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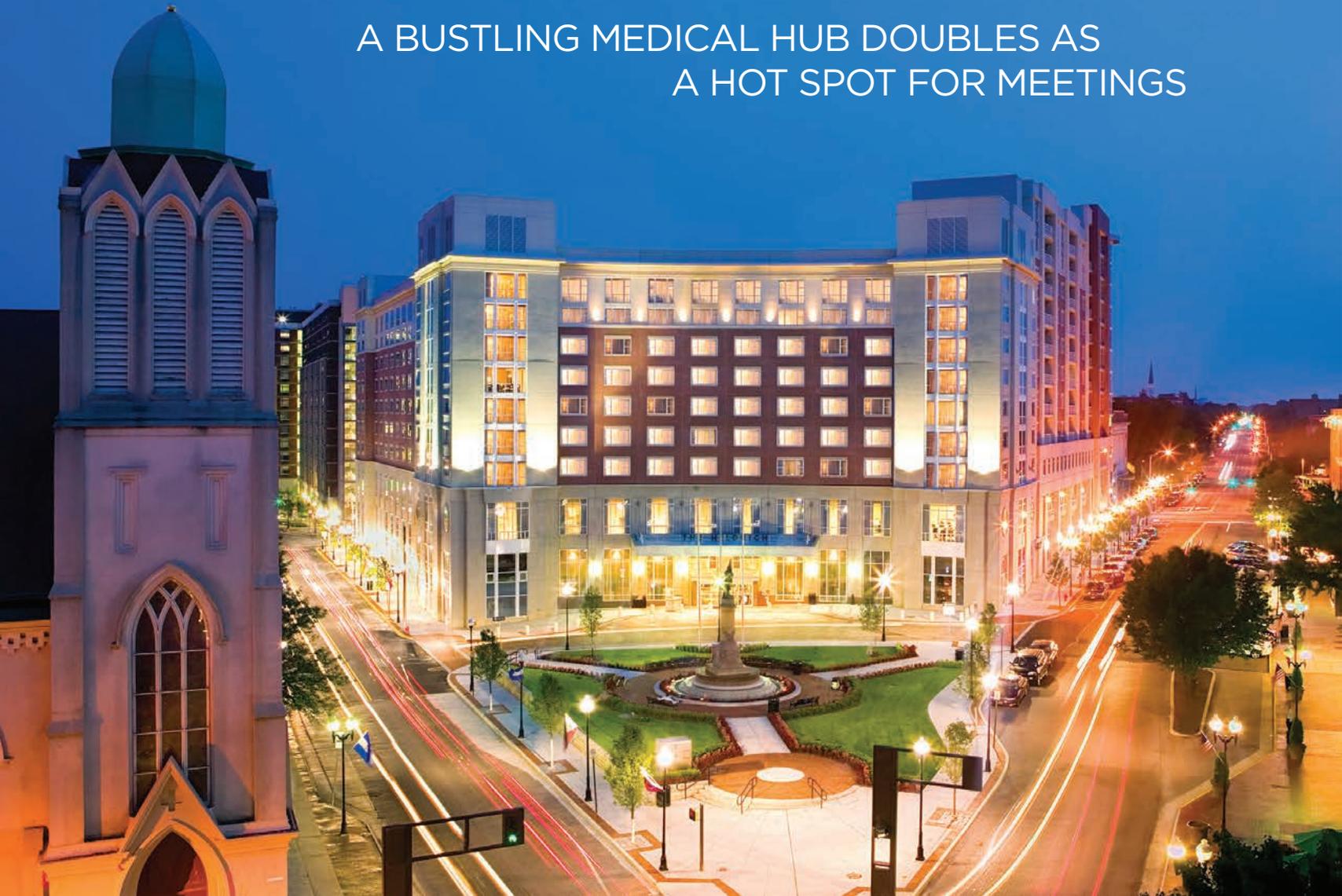
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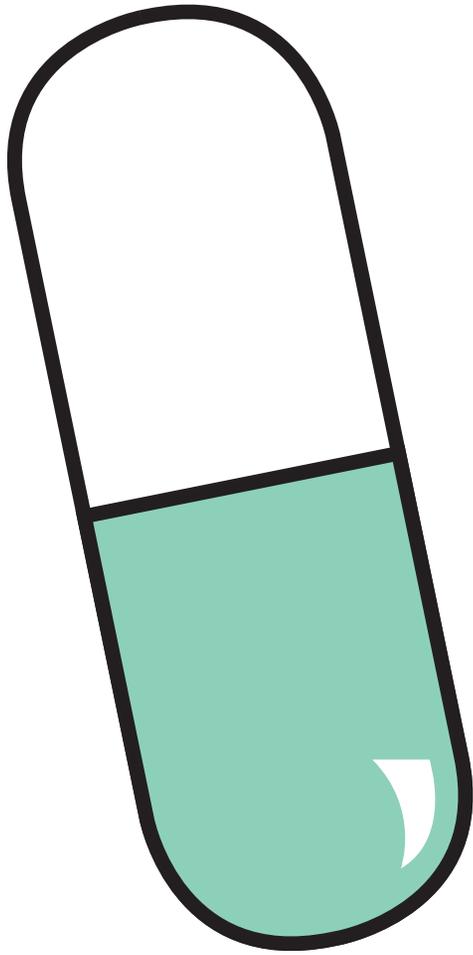
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A BUSTLING MEDICAL HUB DOUBLES AS
A HOT SPOT FOR MEETINGS





THE RIGHT Prescription

*How pharma meeting
planners adapt to
changing demands.*

By Carolee Noury



Nearly half the people in the U.S. take at least one prescription medicine each day, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A study from IMS Health Holdings Inc. found that in 2014 alone, \$374 billion was spent on those medications. With New Jersey's status as home to many pharmaceutical companies—including 14 of the world's 20 largest—it is no secret that this special sector drives the local meeting and planning business.

More prescriptions are being written than ever, which intensifies the pressure to make sure no outside forces are improperly influencing the treatment options doctors select for their patients. To this end, regulations and (strongly) suggested guidelines for pharma companies attempt to keep bias out of patient consultations, an important goal, despite mixed reactions regarding its applications. Not to mention, the added details to track and resulting budget reductions for important educational meetings within the field means pharma planners have no shortage of important work.

Details, Details

Whether you have planned one event or hundreds, you know the numerous details that go into pulling them off. Without question, superior organizational skills are one of the most important traits in successful planners. When it comes to planning pharma meetings, those skills are critical. Pharmaceutical companies uphold strict requirements for their educational and marketing efforts in an attempt to keep their relationships with physicians ethical and deserving of public trust. The efforts to uphold that trust involve additional factors for consideration, extra work and even more details to track.

From tighter budgets to frequent audits, pharmaceutical industry planners juggle layers and layers of additional information and restrictions in the name of supporting better health outcomes for people all over the globe. While it's an intense sector of the meeting and events field, insiders promise it is worth the extra efforts.

One of the major influences on pharmaceutical companies' guidelines is the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America's (PhRMA) voluntary "Code on Interactions with Healthcare Professionals" (CIHP). This document provides guidance on topics such as pharmaceutical representatives' lunch presentations, entertainment, support for continuing medical education (CME) and speaker training. CIHP is available for companies to consider while writing their own rules, and is not directly enforced by any external bodies. Specifically, it offers suggestions for how to keep marketing efforts within reasonable limits to avoid biasing physicians. Because of excessive promotional gifts in the past, concerns were raised that some medications were prescribed to benefit the manufacturer rather than because they were the best option for patients.

Add to that the federal Open Payments program, part of the Affordable Care Act, which requires pharmaceutical companies to disclose all funds invested in their work with doctors, from flights to meals to speaking fees and beyond. Through the Open Payments website [cms.gov/openpayments], anyone can look up a physician to see how much money has been spent on her/him by each pharmaceutical company. The public has more access to the amount of money changing hands, but not necessarily a clear sense of what makes something reasonable or not.

Though neither CIHP nor Open Payments set formal limits on the money spent, both have had a resounding impact on the industry. Significant resources are directed toward complying with the criteria, budgets are carefully considered and often reduced, and even more audits are conducted to ensure the adopted rules are being followed.

Compliance is Key

Pharmaceutical companies have been left to build their own more specific policies. In response, they tend to have dedicated compliance teams to track their rules and also

to evaluate and reevaluate their efficacy. Whether planners work inside the company or not, they are in near-constant contact with the compliance team from the very beginning stages of planning.

the opportunity to build strong, positive relationships. Even when you have to deliver bad news, people greatly appreciate hearing it from you while there is still time to fix it."

Pamela Wynne, HMCC, CMM, CMP, glob-



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SAIRA BANU KIANES, CMP, president and global planner, Banu Event Solutions & Training

Planners aren't off the hook, though. They still have to keep track of the regulations and restrictions. Saira Banu Kianes, CMP, president and global planner, Banu Event Solutions & Training (B.E.S.T), says, "Even though I'm an independent planner, I'm always a part of a team when it comes to pharma meetings. I coordinate with the company's writers, editors and especially their compliance team. We each have vital roles in making sure we satisfy the attendees and host, all while satisfying the compliance requirements. Sometimes that means being what I call the 'Pharma police,' that person who has to identify and explain the conflicts. But then you get to solve those problems for them too, which means you have

al events project manager for Events, by Travel and Transport and Ultramar and president, MPI New Jersey Chapter, plays an active part in making sure her meeting planners and the compliance teams are working together effectively. Her responsibilities are global when it comes to sharing compliance and regulations with global partners. "In my role, I work with operation guidelines and standard operating procedures," she says. "One of my duties is to make sure all the planners are sharing resources and following the same guidelines. I also compile and present industry updates every quarter to let my people know what is happening in our field, including benchmarking and best practices."

If there's a golden rule when it comes to matters of compliance, it is "get it in writing," says Kianes. "If you can't show it happened, it didn't." And head nods don't always signal agreement in Wynne's experience. "A nod can simply mean someone is hearing what you're saying. This is especially true when you're working with people outside the U.S. Make sure you reiterate what you spoke about and that it's in writing before you forge ahead," she says. "It can save you from major headaches later on."

Budgets: Less is Best

A buzzword in this sector is "optics," which goes beyond how successfully the companies are educating medical professionals to how positive the public's perception of those activities is. In the CIHP preamble, it alludes to the importance of this:

“The Code is based on the principle that a healthcare professional's care of patients should be based, and should be perceived as being based, solely on each patient's medical needs and the healthcare professional's medical knowledge and experience.”

—Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA)'s *Code on Interactions with Healthcare Professionals*

This has translated into avoiding meeting destinations that seem too ritzy and setting stringent meal spending caps in the attempt to draw a visible line between appropriate and lavish. The goal is to keep their efforts from being, or being perceived as, an attempt to bias doctors. As with many things, what looks appropriate on paper isn't always feasible within the given limits. With the rising costs of flights and food, each year it is correspondingly more difficult to make those restricted dollars stretch further, especially when the optics reflect the need to spend even less.

In response to this, some venues have developed special packages for pharmaceutical events to better take strict spending caps into account. Some caterers and venues with on-site catering offer "pharma menus" to provide more budget-friendly and cost-effective options to help meet this large need. However, those packages book quickly and often require a lot of lead time to secure. With fewer venues in their price range, planners have the added challenge of securing a space that fits noncompete requirements as well.

"Companies won't hold important meetings at a venue that has a competitor's event at the same time," explains Wynne. "It's becoming a major challenge in our industry. Since we have fewer options with our restricted budgets, we're all looking at the same venues. It has gotten much harder to find appropriate space, particularly in the major hub cities."

Cutbacks go beyond venues and food, says Kianes: "Over the years, budgets have been shrinking. There are cuts everywhere. Occasionally companies decide to hold some of those meetings in-house instead. The problem with that is you literally lose some of your audience. With their offices nearby, those busy attendees end up back at their desks returning calls and emails. Too often they end up coming back to the meeting late, if at all. Sure, holding that meeting may have saved money in the budget, but at what cost?"

It's not truly a profit if the message is lost."

And what about physicians and their busy schedules? Do they miss the former perks that were built into educational meetings to help compensate for time out of the office with lost income? In a 2012 study by Medscape, 72 percent of physicians reported that they believed lunches with pharmaceutical company representatives did not bias their prescribing behaviors. One commenter states, "I am outraged at the notion that a lunch or a pen or a book could be felt to be inducement for me to prescribe certain drugs."

Audit-Ready

Following the guidelines while planning is important, but it doesn't end there. For meetings funded by pharmaceutical companies, records must be kept to prove compliance from the planning stage through to the final reconciliation. The records must provide tangible proof that regulations and related SOPs were adhered to. Beyond that, companies must be able to show that they are actively keeping track of developments in the field and adjusting their own rules accordingly.

This involves many sets of eyes, says Wynne. "Compared to others, pharmaceutical company meetings have a much greater level of compliance and scrutiny," she says. "The meetings are regulated by internal reviewers, and also by state, federal and often international reviewers. Everyone is watching to make sure things are done right." Along with the additional challenges come benefits, adds Wynne: "All the data analysis required has offered a lot of opportunity. For analytical people who enjoy data and standardization, there's a great need for it in a variety of roles. The data can be fascinating."

The Winning Formula

With the additional factors involved, meeting planning in the pharmaceutical industry may seem like an entirely different



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job, but there’s still much overlap. In some cases the basic skill set is the same, but the requisite level of expertise is higher. That experience makes it more manageable when it comes to handling details such as the many extra parties involved in the planning. “There’s a high level of political savvy required to succeed at this,” says Wynne. “Generally senior planners get hired into these positions because they get that. It’s a matter of knowing who to talk to and when; knowing what information is released at what time. You truly need to have the most advanced communication skills. The company is trusting you with their most valued clients: doctors who are conducting research and improving people’s health.”

Kianes agrees that higher-level skills are

essential. In addition, she says a willingness to constantly improve is invaluable. “You truly need to have an insatiable thirst for knowledge,” she says. “You have to want to build on what you already know and the strengths and skills you already have. And you also need to be ready to adapt, since things change all the time. You have to stay with the pace.”

To this end, Wynne and Kianes are committed to staying current with the news in their field and related industries. “It pays to be an avid reader,” says Wynne. “You can’t just rely on headlines, you have to actively search for the important information. Read articles and white papers not just in our industry, but also in publications and on websites targeted toward the companies.”

Hard Work That’s Easy to Love

Since many planners chose the hospitality field for the opportunity to work closely with people, the requirement for sharp analytical skills may be discouraging. There are many aspects of the job that outweigh the more tedious parts. For Wynne, part of that is the unique awareness of global issues and the opportunities to make connections to people all over the world. “When you travel internationally, it offers new perspectives on work and life. You certainly get to know your industry better with a 360-degree view of it,” says Wynne. “It’s absolutely fun work. I love my job. On some days, I’m dealing with the reality of 15 different spending caps due to doctors coming from 15 different countries, but these doctors are making dramatic medical advances. They save lives. I get to support that through my work in bringing them together.”

Kianes echoes the sentiment. “The reason I chose this industry was to make a difference,” she says. “I get to do that every single day. To have any role in the training of doctors who save lives is a gift.”



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