

Meeting

THE PRESS

A media interview, at its best, is an opportunity to share information with key stakeholders. For interviews that relate to health or science, a medical professional is likely to be the most effective spokesperson

While physicians will inevitably have relationships across the pharmaceutical industry – as investigators, advisory board members, prescribers – they still can, and do, communicate unbiased, scientific messages about a company's products. Such associations should never be hidden, but neither should they detract from a medical professional's ability to educate the public about the underlying science, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of a medical condition – and do it with clarity, credibility and compassion.

Particularly effective are recognized, well-informed clinicians. They are often experts in the field, and have a knowledge of, and experience with, relevant scientific studies; use a range of treatments; and believe the therapeutic options being discussed are safe and effective for specific patient populations.

Reporting the findings of a newly-published clinical study – or one about to be presented at a medical meeting – is when interviews of credentialed physicians are most desired by the media. The interview process, however, does have to be managed so that the chosen spokesperson is able to deliver accurate and

meaningful messages in the context of 'news', as determined by the interviewing reporter – enter media training.

A much-maligned term, media training is actually a misnomer. There is nothing sinister in knowing what you want to say and making sure you say it. The vast majority of medical professionals take seriously their role as trusted, concerned and informed healthcare counselors. Many, however, are not accustomed to talking with the media and need help in preparing to speak with conviction in an unfamiliar environment. So-called 'spin' is simply making sure a message is both accurate and relevant to their audience.

Challenging climate

The reality is, talking about pharmaceutical products in any public forum these days is difficult, but the media environment, in particular, is rife with misinformation and distrust. That makes it more critical than ever before to prepare physician experts to help chip away at these powerful misperceptions – especially when they speak through the filter of editorial media.

Unfortunately, the media and consumers

– even spokespeople themselves – are often skeptical, both about the training process and the messages delivered. The goal, however, is not simply to make the trainees 'stars', with perfected sound bites and on-air appeal. On the contrary, a media training session should be organized to:

- Encourage accuracy and consistency, ensuring the product speaks with one voice to KOLs, sales reps, prescribing physicians and other healthcare professionals and government agencies around the world
- Prepare physician experts to deliver a balanced point of view – becoming the voice of safety, reason and relevance
- Explain the meaning of 'news' and enable spokespeople to feel comfortable addressing the reporter's needs to speak to a particular audience
- Put product information in the context of significant healthcare education – explaining the data in terms of its impact on disease progression and sorting out the compound's benefits versus its risks
- Translate the science into language that patients, peers and the media are able to understand



- Adapt to the medium in which the interview is conducted – whether by phone or in person, audio-taped or filmed, one-on-one or taken from the context of a press briefing.

The bottom line: between the peaks and valleys of ‘medicine’s next magic bullet’ and the bitter invective against drug companies that force the sickest among us to choose between food and medicine, media training allows physician experts to provide the public with accurate information and informed rationale – just as they would their own patients.

The medium is the message

Increasingly, empowered healthcare consumers are voracious in their demands for credible insights that will inform their treatment decisions. Media interviews offer a dynamic vehicle through which physicians can offer an initial response.

Critical, however, is gaining an understanding of how the media works and how to deflect its frequent focus on sensationalism and controversy. In addition, many reporters may have limited understanding of research methods and statistics and, therefore, not be able to convey the subtle but critically important nuances of research in clear and concise language. Others may already have a story in mind and ask questions merely to seek confirmation of a particular point of view.

A key role of a communications skills session, therefore, is to enable the physician experts to better control their interviews – to guide each reporter to the story they believe should be told, using science as a foundation to deliver messages that resonate with honesty and relevance for specific audiences.

A well-prepared physician expert can use a media interview platform to:

- Announce all new data – or possible medical breakthroughs
- Explain complex science. Put it in context
- Deliver product information that is relevant to public health issues, or government actions, that could potentially impact prescribing patterns
- Highlight special events or any philanthropic activities
- Respond to negative questions or inaccurate information
- Neutralize product issues that could arise

Messages that resonate

More than 15,000 media outlets in 211 countries provide vast opportunities to reach your key constituencies. Whether your marketing communications plan suggests delivering messages through medical, business,

Key planning steps to consider:

- Organize an internal meeting in advance of the training session in which you and your medical directors can help develop balanced messages that reflect your marketing priorities, but are clearly drawn from the science
- Work with regulatory and legal teams to create a briefing document that sums up and prioritizes the key points from the data, based on the needs of doctors, regulators and patients
- Consult with your internal and external communications team to lay out tough questions that should be anticipated and determine the best responses
- Decide the best venues for the interviews and the target audiences for which messages must be specifically designed
- Learn the style, content, deadlines for target journalists
- Develop relevant data charts or other visuals to highlight the most significant data

consumer print/broadcast, trade or online media, a spokesperson with effective interview skills can turn the discourse into a powerful communications mechanism.

A well-executed media interview allows you to focus on an important clinical study or newsworthy concept that supports your product’s media goals. Articulate medical professionals can provide consumers with relevant disease information and encourage them to see their physicians for clarification of a therapeutic option. For peers, they can add evidence-based scientific depth and perspective to a body of knowledge that may be outside the purview of another specialty. They can even enable journalists to build a credible and interesting story.

“Advance preparation for interviews can ensure that neither your spokesperson, nor your product, is made a victim”

Because the pharmaceutical industry operates in a global market, there are cultural implications too. Recently, for example, a young European doctor in a media training session, for interviews he was to do in the United States, expressed concern about how to deliver accurate information about a drug. He viewed much of the current coverage he’d seen as sensational, life-or-death sagas.

His institution had only recently allowed its physicians to take a higher media profile and before he stepped into the breach he wanted to be sure he could deliver solid, helpful information. In this instance, he didn’t want to talk about survival rates because, he said, “At home, we don’t routinely tell patients data

about prognosis.” In the simulated interviews we did in our session, however, it became clear that repeating overall survival data from the study would not necessarily relate to particular patients, only confirm statistically what all patients, in general, can expect.

Most important, he agreed he must respond to difficult questions, because left unanswered they will probably be asked repeatedly by reporters who believe there is something to hide. Preparation, he learned, can help to control the response and the transition back to key messages. He also realized that focusing on the emotional aspects of a medical condition in the interview can reach out to inform others with similar health issues.

Influence, not control

Marketers will certainly want to take an active role in helping spokespeople prepare, deliver and follow up media interviews they believe are significant to reach a product’s audiences. But, it is important your participation remain low key. Rely on the objectivity of your media trainers – based on their understanding of the product, the media and the science – to prepare the physician experts to shape and deliver targeted messages and speak in memorable ‘sound bites.’

Oscar Wilde said: “Every piece of writing needs a writer, a reader and an idea. Every news story needs a writer, a reader and a victim.” Advance preparation for interviews can ensure that neither your spokesperson, nor your product, is made the victim.

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