

PM SOCIETY MEMBERS SUMMIT 2025

Has the pharma-agency partnership reached a critical inflexion point?

Held on Tuesday 3rd June 2025, Royal Society of Medicine

On 3rd June 2025, experts from across the pharmaceutical industry and agency sector gathered at The Royal Society of Medicine for the PM Society Summit: ***Has the pharma/agency partnership reached a critical inflexion point?***

This members-only event aimed to explore that very question, amidst mounting internal and external pressures that continue to strain collaboration. It was a forum for honest and transparent discussion which, with balanced representation and candid debate, shed new light on a relationship that many believe to be at a crossroads.

Building on conclusions from previous meetings, which described pharma/agency dynamics as “stuck between a rock and a hard place”, the conversation focused on the root causes of the current gridlock – and whether now marks a turning point.

So what are the underlying issues? Does this moment represent critical inflexion? And, crucially, can this long-standing partnership evolve to meet the demands of a rapidly shifting healthcare landscape?

TRUST ISSUES

What's undermining confidence on both sides?

Einstein once said that “every kind of peaceful cooperation is primarily based on mutual trust”.¹ But we didn't need him to tell us, that when it comes to the industry/agency relationship, it has been eroded. “Trust” was, perhaps, the most widely used word in the whole summit, with both sides raising concerns about its decline.

While no one denied the value of the relationship, many acknowledged that misaligned expectations, opaque processes and increased scrutiny were steadily chipping away at the mutual respect that once characterised collaboration.

Here are some key trust takeaways from both sides of the table:

What does the erosion of trust look like for industry?

Mistrust isn't limited to the agency relationship – it's happening inside pharma organisations, too. Representatives from both big and small companies noted that they once had greater autonomy and control over budgets. Today, with a drive to be leaner and more accountable, it's become harder to bring in agencies early.

Several participants pointed to a lack of internal alignment – particularly between global and local teams – as a key factor that disrupts collaboration and has a knock-on effect on how agencies are engaged.

At the same time, industry trust in agencies has been shaped by legacy issues. Certain past experiences continue to cast a shadow, whilst an over-reliance on Preferred Supplier lists has created a cautious, closed-off environment – even toward agencies that haven't yet had the chance to prove themselves.

What does the erosion of trust look like for agencies?

Agency concerns around trust centred largely on ways of working. Several participants pointed to a shift toward more project-based work. This, coupled with a need for faster turnaround, has created a more transactional dynamic that erodes long-term confidence.

Agencies also expressed frustration over the quality of briefs that were coming through the door, with one person highlighting a disconnect between industry's desire for strategic partners and how agencies are treated in practice. This sentiment was echoed by industry representatives, with one person bluntly stating, *“Sometimes people chuck a brief at an agency and are disappointed with what they get back”.*

Mistrust transcends the industry/agency relationship

While much of the conversation focused on the issues underlying the industry/agency partnership, there was also an acknowledgement that the trust deficit in the healthcare landscape runs far deeper. A crucial point raised was the cynicism with which healthcare communications are viewed by healthcare professionals. Specific issues contributing to customer dissatisfaction, included:

- Promotional bias
- Cherry-picked data
- Difficult-to-navigate platforms
- A lack of relevancy

So what happens when trust is lost?

On this point there was a resounding consensus: the erosion of trust isn't just a business challenge, it also has a human cost: a detriment to patient outcomes. It means rebuilding trust is essential. And something that both parties must move toward.

**“IF TRUST IS THE CURRENCY OF COMMUNICATION,
WE NEED TO INVEST IN IT EVERY DAY”**

- Established Industry Leader

EXTERNAL INTERFERENCE IN AN ALREADY STRAINED RELATIONSHIP

While rebuilding trust may be essential, both sides acknowledged that outside forces continue to put pressure on even the best-intentioned efforts to collaborate. Regulatory constraints, rigid procurement processes and the elusive attempts to hit “the sweet spot between commercial relevance, compliance, and creative ambition” were all cited as obstacles - turning the industry/agency partnership into one that’s increasingly complex and difficult to navigate.

Key external pressures identified at the summit included:

Procurement-driven relationships

Cost is a key driver resulting in declining strategic collaboration. Despite industry’s assertion that they want “strategic partners”, agencies can be reduced to vendors due to cost limitations.

The pace of technological change

The rapid shift toward technology, particularly AI, has outpaced agency capabilities. In-house teams, particularly in big organisations, are now using AI to draft communications, reducing agency involvement to refinement and review.

A loss of appetite for vision

A fundamental shift toward tactical delivery, perhaps fuelled by the need for speed, means that strategic vision is neglected and the role of agencies is diminished yet further.

An increasingly demanding customer

Healthcare professionals and other stakeholders now expect “the right messages at the right time, every time”, raising the bar for both content quality and timely delivery.

Speed is the enemy of skill

From an industry perspective, junior team members are often onboarded hurriedly, leaving a skills gap when it comes to working with agencies. This is compounded by an increase in remote working which has resulted in purely online training. The result is that some knowledge is assumed rather than verified.

While external pressures are hard to control, the summit also revealed tensions in how each side responds to them.

I thought we said no secrets

From the agency side, one of the most frequently raised frustrations was a lack of transparency from pharma. “Clients aren’t inviting us to ‘look under the hood’”, noted one attendee – a sentiment echoed by others who felt that an unfair onus was placed on agencies to extract information, resulting in a culture of “if you don’t ask, you don’t get”.

Later in the discussion, the issue resurfaced in relation to campaign performance metrics. Even when agencies did ask, they weren’t always granted access to data they considered essential. And without insight into what success looks like, many argued, it’s impossible to deliver the kind of strategic partnership pharma says it wants.

You always say you'll change, but you never do

On the industry side, frustration was aired at the traditional agency model. There was a feeling that some agencies didn't have the capabilities to adapt to the commercial realities that face pharma. One industry voice even went so far as to claim, "I think the grand design might be

gone", highlighting an urgent need for agencies to become more agile and more outcome-focused.

The industry frustration became particularly apparent on the subject of AI adoption, with one participant claiming that he "hasn't seen a proactive AI approach from an agency yet". It all points to a feeling among industry that agencies are somewhat stuck in their ways, in spite of the promises of innovation and creativity seen at pitches.

HOW DO WE GET THROUGH THIS?

It was almost unanimously agreed that the industry/ agency relationship is at a critical inflexion point, with one leading industry voice describing it as "the most seismic shift we've ever seen".

But if the challenges are big, so too is the opportunity. As we discovered, at the heart of this relationship remains a shared purpose – improving outcomes for patients – and that's a truly powerful motivator for change.

So exactly what can be done to move the partnership forward, to rebuild trust and to redefine value?

It's not you, it's us

There was consensus that healing the industry/ agency relationship will take action from both sides. Here are some key takeaways about what each party can do:

"BRING ME THE PACKAGE, TELL ME THE RISKS, SHOW ME THE ROADMAP"

- Industry voice on what is needed from an agency partner

Industry:

- Be as open and transparent with your agency(ies) as you can. Where possible, share success metrics and encourage early agency involvement
- Invest time in ensuring every member of your team sees agencies as partners. Senior leaders should aim to upskill colleagues on ways of working with suppliers
- Be open to new ideas. Where possible, give agencies access to decision makers and key stakeholders
- Be clear on priorities. If you're doing fewer things how can agencies help you do them better?

Agencies:

- Unsurprisingly, many agency next steps focused on AI adoption:
 - Be clear how AI can be used to improve efficiency and be transparent with costs
 - Show industry what AI can't do. The lion's share of output still needs human input
 - Having AI tools is not enough; Show industry practical applications of AI to solve specific business problems

And beyond AI?

- Now is the time to think about how you evolve your agency model, your capabilities and your services
- Think small, think strategy, think specialist. Focus on what you can (honestly) provide and become an authority for your clients on that
- Consider how industry can build in co-creation opportunities with HCPs. Research shows that customers are 4 times more likely to engage if they've had a role in creating communications

CONCLUSION: “WALK WITH ME”

This simple, three-word mantra was repeated on both sides of the industry/agency fence – and it captures exactly what’s needed now. Amidst broken trust, cost pressures, and the growing impact of AI, human relationships remain at the heart of this partnership. The problems won’t be solved overnight, but with openness, clarity and a renewed commitment to strategic collaboration, this critical inflexion could yet become a meaningful turning point.

And with both sides ready to walk together, the path ahead - though complex - is a shared one.

Works cited

1. Einstein, Albert. *Ideas and Opinions*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1954.

About The PM (Pharmaceutical Marketing) Society

The PM Society is a not-for-profit organisation, which was founded over 40 years ago. Today it has over 4000 active members from over 250 companies and has three aims – to support organisations and people in healthcare, to recognise excellence and promote best practice and to provide education and training.

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