

Insert photo of  
Katherine

## **Simply Symposia**

**by Katherine Hall**

If you've never been involved in organising a symposium, it's very difficult to imagine what it's like. As a writer new to medical communications, I certainly had no idea what was in store when I was asked to run one for the first time. Industry-sponsored symposia are part-and-parcel of most international congresses. They are a medium used by pharmaceutical companies to disseminate key messages and new and exciting data on pharmaceutical products. These messages and data are presented to the audience by a faculty of practising and well-respected opinion leaders, led by a chairman. The medical writer's job is, ultimately, to ensure that key product messages are conveyed clearly without compromising the credibility of the presenters. This is by no means an easy job, but if everything goes according to plan, the results can be extremely rewarding for all involved.

### **Pre-event organisation**

Work can begin months in advance of an event, although for my first symposium we had to turn things around in just 6 weeks! As the writer, one of my first jobs was to ghost write copy for the symposium invitation on behalf of the chairman, and then obtain approval of this from both the client and chairman. This process went in parallel with designing a suitable "theme" for the meeting, driven by our creative team. The theme incorporated the product branding and colours, and was based on the title of the symposium. It was also a "malleable" design that translated well to all symposium materials, i.e., the invitation, abstract book, stage set, directional signage and presentation slides.

The creative process is a joint effort between a creative designer, project account manager and medical writer. The account manager ensures that the correct branding and product messages are incorporated into the design process, while the writer checks that any "biological" imagery used reflects the correct science for the product and indication. Coming from a CRO background, where clinical study reports were my bread and butter, working with creative designers and a production studio was a new and challenging experience – but seeing my work "in print" for the first time was quite exciting!

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The next step in the process is presentation development. The writer works with the speakers to develop their presentations, outlining the aims and content of the presentations, with data and references as appropriate. The writer has to handle this with sensitivity, as some speakers are glad to receive as much assistance as possible while others do not appreciate being "told" what to present. Once the presentation content has been developed, an abstract can be written for each presentation.

Most clients require an abstract book to accompany the symposium, which usually contains the chairman's welcome message, a short biography of each speaker, an abstract for each presentation and 3–5 key slides from each presentation. Again, developing abstracts is not always plain sailing, as some speakers happily allow the writer to draft it for them, while others will want to write their own without any assistance.

#### **Slide development**

One of the most challenging aspects of running a symposium is obtaining a speaker's slides before the event. As the symposium is a high priority for the client, pressure is often applied to the writer and account manager to obtain and finalise slides well in advance of an event. However, sending a PowerPoint presentation to a communications agency is usually way down the list of priorities of key opinion leaders. The writer, therefore, has to strike a happy medium between the two parties – managing client expectations, while at the same time chasing up speakers so that slides are received before the actual day of the symposium!

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Prior to the symposium, we discussed the slides in detail with the speakers and the client. The chairman's input at the symposium can be invaluable as he/she can assist with some awkward aspects of running the event. A common problem is the speaker who supplies, and expects to use, 50 slides for his/her 10-minute presentation. If the writer and client cannot persuade the speaker that this number of slides is excessive, the chairman often can!

#### **Lights, camera, action!**

When the day of my first symposium arrived, I was tired, nervous and excited. What if it all went wrong? What if the slide projector failed? What if I'd missed an embarrassing typo in one of the slides? All of these things crossed my mind as I walked into the auditorium where the symposium was to be held. As I entered the room, my adrenaline levels heightened when I saw the results of 6 weeks' hard work. The huge projection screen carried the title of the symposium (the title that I'd proof-read so many times in the previous weeks!) on a product-branded background that we'd worked hard with the client to perfect. Either side of the screen, two 6-metre-long branded banners framed the screen, making it appear enormous. A lectern on the right of the stage was also "dressed to match", and a table on the stage (provided for the faculty) was adorned with flowers and a branded panel.

After taking in my surroundings, I was told to go and sit with the audio-visual crew and the PowerPoint operator. At this point, I learned that symposia have a language all of their own. I was informed that I was sitting in the "box" (the room at the back of the auditorium), where I was required to wear "cans" (headphones) and was put onto "talkback" (in constant contact with my colleagues at the front of the auditorium through use of the headphones and a microphone). As the audience filed in, the auditorium took on the atmosphere of a theatre – low mutterings in the audience between friends, shuffling "programmes" (in this case, our abstract book) and a sense of anticipation.

## ***The Write Stuff***

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### ***Simply Symposia***

The audio-visual team then started their countdown from 10 seconds down to zero. The lights went down, the audience hushed and the faculty took their seats – we were on!

The symposium began with a branded, animated video, accompanied by music. At the end of the video, the audience broke into spontaneous applause, which made everyone in the box laugh and helped to calm nerves. The chairman took to the stage, welcomed the audience and introduced the first speaker. I was just starting to relax when suddenly red and green lights flashed before me and a loud noise rang in my ears. I panicked and sat bolt upright, thinking there was a fire alarm, but it was just the signal from the speaker to let the PowerPoint operator know he wanted to move on to the first slide! Thankfully the rest of the 2-hour symposium went without any more shocks to my system! As the audience left, we were congratulated by both the chairman and our client for producing a good event. I left the auditorium feeling a mixture of emotions – elation, because it had gone so well, and sheer relief because it was all over!

I've been involved in one other symposium since my first, and thankfully that also ran smoothly. Running a symposium is arguably the most demanding role that a medical writer can take on in the world of medical communications, but with the support of a good team, a co-operative client and an amiable faculty, it is undoubtedly the most rewarding.

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### ***FOOD FOR THOUGHT***

***"It does not require many words to speak  
the truth"***

***Chief Joseph (1840-1904)  
Taken from JAMA 2001; 285: 294***