



Virtual Pitching: A Perspective from Procurement
Wednesday, 3rd February
By Paul Morrissey

- Facilitator, Paul Morrissey
- Staffan Jakobsson – Head of Indirect Procurement, Vifor Pharma Group
- Sara-Jayne Reid – Strategic Procurement Manager, Royal London Group
- Mary Andrews – Global Commercial Operations Director , ViiV Healthcare

We had a strong turnout from industry and agencies for The PM Society's first webinar of 2021 to discuss experiences of virtual pitching and to hear the perspective from Pharma Procurement.

The PM Society was joined by Mary Andrews, Staffan Jakobsson and Sara-Jayne Reid. We were especially excited to hear from Sara-Jayne who was able to provide an insight into virtual pitching practices and strategy from outside the Pharma industry. During the webinar we talked about issues such as chemistry, video call etiquette and what might pitching look like in 2021 and beyond.

The webinar was facilitated by IARIG member, Paul Morrissey. This report has selected a few of the key questions raised in the webinar and the response from our panel.

Pitching and new business development is still the lifeblood of many agencies, have you found the frequency of pitches change over the past 12 months compared to the previous year?

SJ: The frequency of pitches stabilised very quickly last year and is now very comparable to normal business. I have noticed less push from the business, though not procurement when pitches identified in our procurement business plans (Category Strategy). Like many pharmaceutical companies, our top line has been affected which has sparked a few more cost saving initiatives which has meant we have gone back out to the market and explored where we can renegotiate contracts.

Should agencies pitching today change some of their preparations with this in mind?

SJ: Agencies should reach out and be proactive to talk about where they can be more effective beyond traditional cost savings, such as time savings, multi-year engagements, making sure you put in some metrics to track this and use this to build trust with the client. Being able to look at reducing admin time and use team more effectively without reducing quality.

MA: I would definitely look to my procurement teams to help support this, so I have been working closer with them than I have in the past. We are now having more interesting conversations as we look outside of the box as geographical boundaries fall away. We now have some interesting ways to work with agencies in a different way than we did before, and we can also experiment with this. We can now look at who is the best partner to deliver on the challenge (vs who might be more local). The world has opened up and we want to take advantage of it.

SJR: Throughout 2020 I've had no one specify that they need an agency from London or Manchester and I'd even forgotten that this has been a requirement in the past. The fact this has made such a behavioural shift plays into a wider strategy and an opportunity to go where the best resources are.

What might agencies do differently that want to work with International pharma that may only have local market experience?

SJ: I would be interested to see how agencies can be bold and to reach out to companies who may not have thought of you due to your locations. Even agencies can now attract talent regardless of location and this opens up an opportunity to reduce cost of overhead and offices.

What can agencies do to make sure they establish the right chemistry and find out if they can 'click' with the client team?

MA: I think this is really simple - keep your camera on, it's been a surprise when cameras have been switched off as I can't see the body language. It's important to find out how you want to interact, for example I have used WhatsApp with agencies so much more than before. Chemistry goes beyond whether you can do the work and to have a cultural fit for both teams, I need to make sure it's a two-way street.

Whilst preparing for this webinar, there were lots of anecdotal remarks about both sides switching cameras off, should we be clear before the pitch to establish the rules of engagement?

MA: Yes, definitely. The ground rules are that you have to look at my face, so I want to see you too and have a conversation.

SJR: Chemistry is still very important to procurement and I'm a massive supporter of chemistry sessions. This might be against the trend of many in procurement but it's such a strong way to understand business and cultural fit and this is a core part of our procurement process that we progress by taking the right people through to the next stage of selection.

SJ: Procurement role changes in the process of onboarding. We often have to take the approach of a gatekeeper and that everyone has a fair chance. Once you move on to the rules of participation then chemistry becomes so important. There are many agencies who are very capable, but it moves on to whether they fit in our culture and can also work with a specific Brand Manager.

SJR: I'm incredibly interested throughout the chemistry sessions as I'm looking for what issues an agency may have. In procurement, we are often seen as looking after the money, but we're also looking after the agency too.

How many people from the agency should be present in a virtual pitch?

SJR: It's a hard one this. In pre-Covid times it was about the size of the room and how many you could accommodate. However, everyone should have a clear role and this still applies to a virtual pitch. If they don't have a role then I would be questioning why they are there.

MA: If I think back on my recent pitches they tended not to have more than 2 or 3 people present. So for me it has been kept to a small number, but once you start working with an agency that's when I see this open up.

SJ: My advice is to not turn up with more people than on the client side. Have a few people who can answer the key questions and don't be afraid to 'park' anything that you wanted to take away before clarifying.

What do you think are the one or two things to improve on virtual pitching in 2021?

MA: It's a great time to be bold and take some risks on who we ask to pitch. As we go through the pitch process let's put respect first and honour the time that they give to us by keeping all cameras on.

SJR: My biggest take away is to think about writing some high-level guidelines on how we conduct ourselves during online pitches and engage different stakeholders. It would be great to have some guidelines to share with agencies to say here's how we will work with you in the selection process and initial engagement.

SJ: We break a pitch into several sessions; first a Q&A call, with 2 people on each side, a separate session on negotiation, several 1:1 chemistry sessions and then a shorter pitch, perhaps 45 minutes with only 10 slides.

Will we still be pitching virtually for the remainder of 2021 and do you have any final advice for agencies?

MA: Keep it to an hour for the actual pitch, but have more meetings. Meet more people.

SJ: We will continue to see people use virtual pitching. More people will now be working more from home, some big businesses are rethinking how much office space they have too. My final advice to agencies is to be crisp and to the point, time is of the essence and everyone is struggling for time. Be bold yet respectful of people's boundaries when using different media to communicate.

Note from the facilitator:

We were unable to answer a number of questions that were submitted during the webinar but we will be taking these and addressing them through future events, articles or individual feedback as appropriate.

May I take this opportunity to thank Sara-Jayne, Staffan and Mary for their contributions.