DECEMBER 2023

Overcoming Pitfalls in Medical Insights Gathering

5 Practical Tips for MSLs

CREATED BY
PATRINA PELLETT, PHD
RICH SWANK, PHD

Introduction

Insights are the top value driver for Medical Affairs.

Great insights are the best way for Medical Affairs teams to demonstrate their value. At the same time, medical insights (also called field, MSL or scientific insights) are the toughest area to master. Many teams struggle with effective insights gathering. Some top challenges include:

1. Not understanding what is and is not an insight
2. Lack of training on insights recognition
3. Overemphasizing quantity over quality
4. Missing insights opportunities by relying on face-to-face interactions
5. Insights that don't uncover the why

Effective insights gathering is one of the most impactful activities MSLs can deliver.

About This eBook

In this eBook, MSLs will find practical tips to overcome the top insights gathering challenges discussed above. This will enable MSLs to:

1. Raise the bar on the quality of information they are bringing back to the home office
2. Improve how insights are communicated within their company
3. Help their company understand what HCPs are doing, thinking, and saying, within their territory
4. Excel in their role as an MSL and have a larger impact in their company

5 Insights Gathering Challenges & Practical Tips to Overcome Them

Challenge #1: Not Understanding What An Insight Is

"You know a good insight when you see one."

This quote from an MSL manager / MSL new-hire training highlights the nuanced nature of MSL insights. What constitutes a good insight changes as the business' objectives evolve. The dynamic nature of insights makes it hard for MSLs to grasp what an insight is, and how it can change over time.

With time, and as MSLs better understand the therapeutic area and the business, effective insights gathering skills greatly improve.

Practical Tip #1

Frequently Review the Medical Strategy and Listening Priorities to Focus Insights Gathering on Relevant Topics

Great insights are typically relevant to the Medical Strategy or the business' current objectives. To gather great insights ensure that as an MSL you have a deep understanding of what is important to the organization.

Review the Medical Strategy and listening priorities (also called insights questions or Key Insights Questions and Key insight Topics) **on a monthly basis**. Schedule time on your calendar to ensure that key objectives are top of mind. It is critically important to revisit and update these prior to attending a scientific congress in your therapeutic area, as well as reviewing prior to advisory boards and/or investigator meetings.

When engaging in pre-meeting planning for an HCP meeting, always include the insight gathering objective. What is missing about how and why this HCP treats patients or views the therapeutic area? Keep this in mind when you go into the meeting.

Finally, make it a top priority to distill the outcome of the discussion immediately after the HCP meeting to ensure you accurately capture the information to aid the insight process.

Challenge #2: Lack of Training on Insights Recognition

Due to the dynamic nature of insights and therapeutic areas, recognizing what an insight is can be challenging. Frequent refresher training on insights helps MSLs stay on top of what is relevant to the business, what constitutes an insight, and soft skills to help uncover insights.

Practical Tip #2

Get Clarity on What an Insight Is with Insights Refresher Training

Improving insights gathering is tough and constantly evolving. But it is a skill set that can be honed and improved. Quarterly refresher training on what is an insight, how to ask the good questions, and how to enter insights can greatly improve the insights MSLs gather.

Training on technology or the system for the entry of insights is a key area that will improve your abilities in this space. Your training should include specifics on the CRM system you are using, including but not limited to: use of free-text entries to capture HCP interactions; use of CRM or other software that can 'tag' keywords in discussion topics and help parse and organize insights; and finally alignment of HCP discussion topics with the scientific understanding or journey that they may be undergoing.

Remember great insights gathering requires work and constant skill building. Even the most experienced MSLs need refreshers!

Challenge #3 Overemphasizing Quantity Over Quality

More is not always better. The emphasis should be on gathering information from HCPs in your region, that helps guide decision-making. Frequently reviewing the Medical Strategy and attending refresher training will help.

In some cases, MSLs may have a monthly insights target to meet. MSLs should strive to meet their metrics while continuously improving their insights gathering skills, and thereby improving the quality of their submissions.

Practical Tip #3

Proactively Ask For Feedback on Your Insights

In addition to leveraging a continuous learning mindset to insights gathering, MSLs can improve their insight quality by actively seeking feedback from their managers. Ask pointed questions about your insights and if they are going in the right direction. Check out the example questions below.

Typically MSLs can struggle to understand what happened to the insights they are reporting. Don't let your input fall into the black hole of in-house information. By seeking feedback from your manager and those who may be on point for insights presentations, you can rescue your insights from the abyss!

1. How did cross-functional colleagues respond to my information?
2. What topics or areas would they like to learn about in the next month or so?
3. Have the insights been used to alter strategy or change course?
4. What level of discussion did the insights reach internally?

Challenge #4 Missing Insights Opportunities by Relying on Face-to-Face Interactions

Traditionally face-to-face activities are the main source of insights gathering from MSLs. To have a larger impact MSLs must look more broadly to gather insights that may impact the Medical Strategy and be important in decision-making.

Practical Tip #4

Use Your Active Listening Skills to Look for Insights More Broadly

Go beyond face-to-face interactions to gather insights and look to congresses, publications, medical education events, grand rounds, and digital channels. Leverage your active listening skills to help understand what is driving treatment decisions and behaviors of HCPs in your territory.

Monitor HCP social media posts to gauge how to approach your next interaction. This could include LinkedIn, X posts, or even more proprietary channels such as Substack. Don't overlook digital and virtual opportunities!

Challenge #5 Insights that Don't Uncover the Why & Or Help Guide Decision-Making

Medical leadership often sorts through hundreds of pieces of information curated by MSLs to generate insights. Information like the following is not actionable:

"Met with an HCP and shared a slide deck."

"Dr. Smith likes the phase 3 data."

“Professor Jones wants to do an ad board”

MSLs need to dig deeper and understand why an HCP thinks a certain way. This type of information is key to make better, more strategic decisions.

Practical Tip #5

Use This Question To Uncover the Why & Gather Better Insights

Thinking of insights like an exercise in root cause analysis helps MSLs uncover the why behind HCPs' thoughts and behaviors. Ending every interaction with the following question will help you determine what is on your HCPs' mind:

"Is there anything we didn't cover that you would like talk about?"

This will help you understand what is important to your HCPs. Be ready with strong follow up questions when your HCP reveals something that you weren't expecting.

Conclusion

Taken together, the 5 challenge areas and practical tips in this eBook will help frame your approach to improving how you think about, plan for, and execute insights collection. If you are ready to dig deeper and improve your ability to deliver higher-quality insights that meet the level of decision-grade insights, sign up for our insights course waitlist:

Join the Waitlist

Get in touch!

Patrina Pellett, PhD

Richard Swank, PhD

scientificengagementllc.com

medicalaffairsvalue.com

Meet Your Insights Guides

Patrina Pellett, PhD

Patrina has over 5 years of experience helping Medical Affairs teams use insights strategically. She is passionate about using data and insights to guide decision-making and helping Medical Affairs teams take insights to the next level. Check out her practical advice and hacks the Medical Affairs Strategy Hacks YouTube Channel.

Rich Swank, PhD

Richard Swank PhD is the former head of Amgen's field MSL and global field medical excellence organizations, and is the founder and principal of the medical affairs consulting agency Scientific Engagement LLC. As a former MSL he cares deeply about improving MSL impact and giving credit where it is due.