

Succeeding in the Interview:

The Pivotal Step to Becoming a Medical Science Liaison

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Well into its fourth decade of existence, the Medical Science Liaison (MSL) role continues to serve as the foundation of a successful pharmaceutical company's strategic plan, fostering the exchange of scientifically robust, accurate and compliant communications through credible peer-to-peer exchange. Highly knowledgeable and highly trained, MSLs perform a myriad of activities, with the common objective of establishing and fostering relationships with key stakeholders; most notably, opinion leaders. Serving as extensions of companies' medical affairs departments, MSLs engage in activities including but not limited to advocacy development, speaker identification and development, technical support, formulary presentations, and medical education initiative support.

MSLs are expected to be therapeutic and product specialists, and at the same time demonstrate superior communication skills and a solid knowledge of their company's product portfolio, which may include products in development as well as marketed products. They also must be able to fully understand the regulatory climate in which the industry operates and perform their job in a highly ethical manner. Depending on the prospective employer, many MSLs are specifically recruited for these abilities and experience; others, less experienced, are identified for their core values and an ability to develop these skills over time. Regardless of the situation, any candidate for an MSL position must first walk the gauntlet of the phone screen and the face-to-face interview. It's been said that, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression". When initially contacted by a potential employer and during the subsequent conversations, there are some key points to keep in mind when advancing that relationship and achieving a more successful outcome. It should be emphasized that what you are communicating is as critically important as how you are communicating.

Have you done your homework about the company? Do you know as much as you can about the specific therapeutic area for which you are being considered? Again, depending on the employer, you may not be expected to have ten years of experiential wisdom or published dozens of papers on the topic, but can you converse intelligently about the disease area, the treatment options (including the competitors), and where the current research is headed? Have you navigated the company's website for information? Are you aware of recent press releases from the company that can give you a perspective on clinical and business accomplishments, as well as current hurdles?

It is important to fully understand your own resume when that initial contact occurs. Does it speak specifically to the needs of the company? If not, are there functions and responsibilities you have had that demonstrate skills transferrable to the role of an MSL? Since presentation skills are perhaps the most important ability you will be evaluated on, be prepared to address what presentations you regularly delivered (conferences, department meetings, physician interactions, etc.). You may not have been in a field-based position, but what leadership roles did you play and can you give examples of successful independent work? Did you influence others? How? Demonstrating personal leadership is essential for a position that is highly independent and one where you will not be in an “office” environment. Another area that is often discussed during the interview concerns career growth. This extends well beyond simply explaining your progress from job to job or position to position. Can you look at your CV and show how each step along the path has been leading you to a greater role as an MSL or to areas of more responsibility? Employers are always looking to the future when they conduct interviews – are you an individual who fits into their plan for growth? In addition, what personal milestones have you achieved, why were they important, and what was your plan to achieve them? When I conduct interviews, I’m very interested in your accomplishments, but I’m even more interested in how you got there. You’ll be asked to discuss your next steps or future goals.

Another area that is examined is your role in team environments and relationships. Can you give specific examples of challenges you have faced working on those teams? How did you address those challenges both as an individual and as part of the team? Importantly, what was the outcome and was it good or bad? Often, employers will look at previous team interactions and your relationships with work colleagues as an indication of your ability to function in a field-based role interacting with physicians. Have you had to encounter difficult customers? Give me a specific example and tell me what the outcome was. I will often ask interviewees what the last mistake was that they made. This can show both honesty and the ability to self-correct, both critical traits for an MSL. You may be asked about former managers, how they managed you, and what their personal strengths (and needs) were as a manager. I like to ask candidates, “What would you say your manager would say about you right now?”

It is expected that you should have a good understanding of the role of an MSL and the functions of the position when you meet with representatives of the company during that first face-to-face interview. However, that does not preclude you from asking questions. Certainly compensation and benefits are a topic for conversation (unless they have already been addressed during that initial phone call), but save them for the right time. To lead with that discussion will immediately spell disaster, regardless of your qualifications. What types of questions should you ask? My own experience is that questions that show a deeper understanding of issues, when asked in a way that probes me for more information, show me an individual who has done their homework and has reflected on the current role in an effective way. This is the type of individual I would want on my team, as they demonstrate skills that they will need to utilize every day in the field. Another very important topic to discuss is the relationship with the home office and the regulatory climate within which the company operates. While the guidelines for compliance are well documented, what your role is in performing certain



functions (support for trials, entertainment and meals, off-label medical inquiries, etc.) often can vary from company to company. It is very important to have a solid understanding of corporate philosophy when you leave the interview.

Finally, it can't be stressed enough that your communication skills (verbally during the interactions; written before and after the interview) will be the most important area on which you will be assessed. In a typical MSL interview, you will be expected to prepare a formal presentation on a complex topic (often chosen by the employer, occasionally not). While the content of that discussion needs to be concise and accurate, your clarity of thought, familiarity with the content, pertinence of the topic, and mannerisms (verbal and physical) cannot be overemphasized. Rehearse it well, but not too much. Experienced interviewers can readily identify a "canned" presentation when they see one.

In summary, plan your phone screen and face-to-face interview well. Prepare yourself by knowing the client and their representatives. Treat it no differently than if you were meeting a thought leader for the first time. Don't underestimate the significance of this meeting. Be assertive, but not aggressive; confident, but not overbearing. Importantly, maintain a dialogue during these interactions. The prospective employer is not just looking for someone who can simply do the job or who even wants the job. They seek to find a candidate whom they want on their team.

If after reading this article, you feel that you possess the skill sets necessary to become an MSL and are ready to take the next step, please explore our online Career Center for available positions.

