

The launch of the first cancer drug with a paradigm-shifting Mode of Action

The challenge: To achieve exclusive branding and prepare a fully-fledged launch strategy to prepare the market for the paradigm shift.

A large pharma company was preparing to launch a new product that would make its brand synonymous with a new class of drug, in a previously unexplored therapy market. It was unclear whether the new product would require a new diagnostic and how rivals would position themselves when they entered the market at a later date.

The company's branding objectives called for a well-founded, peer-backed argument that would convince medical professionals and other stakeholders in the healthcare sector. But to define its launch strategy, the company first had to understand the inner workings and characteristics of its new target market.

What's more, from the very start, it would be crucial to communicate that the new therapy required physicians to manage an unfamiliar set of side effects – a considerable obstacle given their lack of experience with the class of drug. Failure to recognize and respond to indications early enough could negatively impact therapy outcomes, and endanger the brand goal.

Stage I: hypothesis generation.

Together with the client, Metaplan identified opinion-leading stakeholders and key topics for discussion with a view to defining the next stage of the strategy. To clarify the key characteristics of the market where regulatory approval was imminent, we organized a series of regional advisory boards for influential clinicians. We asked decision-makers to assess the available data and propose a strategy for a successful product launch. At the same time, a smaller group of experts would develop a program that physicians could access to train their own staff.

At the request of the client, participants with experience with the new drug (through study involvement) were actively involved in preparing the advisory boards, and their roles rehearsed. Together, we identified peer-against-peer conflicts and worked these into our advisory board dramaturgy. The dramaturgy is a sequence of questions and contributions that guide the work of the group and focus on contentious issues.

Stage II: Insight generation.

Metaplan prepared and led the regional advisory boards and expert groups.

One controversial topic was the adverse-events profile of the new drug class, which differed from the established profiles of chemotherapies or antibodies. Hematologists and organ-specific oncologists with study-related AE management experience described the profile as manageable, especially in the early stages. The dramaturgy successfully persuaded the group to assess this experience with reference to concrete examples, as planned.

Using the dramaturgy as a guide, Metaplan led the discussion and quickly produced concrete results, for example, proposals for quickly familiarising HCPs with the drug in the target market. Where necessary, we encouraged in-depth scientific debate. For instance, on the MoA of the drug. In some patients, a positive therapy response could be falsely assigned as progress according to the widely established evaluation criteria.

Metaplan allocated more time to themes that divided opinion and dealt quickly with subjects on which the groups agreed. We explored the key issues behind contradictory views and helped the groups formulate explanations as a basis for strategic recommendations.

The result.

Metaplan analyzed the results for the client, recommended a strategy and laid out the pros and cons behind its recommendations. For example, we proposed a sales-force methodology for identifying the target audience and approaching physicians, and established effective arguments for quickly building familiarity in the market. At the same time, we suggested a strategy for reimbursing influential therapy experts who would otherwise be unable to prescribe the new drug at their centers.

Stage III: strategic evaluation.

In a separate meeting, we helped the client define the next steps of the strategy. We addressed remaining issues and developed an appropriate plan of action that included a schedule and clearly assigned tasks for market readiness and launch.

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