



Looking out for a hero! An Insider's Insight into Key Opinion Leader Identification and Profiling

We all need heroes - people who can champion our cause - helping the world to understand our rationale and get behind our position. In the field of medicine these individuals are identified as key opinion or thought leaders and they champion and/or are early adopters of new treatments or procedures. They are often eager to share their opinion with peers.

What do you need to know to ensure that your next search for 'thought leaders' is conducted in an appropriate and considered fashion and yields candidates capable of helping you to achieve your objectives? We offer some insights from the Niche team, who have been identifying and profiling thought leaders for the pharmaceutical industry since 1998.

Before you start

- Establish a clear understanding of the operating environment so that you can define the scope of the challenge before you: optimal therapy area reach, global/local requirements, competitor landscape, unmet needs, speciality representation requirements within your KOL population, etc.
- Describe the profile of the ideal candidate and the thresholds of qualification for the real life KOL nominees. Establish those characteristics that will be essential for KOLs to achieve your objectives.
- Identify opportunities for KOL engagement in supporting activities that will bring your objectives to life. These might include peer-to-peer engagement, thought leadership, and writing of scientific articles as well as involvement in guideline development and patient advocacy activities. Knowing this will help you select the best candidates.

Prepare to succeed

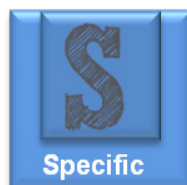
- Adopt an objective approach to everything you do. Start by rejecting incumbent advocates, existing in-house lists of names, recognised experts and 'big names'.
- Build your own list of candidates based on what you need to achieve.
- Define what you would like your champions to achieve in the form of S.M.A.R.T. derived objectives.
- List and rank in terms of importance the various factors that 1) impact on the scope of work and, 2) describe the essential attributes of KOL candidates.
- Develop scoring systems and a scale for each parameter for which you are collecting data.
- Keep data on each parameter for each subject recorded in a spreadsheet.

Key Insights

The pharmaceutical industry has long worked with key opinion leaders (KOLs) to raise the medical community's awareness of research and development trends, clinical trial outcomes and new treatment options and paradigms. Promoting adoption through KOL-facilitated peer-to-peer dissemination of key data and understanding has become integral to the launch of new medicines. A science in itself, the process of identification and engagement of effective champions is coming under increasing scrutiny in a post-Sunshine Act environment.

Bottom line - when identifying KOLs the quality of your candidates will be reflected in how well they help you achieve your objective. Selecting the right KOLs isn't just about effort, it is also about applying a considered and objective approach to the first step on the journey: candidate identification and profiling. It isn't always necessary to boil the oceans dry to find the ideal candidates. And strategies designed to trawl through hundreds or thousands of names will most likely deliver a population of clones who lack the required flexibility to deal with day-to-day changes in your operational environment.

The insight and understanding provided by KOLs in professional education, clinical research, advisory board, medical policy, clinical guideline and strategic communication activities remain essential to the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries.



Set specific objectives – define how much? how often?



Design appropriate metrics that you can use to measure progress.



Establish attainable and practical goals.



Map delivery on a realistic timeline.



Establish a time frame and milestones for delivery.

Our Key Opinion Leader Identification and Profiling Process (KOLIP-P)

- How do you build a community of KOLs that retains within it the ability, opportunity and commitment to help you achieve your objectives?
- How do you ensure that your team will work synergistically, express a broad range of abilities and influence?
- Are there sufficient candidates within their number willing to convert from simple KOLs to advocates or champions?
- And how do you do this in an open and objective manner while ensuring that your partners remain relevant over time?

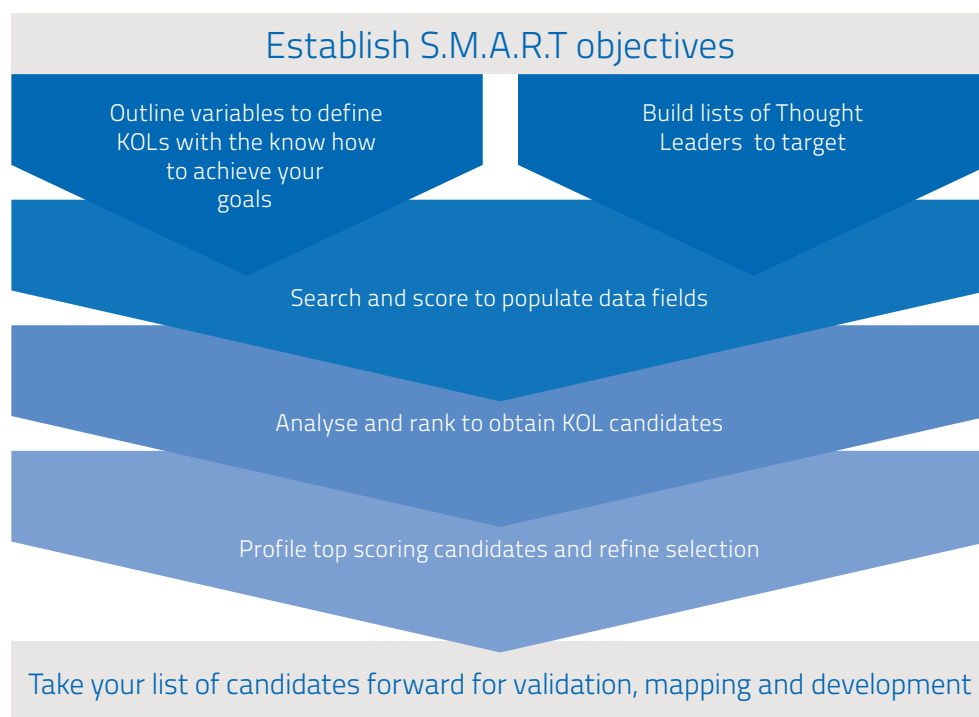


Figure 1. Key stages to identify, profile and develop Thought Leaders into successful KOLs

You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and the secret of success lies in the quality of your starting product - the list of candidates from which you will choose your KOLs. We call our approach KOLIP-P and it can save hours of time searching through thousands of names by following simple steps that will ensure your initial candidate list is 'fit for purpose'. Our in-house KOLIP-P standard operating procedure can easily be converted into your KOL selection policy that you can use to demonstrate transparency and objectivity in your KOL selection process and document your efforts to counter selection bias.

"Developing KOL relationships may, at times, be challenging and time-consuming, but they can be invaluable to both KOLs and pharma"

Marian East, Director of MedSense*

Our approach contrasts the industry tendency to roll out 'the usual crew' irrespective of the event or your objectives. Everyone recognises that certain thought leaders are often over-exposed, have feet in every camp and, most likely, don't have the time or energy to provide the commitment needed for them to be an effective KOL advocate. Audiences know who the industry hacks are and do not necessarily give credit to the messages they endorse.

"If you want a sustainable business you cannot make the right decisions without understanding your external environment - and the only way to that is by talking to people"

Judith Luker, Pfizer UK*

Write a plan

We encourage you to adopt a systematic approach to the identification, profiling and mapping of candidates. This not only finds the best candidates for your needs but also allows you to re-run your selection process at a later date using different qualification thresholds letting you review how the landscape may have changed.

*Quotes provided for an article published in Pharmafocus, July 2008

Step 1 : Define your variables: Landscape, Objectives, Profile and Scale

Field of study: What is the therapeutic field in which you work? Can it be broken down into different specialities?

Expertise: What 'additional' expertise do you need represented within your KOL team to facilitate delivery of your objectives: experience of competitor landscape, unmet needs, level of pharmacologic knowledge, population modelling, health economists and/or patient advocates?

Future: Remember to build for the future at the outset. How do you see the landscape changing with time and how will this reflect on your requirements – follow the old adage – measure twice, cut once.

What do you need your champions to achieve in supporting your future projects?

Define what you would like in the form of S.M.A.R.T. derived objectives. KOLs are often involved in professional education, clinical research advisory boards and delivering strategic communications as well as serving on medical policy and guideline boards. Will these help promote your activities?

The planned landscape and activities will define the profile of the ideal candidate. Identify opportunities for KOLs to engage and support activities that will bring your objectives to life.

Landscape

Objective

Establish clear definitions for each of the aspects that determine your operating environment, are likely to impact on the success of your endeavours and/or will determine the scope of the project. This can best be summarised by the acronym LOPS.

How many KOLs do you need to implement your plans and achieve your objectives? What geographical area are you planning to cover: global, national or local? Will your requirements change with time?

Plan for the full lifecycle of your project or programme. To prevent any unforeseen delay plan to identify around twice to three times the number of KOLs you estimate you will need. Is the therapy area well supplied with candidates?

The pool of researchers will be smaller for rarer diseases and disorders and therefore, fewer candidates are likely to be available than better served therapy areas – it may also mean that fewer will be required to influence opinion within the field.

Scope

Profile

Knowing the landscape and objectives will give you an insight into the key attributes your ideal KOL will embody.

A list of possible characteristics you may want to consider and/or avoid when identifying potential candidates is provided below. How you prioritise each of these attributes will depend on your specific challenge:

- Investigators of clinical trials and authors of journal articles and treatment guidelines
- High therapy area profile
- Editorial board members of journals and officers of professional associations
- Positions of responsibility in hospital and university departments
- Speakers at conventions and symposia
- Excellent communication skills, accomplished networker with charisma... the 'X' factor!

Step 2 : Search and score

This should be straightforward, although it can be time-consuming as you need to visit multiple information sources to obtain a thorough set of data. In this age of sophisticated internet search engines and transparency in professional interests there is a wealth of information about potential candidates available to those with the time and inclination to look for it.

You are not just collecting a list of names. Before you start searching for information set a target with a definable endpoint and/or delivery time line at which searching will stop and you review your progress.

The outputs you derive from Step 1 will inform your decisions on what characteristics will best describe the type of KOL you want. The internet simplifies the process of data collection. Describing a structured search strategy before you start will save you time later by providing a clear delivery pathway and minimising duplication of searches. It will also make the process reproducible (if you want to retrace your steps at a later date) and open to scrutiny as to whether or not you have taken an objective approach.

Make a list of the sources that you will search for data on the key characteristics you are hoping to capture. For example:

Sources

Identify potential sources you plan to search for the required information. Where possible list the search terms you expect to use. Data sources may include:

- Publication databases
- Journals that cover the therapy area
- Learned societies
- Congress meetings
- University and hospital websites

Do you need different types of stakeholders?

Does your definition of KOL and/or its profile criteria capture only clinicians or does it also encompass other possible stakeholders?

Characteristics

- Involvement in defining medical practice and teaching: Sources might include membership of learned societies, teaching posts, editorial board membership, congress/conference board membership and authorship of books.
- Involvement in research: Sources might include authorship of publications, identification on the clinicaltrials.gov registration website.
- Activity in delivering medicine: Sources might include active in clinical membership of purchasing groups and value assessment agencies such as the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), recipients of health service performance awards.

Prepare a tracking matrix, such as a Microsoft Excel® spread sheet, to record the information you collect. Identify each of the search variables within the spread sheet.

Where possible include some form of predefined 'scoring' criteria for each. Some characteristics might lend themselves to a binary Yes/No format, others might require scoring on a multi-point scale.

You can download a copy of our simple Excel® candidate name list and scoring spread sheet.

As you locate information on each characteristic in your brief, score the candidate according to the pre-defined scoring system.

Step 3 : Analyse, rank and identify

Well done in getting this far. Although you have a spread sheet full of data about your Thought Leaders that are potential KOLs you have not yet completed the identification process. Now you must analyse the data you have collected, this should allow you to rank candidates.

The key to successful ranking is to develop an algorithm that will identify the candidates most closely reflecting the predefined perfect candidate. The most straightforward approach to ranking is called the Objective Ranking System.

This utilises specific variables that you should score according to your pre-defined scale. The process is completely objective and provides an unbiased account of the professional landscape for a given set of parameters.

An alternative approach, Peer Qualification, provides an excellent approach to ranking. A panel of peers is asked to score each expert against predefined criteria. The results are summed to produce a final ranking.

HINT

Use the ranked list to identify the appropriate number of qualifying candidates (hopefully you will have a few reserve candidates as well). Your selection algorithm should move stepwise through the characteristics you have defined providing various degrees of weight or bias to each: for example some characteristics will be a 'must have' whereas some will be a 'nice-to-have'.

1	Surname	Pharmacological knowledge	Academic Excellence	Clinical research	Clinical practice	Publication record	Speaker record	Communication skills	Scientific Advisory Board	Overall	Position
2	Prof Anthony Wierzbicki	93.5	77.7	94	74.5	77.3	77.6	77.1	81	81.59	1 st
3	Prof Simon Dubrey	86	84	77.7	61	83.5	86	87.7	81.5	80.93	2 nd
4	Prof Richard Aspinall	86.5	76	96	67.6	86.5	81	75.7	74	80.41	3 rd
5	Prof Jaimie Dunn	84	67.8	91	67.6	86.5	81	82.5	64	78.05	4 th
6	Prof Peter Rutherford	87.4	51.5	82.7	74.5	91	81	77.1	57.7	75.36	5 th
7	Prof Richard Fink	72.5	46	73.5	70.5	67.7	71	61	32.5	61.84	6 th
8	Prof Thomas Rank	65	56.5	66	62.1	61	62.1	57.7	57.7	61.01	7 th
9	Prof William Prince	61.5	51.5	66.5	45.1	71	62.1	67.7	51	59.55	8 th
10	Prof Steven Czop	66.5	31.1	70.5	55.1	66	62.1	67.5	57.7	59.56	9 th
11	Prof Ariel Lant	61.5	61.5	57.6	57.3	61	65.4	67.5	36	58.48	10 th

Figure 2: An example of KOLIP-P results generated from an algorithm, which cross-references and scores each candidate against a number of specific characteristics.

At the end of the ranking process, you will have an ordered list of the right number of qualifying Thought Leaders. To complete the identification process simply select your top scoring candidates. You may want to further interrogate your list before selecting candidates – for example, if you want to select individuals that can represent specific geographical territories – this can be achieved easily enough if you have collected the relevant information from the outset. You are not limited to one analysis. Change the weighting to see how affects the score of your candidates. You may want to identify your good presenters, good investigators and/or those good at publishing in scientific literature (see Figure 2).

Step 4 : Profile

Once the required number of Thought Leaders has been identified you need to build more specific profiles of the KOL candidates that will give you a greater insight into how they are going to fit together as a team.

Outline their career background, research areas, track record and other interests. This should empower you to be able to get a clearer picture of your candidates to understand better who would be the best individuals to recruit as Thought Leaders. Use all the facilities you have at your disposal - university websites are usually a good starting point. You can download a copy of our simple KOL candidate-profiling template [here](#).

Congratulations... you have now constructed a list of candidate KOLs!

An interview with one of our KOL experts

Q What is the most important thing you need to know before starting?

A Plan for the future - both short-term and long-term. Conversion of candidates to active KOLs is an imprecise science, if first choice candidates are unresponsive or uncooperative it is advisable to have your second choice candidates lined up. Also, the brief can change once information on the identities of the candidates becomes available. Keep a thorough record of the process you follow - so you can easily adjust and repeat the process and get the outcome you need if requirements change. This will also allow you re-run or adapt the process over time so you can 'top up' your list with fresh blood or review how the Thought Leader landscape is changing.

Q What should you avoid?

A In many cases you find that a KOL list already exists before you start or you can easily put together a list of 'the usual suspects'. Use these lists to test the 'quality' and/or 'relevance' of your search by comparing them against the list of names you generate. A score of over 90% of names in the pre-existing list captured in your new list can be considered a good indicator of robustness. However, this process raises questions - should you now include the original names missing from your search results? Inclusions shouldn't affect the apparent objectivity of your process so long as you document this step in your process document.

Q What is the most difficult part of KOL identification?

A With access to a large number of names and such well-defined pre-selection criteria, it becomes difficult to avoid a bland homogeneity in the list of candidates you identify. How can you spot candidates with the 'X-factor'? How can you objectively introduce a group of candidates with a broader skills base who are more likely to adapt to changes in the project requirements, as and when they occur. You need to identify a way of including 'wild cards'. At the same time, you need to avoid filling your list with the 'usual subjects' who are unlikely to bring anything new to the party.

Q How can you check the quality of your output?

A The process of data collection can become an all-consuming obsession that quickly overtakes allocated timelines and budgets. Set yourself achievable and measurable endpoints for your project and keep a track of resources you have used. Identify timelines and milestones when you should stop searching and assess the quality and completeness of the data you have collected. In the end, the process of identification and profiling follows the law of diminishing returns - know when to stop.

And finally...

The dynamics of the KOL landscape are constantly changing and evolving. New names come onto the scene, familiar names retire and fresh alliances are formed. KOLIP-P keeps you responsive to change and able to adapt throughout the lifecycle of your project.

Try to identify how your goals and requirements will change as the years pass and how that may be reflected in your KOL requirements. In planning for the future pay particular attention to the identification of 'Rising Stars' so-called as they are at the early stages of their career but have been identified as highly likely to develop to influence their peers (younger doctors) now and in the future.

In these cases, it is often necessary to find intuitive and creative ways of identifying who they will be.

You might have identified your ideal candidates. But this is only the first step. You still have to convince the candidate KOLs to work with you! There is a great deal of work yet to complete.

The next step is to develop a process of engagement and development and to make sure that you maximise the KOLs contribution (see below). This will most likely include sharing key data, findings and positions with the selected leaders in your specific knowledge area. You will want to utilise long-term planning, management and implementation strategies to ensure that the Thought Leaders' expertise is used in the most appropriate areas.

Next steps - converting Thought Leaders into excellent KOLs'

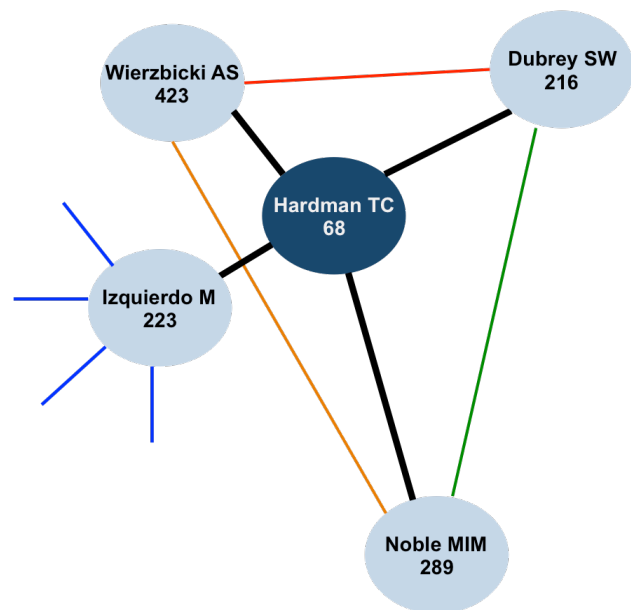
Peer qualification/validation Identify a group of peers. Engage them in assessing the candidates on your list (including each other), in terms of pre-defined characteristics.

Influencer mapping Interactive Ask candidates to identify other potential influencers and their position in the network.

Passive Publication clustering; search for co-authorships between thought leaders and candidate KOLs. Relationships can be expressed visually (Figure 3).

KOL development Establish a development plan before you reach out to your candidates with a call-to-arms. Only through preparation can you ensure that you will convert as many as possible of your candidates into KOLs, advocates and/or champions. Build a structured engagement package designed so that it fulfils regulatory requirements.

KOL lifecycle management Keep your KOLs engaged throughout the lifecycle of your product, seeking fresh blood as required. Adapt the make up of your group as the focus and its goals change, keeping the team fit for purpose.



You can build network clusters for individual authors based on the number of publications they have in common with other authors. The greater the number of connections, the more influence an individual is likely to have.

The number represents the total numbers of publications the author has. How close the authors are in the network reflect the greater the number of shared publications. You can build wide networks between common authors that will highlight leaders.

References and helpful resources

1. Flodgren, G. Local opinion leaders: effects on professional practice and health care outcomes. Cochrane Database Syst Rev. 2011; (8): CD000125.
2. Grimshaw, J. Is the involvement of opinion leaders in the implementation of research findings a feasible strategy? Implementation Science 2006, 1:3
3. Pharma Marketing Glossary. www.pharma-mkting.com/glossary/keyopinionleader.htm
4. Megget, K. Treading the KOL tightrope. www.pharmatimes.com; 2010, p36-38
5. Marketwire. Large pharmaceutical companies tend to pay triple what other size companies do for KOL speakers Press release, 19 March, 2008 www.marketwire.com/mw/release.do?id=834122

How can Niche help?

Our team has a wealth of experience in identifying and profiling Thought Leaders. We can participate in the development of the project brief and gather a wide range of information to allow the selection of Thought Leader candidates that match the desired criteria. We can also take the process further by helping to brief, educate and interact with Thought Leaders.

Next Steps

We created this Insider's Insight into KOL Identification and Profiling to share a few helpful points and learnings that we have gained over the years. If you are interested we would be happy to share more of our experience with you and discuss how you can get the most out of your selection identification process.

I hope that you found our guide useful. If you would like to discuss support for any of our upcoming Thought Leader selection processes please contact me using the email address below.

Dr Justin Cook
Head of Medical Writing
Justin.Cook@niche.org.uk

Get in touch



+ 44 (0)20 8332 2588
www.niche.org.uk