are national, regional and local KOLs. How do you determine which of those buckets a KOL would fit into best?

Dave: Well, again, I think some of it's based on reputation, some of it's based on the number of citations, as I said. So it's a combination of all those different kinds of things. As I mentioned before, market research will tell that; we're asking physicians specific questions like for an example in the oncology space, if we're doing something around lung cancer, we would talk to community oncologists that are practicing if they had a difficult to treat patient with lung cancer, locally who would they refer that patient to, what medical center, what community oncology center would they refer patients to go.

Nationally, those thought leaders are actually a little bit more easy to identify because they're the ones that are speaking consistently at the national meetings. They are the ones that are publishing the clinical trials and they're just sort of the most recognized. The challenge there is developing relationships with those top tier KOLs because as I said before, they're busy, they may speak for a number of different companies and they just may have limited time. So oftentimes finding those sort of up and comers from a national perspective, those could be diamonds in the rough for your organization.

Dan: Well, finding KOLs is one thing, right? So what are some strategies that you can utilize to make your KOLs more active within your brand or company?

Dave: I talked before about the importance of kind of meeting with the KOLs, talking to them, getting to know them. KOLs are people just like you and I and some have strengths in certain areas and some in others. And you need KOLs that have strengths in presenting your data, but you also need KOLs that are very good in performing clinical trials or writing papers and things like that. So it's important as you're lining them up that you understand what their interests are, what their needs are and how to best utilize them.

So in terms of engagement and how to use them more effectively or keep them active it's really understanding what's most important to them. Some physicians, some KOLs are in teaching institutions where they need to be – they're academic, they're teaching courses, they need to educate. So providing them resources with slide decks or data or clinical trial data that they can share with their students is really important. Others are looking for more exposure for themselves. They want to get out, they want to be recognized as a name, so they might be looking for speaking opportunities. That could be, again, at a national meeting. It could be helping to create a poster and a poster presentation. It could be opportunities to speak at like local speaker programs. So, again, it's important to understand what their needs are in order for you as the company to be able to meet those needs.

Dan: Let's talk about those resources that you mentioned. What types of content do KOLs find valuable or would be most relevant to their needs?

Dave: I think it's case by case, but in the instance I said before about our client who had the online community, what they were able to share was up-to-date clinical trials about their product, again, which is important for these physicians within their organizations that they know that kind of what is up and coming, but also decks that have information in them about disease states. So there's always new research that's out there – competitive decks that talk about the landscape of the competitive products, those are valuable to physicians. They're always tweaking their slide decks. They're always making changes and to be able to have those resources provided to them by a pharmaceutical company is something that's very valuable.

Again, we talk about opportunities to speak, opportunities to participate in clinical trials. KOLs that work in academic medical centers, the mantra is publish or perish. So they're always looking for sort of the next set of research studies that they can do, publications around the clinical trials that they're working in, those can be very attractive and important ways to engage your KOLs.

Dan: Recruiting KOLs is kind of akin to a courtship; both sides want to see if it's good match. So what motivates a KOL to become a speaker or a thought leader for your organization?

Dave: There are a lot of factors that might motivate them. Obviously the value that you're product brings to the marketplace if it's new and unique; the people that are recruiting KOLs can't control that, but they can present the information in a way and they can provide opportunities for them to be very involved in the development of the messages around the product. So I think KOLs are looking to share the information and the knowledge that they have, and I think the more that you can make them an

active part of your team as you're developing the product, the messages, the concepts that you're going to bring to market, the more that they feel that they're part of your organization.

As I said before, they're kind of an extension of your medical affairs or marketing team and not in a way that's sort of overly promotional, but in a way that they become an expert in the product, in the disease state and they can speak more credibly.

But again, I think those are the kinds of things that can motivate them and it depends on sort of what their ultimate goal is. So it's important to have those conversations as well. If your product has already been through all the clinical trials that are bringing it to market, there might not be a need for a strong researcher on your KOL team. It's important to share that information. Maybe that's not the best person to bring into your KOL network. They may, in fact, decline or it might not be as much interest. So, again, I think it's a case by case basis there, but it's important to understand what their needs are.

Dan: Absolutely. And it's clearly a symbiotic relationship.

Dave: Sure.

Dan: Finally, Dave, social media is pervasive throughout many aspects of business. How has social media impacted the identification and use of KOLs?

Dave: Obviously, the traditional methods are still utilized to identify your panel of KOLs, but more and more physicians are becoming more active in social media. In fact, what we know is that many health systems or many community centers that physicians work in have requirements that they are socially active, so that they're getting the name out, they're getting the brand of – the center that they work at out into the community via social methods. And social media we know is where a lot of people go to get their information about their healthcare, other things as well, but having a KOL that's socially active is a great way to engage. And while we still use those traditional methods to uncover who the experts are, we can see doctors that have the largest followings in social media.

If you've got, again, we'll use lung cancer as an example – if you have a doctor who is talking – they're an oncologist, they treat lung cancer, they're talking about up-to-date trials that are coming out with the most recent and relevant trials that are coming to the marketplace – those are people that you know that are aware. They know the data. They know the most current literature and that could be a target. And on top of that, they are talking positively about your clinical trials you know that they are a potential advocate. So that's something that you could incorporate in your decision making as well.

So really kind of layering on top what's called social listening to traditional methods of KOL engagement and KOL recruitment is really an important concept to incorporate. So it translates to having traditional KOLs and maybe perhaps socially savvy KOLs as well on your panel.

Dan: That's an important distinction. David, I want to thank you for sharing your thought leadership and expertise with us today. This was a great conversation.

Dave: Thanks, Dan, for having me today. I really appreciate the time and enjoyed our conversation.

That will do it for this episode. Thank you for listening and thanks to HRA for sponsoring this episode. For more information, visit hraresearch.com. And don't forget to check out our other podcasts, webinars, virtual panels, white papers, videos and more at pharmavoices.com.

Until next time, I'm Dan Limbach.