

How to survive Brexit as an independent medical writer

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Abstract

While Brexit has brought about a period of uncertainty in the UK's pharmaceutical industry, what is an appropriate response by medical writers at such a time? Few successful businesses stand idle and wait for things to happen. Taking a look at the current climate of outsourcing and the UK's business environment in terms of investment, now may be the time for writers to consider their strengths and weaknesses, diversifying their portfolio, and being strategic in seeking a competitive advantage.

Britain's decision to leave the European Union is one that has stunned the small business community, with many unwilling to offer opinion on an issue where seemingly the only certainty is uncertainty. Brexit is simply unprecedented: No nation has previously taken the step to leave the EU, meaning that there is no body of literature and no data to be consulted. Moreover, as the terms of Brexit have yet to be negotiated, and there have been very few assurances as to what form they may take, businesses have an uncomfortable situation of limbo; unsure as to what the effects of Brexit will be for their industry. However, through an assessment of probable Brexit scenarios and their effect on the medical writing industry, the relevant literature, and the views of industry professionals, we shall attempt to extrapolate some generalisable principles that may be helpful in navigating through such uncertain times. The dominant impression is that medical writers should prepare to face greater competition from abroad, with

pharmaceutical companies being increasingly willing to outsource to countries, such as India. Yet, greater competition does not necessarily mean that British medical writers will have to surrender their market share, as the effects of greater competition may be mitigated for by means of acquiring a competitive advantage: In the case of UK medical writers, this is likely to involve convincing the pharmaceutical companies of their superior level of service.

Brexit: Significant effects

Perhaps the most universally accepted claim about Brexit is that its effects will be significant and will doubtlessly have a profound impact on UK businesses, particularly those which rely on foreign investment. Cumming and Zahra argue that "Brexit is a monumental event that is likely to have serious consequences, raising challenges while creating international business and entrepreneurship opportunities for companies around the globe".¹ On the positive side, the UK will be able to negotiate a set of mutually beneficial trade deals with whomever it chooses, whether this be the US or even China. Besides, the eventual outcome of the negotiations will probably result in the removal of several EU regulations and tariffs, which could allow UK businesses to cut costs and accelerate transactions, hereby improving efficiency. Furthermore, the decline in the value of the pound could make the UK more attractive to foreign investors, particularly from non-EU countries like the US.¹ Thus, it might be argued that a change of this magnitude may create opportunities that were not previously available to UK companies.

Fall in the pound

While the decline in the value of the pound may have a positive effect on those companies exporting goods and services, any businesses more reliant on imports are likely to see the opposite effect: Increased costs of goods and services, which could have a detrimental effect on the UK economy.² Furthermore, the climate of uncertainty surrounding the Brexit negotiations could dissuade companies from

investing, with some already considering pulling out of the UK.³ Moreover, whilst on the one hand, withdrawal from the EU will also involve withdrawal from EU regulation, tariffs, and "red tape", it will also bring with it new regulatory challenges. Although possible, the UK is unlikely to retain its free trade agreement with the EU, meaning that it may have to individually negotiate deals with each EU nation that it seeks to retain economic ties with and seek to negotiate new trade deals with other nations. Without doubt, this will have a considerable effect on UK businesses, particularly those with a more global focus and the medical writing industry will be no exception to this.

Foreign investment: Effect on outsourcing

Lowendahl demonstrates that the impact of Brexit on foreign direct investment to the UK largely depends on the type of investment.³ However, he also observes that one type of operation that will probably be most affected is outsourcing, particularly that of knowledge-based services. Lowendahl propounds that, in this case, investors are attracted to the UK by the fact that the free movement of people in the EU allows them to access the greatest pool of talent and technical expertise from across Europe. Traditionally, the UK has had a consequential competitive advantage over other EU nations regarding knowledge-based services because many companies, including pharmaceuticals, choose to operate largely in English. Nevertheless, Lowendahl argues that "the UK's attractiveness for FDI [Foreign Direct Investment] in knowledge-based services sectors is likely to be seriously at risk if the UK does not agree to freedom of EU nationals to work in the EU", as the UK will no longer be able to guarantee the greatest pool of talent from across Europe.³

Effect on drug research and medical writing

A sample canvassing of recruiters working closely with both pharmaceutical companies and medical writers found that, as English





remains the language of choice for medical writing, the UK still has a competitive advantage, with much of the European writing talent being based in the UK. This being said, when it comes to regulatory and life sciences, a significant amount of the talent comes from Europe, meaning that the free movement of people is vital in maintaining Britain's position at the forefront of research. While the UK government has acknowledged the seriousness of this need, recruiters continue to assert just how much the UK cannot afford to lose this free movement of people in the life sciences.⁴

In terms of implications for the pharmaceutical industry itself, Brexit will doubtlessly have a serious impact. On the face of it, pharma may seem like a safe industry, as people will always be ill and hence always need drugs, regardless of the economic climate. Moreover, generally in times of economic strife, healthcare spending remains largely protected. Despite this, politicians will seek to cut what they can and one of the areas most vulnerable to this is drug innovation and which drugs the National Health Service (NHS) can afford to use. Currently, the UK is Europe's foremost destination for Phase I trials. However, as the UK will no longer be

eligible for EU grants and able to participate in EU-wide projects, this could be about to change.⁵ Furthermore, the UK is probably going to have to change its regulatory body from the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), which, although the two bodies are closely aligned, will presumably create further disruption, especially if marketing authorisations in the EU are no longer automatically valid in the UK.⁶ Given that medical writers play an intrinsic role in the process of drug marketing applications, the implications for them could be equally significant. Articles on Brexit posted on The Organisation for Professionals in Regulatory Affairs (TOPRA) website,⁷ reveal a reluctance to commit to any clear stance from both regulatory

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bodies, with the EMA saying that "The implications for the seat and operations of EMA depend on the future relationship between the UK and the EU. This is unknown at present and therefore we will not engage in any speculations".⁸

Outsourcing medical writing to other English-speaking countries

More broadly speaking, Brexit must be viewed within a wider context: The increasing willingness of pharmaceutical companies to outsource medical writing to countries where it is simply cheaper to do so, India being the most prominent example. It might be noted that Brexit may simply accelerate a process that has already been occurring for several years. With the future changes in regulatory bodies and a probable decrease in the talent pool, the UK becomes a less attractive place for the industry to outsource their medical writing. Now, instead of being able to rely on contracts for potentially a year at a time, UK medical writers may notice they can only be assured work for a matter of months.

The overall picture for UK medical writers, consequently, does not seem overly positive.

Although the continued success of the UK medical writing industry is threatened, this is not to say that there are no positives to be found from Britain's decision to leave the EU for UK medical writers.

First, it is important to note that the UK has not yet left the EU and, in the short term, medical writers may benefit from the decline in the pound's value, medical writing effectively being an exported service. Additionally, it might be observed that the UK medical writing industry has enjoyed incredible success over the past few years, with medical writers often being offered so much work that they have to turn some contracts down; it is only natural that such a monopoly over the industry could not last forever. The result of this process is that UK medical writers might well now have to compete in order to secure contracts from pharmaceutical companies, as is normal in almost any other industry. Hence, the implications of Brexit are not catastrophic or devastating, but merely dictate that UK medical writers will now have to work harder to secure a competitive advantage over their rivals.

The competitive advantage for UK medical writers

According to Winer (2004), securing a competitive advantage relies on three principles. The first of these is customer value, which "can be defined by the customer in terms of lower price, speedy delivery, convenience, or some other characteristic".^{9,10} However, as UK medical writers are unlikely to be able to compete with India in terms of price, to ensure customer value they shall have to rely on both efficiency and convenience. For instance, agreeing to more ambitious timelines or agreeing to night-time working to accommodate different time zone working patterns.

The second is the enhanced value of the product and it is important to add that this point is, at least partially, perception based: It does not necessarily matter if the service provided is actually better than that provided by competitors, but merely that it is perceived to be so. Traditionally, UK medical writers have had an intrinsic advantage here, as not only is most medical writing written in English, but



pharmaceutical companies have been able to rely on the UK having the best pool of talent from across Europe. For instance, review meetings conducted by a native English speaker with many years of medical writing experience can be perceived as a significant advantage to a study team. Even so, if the result of Brexit is the removal of the free movement of people and attendance in person at certain meetings is expected, then this will no longer be the case, meaning that UK medical writers will have to convince the pharmaceutical industry of their superiority through some other means.

Thirdly, UK medical writers are unique in that they are working and writing in their mother tongue. They also bring many years of experience of working specifically within the UK and European regulatory arena together with the benefits of a good international network of medical writers fostered by organisations such as EMWA.

How to build an image of superiority

Alongside the ongoing demands of running a small business, continuous professional training development is often an area neglected by independent medical writers. There is a danger of being caught out by a new regulatory guideline; for example, the new demands and

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document standards required for pharmaceutical vigilance, or the dossier requirements for China. There are many newer niches that have developed in the past few years that are as well to be aware of and prepared to write for. Reading the regulatory literature and following relevant blogs can keep awareness keen. Training and flexibility are likely to be attributes that build the perception of superiority alongside numbers of years of experience.

Given that superior service is at least partially based on perception, perhaps one of the most important methods by which UK medical writers may impress pharmaceutical companies is through the quality of their curriculum vitae (CV). This may be taken for granted by many, but in an environment where medical writers have had very little competition, the necessity for a polished CV has been somewhat diminished. Furthermore, the concept of presenting oneself well ought to extend to pages on sites such as LinkedIn. Profiles may need to be updated and improved if UK medical writers expect to obtain and secure a sustainable competitive advantage.

Having a polished CV and a professional profile on LinkedIn is of little use, however, if it bears no relation to reality; in other words, superior service should not only be perceived, it must actually be up to standard. One way by which this may be achieved is through having a superior workforce and holding them to high standards, making managerial direction supremely important. Furthermore, a more competitive environment may require medical writers to be more proactive in seeking contracts from pharmaceutical companies, instead of waiting to be sought out by recruitment companies. It may also be necessary to be willing to take a more diverse range of contracts for two reasons. First, any investor will tell you that diversification results in greater protection from risk, and in such uncertain times perhaps this has never been more applicable or more poignant for medical writers. Second, diversity ensures individuality: If a medical writing company is willing to accept contracts that others are not, it thus ensures a competitive advantage, which is Winer's third point relating to uniqueness.

Conclusions

If UK medical writers are to survive the post-Brexit environment, then they must be prepared to face more rigorous competition. Competition should only be detrimental to those businesses who either fail to provide good service, or fail to convince their clients of the quality of service that they provide. Therefore, if British medical writers continue to demonstrate their importance to the pharmaceutical companies, then they are likely to thrive in an increasingly competitive environment. It is also important to note that simply because Brexit has brought with it so much uncertainty, medical writers should not stop planning to grow and diversify their businesses, as “the alternative is planning to stagnate”.¹¹

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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