

Driving impact and value: Tailored engagement strategies

A Definitive Healthcare
whitepaper

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The role of the medical science liaison (MSL) continues to evolve.

Advancements in medical technology, emerging science, and shifting regulations impact the development of new therapies and devices. This dynamic requires medical affairs teams to engage in more specialized conversations with a diverse group of healthcare stakeholders across a growing assortment of communication channels.

The MSL role was established in the 1960s by Upjohn Pharmaceuticals as a scientifically trained field organization to support their commercial teams. Over the decades, the role has grown to help the life sciences navigate evolving regulatory and compliance demands, increased focus on rare disease states, and other challenges beyond the scope of traditional commercial functions.

The modern MSL must demonstrate knowledge of all the factors that inform and complicate the development process, as well as expertise around specific disease states, patient populations, and the healthcare professionals who treat them.

In this white paper, we'll explore how tailored engagement strategies can help MSLs face the challenges of their evolving role—including some challenges that are yet to come—and help their organizations meet their business goals.

Reimagining the value of medical affairs

As healthcare becomes more complex, the demand for medical affairs is growing.

In the life sciences, the number of MSLs deployed from 2001 to 2020 has quadrupled. We're expecting 20% growth in the size of the average medical affairs team within the next few years. Plus, medical affairs budgets show 79% year-over-year growth.

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It's not just biopharma: Medical device, diagnostics, veterinary science, and contract research organizations are all increasingly incorporating the MSL role into their operations.

These shifts are largely driven by new technologies that require more specialized knowledge. High-throughput genomics, proteomics, and metabolomics are just a few of the technologies pushing life sciences organizations to the frontiers of modern medicine.

Likewise, many companies are reimagining their commercial engagement models. Providers and executives represent more diverse skills and backgrounds; ultimately creating new objectives and opportunities for medical affairs teams.

Before we examine the current state of medical affairs and where it's headed, let's take a look back to see how we got here.

How MSLs were deployed

MSLs were first utilized in the 1960s to ensure access to medical and scientific information about specific company products in a given therapeutic area. Pharmaceutical organizations recognized the need for scientific experts to support their commercial operations, but how that support was delivered varied from organization to organization and MSL to MSL. These pioneering medical science liaisons were sourced from experienced commercial representatives with strong scientific backgrounds to bring a higher degree of educational and clinical expertise to the medical professionals they engaged. Today, MSL teams are composed of professionals with degreed scientific backgrounds, including pharmacists, nurses, and physicians. However, the required scientific and educational background, as well as the purpose of the medical liaison role, continues to progressively change.

The earliest MSLs approached expert identification and engagement with limited resources and narrow perspectives, drawing predominantly from their own contacts and like-minded researchers at academic centers. These relationships were driven mostly via one-on-one scientific exchange and focused on data dissemination.

Considering the way these early relationships resulted in some of the 20th century's most impactful population health interventions, it's fair to say medical affairs teams were successful in driving results from the start. However, the real-world demands of the life sciences industry quickly grew beyond medical affairs' original mission scope, prompting the need for more MSLs with a greater breadth of expertise.

What's driving the role's evolution

The increasing focus on and innovation within oncology provides a useful example of these evolving demands: When the MSL role first arose in the industry, cancer was considered a single disease. An organization might have employed a single cancer specialist on their medical affairs teams—if that level of specialization was even attainable.

Today, we understand cancer to be an array of more than 100 unique diseases. Life sciences organizations focused on cancer treatment need multiple MSLs with expertise across various types of cancer and ongoing education programs to ensure those MSLs stay current with the latest research.

Medical science moves much faster today than it did in the middle of the 20th century, so modern MSLs have to work harder than their predecessors to deliver impact. The industry's focus on specialized medicine—such as genetically personalized precision medicine—means MSLs need to master increasingly complex information.

The changing physician landscape is reshaping medical affairs, too. As younger providers are rising to the forefront of healthcare, they're bringing along new learning styles, faster adoption of new technology, and new engagement preferences. MSLs looking for their next KOL among this new generation of clinicians need to adapt to their learning and engagement preferences—as well as the preferences of a diverse group of stakeholders.

With so much clinical data now available, both providers and life sciences organizations are increasingly tuned in to the measurable outcomes of their business decisions. They expect to work with MSLs who have a solid grasp of the data surrounding their therapy or device, especially those data describing impact on care outcomes. In addition, new competencies are emerging as key drivers of success for the MSL, which include but are not limited to delivering impactful communications, understanding customer needs, generating insights, building partnerships, and scientific storytelling.

As the industry shifts its focus from population health interventions to high-value drugs that address rare diseases with shallow patient pools, medical affairs teams must consider new dynamics. Expert pools in these areas of focus are limited, and competition is high, so biopharma companies need their MSLs to work harder to become experts' partners of choice.

Altogether, the industry's growing demands position MSLs as considerable value drivers within their organizations.

A tool for the modern MSL: Tailored engagement strategies

To deliver the most value to their organizations, medical affairs teams need modern engagement strategies tailored to the unique needs and preferences of their target experts. In part, that means embracing the communication and learning approaches that those experts prefer.

It also means finding unique ways to leverage the latest market-specific data to identify and engage the most relevant experts before the competition. We call these bespoke tactical approaches tailored engagement strategies. Let's take a look at some examples of how to use your data more effectively and build your own tailored engagement strategies.



Take the blinders off

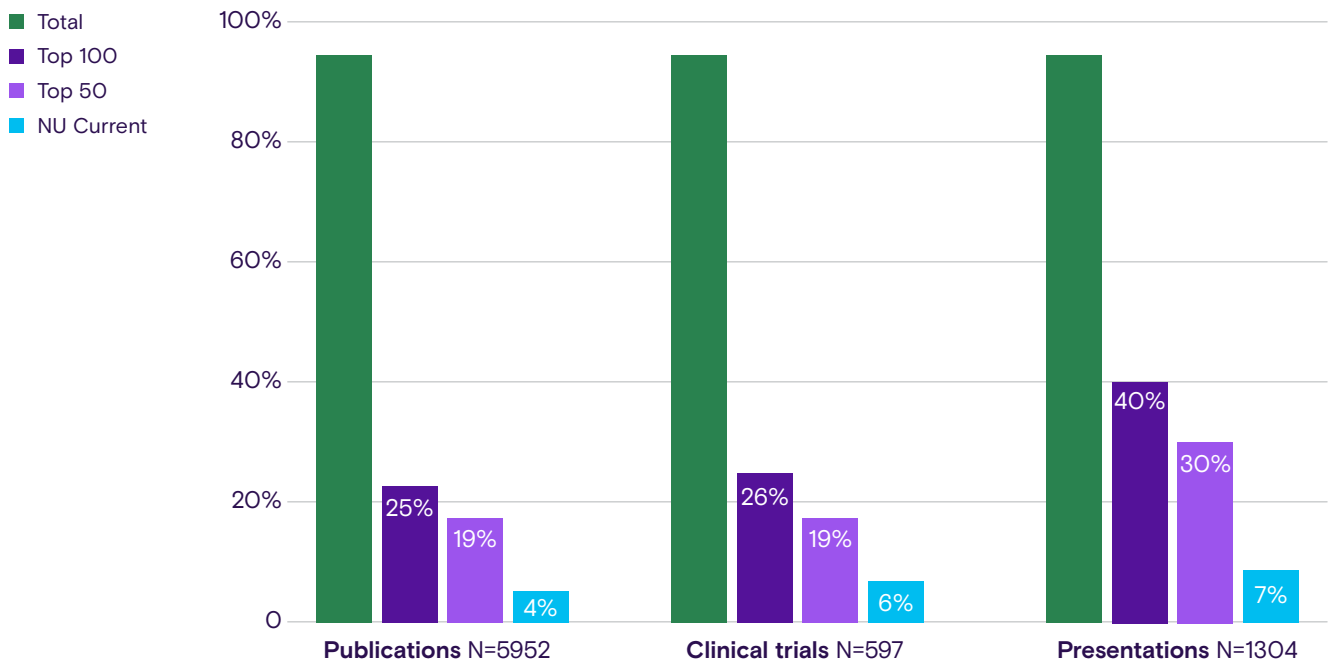
In modern medical affairs, working without current, comprehensive data is like working in the dark. Medical affairs teams can use scientific as well as clinical activity data to identify the pools of experts who are driving the conversation within an organization’s target territory and area of therapeutic focus.

Let’s consider a biopharma organization that wants to understand the extent of its engagement among respiratory experts within a single territory. Using Definitive Healthcare data, they’ve identified 2,082 relevant experts and analyzed their scientific contributions in the form of publications, clinical trials, and presentations.

By comparing the contributions of their currently engaged experts with contributions from the top 100 and top 50 most prolific experts, the organization was able to identify a strategic opportunity for expanded engagement. Figure 1 shows the extent of this opportunity: The organization’s currently engaged experts contribute less than 7% across all three categories. With this analysis, the medical affairs team can identify 90 previously uncontacted experts from the top 100 for engagement.

Figure 1: 100 experts contribute between 25–40% of total body of work in this market. Top 100 derived from a select list of cities within target territory.

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Get to know the experts better

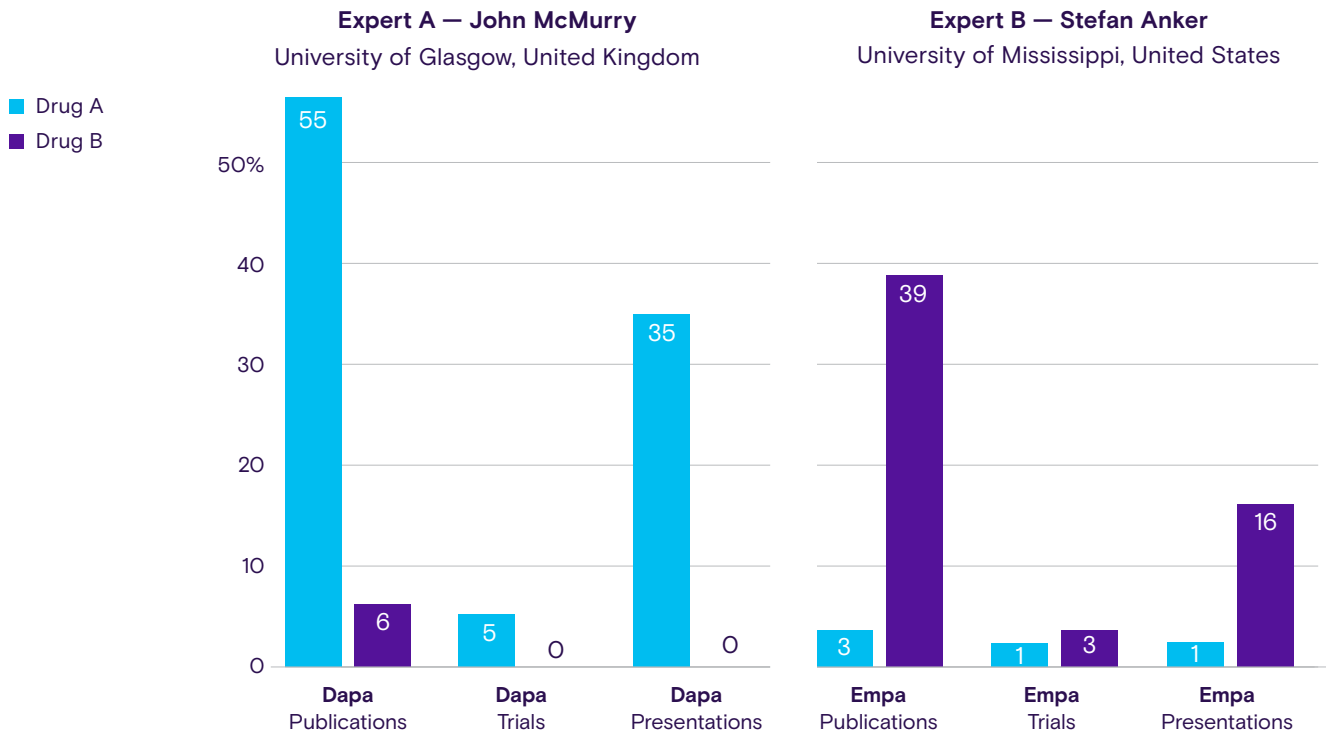
Once an organization knows who the experts are within a given market, it needs to get to know those experts better. MSLs only have so much time to engage with experts; the right data and analytics can help them spend their time and energy on the most relevant experts who are most likely to be interested in working together.

In this example, an MSL has identified two experts with clinical activity related to both their and a competitor’s drug within their therapy area. To narrow down their selection, the MSL compares both experts’ bodies of work surrounding both compounds. Figure 2 showcases these experts and their output for each drug in three categories.

Through this analysis, the MSL can see that Expert A demonstrates not only a higher level of overall output than Expert B, but also a more exclusive alignment to Drug A than Expert B’s relative alignment to Drug B. Recognizing the differences in scientific alignment provides the MSL with a tangible data point to inform future-facing engagement.

Figure 2: Demonstrates the affinity and activity of shared competitive relationships between Expert A and Expert B (left and right).

SGLT 2 ACTIVITY – PUBLICATIONS–TRIALS–PRESENTATIONS



Navigate experts' competitive relationships

One-to-one comparisons aren't the only ways to examine experts' competitive relationships. By looking at clinical activity across top developers within a specific therapeutic area, your organization can find providers with the bandwidth to support your drug or product.

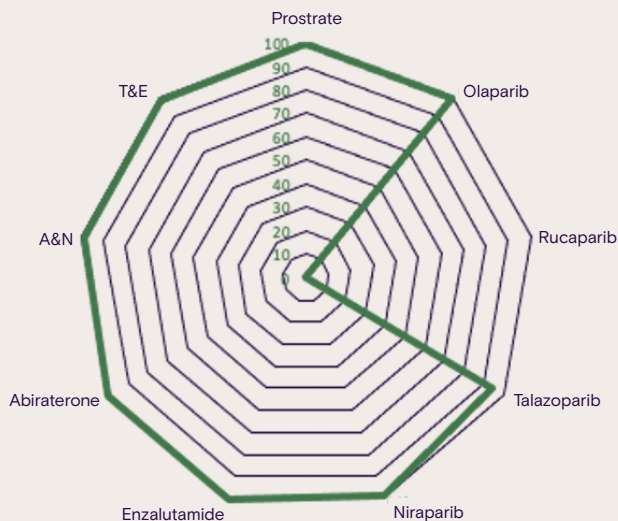
If you're looking for an expert to lead your clinical trial, simply searching for the top 100 providers by clinical activity in your therapy area will likely return a lot of doctors like the one on the left side of Figure 3: Well-known, prolific experts with a lot of allegiances, limited patient pools, and even less free time.

But mining deeper into the data, medical affairs can spot the providers who have lots of experience with one or two developers—like the doctor on the right side of Figure 3—and who probably have a lot more time and available patients to dedicate to clinical trials.

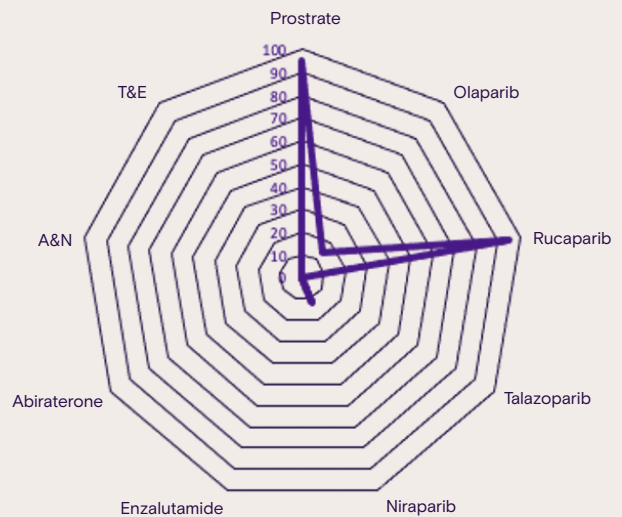
Figure 3: Analyzing providers' clinical activity across multiple developers helps identify those who have the most relevant experience and the greatest availability.

NAVIGATING COMPETITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Neal Shore, Carolina Urologic



Allen Brice, Mayo Clinic



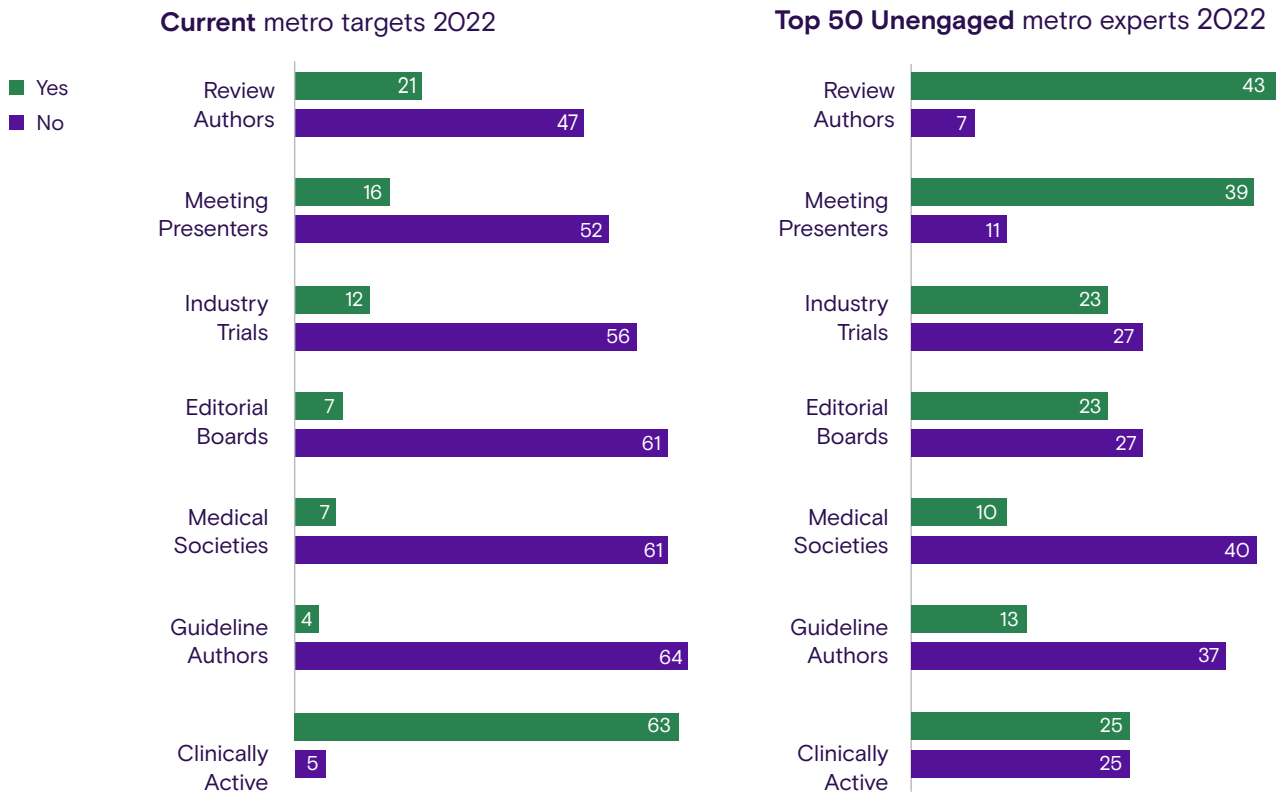
Align expert relationships to organizational goals

The right expert is the one who can address your organization’s specific goals and objectives. Your medical affairs team should leverage data to determine not only how active experts are in their scientific communities, but the types of activities they’re engaged in, to find the experts best suited to support those goals.

One life sciences organization wanted to better understand how their current targets for engagement stacked up against the top 50 unengaged experts in their market. The organization had prioritized overall clinical activity when selecting its targets; however, those targets had considerably less relevant activity within key communication categories than the top unengaged experts (only half of whom were clinically active).

Figure 4: Two target expert pools sorted by leadership activity within those categories.

LEADERSHIP ELEMENTS



Be ready for the millennial takeover

The life sciences industry has long relied on engagement strategies and tactics developed by biopharma organizations in the business of population health drugs. While these approaches have become muscle memory for many commercial and medical affairs teams, they don't reflect current audiences.

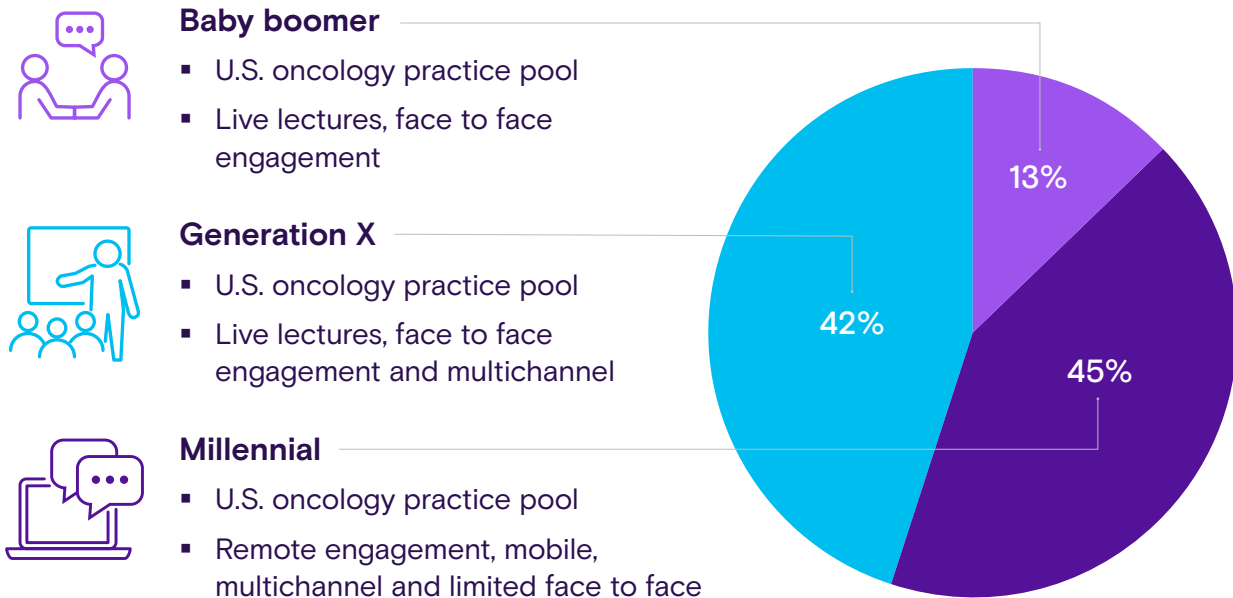
In-person engagement, classroom-style education, branded guides—these methods worked with baby boomers throughout the 1980s and '90s, but those experts are on the way out. By 2025, three-quarters of the global workforce (and the majority of practicing US oncologists) will be represented by the millennial generation.

Figure 5 offers a projected generational breakdown of the U.S. oncology practice pool by 2025, as well as each generation's surveyed engagement preferences.

It's easy to see how drastically engagement preferences shift from the baby boomers and Generation X to the millennials. To make the most of their time and resources, MSLs will need to understand and embrace the incoming generations' preferred methods and learning styles, while knowing when to leverage the traditional tactics for older providers.

Figure 5: The 2025 demographic breakdown of the U.S. oncology practice pool.

IS THE MILLENNIAL SETTING US UP FOR A PERFECT STORM?



Conclusion

MSLs are lifelong learners on the cutting edge of science. This exciting position within the industry is what draws many individuals to the job—but it's also the source of many of its inherent challenges.

To succeed, medical affairs professionals must embrace this precarious position and constantly aim to update their understanding of the healthcare landscape and the industry's dynamic trends.

Changes come fast and hard in the life sciences, so MSLs have to remain flexible. A strategy that worked last year—much less a decade ago—may not work next year. Current, comprehensive expert data can help medical affairs professionals and teams identify the right experts and determine the best tactics to engage them with.

As the MSL function continues to evolve and gain prominence within the industry, value-based engagement and performance metrics will reveal the outcome of innovation and its impact on patient care. With a watchful eye on these data, MSLs can keep adapting to the industry's needs as they develop and deliver more meaningful results for their organizations.

About Definitive Healthcare

At Definitive Healthcare, our passion is to transform data, analytics and expertise into healthcare commercial intelligence. We help clients uncover the right markets, opportunities and people, so they can shape tomorrow's healthcare industry. Our SaaS platform creates the path to commercial success in the healthcare market, so companies can identify where to go next.

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