

For-Profit Conferences: Evil or Essential?

By Timothy Pratt, PhD

There are a plethora of small conferences in our industry. They address topics as diverse as electronic patient-reported outcomes, (ePRO), eclinical technology, regulatory affairs, patient recruitment and outsourcing. These meetings can be quite broad (the Clinical Trials Congress) or sharply focused (The Advanced Import Compliance Forum). Many of these conferences are organized by fine companies such as IIR, CBI, Marcus Evans, ExL Pharma and others.

The primary differentiator between these small conferences and those conducted by professional societies such as DIA, SCDM, RAPS and ACRP is simple. The small meetings are conducted for profit. Society meetings are not. So what? Is the profit motive so bad? Perhaps.

Follow The Money

When a paper or abstract is submitted to a professional society meeting, what happens? Peer review. In society meetings, submissions are reviewed on merit in a blinded fashion. A submission's merit is evaluated on relevance, novel content, scientific integrity, lack of obvious bias, and other factors. If the submission warrants a presentation to support it, the lucky author gets onto the program. What's the cost involved to present? Nothing.

In for-profit conferences, however, the process is different. In the many I have been involved in, there is no submission process. Why? Because a check is all that's required. Most of the speaking opportunities are sold for thousands of dollars. Merit is not a factor. These opportunities are partially legitimized as "sponsorship" and bundled with marketing opportunities, like having a company logo on meeting brochures. But, to speak, almost always, one must pay.

Built-In Bias

Is pay-to-play the issue? It does rankle the academics among us, simply on principle. But it also introduces a disproportionate share of vendors on every agenda in the for-profit meeting landscape. Who else would pay \$5,000, \$10,000 or even more to speak for half an hour? Only vendors. So that's what for-profit conferences have a preponderance of: vendors.

Vendors (yes, I work for one) have their own financial calculus. They need a return on that hefty speaking fee. Thus it is inevitable, as day follows night, that small meeting attendees hear the vendor line on many issues. Objectivity is under severe threat under these circumstances.

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Freedom Of Speech

Vendor presentations (sometimes given by a client or sponsor with a carefully vetted slide deck) run the gamut from high quality (rare), to thinly disguised sales pitches (frequent), to blatant advertorials (all too common). Don't forget that somewhere along the line the consumer of the companies' services (often in the sponsor community) ends up paying for all this.

Why don't the for-profit conference providers stop this? Because this is their business model. But it renders them unable to exercise the same level of discretion over their meetings that societies command.

Quality Control

After all, if a for-profit conference has a vendor who just paid them \$100-\$500 per minute to speak, are they really going to tell the vendor "you can't say that"? Most of the for-profit conferences, alas, don't seem to have any form of review process in place to ensure the quality of the material presented.

So some attendees end up in a situation where they may suffer through two days of sales pitches and advertorials (for which they paid \$1,000-\$2,000!) and receive a skewed perspective on the topics presented. The pricing structure necessarily excludes small vendors who may have a better mousetrap or very important concept, but can't afford the fee.

By now, you're probably at least partly agreeing with my thesis. For-profit conferences, if not evil out right, have some significant problems with bias due to their fundamental business model. So do we need them at all? Yes.

The for-profit providers generally deliver highly specialized conferences with a level of detail and insight into our industry that professional societies cannot always match. The societies, serving many thousands of members' needs, pursue multiple objectives and do not specialize in organizing events.

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My Gauntlet

How should we address the issues outlined here? One partial solution would be fairly simple. For-profit conferences should put an independent review board in place. My suggestion: spend some of the copious monies these events generate on retaining a subject matter expert (or three) to review proposed presentations. These reviews, ideally, would be blinded, just like the professional society or peer-reviewed journal reviews. That should be a surmountable challenge; we do it all the time on the editorial advisory board of Applied Clinical Trials, on which I serve for free.

My challenge—to the for-profit conference universe; and I hope you will join me in this—is to put review boards in place for the good of the industry. Such boards will improve the integrity of their product, and facilitate the unbiased exchange of a diversity of ideas. While it's arguable some of these events are evil, given the demands for ransom to appear at the podium, they are also essential. For-profit meetings simply need to be reformed. Here I stand—I can do no other.