

PharmExecBlog

Discourse, dialogue and discussion about global pharma matters

Winning Pharma's Super Conferences

By GUEST BLOGGER | Published: OCTOBER 18, 2013

by Stan Bernard and Janet Wells

Like the Super Bowl, pharma companies are winning major congresses by using competitive conference techniques to generate brand buzz and corporate recognition.



Stan Bernard, President of
Bernard Associates

Each year, thirty-two National Football League teams compete to win the Super Bowl, the ultimate U.S. team sport championship. Simultaneously, dozens of major companies are also competing to attract the attention of viewers in this, the single most-watched U.S. television event with over 110 million viewers annually. For them, its not football but rather the Super Ad Bowl, where the goal post is to obtain the most exposure, buzz, and promotion for their respective companies and brands. They use the Super Bowl to transcend ordinary promotional opportunities and stand out in an increasingly noisy on- and offline advertising world.

The equivalent in our trade is the way in which pharmaceutical companies compete at the “Super Conferences,” big Pharma’s own versions of the Super Bowl. The Super Conferences

represent the one or two top professional society meetings in each therapeutic area, such as the American Society of Clinical Oncologists (“ASCO”) congress for oncology or the American Diabetes Association (“ADA”) meeting for diabetes. As the industry has transitioned over the past 15 years into its Competitive Lifecycle Stage, the intensity, commitment, and necessity for winning these conferences has never been greater. Several factors have driven what we call “Competitive Conference Management”:

- **High profile:** With so many competing brands, companies, and channels creating so much market “noise,” pharma companies are struggling to effectively communicate their brand positioning and messaging. They increasingly need high-profile, unique events like the Super Conferences for their companies and products to be seen and heard.

- **High impact:** Historically, pharma companies tried to win major professional society

meetings by having the highest booth traffic or symposium turnout from traditional meeting attendees, such as key opinion leaders and physician prescribers. However, companies now realize the greatest impact is actually *beyond* the meeting: reaching the much larger and highly influential stakeholder ecosystem, including media, analysts, policy-makers, payers, and patients. Increasingly, companies conduct conference-specific media events and analysts' meetings to generate brand buzz and enhance the perception of their products.

- **High value:** Super Conference companies often spend a year or more planning and preparing for these major events. Fortunately, such conferences can be relatively cost-effective, since so many of the key stakeholders — especially KOLs, media, and analysts — are on-site. Interestingly, because the goal is the biggest buzz and not the biggest booth, smaller players or larger companies making smaller investments can win these conference battles with strategic, efficient planning.

The new Goalpost: Competitive Conference Management

Pharmaceutical companies have leveraged Competitive Conference Management in a variety of ways to gain competitive advantages and enhance product sales:

ASCO: Over 30,000 physicians, pharma professionals, analysts/investors, and journalists annually attend ASCO, the world's largest cancer conference. Bristol-Myers Squibb was crowned as the winner of ASCO in 2012 by several analysts. Pontifax analyst Ohad Hammer, who follows major oncology conferences, said that "BMS's anti-PD-1 immunotherapy (nivolumab) generated the most ASCO buzz and has blockbuster potential across several solid tumors." *The Street* claimed that "the biggest news at this year's ASCO came from BMS' PD-1 antibody." To keep its momentum going at the 2013 ASCO Meeting, BMS generated over 60 abstracts for its PD-1 agent; released data prior to the meeting claiming high tumor shrinkage when combining its PD-1 agent with its Yervoy compound; and arranged to be featured at the ASCO pre-conference media event where ASCO President Sandra M. Swain stated that "this rapid and profound lasting tumor shrinkage has not been seen with immunotherapies before." BMS's stock shares rose 5% on news of this data.

Interestingly, BMS highlighted at this conference its PD-1 combination therapy data, likely because its PD-1 monotherapy data did not appear to be as impressive as its competitors' data. It is not unusual for some companies and products to be perceived as "conference winners" despite not having the best actual data. For example, Novartis did not even have major study results at this year's ASCO but was still ranked as a top five ASCO player by Semantelli, a market research firm that tracks social media in the pharma world. Semantelli CEO Siva Nadarajah noted that Novartis conducted an intense media campaign to convince journalists and their readers that its ASCO presentations reflected a "promising oncology portfolio."

ATS and ERS: The American Thoracic Society Meeting ("ATS") and the European Respiratory Society Congress ("ERS") are the top Super Conferences for companies competing in pulmonary diseases. ATS 2013 saw a playoff between GSK — which is battling to maintain its dominant respiratory position — and challenger Novartis, which is bringing its own once daily LAMA/LABA combination to the COPD market. With GSK's once daily ICS/LABA replacement for Advair having gained FDA approval in COPD just prior to the conference, one might have expected GSK to seize the ATS trophy. But Novartis, whose combination has encountered delays with the FDA and has not yet even been filed in the US, announced 34 respiratory abstracts for its COPD portfolio, literally flooded the ATS congress with new data from its ex-US development program. Novartis continued its onslaught at ERS 2013, boasting 39 abstracts for its respiratory portfolio in a meeting that took place just days before its LAMA/LABA gained European approval.

There are different strategies that can be used to “win” the reputational assets that can be reaped at these conferences. Share of voice is one option, but there are many others. For instance, GSK did not play the share of voice game to compete with Novartis. Instead, it held an Analyst and Investor Meeting just following ATS during which it provided a positive update of its emerging portfolio, including two first-to-market U.S. launches. GSK’s scientific spokesperson also offered the GSK expert opinion on a key Novartis study, highlighting one aspect that created doubt about the value of its competitor’s study outcomes. At the ERS, GSK stole the limelight away from Novartis with the announcement of a strong majority FDA panel vote in favor of marketing its new LAMA/LABA combination agent in the US.

In framing a winning program for super conference leadership, four factors stand out.

These are:

- **Competitive Conference Planning:** Ideally, Super Conference planning should start as with the closing of the previous year’s conference. Planners should consider three stages of planning: Pre-Conference, At-Conference, and Post-Conference.
- **Competitive Conference Simulations: The objective here is to** design and conduct simulations where selected company professionals role-play their competitors and themselves to identify conference opportunities and threats, pressure-test plans, and brainstorm innovative ways to win.
- **Conference Preparation Workshops:** These workshops can be used to fine-tune pre-Conference and at-Conference planning prior to the meeting.
- **Conference Competitive Training:** Conference experts can teach the latest strategies and tactics for planning, preparing, and winning Super Conferences.

Stan Bernard, MD, MBA is a member of the Pharm Exec Editorial Advisory Board and President of Bernard Associates, LLC, a global pharmaceutical competition consulting firm. He can be reached at SBernardMD@BernardAssociatesLLC.com. Janet Wells, MBA is a Senior Associate at Bernard Associates. She can be reached at Janet.Wells@BernardAssociatesLLC.com.