

Harnessing Cross-Industry Collaboration to Navigate the Evolving Field Medical Landscape


Authors

Donna Holder, PharmD,
Senior Director, Global MSL
Excellence, Oncology,
Daiichi Sankyo, Inc.

Wendy Fraser, PhD,
Executive Director, Field Medical
Center of Excellence & Global
Scientific Training, Merck Sharp &
Dohme LLC, Rahway, NJ, USA

Emily Howman, PhD,
Senior Medical Strategy Lead,
Envision Pharma, Inc.

Author disclosures: Emily Howman is a full-time employee of Envision Pharma Ltd. Donna Holder is a full-time employee of Daiichi Sankyo, Inc., and is a shareholder of AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, Daiichi Sankyo, Inc., and Merck & Co., Inc. Wendy Fraser is a full-time employee of Merck Sharp & Dohme LLC, Rahway, NJ, USA



The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not represent or reflect any official policies or positions of their employers.



Abstract

The Field Medical landscape continues to evolve, and it is imperative that organizations are forward focused to ensure their field teams will thrive in the future. The insights from an industry leaders' roundtable on "Shaping the Future of Field Medical" provided the foundation for workshops at the Medical Affairs Professional Society (MAPS) Annual Meeting 2022 Global. Based on discussions between 80 cross-industry Field Medical colleagues from small to large biopharmaceutical and medtech companies, this article highlights key actions for Medical Affairs teams to consider for implementation in their own organizations. In summary, Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs) need to be agile storytellers, with access to flexible approved content, allowing them to build compelling and concise scientific narratives that are customized based on individual stakeholder needs and interests, with additional information made available to stakeholders via self-service content and on-demand MSL support.

Introduction

The evolution of Field Medical was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic with a clear shift in how we communicate and engage with external experts. We need to be prepared for both the challenges and opportunities that Field Medical faces as we move into the future.

Peer-to-peer exchange within the industry is a vital catalyst to both inform and drive change. The authors participated in an industry leaders' roundtable in December 2021 to discuss how organizations are contemplating future Field Medical strategy.¹ At the Medical Affairs Professional Society (MAPS) Annual Meeting in New Orleans in March 2022 Global, the authors led two high-energy, interactive workshops using a sprint approach to translate the top four of six priority insights from the roundtable (Figure 1) into actions that can be implemented within Field Medical organizations.²

This article is based on discussions between 80 cross-industry Field Medical colleagues who attended these workshops, including Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs), Field Medical Managers, and other Medical Affairs leaders from small to large biopharmaceutical and MedTech companies.



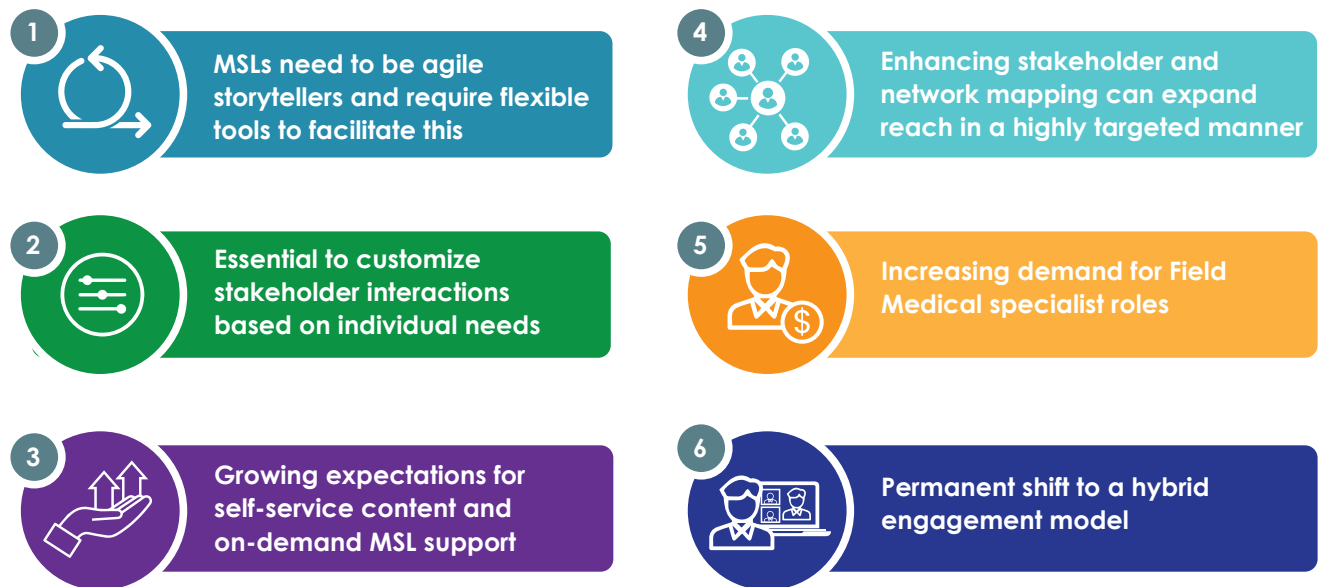


Figure 1. Key insights ranked in order of priority

MSIs have more impact when they are agile storytellers

Field Medical roles and capabilities must evolve, and while scientific acumen and interpersonal and communication skills are paramount, the delivery of data will look different. In the past, Field Medical was the primary source for the delivery of a company's scientific data to external experts. Today, this information is readily available via a broad range of channels. Therefore, it is imperative that MSIs bring additional value when communicating data.

An MSI who can harness agile storytelling techniques informed by the expert's interests, beliefs, and behaviors will be more interesting, engaging, and impactful than one who takes a static and standard approach. Agility and flexibility will also be advantageous since engagement times are typically shorter and less frequent than pre-pandemic, especially when building a new relationship with an external expert.

Key actions

Ensure a high level of storytelling competency among Field Medical professionals

Incorporate storytelling skills and competencies into hiring practices

Conduct skills and competency assessment to effectively identify and address agile storytelling gaps

Ensure storytelling training is part of the core curriculum for Field Medical professionals

Upskill Field Medical professionals on creating and delivering scientific narratives to communicate with different stakeholder groups in ways that resonate with them

Agile storytelling allows a MSL to communicate concise, customized information to different stakeholders based on their individual needs. This will elevate the impact of the interaction three-fold – for the external expert, the MSL, and the company through the quality of insights this approach generates.

MSLs are playing a greater role within the healthcare ecosystem, with stakeholder groups expanding beyond healthcare providers (HCPs) to include patients and payers.³ The scientific narratives that will resonate with these audiences will differ because they assess the information through a different lens. Understanding the data needs and opinions of these groups is vital to be able to communicate information of the greatest relevance and interest.

Agile storytelling should now be considered a core competency and included in both recruitment and training.



Key actions

Gain leadership support and alignment to generate flexible, approved, and compliant content

Obtain dedicated resources and budget for the development and deployment of innovative and timely flexible content

Conduct internal needs assessment and invest in technology that supports the use of flexible content

Partner with Compliance/Legal early to ensure an understanding of the need for flexible content to enhance scientific exchange

Build a Compliance/Legal framework to ensure appropriate development, approval, and use of flexible content in the field

Partner with Medical Communications to develop content

Access to flexible approved content enables MSLs to build compelling and concise scientific narratives

Core content should be easy to locate and navigate, suitable for both in-person and virtual engagements, and work well across digital devices. To support agile storytelling, there is a desire to move away from high-volume, linear, core slide decks to more flexible options that enable MSLs to build compelling and concise scientific narratives. There are various approaches to explore that are highly navigable and allow MSLs to rapidly move through content, or that enable MSLs to organically pull a narrative together from approved source materials such as core content modules or a slide library.

Compliance guardrails need to be considered if MSLs are permitted to tailor presentations for individual stakeholders while avoiding the “cherry picking” of data. Certain data may be mandatory and other data may always need to be presented as a group, making the tagging of content imperative. There are platforms available that support flexible, compliant content generation where required content is automatically pulled into new presentations. Various tools also have sophisticated metric tracking that can help inform which content/materials are of the greatest interest and which need to be updated or reconsidered.

It is also important to consider various content formats to convey a scientific story in the most effective way. Interactive infographics are increasingly popular and bite-sized animations or videos are often leveraged to convey a complex clinical trial design or mechanism of action, for example. A plain language summary (PLS) of journal articles or congress presentations can also be leveraged by MSLs to explain complex concepts and to support communication with non-specialist audiences.

Content should be customized based on individual stakeholder needs and interests

For MSLs to remain relevant, they need to meet the expectations of both their external experts and their organization through elevated scientific exchange and insight generation. A “one size fits all” approach is no longer sufficient and Field Medical must contextualize information for each stakeholder based on their unique profile and make it relevant for their practice, or they will seek information elsewhere. To achieve this, MSLs need to determine stakeholder interests, educational needs, beliefs and behaviors, and content/channel preferences to enable communication customization.

There are a wealth of tools, data, and advanced analytics available to provide a 360° view of individual external experts from a cross-functional perspective while maintaining compliance. Field Medical external expert groups may include physicians, nurses, pharmacists, payers, and patient advocacy groups, each with specific needs. Identifying Digital Opinion Leaders is also important – these are individuals who are driving the conversation across social channels, in contrast to those who simply reshare information.

MSLs need to be able to leverage all the resources available to them such as expert mapping platforms, medical claims databases, and social media listening. This information can then be enhanced based on the MSL's own interactions with each external expert and the feedback/insights they bring back to the organization. MSLs can utilize this intelligence to customize content based on individual stakeholder needs and interests.

The utility of artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming more sophisticated in this space. AI can be leveraged to streamline the process with predictive algorithms to determine the next best action for an MSL to consider based on an external expert's activities, interests, and preferences.

Key actions

Obtain the budget and access to tools, data, and advanced analytics to provide a 360° view of individual stakeholders from a cross-functional perspective while maintaining compliance

Conduct MSL insights training to strengthen feedback regarding stakeholder interests, educational needs, and content/channel preferences to enable further communication customization

Upskill Field Medical on the application of data for enhanced profiling to ensure a better understanding of individual stakeholders

Enhance pre-visit planning by preparing key topics/content to enable MSLs to deliver data in the context of the stakeholder's own patients and/or interests

Leverage AI to streamline the process – mapping and predictive algorithms to determine the next best action



Provide additional information to stakeholders via self-service content and on-demand MSL support

External experts can engage directly with Field Medical to address knowledge gaps, but there is a growing desire for self-service content available on-demand. This can be achieved using a centralized hub or portal that MSLs can direct external experts to as an additional touchpoint. Leveraging this channel ensures external experts have access to the most up-to-date data and resources, while reducing the burden on individual MSLs who are unable to meet frequently with external experts.

Key actions

Gain leadership support and alignment to provide alternative engagement options

Invest in technology to support self-service and MSL on-demand support

Leverage a user-friendly, intuitive platform for self-service content – a centralized source for presentations, articles, videos, webinars, and more

Design and implement a process to leverage usage metrics and insights to inform rapid content enhancement

Simplify current content with increased modularization and interaction

Develop a resourcing and deployment model for on-demand MSL support

Information can be made available in a range of content formats that align with audience preferences. Content can be modular or templated to simplify and accelerate audience-specific modifications or updates. Various user metrics such as content views (down to individual pages/slides) and downloads can be tracked to provide insights into content and format preferences, which can be leveraged to inform tactical planning.

There is now a growing expectation for on-demand MSL support. Around a decade ago, several companies tried implementing virtual MSL centers for on-demand support but these failed, possibly because they were ahead of their time. Today, on-demand support will need to be a viable option for some external experts based on their preferred means of engaging with MSLs. However, real time Field Medical support will put new demands on organizations, and this will need to be carefully managed.

Discussion

The collective intelligence of 80 cross-industry Field Medical colleagues regarding the top four priority insights described above can be summarized in an elevator pitch (Figure 2) – a concise and compelling conversation starter for Field Medical colleagues to leverage within their own organizations to help ensure the implementation of tools and processes to successfully navigate the evolving Field Medical landscape.

The elevator pitch to kick-start a conversation within your organizations

MSLs need to be agile storytellers with access to flexible approved content to build compelling and concise scientific narratives that are customized based on individual stakeholder needs and interests with additional information made available to stakeholders via self-service content and on-demand MSL support.

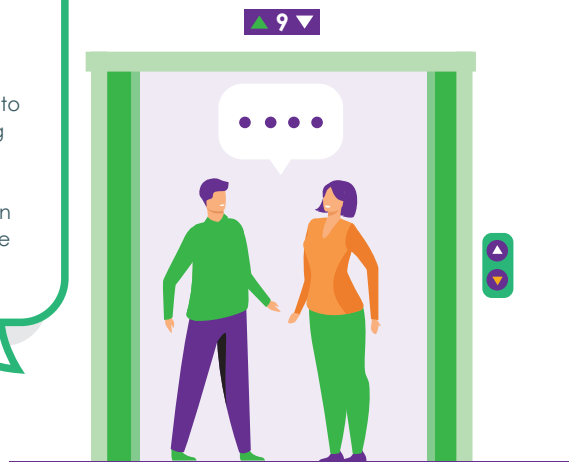


Figure 2: The elevator pitch to kick-start a conversation within your organizations

It was unsurprising that "Permanent shift to a hybrid engagement model" ranked last in the workshops. For most, this is now accepted as the standard way of working due to both a shift in HCP engagement preferences and MSL deployment models in many organizations. The balance of in-person to virtual engagements will vary based on both organization and external expert preferences. Virtual engagement provides greater flexibility to match the right resource to the external expert's need. In-house subject matter experts such as R&D scientists and patient advocacy experts may be leveraged to interact with external stakeholders. Additionally, engagements are no longer limited to those who live locally or can travel, thus the concept of fixed MSL territories disappears allowing for increased efficiency and expanded coverage.

"Increasing demand for Field Medical specialist roles" was a lower priority, but remains an important consideration as there will be a significant expansion of the role of Medical Affairs in listening and responding to new external stakeholder groups.³ "To benefit society, Medical Affairs must broaden the stakeholders with whom we engage to meet the data dissemination and scientific exchange needs of payers and patients in much the same way the function has traditionally met the needs of HCPs and Key Opinion Leaders."³

Field Medical specialist roles such as Medical Value Liaisons, Clinical Trial Liaisons, and Patient Advocacy Liaisons are already becoming more common across organizations. This indicates a need to effectively communicate HEOR data to payers, help drive clinical trial execution and patient recruitment, and engage with patient advocacy groups throughout the product life cycle.

Conclusions

At a societal level, digital transformation has impacted how we engage and interact with each other, how we consume information, and how we behave as customers. We expect a personalized experience in our daily lives and the same can be said for our external experts. HCPs want efficient, seamless experiences in all interactions – whether it is with an airline, bank, online shopping, or pharma. Like other industries, we need to embrace a mindset shift to continue to remain relevant and be valued partners.

Workshops at MAPS 2022 Global enabled Field Medical leaders to come together and agree on a path toward more successful communications styles in 2022 and beyond. This will help maximize the impact of Medical activities, but cannot be driven solely by Medical Affairs, therefore engaging broad internal stakeholder groups to partner on this evolution will be critical.

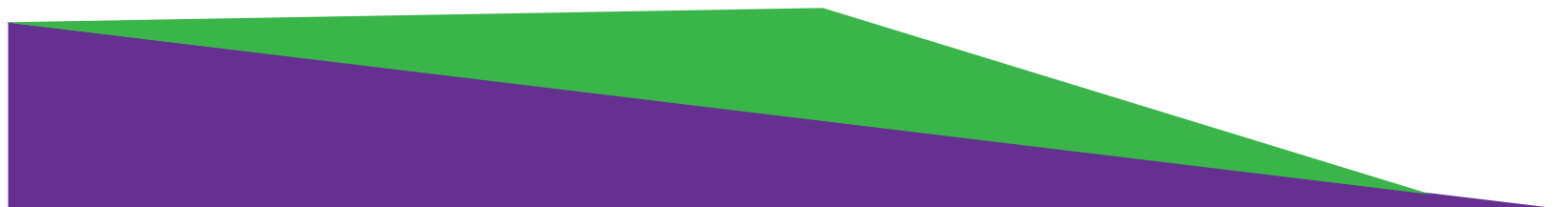
The authors hope this article can be used to both validate and pressure test your own internal cross-functional discussions as you build strategy for your Field Medical organization in 2023 and beyond.



References

1. Field Medical Leadership Roundtable: How are organizations rethinking Field Medical Strategy for 2022+? © Envision Pharma Inc., 2022. All Rights Reserved.
2. Holder D, Fraser W, and Howman E. Shaping the future of Field Medical: Turning industry leaders' insights into action. Medical Affairs Professional Society Annual Meeting 2022, New Orleans, USA.
3. MAPS Visionary Working Group. The future of Medical Affairs 2030. Medical Affairs Professional Society 2022.

ELEV^ATE





ELEVATE
www.medicalaffairs.org/elevate

