Getting the Most from Your Medical Science Liaisons: Five Keys to Success

Gary Tyson, Senior Vice President, Campbell Alliance
Mike Menta, Vice President, Campbell Alliance

Introduction

The medical science liaison (MSL) has become an increasingly important role in the pharmaceutical and biotech industry over the past few years. As the industry focuses more attention on specialty products—most of which are prescribed and administered in complex environments—it must rely more heavily on professionals who can discuss scientific and therapeutic issues with physicians on a peer-to-peer basis.

Because these professionals must often deal with scientific issues, field questions about off-label use, and communicate complex messages, they must be managed by the Medical Affairs (MA) organization. In fact, MSLs are often the single largest investment in human capital made by MA. Therefore, MA leadership is motivated to ensure that MSLs are as efficient and effective as possible.

Unfortunately, a number of factors act to reduce MSL effectiveness. Although the role has become more important in recent years and the role’s requirements have evolved, MSL management practices have not kept up. MA leaders can “catch up” when it comes to MSL management by remembering and implementing the following five keys to MSL success.

• **Stakeholder Awareness:** Ensure that MSLs are aware of and understand the perspective of their internal and external stakeholders

• **Clear Goals:** Establish clear goals and expectations that are appropriate given the life cycle stages of the products for which they are responsible

• **High-Value Activities:** Ensure that MSLs spend their time on high-value activities that relate to those goals and expectations

• **Performance Measurement:** Measure MSL performance against their goals and provide training or other remedial action for those who need it

• **Dedicated Management:** Assign full-time managers to ensure that all of the above takes place properly and that MSLs get the guidance they need

By remembering these five keys to MSL success, MA leadership will ensure that it realizes maximum value from this expensive resource. Following are details on each of the five keys, including examples, insights, and caveats that MA leaders can use as they optimize their MSL forces.

**Stakeholder Awareness:**

Ensure that MSLs are aware of and understand the perspective of their internal and external stakeholders

**Internal Stakeholders**

The MSL role is the entry-level role for many of the people who staff it. Many are coming from a scientific or healthcare environment. They have little knowledge of the myriad and complex functions that exist within a global biopharmaceutical company. Yet the MSL role, more than many other roles within pharma, requires an ability to work collaboratively with a range of different pharma functions. To be successful, an MSL often has to work with internal stakeholders in Research, Clinical Development, Access and Reimbursement, and Commercial. It can be difficult collaborating with those functions unless the MSL understands the needs and perspectives of each of these internal stakeholders.

Successful MSL organizations educate their MSLs on the purpose and approach taken by these internal stakeholders. For example, while many MSLs understand the workings of clinical trials, they may not appreciate the competitive nature of today’s clinical development landscape and the importance that relationships play in the success of clinical programs. Conducting educational classes for MSLs that share the perspectives and drivers of the clinical development function will help the MSLs better appreciate the needs and urgency of this important internal stakeholder group.

Similariy, many MSLs are only vaguely aware of the challenges of the commercial functions within...
pharma. While the line between education and promotion needs to always be clear, MSLs can more effectively support their commercial internal stakeholders if they better understand what is driving their needs. Education from commercial on the commercial landscape for the company’s products allows the MSLs to better identify external intelligence that can be important to commercial’s success.

Given the wide range of internal stakeholders that are seeking support from MSLs, high-functioning organizations ensure that their MSLs are trained upfront on the purpose of these internal stakeholders and then put in place ongoing communication opportunities (e.g., monthly meetings, status updates) to ensure that good two-way communication remains in place.

External Stakeholders

Equally important for MSLs are the external stakeholders. These health care professionals are the primary focus of the MSLs’ communication work. While the MSLs often have an easier time appreciating the perspective of these stakeholders because many MSLs used to be in their roles, it is important to avoid making assumptions that all external stakeholders have the same needs.

Instead, MSLs need to be trained on being active listeners. Putting aside their pre-conceived notions and gaining an understanding of what is driving the needs of each external stakeholder will increase their ability to establish strong relationships.

Clear Goals:

Establish clear goals and expectations that are appropriate to the product’s life cycle stage

In many organizations, MSLs are able to establish their priorities and manage their schedules in a highly autonomous manner. As they are professionals, it is understandable why it would be that way. However, MSLs are too often without clear guidance from their managers as to what their overarching goals and objectives should be.

MSLs’ goals for any given product should relate to the life cycle stages of the assets for which they are responsible. An MSL’s most appropriate objectives and courses of action for a given product will vary depending on the stage of the products they represent. Knowing what those objectives should be and how to measure progress against those objectives requires guidance from leadership.

For example, products that are early in their life cycle often require MSL support to identify KOLs to serve as scientific advisors, speakers, and sources of study participation. MSLs should also work to ‘lay the groundwork’ for the new product, ensuring that physicians have the information they need to effectively and properly use it. MSLs’ efforts should be focused on those goals, with objective metrics in place to measure their individual contributions. Later in the life cycle, the MSL must work to maintain relationships already established with those KOLs, as well as address ongoing therapeutic questions and issues. Towards the end of a product’s life cycle, MSLs may be tasked with sharing information and engaging KOLs and other physicians regarding the scientific and therapeutic aspects of replacement products in the pipeline.

If MSLs are not clear on how to divide their time among pipeline, inline, and mature product support, then there will be a mismatch of effort with needs.

High-Value Activities:

Ensure that MSLs spend their time on high-value activities that relate to those goals and expectations

Once the proper goals are established for a product or portfolio, MSLs must ensure that their day-to-day activities are aligned with those goals. This responsibility must be shared by the MSL and MA leadership, with leadership driving the process.

At the highest level, MA leadership must clearly define the overall vision and goals of the MA group. Next, it must work with other stakeholders to translate that vision at the therapeutic area or franchise level. Too often, MA organizations focus on tasks that are needed (e.g., advisory boards, publications) without defining the strategic context for those tasks. Once the medical affairs strategy is defined, tasks can be prioritized accordingly.

For example, while KOL engagement is central to the MSL role at all times, for some early stage assets the strategic priority of KOL engagement is to set clinical direction, while for some later stage assets...
the strategic priority of KOL engagement is to better understand real-world treatment decisions. These different priorities should result in different actions by the MSLs.

The same type of activity may be planned differently depending on its strategic goal. KOL discussions in which the goal is to inform the KOL about the mechanism of action of a pre-launch drug may be designed differently than those in which the MSL is seeking information to bring back to the clinical and commercial organizations about unmet needs.

Medical Affairs can also maximize the value MSLs bring to the company by taking an active role in coordinating their activities with those of other professionals engaged in outreach programs. As a result of clear allocation of responsibilities, MSLs and others from the organization avoid redundant contacts and ensure efficient dissemination of information. KOLS are most likely to receive correct, consistent information from the group most appropriate to deliver it. They will appreciate the fact that their time is treated as a precious commodity. These practices increase tangible value in reduced inefficiency and intangible value in improved KOL relationships.

Performance Measurement:

Measure MSL performance against their goals and provide training or other remedial action for those who need it

Once the MSLs’ strategic goals are established—and activities are prioritized that relate to those goals—the best MA organizations will measure their MSLs’ progress against their goals. They will reward high-performers while providing remedial training to those who are struggling.

For some types of goals, it can be fairly straightforward to measure activities and results. For some, it is not as straightforward. For example, some goals are “soft” and are expressed in qualitative terms, such as “improve the scientific reputation of the company” or “increase awareness of our cutting-edge research.”

Goals like these are not the responsibility of the MSLs alone. They are lofty corporate goals toward which many stakeholders will contribute, and progress against them is not as easily measured. For goals such as these, it is necessary to conduct initial primary research to establish baseline measures of physicians’ opinions of the company’s scientific reputation, R&D capabilities, and so on. Periodic follow-up surveys will help measure the company’s progress in changing attitudes.

By tracking results over time and linking the respondents to individual MSLs, the MA organization can not only see how macro-level attitudes have changed, it can also differentiate between higher- and lower-performing MSLs. This will highlight those that need extra training and development.

Dedicated Management:

Assign full-time managers to ensure that all of the above takes place properly and that MSLs get the guidance they need

As stated earlier, MSLs are not often managed very tightly. For one thing, the company may not think of MSL time as a limited resource and therefore does not see a need for close, ongoing monitoring. Or, they may see MSLs as professionals who are either resistant to being managed or capable of setting their own priorities and carrying them out with little oversight.

Often the organization has not dedicated any high-performing MSLs to full-time managerial roles. Instead, MSLs with management responsibilities still have operational responsibilities, leaving them without the time or ability to focus on planning and managing the activities of less strategically oriented colleagues. Changing this practice is essential to increasing the effectiveness of the entire team.

Dedicated managers would be able to differentiate between higher- vs. lower-functioning MSLs. They would measure MSLs against goals, analyze the reasons for lower performance, and get the MSL the needed training or other support.

It is also important to remember that KOLs and other physicians view MSLs as their primary routes to the initial primary research to establish baseline measures of physicians’ opinions of the company’s scientific reputation, R&D capabilities, and so on. Periodic follow-up surveys will help measure the company’s progress in changing attitudes.

Summary

MSLs are an expensive, limited, and increasingly important resource. It is imperative that pharmaceutical and biotech companies realize maximum value from their MSL ranks. This has become even more critical as the market has shifted toward complex specialty products. Therefore, the long-established precedent of allowing MSLs to operate with limited strategic guidance and “part-time” oversight must change.

Those companies operating in complex specialty markets stand the most to gain from revamping the way they manage their MSL groups. They would help themselves (and the physician and patient communities) by providing that strategic guidance, ensuring that MSLs have clear and appropriate goals, ensuring that MSL activities relate to those goals on a day-to-day basis, measuring MSLs’ progress against those goals, and providing additional training and development to those who need it.