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INTEGRATED MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY AND PLAN

Fatima Ahmad, PharmD, Vice President Medical Affairs, Castle Creek Biosciences
Hosie Bhathena, MD, VP, Medical and Scientific Services, Cactus Life Sciences
Clare Baker, Senior Director, Global Medical Operations, Idorsia Pharmaceuticals Ltd
Elvira D'souza, President, Cactus Life Sciences at Cactus Communications
Paula Soto, PhD, Director, Medical Communications, Iveric Bio

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MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTION: STRATEGIC DRIVERS OF AN INTEGRATED MEDICAL AFFAIRS COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY AND PLAN

As Medical Affairs teams transform in the era of novel technologies and personalized medicines, the discipline of Medical Communications has likewise evolved and expanded from having a focus on leading publication-planning activities to also driving the development of strategic scientific communications across multiple platforms and all phases of the product lifecycle.

Medical Communications teams have historically played an execution-focused, rather than a strategic, role with respect to communicating scientific evidence. However, given the focus on accelerating scientific data communication, with an emphasis on customizing outputs to various audiences, and the increasing use of digital strategies to engage with stakeholders, there has been a clear need for the function to evolve into a more strategic discipline of Medical Affairs in order to drive a cohesive and consistent scientific communications strategy across multiple channels and cross-functional touchpoints.¹

In both pre-commercialization and post-launch phases, an integrated Medical Communications Strategy, including a compelling Scientific Narrative, is critical in educating internal and external audiences about the progression and differentiation of assets in the context of the surrounding competitive landscape. The Medical Communications discipline is particularly well-placed to drive this process and is increasingly called upon to be strategic thought partners within and beyond the broader Medical Affairs organization, specifically with teams creating the overall medical strategy [Medical Strategy Team], and product commercialization/asset teams. Medical Affairs teams create forward looking strategies by interpreting and contextualizing emerging data, generating real-world evidence, engaging in peer-to-peer scientific dialogue, and identifying clinical practice insights.² Implementing an integrated Medical Communications strategy and plan can provide an exemplary value-add to this overall strategic approach.

Medical Communications and Medical Strategy teams have emerged as natural partners to other Medical Affairs subfunctions in generating, integrating, and communicating scientific evidence. Medical Communications teams are experts in developing a compelling Medical Communications strategy, and this expertise in tandem with Medical Strategy, Field Medical Affairs, and HEOR-related workstreams is important to communicate a consistent scientific narrative. These teams must come together with other functions to develop an Integrated Medical Communications Strategy and Plan (IMC S/P) which is the roadmap for how a Medical Affairs team communicates its product vision and value proposition to internal and external stakeholders.

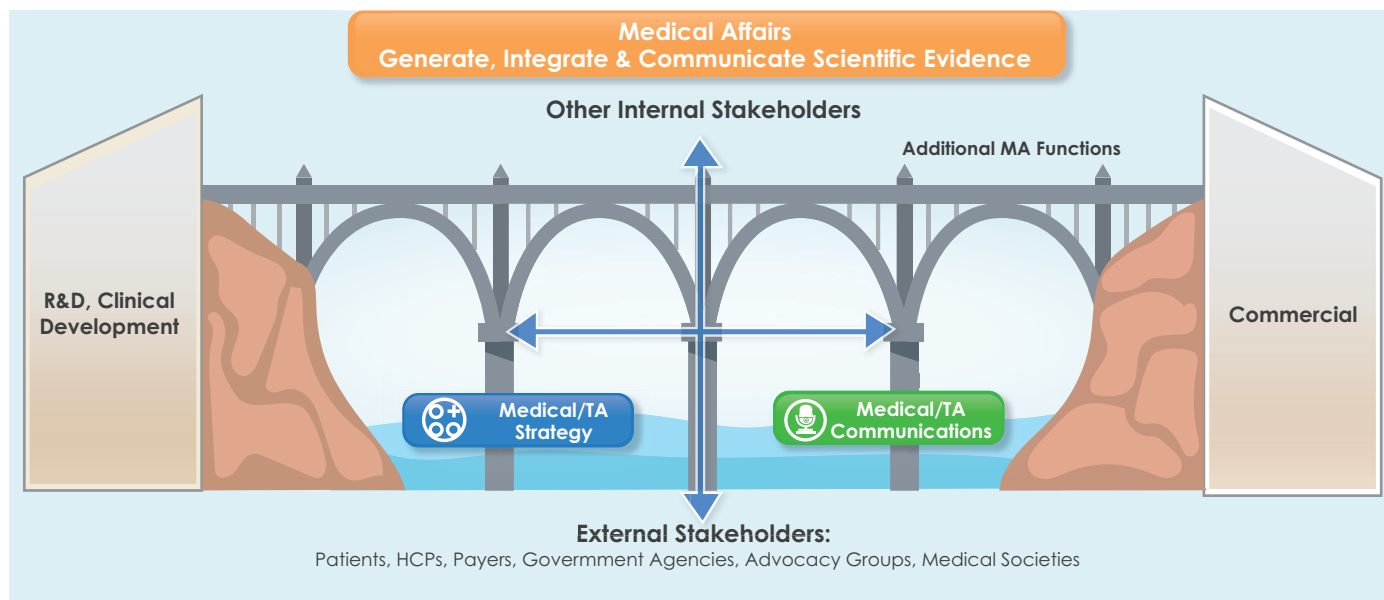


Figure 1. Medical Affairs: The bridging function

WHAT IS AN INTEGRATED MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY AND PLAN?

An iMC S/P is a methodical approach to align Medical Communications with the overarching Medical Strategy for the product and therapeutic area (TA). Its broad purpose is to articulate a consistent and cohesive scientific narrative across multiple dissemination channels and formats (traditional and digital). This approach involves combining insights from cross-functional teams and translating these into impactful communication activities/deliverables tailored to stakeholder needs and content consumption preferences.

BENEFITS OF CREATING AN INTEGRATED MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY AND PLAN

An iMC S/P provides the roadmap for Medical Affairs teams to efficiently and effectively deliver:

- A consistent and cohesive scientific narrative: The plan includes key pillars/objectives of the overall Medical Strategy for the product and ensures consistency in how data are communicated. It specifies which data are of particular interest, and how the data impact the treatment landscape and guide implementation of the drug in clinical practice. The plan focuses on a

consistent scientific narrative while tailoring how data are presented across various audiences and channels across global and regional teams and across all deliverables created by Medical Affairs. This helps establish trust in the science and build deeper engagement with the external medical and scientific communities.

- To the right stakeholder/target audience: The plan details which stakeholders should receive each communication, why these data are relevant to them, and how to customize to various audiences, such as HCPs, patients, payors, and other key audiences. It also ensures that actionable insights are appropriately captured and incorporated into the communication strategy, which allows Medical Affairs teams to ensure that all their activities address relevant stakeholder needs in a timely and agile manner.
- The iMC S/P focuses on the appropriate timing of data communication in relation to the product lifecycle and ensures that stakeholders can find this information when they search for it.
Across channels, formats, and engagement touchpoints: The plan identifies the most appropriate channels based on the needs of the target audience and recommends formats (long form or more interactive formats) and dissemination tools (self-service medical affairs portals, social media platforms, etc.) based on audience needs and other considerations.
- Additionally, an integrated plan also allows Medical Communications teams to identify areas of overlap and duplication of efforts in their content creation workflows across Medical Affairs teams. This helps with streamlining processes to allow for efficiencies, encourages content reuse and repurposing, and ensures a higher return on investment in content creation. Table 1 below discusses in more detail the various components of the iMC S/P.

Discrete Medical Communications deliverables	Integrated Medical Communications Strategy and Plan
Publications plans, congress plans, Scientific Communications Platforms existing independently of each other, or with minimal connection	Articulates an overarching communications strategy and includes a plan that knits together all these discrete deliverables in a cohesive fashion
Created in silos with limited cross-functional input	Created in partnership with Medical Strategy teams and other cross functional stakeholders within and outside of Medical Affairs
Created with more short-term objectives. May not be aligned with the larger medical and product strategy	Focuses on both short- and long-term objectives and is fully aligned with the larger product, medical and digital strategy
Typically address unmet needs and gaps in literature and involve a more systematic (and not necessarily strategic) approach to determining what communications are needed to ensure optimal use of the product	Goes beyond analyzing gaps in literature to ensure an audience-focused approach and a deep understanding of the educational/knowledge gaps and content consumption preferences based on cross- functional insights
May not necessarily factor a multichannel strategy and focuses on more traditional methods of data communication and, if multi- channel, may not ensure a consistent and cohesive scientific message across channels	Ensures a consistent and cohesive scientific narrative across channels, content formats, and audiences

Table 1. Difference between discrete Medical Communications deliverables and an Integrated Communications Strategy

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION FOR DEVELOPING AN IMC S/P

In order to provide a targeted, comprehensive, and valuable communication program, as a best practice, it is recommended that Medical Communications teams drive the creation of the IMC S/P along with the Medical Strategy Teams. Cross-functional stakeholders within and outside Medical Affairs should be included during the development and review process to ensure that communication objectives are aligned with the overarching product, medical, and TA strategies. Their involvement also ensures that insights and real-world experiences drive the strategy and that the plan is current and relevant.

Medical Communications teams already work with cross-functional teams to develop and align on the Scientific Communications Platform - a strategic foundational document that ensures accurate, consistent language and referencing through communication activities.¹ They should work with the same set of stakeholders to create the annual IMC S/P (containing publications, field-based materials, medical education, and medical information content plans) and ensure alignment with the TA strategy, annual product, medical, and digital strategy plans, and the SCP. Some deliverables will be driven by Medical Strategy, others by Medical Communications – but all should be aligned, ensuring value and impact are amplified because they all support a consistent scientific narrative.

STRUCTURE AND COMPONENTS OF AN IMC S/P

An IMC S/P is an annual plan and is created as part of the planning cycle. We outline below the key steps to building an integrated plan:

Step 1: Define the overall Medical Communications objectives for the product.

The first step in creating an IMC S/P is to identify key scientific communication objectives and priorities for the product and the TA. These should be aligned with the overall product vision, the strategic imperatives for the product (Product/Brand strategy), the Medical Strategy, the TA strategy, and strategic pillars in the SCP.

In addition to the elements of the product, medical and TA strategy, information in this section to support the scientific communication objectives identified could include:

- A.** Product overview: Include a brief overview of the product including information on the disease state, mechanism of action, etc.
- B.** Competitor updates/Landscape analysis: Include new updates that could impact your communications strategy for the year, as well as key events impacting the product landscape (include timelines for key data and approvals).

- C.** Audience insights: These can include insights from the field-based teams or those in customer-facing roles regarding what information the target group of stakeholders is seeking, or additional insights on the treatment landscape from broader channels.
- D.** Key considerations for the plan (key data, new markets, use of digital initiatives aligned with overall digital strategy, alignment with overall company vision, etc.)

This first step is important in ensuring that the plan is “truly integrated” from the perspective of alignment with the larger Medical Affairs vision and business objectives for the product. Ensuring that cross-functional stakeholder input is used to derive communication objectives is important so that the communication tactics planned are relevant. It also ensures alignment with the gaps observed and stakeholder needs described by functions responsible for driving engagement through various touchpoints.

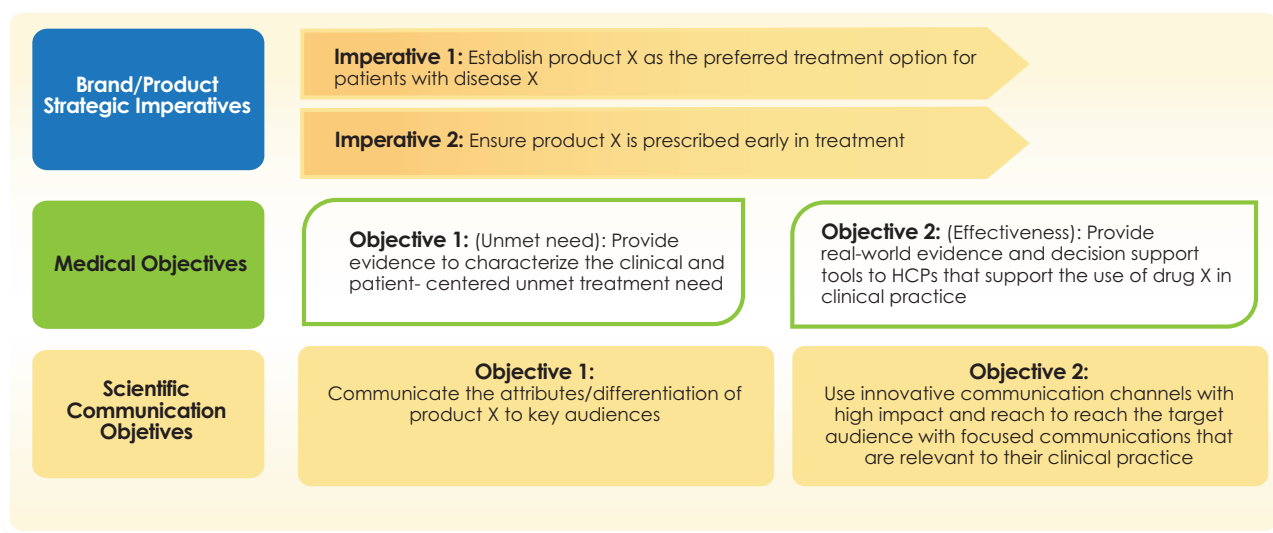


Figure 2: Scientific communication objectives should be aligned with the brand/product strategic imperatives and medical objectives for the product

Step 2: Identify/understand the audiences and how they consume content.

Medical engagement now includes a broader community of stakeholders beyond HCPs that consume information across a range of increasingly digital touchpoints.³ While traditional plans focus on product data and how to disseminate them to the community, integrated plans tend to be centered around not only the data but how the community wants to receive the data. To build trust through communication at the various stakeholder engagement points, stakeholder journey mapping becomes important for Medical Communications teams.

Information to be defined/specified in this section of the iMC S/P includes the following:

- A.** Who are the target audiences? (HCPs, KOLs, Digital Opinion Leaders, payers, policy holders, patients/caregivers)

- B.** How do they seek information? (Digital footprint, online destinations, preferred search methods)
- C.** What sources do they trust and use? (Peer-reviewed journals, scientific congresses, social media, symposia, societies, physician networks)
- D.** How can we optimize MSL content and field insights?

Insight-filled data regarding stakeholders and their preferences reside in different pockets within the larger Medical Affairs organizations. Insights can be harnessed from multiple sources/teams and from different digital applications (field insights, document management platforms, metrics captured from existing portals for stakeholders, etc.). Some organizations may have separate insights teams, and will need to coordinate across teams to capture those insights. Medical Communications can play an important role in helping contextualize these insights, along with knowledge gaps identified from traditional approaches and translating them into an impactful communication plan. Organizations have started to use technology to rethink their insight assimilation process (artificial intelligence/machine learning tools to glean insights from multiple sources to develop a “single source of truth” that can be used cross functionally; social media listening, etc.) to develop an in-depth understanding of the stakeholder knowledge journey and inform strategic plans.

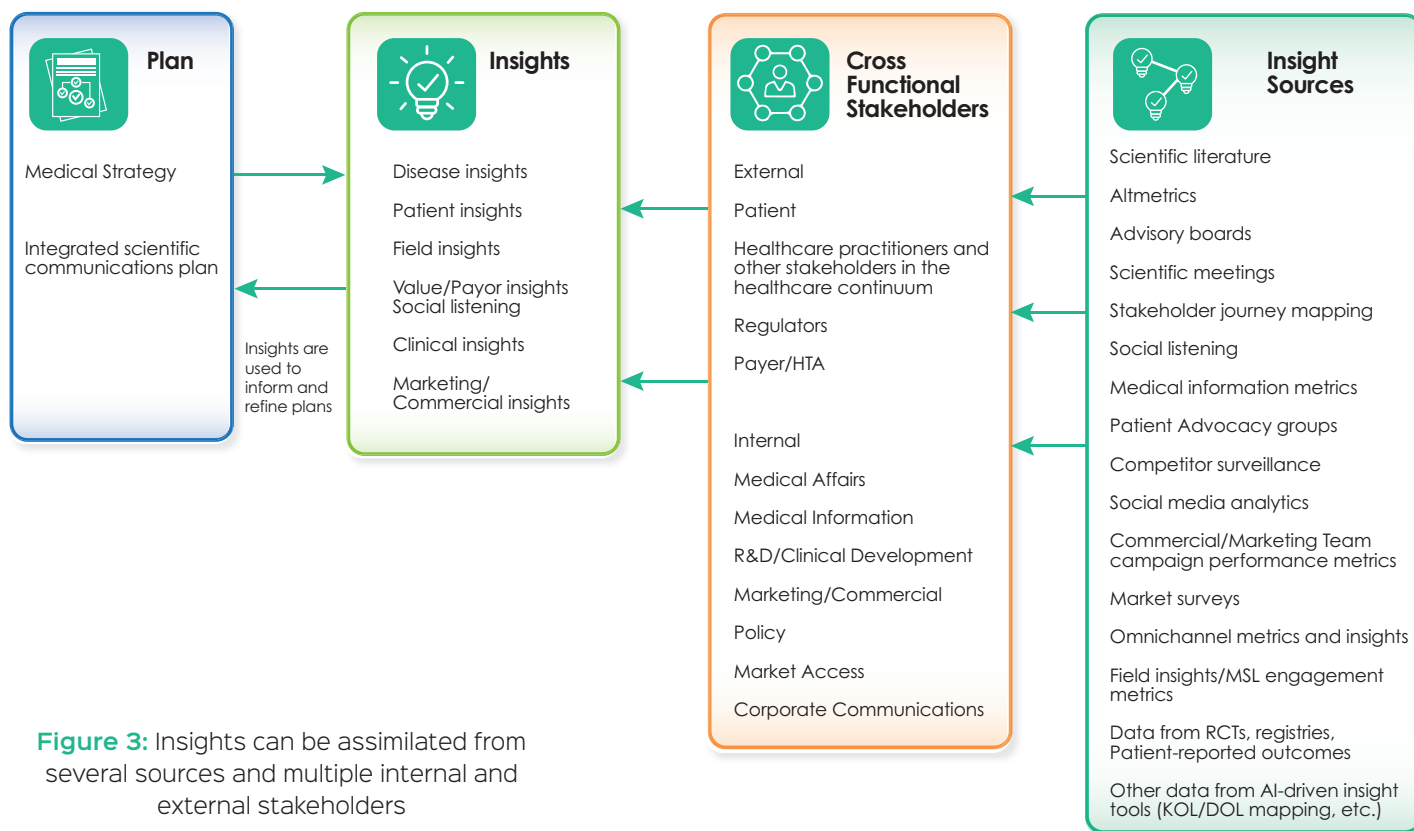


Figure 3: Insights can be assimilated from several sources and multiple internal and external stakeholders

Step 3: Identify appropriate channels and formats of communication to best engage stakeholders.

Given time limitations they have, stakeholders want scientifically accurate and appropriately referenced content. In addition, Field Medical Affairs Teams prefer easy-to-access resources to use with HCPs/KOLs in an era where virtual engagement is increasingly the norm. The amount of medical content and number of peer-reviewed publications is growing at an enormous rate. Stakeholders have limited time to stay updated and hence use several traditional and non-traditional tools and formats to search for and consume information (news aggregators like WebMD, Twitter, etc.). Stakeholders are also increasingly expecting a Netflix or Amazon like experience where they can consume medical content when they want it (at a time convenient to them) and how they want it (in a format that appeals to them).

These factors further stress the importance of the iMC S/P in understanding and covering which traditional and digital channels and formats will be most suitable to best match stakeholder needs, and best fulfil Medical Communications and brand/product objectives. For an iMC S/P to be truly impactful, it must also be aligned with any digital strategy that may be in place. A good iMC S/P will weave together a consistent scientific story across all engagement touchpoints. To do this, Medical Communications teams need to collaborate with cross-functional stakeholders to align on which channels and formats will be the most effective, and how medical content can be repurposed and personalized for various channels and engagement touchpoints, ensuring the communication of an integrated and consistent scientific narrative.

Medical Communications teams should consider the following digital formats and channels to enhance the reach and impact of the iMC S/P:

- Digital enhancements for publications (videos, podcasts, infographics, visual abstracts)
- Plain language summaries for patients, caregivers, and non-specialist HCPs
- Innovative or interactive formats for proactive and reactive slide decks
- Virtual congress medical booths and microsites
- Self-service medical information or medical affairs portals
- Social media
- Physician networks

Audience Amplification:

In addition to newer formats and channels, there is also an increasing focus on increasing the discoverability of medical content. Various approaches for audience amplification, including publication search optimization (PSO/SEO), progressive disclosure of information, use of options such as the Article Discovery Package provided by publishers like Wiley, and content

recommendation tools such as TrendMD, are being increasingly used to ensure that medical content is more discoverable when key audiences look for it. Stakeholder expectations for data transparency are increasing and Medical Affairs teams should stay abreast of the ongoing dialogue on this topic, as we use innovative approaches to reach audiences and ensure that they have access to transparent, timely, and accurate information.

Modular Content:

To ensure that content is created efficiently, several Medical Communications teams are also exploring modular content strategy formats (creation of core modules that can be reused across assets; commonly used in other industries such as retail) with the objective of creating content once and then repurposing it for use across channels and geographies. Most teams are at an early stage of assessing how best to fit a modular strategy within the Medical Affairs paradigm, but the evident efficiency gains and speed of content creation seem to indicate it is certainly the future. An iMC S/P also allows teams to visualize a content map where they can identify all the different channels and formats for the data that need to be communicated and helps identify methods to avoid duplication of efforts.



Step 4: Identify focus areas and detail tactics and an implementation plan:

The next step is to identify focus areas and priority topics for the Medical Communications teams. This step is focused on developing a detailed plan for communication of the scientific narrative that incorporates input from the cross-functional teams, and allows other functions to have visibility of and plan around availability of materials. These could vary depending on the stage in the lifecycle of the product, the target audience, the TA, etc. It is best practice to indicate which of the scientific and medical objectives and/or imperatives the tactics are related to. An iMC S/P allows cross-functional stakeholders to have a visual representation and knowledge of the various communication tactics that will be available for engagement with stakeholders. It also ensures alignment of stakeholders and activities for maximum reach and impact.

Step 5: Define and measure success, review, reevaluate and adjust as needed.

Medical Affairs teams are expected to demonstrate the value of all their activities. The identification and use of appropriate metrics to demonstrate the effectiveness of Medical Communications plans is a hot topic of debate and discussion. There is an increasing need to go beyond reach and readership/usage to engagement and impact metrics. Metrics, when used appropriately, also function as feedback mechanisms for whether a communication strategy has been effective. The following are examples of metrics that are used by Medical Communications teams:

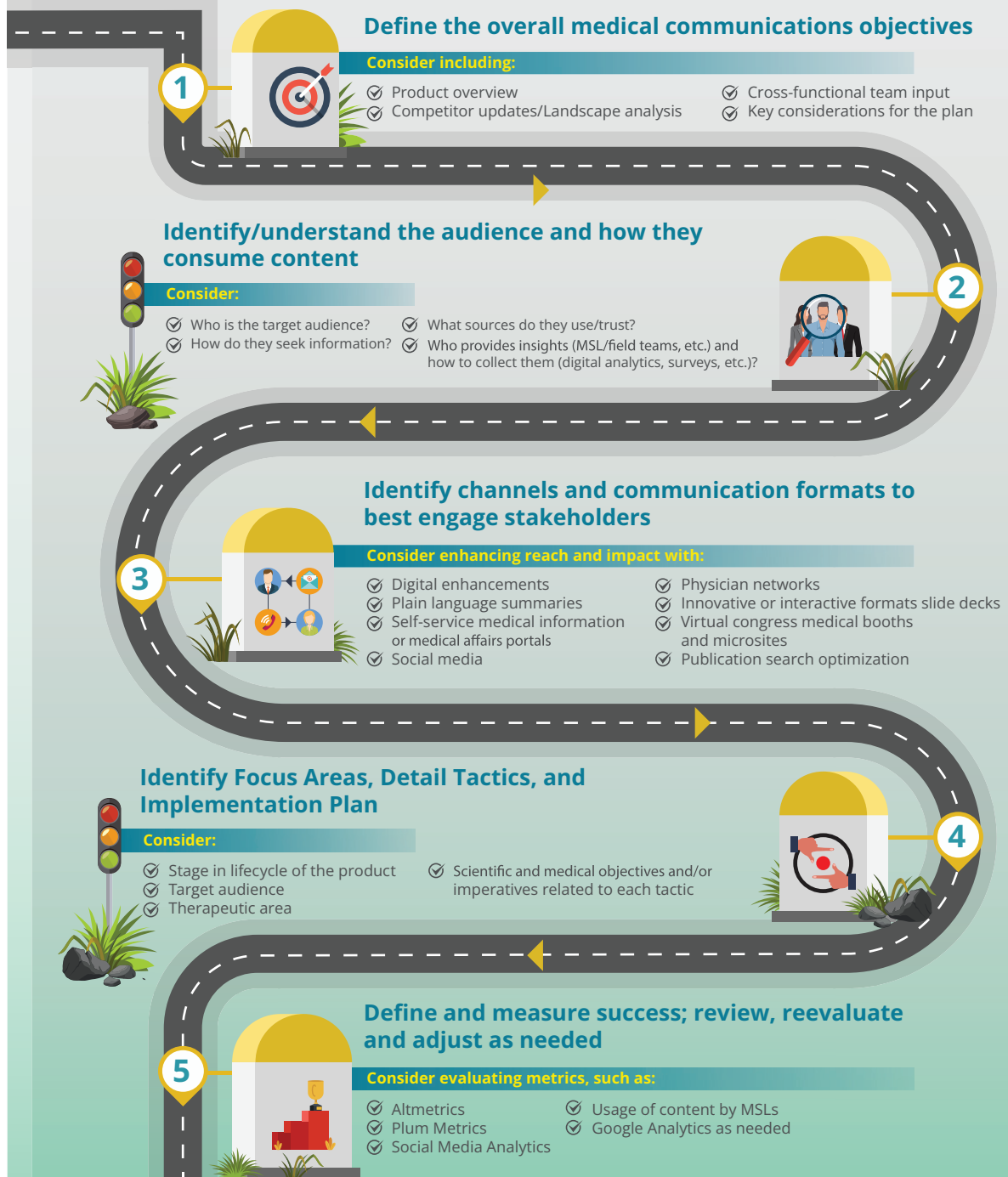
- Altmetrics
- Plum Metrics
- Social Media Analytics
- Usage of specific content by MSLs
- Google Analytics

Metrics that help capture and demonstrate ROI is still an unmet need in the industry and we hope that ongoing discussions on the topic will result in innovative approaches for appropriately measuring impact of communication and dissemination activities.

In addition to measuring the effectiveness and impact of an iMC S/P, it is important to ensure that the iMC S/P is reviewed at regular intervals (at least quarterly as a best practice) and for cross-functional stakeholders to be part of the review process. This allows for new input to be incorporated in real time and for changes to the overall strategy and plan to be made in an agile manner for the plan to always be current and relevant.

A Roadmap for Building an Integrated Medical Communications Strategy and Plan

*Review plan at regular intervals with cross functional stakeholders



infographic by:
Samantha Weissman, Senior Director, Digital Strategy and Engagement, Cactus Life Sciences
Vinita Sethuraman, Design Lead, Cactus Life Sciences

BEST PRACTICES FOR SEEKING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL ALIGNMENT

- Alignment from cross-functional stakeholders with their own individual department priorities can prove to be a challenge. Here are some best practices that could help with seeking alignment.
- Medical Communications representation at cross-functional meetings: While Medical Communications teams may not necessarily have been part of cross-functional team discussions during the development of the Medical Strategy for the product previously, it is important to include them so that the insights gleaned from these discussions can inform the creation of the iMC S/P.
- Planned review cadence/cycles: Medical Communications teams should plan for cross-functional representation needed for the creation and review of plans. This means that a meeting cadence should be planned sufficiently in advance, along with a clear agenda and expected contribution from each stakeholder.
- Use shorter content formats for seeking input on plans: When plans are sent via email for comments from cross-functional stakeholders, getting quality responses can be a challenge. Medical Communications teams should attempt to use the same principles applied while creating impactful content for external stakeholders to get the input needed. Non-traditional approaches can include summarizing key content relevant to each stakeholder where input is needed, use of more visual and short-form content, workshops, use of interactive tools (e.g., Google /MS Teams polling features), etc.
- Standard templates/formats for plans: To ensure alignment between global and regional plans, it is recommended that global teams create a standard format/template for regional plans. Regional teams can use elements of the global plan and customize relevant sections based on their specific regional needs. Another best practice is the need for a common template/format that facilitates alignment by ensuring information is presented in a standard manner, encourages reuse of material where possible, and provides a consistent framework on which to base metrics.

SUMMARY

Medical Communications teams, with their expertise in developing a compelling Medical Communications Strategy, are well-positioned to drive scientific communication across an organization, in thought partnership with Medical Strategy and other Medical Affairs sub-teams. The iMC S/P is an important strategic document that plays a significant role in ensuring that a consistent and cohesive scientific narrative is communicated to the right stakeholder/target audience at the right time and across the right channels, formats, and touchpoints. Adopting this approach of creating an overarching and integrated scientific communication strategy maximizes engagement and trust with external stakeholder communities, allows communication objectives to be met in a consistent manner, and ultimately enables fully informed use of a product in order to facilitate the best possible clinical outcomes for patients.

ADDITIONAL READING

- Medical Communications as Strategic Drivers of Scientific Communications:
<https://medicalaffairs.org/medical-communications-scientific-communications/>
- Online Discoverability of Publications:
[\[https://medicalaffairs.org/discoverability-publications-search-engine-optimization/\]](https://medicalaffairs.org/discoverability-publications-search-engine-optimization/)
- Beyond the Content: HCP Communication Preferences in the Virtual Era:
[\[https://medicalaffairs.org/beyond-content-webinar/\]](https://medicalaffairs.org/beyond-content-webinar/)
- The Value and Impact of Medical Affairs: Mastering the Art of Leveraging Meaningful Metrics
[\[https://medicalaffairs.org/art-leveraging-meaningful-metrics/\]](https://medicalaffairs.org/art-leveraging-meaningful-metrics/)
- Measuring the value of medical affairs with altmetrics
[\[https://medicalaffairs.org/value-medical-affairs-altmetrics/\]](https://medicalaffairs.org/value-medical-affairs-altmetrics/)

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