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Content or Community?

Those who know me personally are well aware that I don't like being wrong. I don't throw hissy fits, but I do spend a lot of time trying to figure out how a failure in my logic caused me to make a bad call.

I just got back from PMRG in Phoenix, where I experienced having been wrong and, even though someone had to hand me the insight, I finally figured out why I had made a mistake in a prediction several years ago, and last year as well.

More specifically, those of us who were in the industry a few years ago will recall that PMRG was, to be polite, going down the tubes. The client/vendor ratio was worse than ever, and the total number of attendees had plummeted. Worse, the atmosphere at the conferences was extremely morose, and a palpable pall hung over the twice-a-year sessions. Death of the organization, or at least its oft-discussed merger with another pharmaceutical marketing research organization, seemed unavoidable.

But then a handful of people, including Brian Cain, Roger Green and some others, decided that they were going to turn the organization around, to bring it back from the dead as it were. Frankly, although I had been a long-standing and avid supporter of PMRG and it caused me great consternation to see its upcoming demise, I told them that they were crazy and that they should just let the organization die a merciful death. But they wouldn't hear of it, and insisted that it could be revived. They then began a program of revitalization that culminated, or so I thought, with a meeting in March 2007 that was attended by about 500 people. Skeptic that I am, I wrote the huge attendance off to the fact that the meeting was held in Las Vegas, and that the people were drawn more for the venue, although not one of my personal favorites, than for the meeting itself. The acid test, I felt, would come this year, when the meeting would be held in Phoenix. Not a bad destination by any accounts, especially when the event was to be held at the beautiful Marriott golf resort, but it was not Las Vegas. Once again, meeting attendance was huge, with about 500 people.

The conference began with a series of "precon" breakout sessions, where delegates could spend a couple hours on the Sunday afternoon when the meeting began, focusing on a topic of interest to them. I had the opportunity to lead a session on the future form and function of pharmaceutical marketing research organizations, and I found literally a room full of people (about 100) anxious to hear me opine on this topic. Questions from the crowd were excellent, discussion vigorous, and discussion of the session for the balance of the conference extremely gratifying.

That night at the welcoming reception and cocktail party, I cornered PMRG President Roger Green and asked him a question I had posed before but didn't get an answer I could understand. Quite simply, I asked him how this great turnaround had happened. Roger rather cogently and clearly explained the situation.

First, he pointed out that on previous occasions, PMRG meetings just sort of happened. Speakers were recruited somewhat at random and often at the last minute, presentations were made and little attention was paid to organizing a coherent event. In the more successful versions, on the other hand, extensive planning had gone into the constructing of a coherent meeting. Those in attendance had the opportunity, on the Sunday afternoon when I gave my presentation, to choose among six precon, two beautiful golf courses or simply lying by the pool. And beautifully, some of the attendants chose to do each. And psychologically, while in days gone by attendees would have felt guilty if they had chosen the golf or pool options, here people went to conference sessions because they wanted to, not because they had to, and as a result profited substantially more from the experience.

So back to the question I asked Roger Green, yet again, in Phoenix: How did this happen? How did an apparently dying organization become more vital and alive than it has ever been? This time, Roger provided an answer that was not only clear, but profound. He reminded me that the rebirth of PMRG had begun with a careful SWOT review and the generation of a strategic plan and direction.

Even more specifically, he explained that PMRG and the other professional organizations assumed that attendees came for exposure to information, or content. Since presentations at these sessions were offered in 45-minute sound bytes that were not coordinated with each other and were also often poorly veiled sales presentations for the organization with which the presenter was associated, the opportunity for attendees to learn something of genuine value was quite limited. In brief, these were not ideal learning circumstances, and marketing researchers from pharmaceutical companies learned to stay away in droves. Marketing research agencies, on the other hand, showed up defensively, concerned that they might miss the opportunity to strike up a relationship or sell one project to a client, if they were to but show up. While we pretended that PMRG was operating like the good old days, when clients and agencies alike came together to exchange ideas in an open forum, the real situation had become a predatory nightmare in which the few clients, typically from smaller pharmaceutical companies, were pounced upon by vendors who vastly outnumbered them. In brief, the situation was one in which we showed up pretending to learn, but with agencies actually there to sell and clients there to avoid being sold to.

So, Roger observed, the major epiphany that turned the organization around was the realization that increasingly, as the pharmaceutical industry was having a tougher and tougher time realizing that it would either have to make major changes in the way it does business or simply continue to watch its business erode, clients and consultants alike needed to come together for different reasons than had historically been the case.

In days gone by, e.g., as the Internet and other new technologies and methodologies were entering the marketplace, there were lots of new things for presenters to talk about. In recent years, marketing research developments of consequence have been few and far between, and thus interest in attending professional conferences for the benefit of learning has waned substantially. However, as threats and realities of job cuts and other belt tightening have beset pharmaceutical marketing researchers, the need for experience sharing increases substantially. Therefore, in order to optimize the attendance at, and value of, PMRG, Roger explained, they have gone beyond simply being a twice-a-year meeting to becoming an ongoing community. They have also gone beyond the usual players in pharmaceutical marketing research to incorporate other players such as list vendors, modeling companies and others who need to talk to each other in an open marketplace environment. In fact, as Roger explained it, PMRG has come to realize that its primary focus should be one of "community" with "content" still being important but less so for the reasons discussed above.

For the hundreds who attended the session in Phoenix, the spirit of the meeting bore this out. Clients and agency personnel experienced peer interactions rather than piranha-like salespeople attacking clients. Having fun together was as important as listening to presentations together. Felt different, was different!

I think there is a simple but important lesson to be derived from PMRG's success. The fact that these are tough times for the pharmaceutical industry and those who serve it is no secret, but I think that what has happened with PMRG demonstrates that these difficult times provide us with an unprecedented opportunity to work together, in full cooperation, to reinvent the industry, rather than learn how to research better things that no longer matter. Hopefully, this lesson will transcend PMRG, and will let us all work, collaboratively, to create an outcome that will benefit all of the stakeholders in the health care/pharmaceutical arena.



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