

What event professionals can learn from the Pharmaceutical Code

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Many event organisers will be familiar with the ABPI Code of Practice for the Pharmaceutical Industry when it comes to organising events. Similar versions exist around the world. Even if you're not in that sector, you can benefit from reviewing your events as if a similar compliance code applies to you. And pretty much all the outcomes are positive.

As an organiser, have you ever felt frustrated that you have events thrust on you, that other people have made a commitment or signed a contract, and you're left to clear up the mess?

Well, using your organisation's version of 'compliance' could help you strengthen your events programme as well as respect for your role. And that is where a look into the 'Pharma Code' could provide a new perspective.

The overarching principle of 'compliance' sits within the world of governance and risk management. For example, you protect your company from risk when you insist every event attended must be vetted by you. You can also apply this, working with your PR team, to anyone speaking on behalf of your company along with their content.

More specifically, here are the statements within the all-important ABPI Code Clause 10.1, and our interpretations of how this can help you.

1. The event/meeting must have a clear educational content; it should be the programme that attracts delegates to attend and not the associated hospitality or venue.

If attendees aren't coming away having learned or experienced something of value, why are you letting your company even consider this event?! Enrich your events with a compelling list of WIIFM factors ('What's In It For Me') aimed at potential attendees.

2. The content must be appropriate and relevant to attendees.

It seems obvious, but a major complaint of delegates is that content is not appropriate or applicable. Create a very clear vision of who your delegates are and ensure your content targets people with similar levels of knowledge and experience – or at least offer different tracks. And remember as you structure your sessions, your attendees want to learn as much from each other as they do from your content.

3. The venue must be appropriate and conducive to the main purpose of the event/meeting; lavish, extravagant or deluxe venues must not be used.

Of course, an exciting venue can be an appeal, and the constraints may not be as rigorous in your sector as they are in the healthcare market. However, do remember that there is a Bribery Act in the UK, for example, and many delegates may be put off by excessive largess. They may also have to 'sell' their attendance internally, and managers may question something that smacks too much like a 'jolly.'

We recently attended an event at a 5-star hotel in London. It was too expensive for most of the delegates and the ballroom was, in fact, too small for all the delegates to comfortably attend. How did this happen? Probably because the partners wanted to stay there and, likely, someone other than the event manager selected the venue. Use your delegate data to make decisions that are the right fit.

4. Any associated subsistence (food and drink), accommodation and travel costs must be strictly limited to the main purpose of the event/meeting, must be of secondary consideration, and must be appropriate and not out of proportion to the occasion.

It is interesting to note the growth of the 'hosted buyer' in the MICE sector – and others. Assisting delegates with some elements of cost may well be justified if you are targeting disadvantaged segments of society; and such actions also assist individuals in achieving their own ROI. Just keep within – in the words of the Law – 'fair and reasonable.'

5. Companies must not sponsor, support, or organise entertainment (such as sporting or leisure events, etc).

Your sector may have more flexibility, but again think about how the event may be perceived to delegates' managers. And consider the feelings of individuals who consider events that focus on drinking and gambling as anathema

6. Any hospitality provided must not extend to an accompanying person unless that person qualifies as a proper delegate or participant at the meeting or is a carer.

This one may need some judgement, especially for companies who offer 'partner' programmes on incentive trips, for example. You may want to take professional advice about where the responsibility for paying for 'benefits in kind' falls.

Yes, we all need to balance work and personal lives and having partners attend can support this. Simply consider is it beneficial to the attendee or a distraction?

7. In exceptional cases of established clear health needs of the delegate (e.g. disability or injury), similar hospitality may be provided for an accompanying person.

Of course. The events industry has been focussing heavily on DEI. We applaud all events being as inclusive as possible for all members of society. It is not only legally and morally necessary. It makes sound business sense.

One final thought

It is always helpful to step back from your day-to-day event planning and consider how other industries' constraints – or differences – might add a fresh element to your efforts. We hope you have at least one new thought starter thanks to the Pharma Code.



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