2016 Veeva European Commercial Summit

Walking into the lobby of the Madrid Marriott Auditorium, where Veeva’s European Commercial Summit was held this year, it is hard not to be impressed by the scale of the place. In many ways, it is indicative of the size of the event and, by the same degree, the level of interest in Veeva’s software offerings. Veeva is quite open about wanting to become the industry cloud for the life sciences and, at an event where its spokespeople announced further developments and expansion, it seems that it is making good progress.

The amount of companies that chose to attend the event is perhaps one of the best signs of how far Veeva’s reach extends, but the range is also revealing, with biotech start-ups mingling alongside some of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the industry. The morning also featured a panel discussion by the GSK team. The keynotespeeches went some way to explaining exactly why these companies had taken the time to attend the event and, increasingly, the decision to adopt the systems that Veeva has on offer.

Matt Wallach, co-founder and president of Veeva, emphasised in his speech how the average person’s expectations of technology have been fundamentally “disrupted” by services such as Uber and Airbnb. These were cited as examples of companies offering convenience allowed by the advances in technology, putting direct control of services into the hands of the customer. Once there, the public often expects this level of service and convenience when it comes to other products. This is where Wallach pitched the new Veeva CRM Engage Meeting: “With Engage Meeting, we’re going to make video calling and video meetings as easy as sending an email.”

Engage Meeting allows sales representatives and medical professionals to interact directly via video calls, enabling flexibility in locations beyond an office environment.

The pharmaceutical industry is often noted for its traditional and somewhat slow adoption of technology; the uptake of Veeva’s software by a growing number of top 20 pharmaceutical companies therefore displays the growing interest in taking up technological solutions to old problems.

Ian Hale, vice president, head of global advertising and promotion at Shire Pharmaceuticals, highlighted the challenge of processing the vast amount of new users who needed to operate and be introduced to the new system after Shire’s merger with Baxalta in June. He stressed, “It’s a big job. We went from 5,600 to 22,000 employees overnight. So we transitioned the US Baxalta folks quite quickly to Veeva Vault PromoMats. The challenge we face across the international space is that, within legacy Baxalta, they’re using Zync MAPS, but there are also some areas within the international space, some 68 countries, that don’t have anything – no electronic system whatsoever. They’re using either email or paper-based. So the migration is complicated.”

Though the uptake of the system may produce difficulties, it’s one that more companies are willing to risk. The main beneficiaries of Veeva’s software are the individuals who interact directly with the healthcare professionals themselves. Marco Gorini, medical science liaison manager at AstraZeneca, explains how the software helps: “We have a huge amount of data that we can use in our interactions. This helps us to tailor our interactions, and we can be more focused on the health-care professional’s needs. We also involve them in the scientific initiative, and we can really tailor that initiative to the person who has a scientific interest in that specific field. It’s helping us to build a stronger scientific partnership and to drive content that’s more specific to their interests.”

This is enabled by the fact that Veeva CRM allows insight into the particular health-care professionals with whom members of a pharmaceutical company’s sales and medical science liaison teams engage before they meet them. Veeva’s software holds in-depth data on healthcare professionals, such as what research they have been working on recently, which can provide the sales representative with a clue as to where their interests are focused.

It’s a movement that has swept across the pharmaceutical industry of late, which is placing focus upon the small details that connect an individual to a company, and the marginal gains that can be accrued from paying attention to the little details. This approach has passed over to the customer, not just health-care professionals. Tim White, head of customer experience at Teva Pharmaceuticals, commented: “We saw a need, from a customer perspective, that they’re getting a lot of scientific education, but they’re not getting a lot of care education. We believe this is as important in many ways, as breakthrough treatments, and we can help train and educate them on that. If you look at content marketing, it’s about what’s good for the customer and the company, and finding that middle ground and then replicating that approach across the company.”

Teva’s changing method of engaging with patients and the ability to use Veeva’s software to engage with health-care professionals demonstrate a shift away from an image that pharmaceutical companies have struggled to shake – that they have previously been happy to simply spend money to earn interest. This was a point that came up in GlaxoSmithKline’s opening keynote panel; Marcel De Jong, global vice president of CRM Futures at GSK, opened with how the company is improving and changing relations with health-care professionals, particularly by using Veeva systems: “We really had to make sure we were focused on the quality of interaction with healthcare professionals, and that our representatives served them with the right information at the right time.”

He continued, “We also thought it wasn’t enough, so we stopped paying health-care professionals to talk about our medicines on our behalf and directly sponsoring HCPs to attend congresses. It was a big move, and that is not to say there is anything wrong with paying health-care professionals, but we wanted to avoid any perceived conflicts of interest.”

GSK’s move away from perceived conflicts of interest can be viewed in two ways: to maintain greater integrity or to create better PR. Either way, the two aims both have outcomes in which the public and medical health professionals can understand GSK’s position, while that position promotes greater trust in the company. It’s a change that builds towards a greater relationship with the public.

This seems to be the reason the pharma industry has begun to take Veeva’s software systems; it’s a change made to build a stronger relationship with healthcare professionals. Speaking directly to Pharmafocus, De Jong explained, “End users in most countries wanted the new CRM – when we did the planning, there was fighting to see who could go first. We were company number 18 to adopt Veeva, so they knew from other pharma companies that the systems just worked.” With such strong acknowledgments of the software’s efficiency, GSK is unlikely to be the last to take the plunge.