

For the greater good...Can agency competitors cooperate to advance medical publication practices?

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Abstract

The business of medical writing is competitive, but can it be cooperative? Is it time for agencies, which provide professional and ethical publication support to authors, to cooperate for the greater good of the medical publication profession? Formal collaborations have occurred among competitors in the biopharmaceutical and the contract research organisation sectors but rarely among competitors in the medical communications sector. In holding the inaugural Agency Executive Forum, sponsored by the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP), representatives of nine large international agencies met to rectify this situation. We identified a number of areas where we might cooperate, including proposing best-practices for working with freelance medical writers and for responding to procurement-driven requests for information. We are actively looking to cooperate with other groups, such as EMWA, to help ensure outputs that are valuable to the relevant stakeholders.

Keywords: Medical writing, Medical communication agency, Freelance, Compliance, Training, Procurement

Effectively, change is almost impossible without industry-wide collaboration, cooperation, and consensus.

– Simon Mainwaring (Australian social media specialist)

Any business involves buyers and sellers. In the field of medical publications, biopharmaceutical,

vaccine, diagnostic, and device companies and the authors they work with need timely and high-quality publications to meet their ethical and scientific obligations. Publication professionals, working in medical communication agencies or as freelancers, can help companies and authors meet these obligations, ethically and effectively.

We are used to thinking of medical communication agencies operating in a competitive marketplace; indeed, intense competition has influenced the success of each agency and will continue to do so. Has the time come, however, for us to expand our perspective and see agencies as being able to operate in a *collaborative* marketplace? Could focussed cooperation add to the success not just of a few agencies but also of the agency sector and the authors and clients we work for? If agency competitors were to cooperate, where would they start and what would they do?

In this article, we describe the rationale for one starting point in this discussion, the first Agency Executive Forum. We highlight business-focused initiatives identified at the Forum that are now being considered by agency competitors collaborators. One initiative, the 'best practices between clients and freelancers' checklist, may be of particular interest to many of the freelance members of EMWA and the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). Through this publication, we hope to raise awareness of the Forum and the resulting initiatives. As participants at the Forum we welcome the opportunity to cooperate with EMWA members in the months ahead.

Competitors cooperating?

On Sunday, 26 April 2015, leaders from medical communication agencies walked, perhaps with a mix of hope and trepidation, into a boardroom at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City hotel in Arlington, Virginia, USA to attend the inaugural Agency Executive Forum, which was sponsored by ISMPP. In time, this meeting may well be remembered as either inconsequential or as the start of cooperative initiatives amongst competitors that led to meaningful advances in the medical publication profession.

The impetus for this Forum started a year earlier when a few agency leaders met informally to discuss whether agencies were in a unique position to advance the medical publication profession. Notably, we already had an evidence-based catalyst for this informal discussion: the publication of the Global Publication Survey (GPS).¹ The GPS highlighted areas in which agencies were performing exceptionally well but also revealed areas of potential risk for agencies and, by extension, for their clients. Was there an opportunity, if not a responsibility, for those in the agency sector to respond to this evidence and actively seek to change practices affecting or being affected by agencies? The consensus amongst this small and informal gathering of agency leaders was ‘yes’.

With this embryonic, but determined, sense of cooperation, plans were made to reconvene. We recognised that leaders from biopharmaceutical and device

companies had been attending the ISMPP-sponsored Industry Executive Forum for years, but there was no equivalent meeting for agency leaders. As agency staff account for approximately half of ISMPP’s membership and comprised half of the GPS respondents, we believed there was a strong organisational and evidence-based rationale for an Agency Executive Forum at the next ISMPP Annual Meeting. The ISMPP Board agreed, and the first Forum was held in 2015.

Cooperating for the greater good?

Bringing competitors together to cooperate for the greater good is not without precedent. At the Forum, we reflected on how the TransCelerate initiative (<http://www.transceleratebiopharmainc.com/>) brought clinical research competitors together and how subsequent cooperative efforts were addressing common areas of risk and inefficiency. Although this clinical research initiative is far more advanced than our embryonic agency initiative, it serves as an inspirational example of outcomes-focused cooperation.

During our discussions, we sought to prioritise issues that could potentially expose agencies to risk or inefficiency and how, through cooperative efforts, we might be able to address these issues to help the agency sector, and by extension, the authors and clients we serve (Table 1). Although these two issues generated the most discussion, we recognised that the agency sector could contribute to initiatives focused on other issues, including:

Table 1: Agency-relevant issues that could benefit from cooperation

What is the issue?	How could cooperation help?	Potential next steps
The Global Publication Survey ¹ revealed gaps in how agencies trained, monitored, and audited freelancers. These gaps could expose agencies and their clients to compliance risks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies could cooperate to share best practices for identifying, training, monitoring, and auditing freelancers and becoming a ‘preferred client’. Agencies could collaborate with freelancers to help them gain insight into agency concerns and selection criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft a ‘best practices’ checklist for agencies to use to reduce potential compliance risks and to enhance working practices with freelancers. Invite leaders from EMWA and the American Medical Writers Association, which have high freelance memberships, to provide feedback on the draft checklist. Make the checklist readily accessible to agencies, clients, and freelancers so that each stakeholder group is aware of the proposed best practices to reduce compliance risks.
Procurement staff want timely and robust information from agencies, but there appears to be unjustified variation in the type of information requested. Although client-specific information requests are justified, some level of standardisation during the request for information/request for proposal process may benefit both agencies and clients.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies could cooperate to identify the type of information that is commonly requested and collaborate with clients (procurement and publication departments) to standardise these requests. Agencies could ensure data are collected to meet these standards. Procurement could benefit by gaining timely and more robust responses, which could be readily compared across agencies and across time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify the most common types of information requested and the extent to which there appears to be unjustified variation. Share this background information with clients (publication departments and procurement) to determine if there is interest in reducing inefficiency and enhancing effectiveness through some level of standardisation of information requests. If there is interest, agencies and clients could collaborate to prepare a checklist of standardised questions that could be used (in whole or in part) during the request for information/request for proposal process.

- **Identifying best (and worst) practices for bringing on board a new agency.** How might we share our insights, gained from years of agency experience across many clients and from being clients ourselves, with the industry sector? How might we gain input from industry clients to enhance how agencies prepare for the onboarding process?
- **Proposing novel ways to meet increasing levels of client-driven compliance training.** How can we do this efficiently and cost-effectively? Are there areas of redundancy amongst client training programs that could be reduced via some level of standardisation?
- **Explaining the role and value of agencies to help authors prepare timely, trusted, and high-quality publications to address the specific concerns and information needs of different audiences.** These audiences may include industry clients who have limited experience with outsourcing publication planning and delivery; critics who judge the whole agency sector based on poor practices from a select few; and agencies that undermine the professionalism of the sector through the use of inappropriate terminology on websites or recruitment advertisements, or by not committing to comply with ethical publication practice guidelines.
- **Developing a guideline on potential ways to manage agency-relevant issues that can arise regarding conflicts of interest.** How do different clients and agencies define a conflict? What are the most common stipulations in confidentiality agreements? How long after a conflict ceases should work be declined? What is considered best practice for firewalls when a single agency network separates conflicting work amongst its divisions?

Where to from here?

Attendees at the Agency Executive Forum shared the common desire to avoid turning future Forums into 'talkfests'. We will strive to focus on practical issues where contributions from the agency sector would be a critical element of any proposed solution. We will seek out best practices for turning

ideas into innovative and cooperative solutions, such as those highlighted in a 2010 TED talk by Steven Johnson.² We will aim to meet regularly between Forums and share our progress with the broader publication profession via industry conferences. While we do not want to interfere with other initiatives that seek to advance the publication profession, we do believe that the time has come for the agency sector to take responsibility for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of agency-relevant practices. When it comes to 'the business of medical writing', arguably, those leading businesses in the publication sector should be playing a visible and meaningful role. The authors we support and the clients who trust us should expect no less. We welcome feedback and would enjoy the chance to cooperate with EMWA members on our proposed initiatives.

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Conflicts of interest and disclaimers

The authors are employed by medical communication agencies that provide GPP2-compliant publication planning and delivery services to the biopharmaceutical industry. All authors are also active members of not-for-profit associations that support ethical publication practices.

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	Professor Karen L. Woolley ProScribe – Envision Pharma Group	<i>'Healthy competition and healthy collaboration can co-exist – those whom agencies employ and those whom agencies serve stand to benefit from both.'</i>
	Sarah L. Feeny Complete Medical Communications	<i>'Trust and the ability to see a discussion through the eyes of another. Two requirements for successful collaboration'</i>
	Julia Ralston MedErgy HealthGroup	<i>'There is value in every activity that creates more consistency in application of best publication practices: this surely includes agency collaboration'</i>
	Jackie Marchington Caudex	<i>'Although we are competitors, we cooperate every day by conducting our businesses according to standards that benefit us all'</i>
	Steven M. Palmisano MedThink SciCom	<i>'Having been both a client and an agency professional, I realise that competition isn't as productive as collaboration. Collaboration gives each partner the opportunity to focus on their strengths, which, in turn, allows all of us advance our client partnerships.'</i>
	Bryce McMurray inScience Communications – Springer	<i>'Companies in the agency sector should cooperate to help to set standards and demonstrate and communicate the value that they bring to the field of medical publications.'</i>

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