

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Pharmaceutical Partnership: Educate, Communicate, Innovate

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'Compliance'... it's a word that makes professionals in the world of medical meetings cringe these days. The relationships between medical associations and pharmaceutical companies have never been more complicated. For quite some time, it seemed that it was easier for an association or a congress with the right following to get money out of companies than it was to steal candy from a child. In many cases, these relationships were uneven and the associations were clearly in a position of power, just like many of their members themselves.



of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA) have tried to formulate an industry code. In itself, that is fantastic; however, in general these codes are no more than an overview on compliance, as specific compliance guidelines can vary immensely among different EFPIA member companies. In addition, the issue of cultural differences comes into play – what works well in North America might not work at all in Asia.

As if self-imposed regulation wasn't enough, governments have imposed a string of new regulations relating to the funding of physicians' activities. One of the most significant changes was the "Physicians' Sunshine Act", which was passed first in the United States but has quickly been copied within the European Union. Its purpose is to protect patients' interests by assuring them that physicians are acting in their best interests rather than on behalf of a pharmaceutical company that has paid them. Nobody could disagree with that aim; however, the details into which the Sunshine Act goes, and the difficulties of its practical implementation, make it increasingly problematic to obtain funding for educational activities such as medical conferences.

Regulations differ from country to country, from company to company (as well as between company locations), and from year to year. It is up to us to keep the lines of communication

open and active with our key sponsors in order to get the best possible benefit for our conferences and our delegates... which in turn will create the greatest benefit for our sponsors. The key to improving understanding in this area is constant dialogue.

Not all changes that have come our way in the past few years are bad. Bringing some transparency, and the focus on education and science, back to medical meetings is actually a good thing. However, it remains desirable that attitudes change regarding funding of physicians to attend meetings, as well as the perception of needing to exclude the social element of meetings.

Networking is important – anybody who has attended a meeting in their field will admit that many of the best 'take-aways' come from dinner conversations with like-minded people from the same area of expertise... The value of such interactions will hopefully will be rediscovered.

Until then, the keys to success when seeking pharmaceutical partnerships for an association's activities are as follows: **Educate** – educate yourself and your team about the latest changes in terms of compliance regulations; **Communicate** – keep an open line of communication with your sponsors and corporate partners; and **Innovate** – be ready to change your approach to comply with all regulations and to fit the needs of your stakeholders.

First-class tickets, boutique meetings in resort destinations and lavish hospitality were the tip of the iceberg, and unfortunately made for much better headlines than the millions of dollars that went towards education, research and development. As a way of illustrating the point a little better, picture the relationship as a pendulum. For a long time, it swung further and further in one direction, until it basically flung itself back to the other side as a result of tighter scrutiny, bad press and billions of dollars in fines. This is where we find ourselves today – with the pendulum stuck on the other side. Pharmaceutical compliance was primarily self-imposed by companies to regulate the market before it was done for them by the lawmakers. As almost all companies were faced with the same challenges, but came up with very different solutions, their representative bodies such as the European Federation