Launching a Biopharmaceutical Marketing Campaign Around Industry Trade Shows - Kite Pharma's Pre-FDA Approved Strategy

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In 2017, Wall Street investors were left somewhat puzzled after learning that biopharmaceutical leader, Gilead, moved to acquire CAR-T developer Kite Pharma. With a previous focus on developing HIV and hepatitis C treatments, the transition to the oncology sphere took investors by surprise - especially given Kite Pharma had yet to receive FDA approval. At the time, Gilead had been on a dealmaking hiatus following the rapid success (and subsequent decline) of the $11B hepatitis C investment, Pharmasset.

Although the high cost of Pharmassets' treatment eventually stalled Gilead's success in the hepatitis C market, Gilead's initial investment in 2011 came as a no-brainer to the industry. Analysts considered Pharmasset to be a clear leader in its field at the time of investment. In comparison, Kite Pharma was one of many emerging CAR-T developers on the market at the time of acquisition.

Industry experts questioned Gilead's decision to act before Kite received FDA approval, with 59% of Wall Street investors expressing disapproval of the deal.

Despite facing criticism, Gilead was "ultimately convinced" that Kite Pharma would become transformative for the company, according to contacts close to the deal.

How did Kite Pharma build such a strong trust with Gilead between its FDA submission in March 2017 and deal announcement in August?

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Landing on Potential Partners' Radars - Launching an Educational Marketing Campaign Around FDA Approval

Three months before submitting their FDA submission, Kite Pharma launched the Discover CAR-T campaign at the 2016 American Society of Hematology annual meeting. CAR-T therapy was a relatively new concept to the industry at the time and therefore required educational initiatives to take place. The educational campaign sought to teach medical professionals about the potential emerging treatment technology and directly connect them with it.

As a part of the campaign, a self-service-oriented website was set up. The site served as the primary destination for Kite Pharma's target audience of medical doctors. Clinical trial data was featured in addition to live access to clinical trial enrollment.

After effectively learning about the potential of the therapeutics, doctors were encouraged to take direct action to refer patient candidates to the trial. Fourteen different trials were featured on the website, allowing doctors to determine if participation was possible based on location quickly.

Beyond self-service, the campaign destination featured the next steps for connecting with a direct representative from Kite Pharma. A call center was organized to discuss the investigational therapies featured on the website. Doctors were ultimately given all the pieces to decide on one platform.

With initial campaign success, Kite Pharma ramped up its marketing efforts after FDA submission. In May, the company attended ASCO (American Society of Clinical Oncology) 2017, the most significant event for cancer doctors in the US.

Posters were widely dispersed on the walls of O'Hare International Airport (the primary travel destination for many attendees). Featuring the picture of an average cancer patient, Kite Pharma introduced the benefits of their technology with a simple headline "Meet Joe," followed by "his immune system has the potential to treat his cancer."

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The simple, yet attention-grabbing poster, sparked the interest of viewers. A call to action was featured at the bottom, directing medical professionals to learn more about CAR-T technology on their campaign website. These posters were also distributed throughout conference areas and on online channels through digital ads, ultimately increasing visibility around their trade show attendance.

Post Campaign Industry Footprint Contributed to Acquisition Deal

Before obtaining FDA approval, Kite Pharma's successful campaign was vital in raising awareness about their specific technology and educating the industry about the novel approach. One month after ASCO, Kite was listed #7 on MIT's Smartest Companies List of 2017, a significant feat for positioning the company as an industry leader to prospective partners.

In an interview with the LA Times shortly after announcing their acquisition of Kite Pharma, Gilead representatives accredited Kite's local marketing team as being "really critical in the process." Although the educational marketing campaign was not directly mentioned, the strength of Kite's internal team was ultimately a driving force behind the acquisition.

Beyond presenting successful clinical trial data to Gilead, Kite Pharma was also able to demonstrate early signs of potential commercial success. Cultivating relationships with the oncology doctor community showed the demand for their technology to fill unmet needs in the industry.

Emerging therapeutic developers should look to create value for potential partners beyond providing clinical study data like Kite Pharma to strengthen their ultimate value proposition.

- 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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