Implementing a Medical Science Liaison Team

Introduction

The title “Medical Science Liaison,” or MSL, was first introduced in 1967 by the Upjohn Corporation. Life sciences companies are increasingly turning to MSLs to enhance the full exchange of scientific information between the company and the global medical science community. MSLs communicate with the unbiased integrity of a peer and also offer the unique perspective of the companies they represent. Today’s MSLs are peer-to-peer communicators who contribute to improved patient outcomes by fulfilling five fundamental responsibilities:

1. Identify and develop relationships with key opinion leaders (KOLs)
2. Present scientific findings in a timely and responsive manner
3. Provide support for both company-sponsored and investigator-initiated trials
4. Train speakers, sales representatives, and new MSLs
5. Gather and report competitive intelligence

While each of these five responsibilities is important, the first of them—identifying and developing relationships with KOLs—is paramount. KOLs are crucial to a life science company’s clinical development activities. Moreover, as detailed in Big Pharma’s Market Access Mission, a 2011 Monitor white paper, KOLs continue to wield significant influence over drug access; in fact, their influence is growing. For MSLs industry-wide, the importance of developing strong KOL relationships can hardly be overstated.

In many companies, MSLs are credentialed health professionals with advanced degrees such as MD, PhD, PharmD, etc. However, some companies include MSLs with the profile of an undergraduate degree in nursing, pharmacy, or another allied health profession. While MSLs are most often field-based, locally focused, full-time team members, some companies are beginning to deploy MSLs in less-traditional work settings. Some MSLs work part-time schedules, and others conduct all or part of their HCP interactions remotely (online, or via teleconference or live video).

Despite the much-publicized field-staff reductions at many life sciences companies, the funding for medical affairs teams continues to grow. In 2011, MSLs were the largest group of medical affairs personnel. Nearly one-third of companies planned an increase of 10% or more in medical affairs funding, portending a bright future for MSL ranks.
Strategic Considerations

Before initiating an MSL-team development process, thoughtful attention should be paid to several strategic considerations that can profoundly influence the implementation plan. These include the expanding role of MSLs, current issues facing MSL teams, and determining whether to deploy an internal or an outsourced team.

The Expanding Role of MSLs

In addition to the five fundamental tasks noted previously, MSLs are asked increasingly to take on added responsibilities in several pivotal areas:

- **Research**: MSLs are frequently engaged in identifying and recommending research sites, developing clinical and scientific content, writing scholarly articles, and planning publication strategy.

- **Education**: MSLs routinely participate as subject matter experts in an array of HCP- and patient-focused educational venues and events, including conferences, seminars, formal and informal training sessions, etc.

- **Consultancy**: Although MSLs usually don’t serve in consultative roles, they do occasionally represent their companies in interactions with managed markets or governmental agencies. In such cases, they typically provide technical information about the companies’ products and/or research.
While research, education, and consultancy are noble and necessary company activities, recent research suggests that MSLs’ focus on such non-core tasks can dramatically reduce their ability to achieve their prime objective—that is, to build relationships with KOLs. The 2010 Cutting Edge Information report, The New MSL Profile, found that MSLs who are in the field only one or two days per week spend just 22% of their time building KOL relationships. In contrast, MSLs who are in the field four or more days per week spend 49% of their time meeting and communicating directly with KOLs.

Current Issues Facing MSL Teams

While MSLs enjoy a positive employment environment and savor the personal reward of serving a vital communications role, the MSL profession also faces a series of noteworthy issues:

- **Separation from Sales/Marketing**
  MSLs and their team leaders have waged a years-long campaign to create a clear separation between MSLs and the sales function. Despite this effort, role confusion continues to persist in the minds of some HCPs.

- **Tangential Demands**
  MSLs are highly educated, well-trained, effective professionals. As a result, it’s no wonder that they are increasingly asked to invest time and effort on additional task areas such as health economics, outcomes research, Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy (REMS) support, etc. It is important to note that in traditional MSL teams primarily dedicated to thought leader support, effort expended in these additional areas may detract from core responsibilities.

- **Travel/Large Geographies**
  Compared with sales forces, most companies’ MSL teams are small, consisting of just one to 50 individuals. Therefore, most MSLs cover large geographies and must engage in frequent travel, often overnight. Alternative communication technologies—teleconferencing, eMail, web conferencing, and texting—are helping to ease the burden, but travel continues to be an issue for many MSLs.

- **Managing the Regulatory Environment**
  The Office of Inspector General of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (OIG) and other governmental agencies continue to scrutinize how life science companies promote and market their products. Given the current regulatory environment, all companies should focus attention on MSL compliance.

- **Trend Toward Specialization**
  While both generalist and specialist MSLs have a place in today’s market, the future may trend more toward specialization. Many believe that the emergence of increasingly complex science, biologics, genetic testing, and expensive pharmacologic agents will continue to push MSLs to achieve levels of knowledge and skill that will require specialization.
Determining Best Fit: Internal or Outsourced MSL Team?

For any company planning to implement a new MSL team (or substantially alter an existing team), one of the most important steps is to decide whether to hire and manage the team internally or to deploy an outsourced team. Of course, many companies directly hire and manage their own MSL teams. However, many life sciences companies outsource some or all of their MSL team members; a recently published survey of MSLs and MSL managers indicated that about half of the respondents’ companies employ outsourced MSLs. (Bass J, Marrone C, Klinger C. Drug Information Journal. Sept 2010.)

Several common business situations lend themselves to MSL outsourcing. The survey referenced above identified six primary reasons for outsourcing MSLs: (1) To determine whether a team is warranted before making a further investment—32%, (2) Compound in development with uncertainty surrounding approval—26%, (3) New therapeutic area for company—26%, (4) Headcount freeze or budgetary constraints—21%, (5) Limited internal resources—16%, and (6) No prior experience in this therapeutic area—11%.
Beyond the specific circumstances noted previously, MSL outsourcing offers three global benefits that may make it a reasonable option for any company implementing an MSL team:

- **Increased Efficiency**
  Building an MSL team internally can be expensive and inefficient. On the other hand, a qualified outsourced provider is continually recruiting, hiring, training, and managing high-performance MSLs. By using their provider’s expertise, life science companies can focus on their core competencies without straining internal resources or hiring significant new infrastructure.

- **Optimized Flexibility**
  By outsourcing all or part of an MSL team, companies can respond rapidly to marketplace changes, ramping up and/or down as needed.

- **Mitigated Risk**
  The hallmark of today’s new life sciences marketplace is uncertainty. Safety and reimbursement challenges can instantly change a company’s strategic approach. Competitive issues can transform a market overnight. Using outsourced teams allows firms to mitigate the risk presented by any issues that could rapidly alter the business environment.
Key Steps to Implementation

Implementing an MSL team is a complicated process not unlike that of implementing a field sales force. In fact, while the roles and goals of MSLs are categorically distinct from those of sales representatives, there is substantial overlap in the process of implementing the two types of teams. The Publicis Touchpoint Solutions white paper “Implementing a Life Sciences Field Force: A Process and Tactical Blueprint” includes a series of implementation checklists that may be instructive for those considering an MSL team. See: http://www.TouchpointSolutions.com/WhitePapers.html.

Despite these process similarities, the establishment of a high-performing MSL team involves the use of specialized strategies in several core functional areas, including recruiting, training, regulatory/legal/compliance, operations support, performance management, and retention strategy.

Recruiting

Recruiting high-performing MSLs is a formidable challenge in large part because few individuals simultaneously embody both of two crucial qualities. On the one hand, successful MSLs are academically gifted, scientifically educated, and thoroughly precise in thought and word. That is to say, they are decidedly intellectual. On the other hand, successful MSLs are socially skilled, conversationally at ease, and exhibit a high degree of emotional intelligence. That is to say, they are decidedly relational. Individuals who are at the same time both highly intellectual and highly relational are rare indeed.

In addition to the overarching challenge of locating “relational scientists,” recruitment must be based on the company’s specific culture, skill-set needs, and therapeutic area considerations.

In today’s environment, four specific recruiting tactics have proven to be particularly valuable in cutting through the recruiting clutter and pinpointing best-fit MSL candidates:

- **Passive-Candidate Focus**
  Identifying and actively recruiting high-performing individuals who are not actively searching for new positions—so-called “passive candidates”—is one of the best recruiting tactics in today’s marketplace. Passive candidates can be uncovered through networking with professional groups and former co-workers and colleagues, mining social networks, and networking at industry conferences. Of course, passive MSL candidates must be convinced that a move will have long-term personal benefit. This is usually best accomplished by positioning the new opportunity as an exciting drug and/or therapeutic area within a stable or growing company.
• **Sophisticated Internet Search Strategies**
  These strategies help identify candidates who may be lost in the clutter of Monster, Career Builder, and Indeed.com. The Internet search process should include the most advanced online search tools and strategies to locate top-tier candidates, and is extremely useful in identifying highly qualified passive candidates.

• **Behavioral/Personality Benchmarking**
  Behavioral benchmarking—also known as personality benchmarking—can be used as a very effective recruiting tool in two ways. First, behavioral surveys objectively describe and measure the mindset and work behavior of current top-performing MSLs. Once benchmarks are established, MSL candidates are asked to complete the same survey in order to determine the degree to which their characteristics match those of known high performers. A number of excellent behavioral surveys are available, including Predictive Index®, DiSC®, and MBTI® (Myers Briggs).

• **Artificial Intelligence**
  These highly sophisticated techniques—including conceptual mapping and cloning—help identify candidates who uniquely fit a company’s specific profile.

When building a new MSL team, is it best to recruit experienced MSLs, or is it better to hire those with no MSL experience? The answer depends on the type of team desired. Experienced MSLs enjoy the benefit of having done the job before. However, they may also bring along undesirable practices from their previous positions. Hiring new candidates straight from graduate school or from an academic setting can be a good approach. These individuals are usually very eager and bring a lot of energy to the role, but they require more training.
Training

Initial MSL training typically focuses on four key topical domains: (1) disease state and therapeutic area, (2) product and competition, (3) technical/system skills, and (4) “soft” skills.

- **Disease State and Therapeutic Area**
  Within their areas of expertise, MSLs engage in detailed one-on-one scientific discussions with the nation’s most important and influential medical researchers, educators, and opinion leaders. To be successful in these conversations, MSLs must possess detailed knowledge of the disease state and therapeutic area that equals—or, even better, augments—that of the KOLs with whom they are interacting.

  Thought leaders quickly recognize which MSLs are prepared to be trusted partners and which need more seasoning. In order to pass muster, MSLs undergo intense education and training regarding the company’s disease state focus and therapeutic area.

- **Product and Competition**
  MSLs engage in extensive training on the company’s product and competitive products. Although MSLs may review sales training materials as background, MSL product training goes far beyond that received by the sales team and has a different focus and intent. Whereas sales training emphasizes features and benefits, MSL training is much more focused on the clinical studies and the science underlying the products.

- **Technical/Systems Skills**
  MSLs must be fully trained in the proper use of all the communications and reporting hardware and software that are common among field-based personnel, including laptop and tablet computers (eg, Apple iPad, Android tablets), smartphones and other wireless communications devices, eMail, voicemail, texting, etc. In some companies, MSLs now conduct part or all of their HCP interactions remotely (via teleconference, online, or live video); additional hardware, software, and training are required for these.

  MSLs must be trained on all key company policies:
  - Corporate compliance and regulatory affairs policies
  - Travel and expense policies
  - Business practice policies
  - Adverse event reporting policies

  MSLs should receive specialized guidance and training in a number of sensitive [regulatory/legal/compliance] areas.
• “Soft Skills”

As described earlier, successful MSLs are those who are able to easily interact with and relate well to others. Of course, relationship skills are in part a function of personality. But personality is only the beginning. MSLs should undergo advanced training in social and emotional intelligence, listening, probing, and negotiation. In addition, successful MSL programs often include professional communications skills training, including writing, speaking, presenting in a conference setting, etc.

Beyond initial training in the four key domains, ongoing continuous training is an essential part of MSL success. Ongoing training and education are particularly valuable in two vital clusters: product/therapeutic area, and soft skills. Product and therapeutic area training is often provided through weekly or semi-monthly therapeutic conference calls or journal clubs. Alternatively, soft skills training is best handled through mentor or management observation and coaching.
Regulatory/Legal/Compliance

To help them avoid legal and regulatory pitfalls, MSLs should receive specialized guidance and training in a number of sensitive areas:

- **Sales Force Interaction**
  MSLs must never be allowed to serve (or appear to serve) as a tool or extension of the sales department. They should have clear guidelines regarding interaction with the sales force. They should typically be discouraged from joining sales representatives on sales calls.

- **Off-Label Uses and Unapproved Drugs**
  MSLs must understand the restrictions surrounding the discussion of off-label uses and unapproved drugs. Those who are allowed to provide information to HCPs regarding off-label uses and pipeline products should be given all available information, both positive and negative.

- **Investigator-Initiated Trials (IITs)**
  MSLs should receive clear guidance regarding involvement with IITs and must avoid “seeding” trial ideas with KOLs.

- **KOL Meals**
  MSLs need distinct guidelines with regard to meal interactions with HCPs. Typically, these guidelines specify when an MSL-sponsored meal is appropriate and who may attend.

- **Content Leave-Behinds**
  MSLs are scientists who rely on data and are expected to disseminate scientific findings in a timely, responsive manner. Nevertheless, they must be made aware of the types of information they are allowed to disseminate, limitations on its use, and approved methods of obtaining and disseminating the information.

MSLs should be provided a proven MSL-friendly customer relationship management (CRM) software package; a sales-centric CRM package such as salesforce.com is not optimal.
**Operations Support**

MSLs are high-mobility communications professionals who depend on high-performance company support, including all the communications and reporting hardware and software that are common among field-based personnel:

- Laptop computer
- Tablet computer/iPad
- Smartphone
- eMail system
- Voicemail system
- Data sharing system
- Expense reporting system
- Clinical reprint access

Finally, MSLs should be provided a proven MSL-friendly customer relationship management (CRM) software package; a sales-centric CRM package such as salesforce.com is not optimal. Proprietary systems are commonly used, such as KMAP or OpenQ.

**Performance Management**

MSLs should never be compensated based on sales performance or prescription volume goals. Instead, MSLs usually have activity-based SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) and are evaluated as any internal manager would be.
Marrone, Bass, and Klinger (*Journal of Drug Information*, 2007) surveyed MSL program managers to identify several *qualitative* metrics commonly used to evaluate MSL performance:

- Management observation (selected by 85% of respondents)
- Project participation/completion (78%)
- Business partner feedback (65%)
- Accomplishment write-ups (57%)
- Client surveys (55%)
- Unsolicited client feedback (53%)

In the same article, the authors also identified several *quantitative* metrics commonly used:

- Frequency of contact with KOLs (selected by 64% of respondents)
- Number of presentations (57%)
- Number of visits per month (50%)
- Number of trials submitted/completed (36%)

**Retention Strategy**

In order to build teams of MSLs who are highly trained and effective scientist-communicators, companies must invest a great deal of effort and resources. To protect that investment, corporate management should consider ways to retain these valued team members.

One of the first steps in designing a retention strategy is to gain insight into MSLs’ desired career paths. Klinger, Marrone, and Bass (*Journal of Drug Information*, 2010) surveyed 237 MSLs and MSL managers to determine their career strategies. They found that more than 40% of MSLs want to stay in an MSL role indefinitely, suggesting that companies should anticipate and accommodate long-term in-position MSL careers. When MSLs were asked what their next career moves would be, their most common responses were:

- 43% - MSL management
- 31% - MSL at another company
- 29% - MSL technical promotion, eg, MSL to senior MSL
- 28% - Other field-based medical role

With these responses in mind, what are some of the most effective MSL retention strategies?

1. **Ask** each MSL about his or her career goals and plans
2. **Listen** intently to identify each MSL’s most important career triggers
3. **Provide** necessary training and coaching to support each MSL’s career path
4. **Create** additional job opportunities within and beyond the medical affairs department
5. **Involve** MSLs in exciting products and projects
6. **Give** MSLs frequent access to senior management
7. **Provide** competitive pay and benefits
**CONCLUSION**

With proper structure and skillful management, a medical science liaison team can become a life science company’s most visible and valuable interface with leading medical researchers, educators, and opinion leaders. Of the many ideas discussed in this paper, a few deserve further emphasis:

- Successful MSL recruitment hinges on identifying candidates who are at the same time both highly intellectual and highly relational; these individuals make the best MSLs.
- Great care must be taken to ensure that MSLs are given the liberty to focus on their most important responsibility: identifying and developing relationships with KOLs.
- No matter the business pressures, MSLs must maintain a clear separation between themselves and the sales function.
- Consideration should be given to outsourcing any new or substantially altered MSL team. Outsourcing offers three global benefits that may make it a reasonable option for any company: increased efficiency, optimized flexibility, and mitigated risk.

Publicis Touchpoint Solutions’ clinical center-of-excellence—Touchpoint Clinical Solutions—is a premier provider of outsourced MSL solutions. As the innovator of outsourced MSL teams and the industry leader for over a decade, Touchpoint’s MSLs have evolved to lead in today’s new life sciences marketplace.

Touchpoint Clinical Solutions is led by Doug Young, PhD, vice president. Dr. Young has more than 22 years’ experience in the biopharmaceutical industry, including 16 years with Bristol-Myers Squibb, where he served most recently as vice president of Global Medical Affairs and the leader of the Global Field Medical Center-of-Excellence. He has an extensive background in strategic development and building and leading clinical teams, as well as expertise in marketing, medical affairs, and medical education.

All Touchpoint MSL program elements undergo review and approval by Maria Woods, JD, director of compliance and privacy. Ms Woods has more than 11 years of experience in healthcare law, including regulatory and compliance roles at Novartis and the Greater New York Hospital Association.