

Building Support in US-Based Medical and Patient Communities Years Before Launching - Successful Partnering Case

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If you're in tune with the global biotechnology industry, then you likely know that BIO One-on-One Partnering™ is set to open in early April.

As the world's largest trade association, BIO connects small and large developers with potential buyers, policymakers, and beyond. The platform catalyzes new deals and ventures yearly, especially around major trade shows like J.P. Morgan. However, this holy grail of networking should not be bio businesses' only partnering strategy.

After J.P. Morgan in 2020, brain health disorder therapeutics developer Sage Therapeutics successfully secured a partnership with Biogen. The company needed more than just networking programs and conferences to land on Biogen's radar successfully.

Sage Therapeutics started by building local communities to educate the industry on unmet needs in the postpartum depression market.

Early Days - Discovering an Industry Niche

From 2010 to 2015, Sage Therapeutics was still finding its footing in the industry. Multiple preclinical trials from Epilepsy to Essential Tremor generated positive initial results. By 2016, Sage's path forward became clear. Their small-scale clinical trial of fewer than 30 people for the postpartum depression drug, SAGE-547, presented promising results.

Seven of the ten women injected with the experimental medicine experienced a reduction in depression symptoms in just 60 hours. This a significant feat considering that industry-standard drugs for depression took roughly a month before alleviating symptoms.

Although the study was initial, Sage took these results and ran.

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Selecting the Right Location for a Controversial Topic

By 2017, Sage's Phase 2 results for SAGE-547 were published (and republished) in a wealth of scientific journals, industry outlets, and local publications. Rather than waiting for later stages of development to begin conversations with end users, Sage began building communities immediately.

Although conversations around postpartum depression (PPD) are more common in the US today, Sage furthered discussions when the topic was still largely taboo. Despite being the most common medical complication of childbirth, PDD went undiagnosed in **50% of cases.**

The company launched the "Silence Sucks" community-oriented campaign to break the silence around PPD. At a local level, Sage honed in on PDD within the Boston area.

The choice of location was strategic. With Sage's headquarters in Cambridge and Boston's reputation as a leading biotechnology community, the last remaining piece of the puzzle was the demographics to have these conversations.

Massachusetts is considered a blue state, featuring more liberal viewpoints than red, conservative states. Although launching a campaign around PDD was controversial, these geographical audiences presented a higher probability of positive reception.

As anticipated, the campaign received both backlash and praise.

Launching a Campaign and Overcoming Backlash

"Silence Sucks" was launched during the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists conference in 2017. A clever choice considering it was also Maternal Mental Health Awareness month, Sage to further demonstrated their active role in supporting patients.

Leveraging a mix of digital and guerilla marketing, Sage created conversations online and in real-time locations throughout Boston, Massachusetts.

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Train cars traveling the course of Boston's most highly populated areas were remodeled to feature Sage Therapeutics' branding. Each vehicle featured images of women (presumably suffering from PDD) with pacifiers in their mouths and text reading "Silence Sucks." One clear mission-driven call to action for viewers was presented: "Help break the silence. Visit PDDsilencesucks.com."

Social media came into play to further amplify these out-of-the-box in-person marketing efforts. The branded hashtag #PDDSilenceSucks sought to break the silence by bringing conversations to the online sphere.

A specific landing page was the endpoint to raise awareness for the issue (versus their soon-to-be-launched drug candidate). The value of this asset to their business strategy was clear. Sage sought to educate the industry to create actual demand for their product within the market.

If conversations were not happening now, high demand would not follow later.

Local discussions soon turned national. While many parties criticized the campaign, Sage's ultimate goal was achieved: conversations were happening.

The website saw a 1000% increase in traffic, with 1/2 of the visitors spending 35% more time on the symptoms page. Not only was Sage successfully educating non-sufferers about PDD, but they were also aiding potential sufferers in identifying their symptoms.

By the time 2018 rolled around, the results of "Silence Sucks" were awarded Gold during the Healthcare Marketing Impact Awards. Sage had successfully positioned itself as a leader in the PPD community.

Outreach and Community Efforts Ramp Up Ahead of Phase 3 Data

While preparing to release Phase 3 data in 2018, Sage developed a two-pronged outreach strategy following the success of its campaign. Programs were designed with tailored messaging to highlight the benefits for their primary two stakeholders: medical professionals and patients.

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Within the medical community, Sage focused on OB/GYN surgeons, OB/GYN practitioners, and OB/GYN thought leaders. The key message for these groups? Speed of treatment.

In a 2018 interview with Life Science Leader, former Sage CEO Jeff Jonas, explained this vital messaging point, stating, "here's something interesting regarding thought leaders and practitioners on the OB/GYN side, many of whom have told us that they've seen more cases of depression than they care to. These people are surgeons, and an intervention that works in a day or two is very appealing."

Through conversations with OB/GYN professionals directly, Sage was able to identify the best positioning points to target this community. The same can be said for Sage's second target: patient advocacy groups and payers (patients, family members of PPD sufferers, etc.).

Sage organically formed connections with potential patients, conducting various community initiatives. Representatives from Sage partnered with maternal organizations, such as Big City Moms, to host educational panel events for mothers. Additional efforts to make a difference for mothers included building "my first STEM kits" for school children.

While building support from the patient community, Sage was also able to present the long-term cost savings to influence patient parties. The principal highlighted benefit? The "potential to replace costly psychotherapy and long-term chronic antidepressant therapy.

With industry support from their most vital stakeholders, biotechnology was on the path toward another significant milestone in 2019: FDA approval.

Securing FDA Approval and a Partnership with Biogen

On March 19, 2019, Sage Therapeutics officially announced FDA approval for the PPD drug ZULRESSO. In a press release highlighting the feat, Sage announced their leading status as "the first and only treatment specifically indicated for postpartum depression." An infographic was attached to the release to easily communicate Sage's vital role in treating PPD (building anticipation for release and accelerating demand in the marketplace).

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The company secured a key presenter role at the 2020 J.P. Morgan Healthcare Conference to discuss its successes. In the following months, media coverage ramped up (B2B and B2C). Sage's referencability within the market exploded as they scored coverage in major consumer outlets like People Magazine, a not-so-common media source to target for healthcare news.

The results of Sage's early community-building efforts officially paid off in November 2020. After successfully landing on Biogen's radar, the two companies announced a global collaboration to develop and commercialize the breakthrough therapy.

Key Takeaways from Sage Therapeutics

Many biotechnology companies skip the community aspect and focus on presenting scientific evidence. Sage Therapeutics presents a road-less-traveled-by approach. While this approach pays off for some, as Sage demonstrates, community-building steps can be vital to establish your brand in the market effectively.

Seeking approvals should only sometimes be the first step taken. By the time FDA approval was granted to Sage, they already had set B2B and B2C communities of support backing their company. Waiting to connect with core stakeholders - at all levels - will only delay your market entrance further.

Multiple strategies, tactics, and assets must go into community building. Audiences will not be drawn to your biotechnology alone; you must go the extra mile to create actual value.

In 2022, Sage's collaboration with Biogen continues, showcasing the real payoff of their early efforts.

Biotechnology companies looking to draw support in the US market need to think ahead, remain persistent in moments of potential crisis, and consider out-of-the-box approaches to do so effectively.

When a community is correctly built and nourished, it will only flourish.

- Content by the BDMT Global Team

If you are interested in potential partnerships and long-term relationships with the companies mentioned in this article or others in the U.S. and/or S. Korea, contact Suzy at sim@bdmtglobal.com.

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As the head of BDMT Global in Boston, Im focuses on accelerating the innovative transformation of global companies. She is a Professor of Marketing and a member of the Advisory Board at Emerson College. Im is also co-founder of Sponsors of the Future, a non-profit organization that leads corporate social responsibility, promoting neurodiversity and inclusion. As a well-known business developer and marketing strategist in the global field for over 20 years, Im merged the two critical global business functions of Business Development (BD) and Marketing Transformation (MT) for the first time. She was recognized for her innovative business model and contribution and received five consecutive awards in the U.S. including the North American Business Awards and TITAN Business Award 2022 in Biotechnology.

