

A rough guide to... advisory boards

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Our intrepid writers take us on a journey through advisory boards and show that pre-trip planning is the pathway to perfection



You've been to hundreds of them: the dutiful advisory board. It's on the brand plan and your annual review is looming. You have a handful of new data you need advice on, an issue on the horizon that needs some talk therapy and, of course, you're dying to ask: "Why don't you use our product?". So you dust off a few generic objectives, fill the agenda with presentations and book Gertie from Global to field the tough science. An advisory board is born.

When we started in medical communications, this haphazard navigation inevitably ended up as tangled wreckage otherwise known as the advisory board report. We'd receive a transcript the size and weight of a concrete slab full of rambling conversations and alarming remarks like, "As you can see from this extremely complicated yet essential chart ..." - which we didn't have. We did our best. Key themes emerged by stitching together a snippet here and a comment here. It all took hours.

Even back then it was obvious there had to be a better way of interacting with experts, by creating meetings with clear, specific objectives that everyone agreed on at the beginning that the meeting was designed to achieve. Facilitation was reaching high levels of sophistication outside pharma - surely we could do better?

About five years ago, SCRIPT started learning from negotiation lawyers and United Nations facilitators. Secure in the knowledge that we wouldn't start a war if we messed up, we applied

UN methods to pharma advisory boards. Almost 100 ad boards later, what have we learned about balancing competing interests, overcoming mistrust and achieving clear objectives within a tight time frame? Here, for your consideration, are some nuggets.

Ten steps to advisory board Shangri-La

1. Be authentic. A bad truth is always better than a good lie. Plan for clear, direct questions and ensure that your clients will listen openly without becoming defensive.

2. Involve everyone. Avoid that special moment when your client's boss' boss, who's never seen the agenda before, starts to make changes during the breakfast buffet. Your planning meeting should include everyone who's going to be present at the ad board.

3. Create a list of tangible 'results' you want from the meeting, a wish-list of the actual stuff you want. A flow-chart of the therapeutic journey? A prioritised list of clinical implications of the data?

4. Use the ad board as a springboard. No advisory meeting should be a destination in itself: where to go next? Advisors can be enthusiastic partners in research, communication and everything in-between (see Figure 1).

5. Build a meaningful agenda. Do you really need Boris from Market Research? Well, check your 'results list'. If Bar-Chart Boris helps, wheel him on; if you don't need him, don't include him. However, balance this gimlet-eyed approach with the needs of the advisors, who hope to learn something interesting (see callout). Ensure that some of the topics speak to their interests too.

Technology can bring advisers together from around the world at short notice

6. Circulate the meeting plan to everyone. The clear message is 'no breakfast-buffet changes please: this is it'.

7. Brief the Chair and speakers. The most beautifully designed meeting won't work if your Chair doesn't know what the plan is. Three touch-points work well: a) A call to go over the proposed meeting plan (Chairs bring a touch of reality and have awesome ideas); b) A 'dry-run' webinar with the slides; c) An on-site rehearsal - preferably the evening before.

8. During the meeting:

- Give the Chair a meeting plan so that he/she knows what's happening at all times.
- Sit next to the Chair, to assist with timing.
- Make ample use of open questions ('Which factors do you consider when deciding whether to treat?') and train everyone to let the silence lengthen until someone answers. Avoid ruining a great open question with a flurry of closed questions ('Efficacy? Side effects? Costs? Would you use our product? Huh? Huh? Huh?').
- Ditch the flip charts and make more use of sticky notes to include everyone, not just The Big Guy With The Big Marker.
- Vary the pace during the day by alternating presentations with workshops and exercises.

Short, fun items should get participants on their feet (especially after lunch). Celebrate! Have a kidney-shaped cake.

9. Let your meeting plan write your report. If you've done your planning well, the transcript should flow beautifully from one item to the next.

10. Afterwards, ensure your experts know you/your client is just a phone-call away. Send a report. Use technology to help foster ongoing dialogue.

Advisory boards in the digital age

How can we best use technology to bring people together?

- **Virtual meetings:** Technology can bring advisers together from around the world at short notice to view data, share opinions and make decisions. With webcams we can see as well as hear each other; advanced platforms even allow breakouts and sticky-note brainstorming. Less social perhaps, but also less wear and tear on your experts - and your budget.
- **Advisers' website:** Why not provide a secure, web-based facility for advisers to access important resources, such as copies of key slides and presentations, meeting minutes, educational materials, references and contact details?
- **Development of digital tools:** Work collaboratively with your advisers to deliver educational initiatives digitally: perhaps a high-value app, an online training resource, a treatment consensus or a webcast.

The final step: long-term ad board planning

Imagine a world with a forward-looking plan to gain scientific advice:

- Who we seek input from, on which clinical or scientific topics, and on what timeline.
- Which forums we are planning and what the required budget is.
- How we will facilitate an exchange of knowledge between global experts and local leaders.

If we plan our publications up to five years in advance, based on the timing of clinical trials and competitive launches, why not do the same for advisory boards?

Why do experts participate in advisory meetings?

What makes the world's most influential clinicians and academics give up their time for advisory meetings? Oxford PharmaGenesis asked big names on the advisory circuit.

Giving advice Who doesn't like making their voice heard and gaining the respect of their peers?

Privileged access to data Knowing interesting information before the world at large is a big turn-on.

Leading clinical practice Academic clinicians thrive on educating colleagues through publications, meetings and training materials.

Driving future research Research pushes forward the frontiers of knowledge - and accelerates careers.

So, how can we make meetings easier for these busy experts?

Location An accessible location beats a desirable destination every time: an airport hotel is good, a hotel at a hub airport is better.

Timing Weekends are increasingly unpopular - Wednesdays to Fridays are preferred.

Notice Ideally, at least eight weeks.

Venue Experts usually prefer stand-alone meetings to juggling diaries during a packed congress.

Compliance Diligence with 'Fair market value', disclosure and adverse-event reporting builds trust. You'll also need to work within your own country's special rules and regs.

Pre- and post-meeting materials Experts appreciate being prepared and a meeting report ensures they feel heard.



Figure 1.

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