

Might International Thought Leaders be your Best Research Respondents?

The best thing about recruiting the very top people as respondents for research projects is that, properly designed, your project can be completed very quickly, often within three weeks, and you'll gain the most convincing opinions about healthcare faster than through approaching 'conventional' physician respondents.

Stephen Godwin from THE PLANNING SHOP explains who KOLs are, how to find them, the types of research project they are suitable for, and how best to interview them.

First, let's define these 'top people'... often known as KOLs. The term 'Key Opinion Leader' (or International Thought Leader, or 'KOL' for short) means what it says, i.e. an expert who, through his or her activities – usually but not always research-based – influence and thus lead the field.

It follows that a healthcare KOL is an individual who is seeking to improve the lot of patients, and is, in effect, an agent of change.

It further follows that there are not many of them. Even in extraordinarily dynamic fields (like lung cancer), there are probably fewer than 100 KOLs worldwide. This is a very rarefied group.

What sort of research project is suitable for KOLs?

The main catch about KOL research is that it must be interesting. The topic must first catch the KOL's eye and, to succeed as a project, the questions must test them.

The first two KOL research rules are:

1. Real KOLs are very busy people
2. Real KOLs won't do research for the money.

So, if you want KOLs to contribute to your research project, edit the interview objectives to suit them. Don't ask them what you can read in a book or WIKI (they probably wrote it); ask them what your client really doesn't know or understand and concentrate on elucidating responses to questions where the KOLs' opinions will really help.

For example:

- How things will change in the future, and why; or
- Their views on a client's prospective TPP.

The third rule, supporting this point is:

3. The more clinically and/or scientifically challenging the questions, the better.

And its converse is the fourth rule:

4. Real KOLs can get very bored very easily – so avoid repetition.

The fifth rule is trickier:

5. Know your subject.
No-one – well, no normal researcher – is going to understand a topic as well as the expert. However, when preparing to speak with an expert, the researcher needs to conduct thorough pre-interview research.

You must be familiar, for example, with the condition you're researching, and you need to know and understand the various treatment approaches.

This will help you interview experts effectively, to enable interactive, in-depth discussion.

KOLs are not difficult to find

International KOLs are not hard to identify... nor hard to attract, providing you adopt the right approach. The most obvious factor to bear in mind is that there are not many of them! In fact, in a project specifically designed for its purpose, we found less than 40 KOLs effectively 'controlled' the ongoing development in one important neurological field – controlling it via their domination of key roles on peer-reviewed key journal boards and on major international conference committees. It follows, if you try to recruit KOLs too broadly, you can risk diluting the best with the mediocre. (A salutary lesson: on one occasion a top French KOL learned – we don't know how – that we had invited someone he evidently considered 'junior' to a research project, and promptly withdrew his participation!)

KOLs know a lot!

International studies of KOLs are, well, international! Few KOLs restrict their answers to their own country if tempted otherwise. Often, KOLs will, unprompted, answer in 'global' terms, commenting on what is relevant for the EMA or FDA, or both.

So, KOLs from USA and the 'big 5', then?

Many projects, especially projects that deal with addressing future change, will benefit enormously from the views from the top. By listening to what KOLs say and the way they say it, understanding what they think and why they think it, through intelligent, interesting and relevant discussion, will provide you with a true master-class on a simple or a complex therapy area – quickly.

KOLs are worth thinking about! If you can, use them in your research projects.



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About the author:

Stephen began his professional life as a post-doctoral, serotonin-receptor scientist, evolving through the pharma industry (with Merck and Lilly), UK retail and International Management Consulting into pure marketing research on the agency side. Following 11 years of general healthcare research as a TNS Healthcare Board Director, he joined Isis, (later Synovate) to develop and hone a speciality in international scientific opinion leader research – focused principally on assessing drugs early in the pipeline. Currently, Stephen is Head of Key Opinion Leader Research at THE PLANNING SHOP.

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