

Interview with Perry Kyrsten, Director, The Windows Event Company

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The Window Conference Center is hosting at least six pharmaceutical events within a month, and has a broad prior history of orchestrating such occasions. How important is the pharmaceutical industry to your business?

To speak to the broader situation in the UK (and obviously, that situation is affected by the global market): our venue is very conducive for training and learning. So a lot of companies come to us—be they privately funded or government funded—for trainings. And the two main lines, or sectors, that are working frequently with us—representing many of our top 20 clients—are education and medical. So if you look at the pharmaceutical companies that are coming here, you're going to find that they are usually high-end, quite exclusive, and sometimes they are UK-based, sometimes Europe-based, and sometimes they have a global audience—for instance, Pharma Training come, and all of their people come from around the world. They are a very small group, but they have signed up another 24 bookings with us next year. So you can see that they have hit something in the market that is speaking exactly to the sort of high-end executives in the pharmaceutical industry that need that kind of support right now—given the economic downturn, and considering what the industry needs to respond creatively to regulation, and etc.

Speaking to that effect, we have two other mainstay clients, London Deanery and Visiongain. Visiongain, for example, have really hit the Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient (API) Auditing market lately. They bring something valuable, something individuals in this industry can benefit from hearing. When we speak to sponsors—just casually on the day of the conference, or when we are helping them organize their stands and etc.—we find that they are very proud of what they are participating in, and what they are supporting.

This venue is a smallish venue. We are not a huge hotel taking 500 people per day. Still, we fit more like 100 people—or even 80, which is a comfortable amount. I know Visiongain has honed in on a unique market, and their events bring in 70 to 75 people. Five or six pharmaceutical sponsors come, and they may gather a group of about 90. People feel like they are networking, like they are getting knowledge of their industry. And at the same time, they are creating more business with each other, and there is a lot of creative friction, and ideas coming back and forth.

For The Window, hosting pharmaceutical conferences is essentially even with our educational business, in terms of revenue. It depends if the event is publically funded, or privately funded. In privately funded events, pharmaceutical forums are our number one. In publically funded events, they are second. Right now, I am changing our focus to corporates, and less on government, because I have 22 public-sector clients who have had a real hit with the budget cuts. So, sure, everybody is looking at, “how can we help them?” But at the same time, it means I need to refocus the business on the corporate side more.

You seem to be one of the most prominent companies in London in terms of hosting mid-size pharma events. What is the history of how you became a venue of choice for the industry, underpinning major highlights?

I started the business six years ago, and I thought of what the building might be conducive for; which sectors should I be approaching? Obviously, we had the local council, and the local businesses here use us a lot. But, we have got a facility that is very favorable for learning, so I was thinking trainings would be good. I went out and prospected. I remember going to the London Deanery, a medical training company and an NHS group, and I told them, "I have checked the venue that you are using at the moment, and I think that you can be in a better one, and I could do it for a great price. We have put a lot of love, time and care into making the space conducive for learning, and you are doing tons of training, in delivering to the medical industry—let us work with you."

The work the London Deanery is doing quite important. The care issue in this country is a big issue. For example, you may have seen on the news that the notion of how we are dealing with the elderly is keenly debated at the moment. There have been many conferences here over the last six years where people have discussed things like, "Should it be public? Should it be private? Should it be a mixture of both? How do we actually deliver the kinds of services that we need to, and set them at the right price without compromising anything—deliver the right level of care, at the right level of business?" It is essential that organizations like the Deanery are able to have the right environment to provide training and discussion forums for medical specialists.

When I prospected the London Deanery, they decided to give me a go, and they did one event with us. It was fantastic, and then I asked to do a few more of their smaller events. The following year, they gave The Window all of their bigger conferences, as well as many of their smaller ones. Now I have three contacts there, and we do much of their work. They still handle much of their internal stuff personally, but, particularly when they have externals—like the marketers—coming in, and they want to show off their ideas, and their cutting-edge thought, they use us. So we do much of their external, public interface. The building is perfect for that.

Besides mid-size events, you have also hosted some more significant occasions, like Visiongain's 7th Annual Biosimilars Conference. Do you think you can go on to more consistently attract a higher profile of conference? In general, what are your ambitions for deepening your involvement in this industry?

It is interesting that you should say that, because I went and met with Visiongain regarding that conference. I said to them that the pharmaceuticals industry is kind of booming in one way, and in another way it is very delicate in terms of how it is handled and how it should move forward. So I asked, "what is the niche market that you are working with?" At The Window, the setting is intimate. People feel like they are getting invaluable sector knowledge, creating business, and finding things out from people who are further ahead of them in terms of leading edge thinking in this sector. I said to them, "What shall we do?" And they said that we should do more with them. I offered to rearrange our facilities, to give sponsors another floor and extra space. Sponsors are paying anywhere between five and ten thousand Pounds to be promoted within the sector, at that particular conference (although I am not sure if it is an annual fee, or just for the event itself). Therefore, they should receive exceptional service.

We are looking to up-level how sponsors are supported within the event itself. And regarding the Visiongain company, we have been speaking with them, and saying, "You have got that market, how do we develop it? How can we support you in that endeavor?" A lot of it has got to do with pre-planning. Because a lot of people in the industry want what these conferences offer, want to be in that network, and want to know what the leading edge thinking is. At The Window, more than

10,000 people come through the building per year. Obviously, a large proportion of those people are working within the medical industry, and we are getting more known in particular sectors for providing progressive, freethinking conferences.

And if I can pinpoint some kind of X-factor, our business is attached, in the same building, to EnlightenNext, which is a charity that produces a magazine that discusses the cutting edge in everything from quantum mechanics to women's liberation. This is why we created this building to facilitate forward-looking discourse. When the pharmaceutical industry comes here, and they wish to engage in that kind of discourse, they say to themselves, "Wow, this place really services that, and is very supportive of that kind of environment." When you talk to the clients and read their survey forms, they all say the same thing. "Fabulous food, holistic event, really conducive to creative dialogue." When you go up to our top floor, you really feel like you are above the city, and free of everything. You can think freely. You are not thinking about going to do invoices, and this, that, and the other. You are thinking, "What is the next step in this industry?"

Clients have also praised The Window for a personal touch, and dynamic response to their requests. Do you have a specific style in dealing with the pharma industry?

I would say no. You know why? Because everybody gets the same standard from us. We are a small enough organization to respond appropriately, whether for education, or medicine, or business, or what have you. If the client wants us to respond in a whole-hearted way, we will. If they want us to step back, we will. We work it out with each client, one by one.

For instance, Pharma Training have told us, "Your values, and what your team express, are totally what our company expresses." Their event organizer is moving away from the UK, and asked me to look after her people that come to these events. I asked what the values were, what they wanted us to express. They said that it is simply a matter of caring. Making sure that event participants have got all of the manuals, that everyone knows what they are doing, knows where they should go so they are free to think. That is actually what we are really good at. One of the cool things about it is that we are actually able to do that. A lot of people say that they are into customer care and etc. but for the staff at The Window, and especially for myself, this business is our baby.

Having EnlightenNext in the window meaning we have the conference business and the charity is a hybrid example in the UK of what is possible, and it is totally what I am passionate about proving that something like this can work. There are a couple of other organizations in the UK, too, that have a building, where there is a charity, and there is also a business. So we are really trying to prove something is possible. I want people to get that can-do spirit when they come here. If they come from medicine, or education, or wherever, they get the same thing: an attention to and awareness of where they are going, and an environment that can serve them in what they want to create.

A lot of prominent figures are saying that the industry needs to come together more often, in order to discuss the challenges they are facing in the UK market. At the same time, the economic downturn is hurting companies' bottom lines, perhaps preventing them from affording this kind of dialogue. How do you see the current UK climate affecting the frequency of conferences that you have here?

This is a very interesting point. I cannot speak for the whole country, but I can discuss what is going on at The Window. For instance, the London Deanery: we have an amazing working relationship. They provide a particular standard for the country in terms of medicine and training people, and they provide modules that must be delivered one way or the other. One of the gentlemen who I have

done business with for the past six years told me that with all of the major budget cuts, they did not believe that they could go to any external venues in the coming years. He said that he might even lose his job.

But he said that even if he loses his job, he will come organize these events with us as a consultant. So he really cares about it, and I think it is interesting because as much as other countries, and even people in England, speak ill of the NHS, when you get down to it, there are people in the organization that truly care and try to deliver a service. As I have said, there is something important about London Deanery supporting and providing that kind of training. So he was quite distressed, explaining how they had planned out the next two years, thinking they would be using The Window, and now he did not think it was going to happen.

I thought, "Oh my God, we have just lost 60,000 Pounds worth of work." Then I said, "Ok, what can we do to help you? Can we give you more time to pay or offer you a favorable contract, or this or that? Of course, we do not want to lose you." At the same time, I realized that they might now have any choice, so we may just have to roll with the punches. Two weeks later, however, the contact came back to me and said that he had been up to the board level, spoken with senior management, and it was decided that they would definitely use us, and the two years' worth of work would continue. Because it actually has to happen, it is imperative. Otherwise, our health sector would fall back in the international market, in terms of the level of care that we are giving.

So the downturn is certainly having an effect. But you can look at a smaller company like Pharma Training, that is very vertical and exclusive, and they are absolutely booming. I think it is because they are so cutting-edge, and dealing with the kind of meta-thinking that needs to happen in the industry to pull us through all of this.

What topical categories do you see the industry discussing of late, based on the types of conferences you see happening at The Window?

I am not an expert, but there are certain themes I am aware of when I speak to the sponsors, and I speak to the clients, in the pharmaceutical industry. One is around centralizing, privatizing, and whether medicine, care and health should be a publically-funded affair, a privately-funded affair, or a mix of both. Obviously, you have got these campaigns in America that Obama has been pushing, to make it so that everybody is covered, not just those who pay private insurance companies. Here in the UK, you have the example of healthcare being publically funded, and everyone has access to a certain level of health. The industry is discussing how to manage or amend that system for the future.

Another frequent topic is API Auditing. This kind of auditing seems to generate a lot of concern. How do you actually go about auditing? How do you measure whether you are hitting the mark or not? The industry actually has to justify what they are doing, so therefore, they need something that is fair for everybody, be they in the private or public sector.

A third issue that has come up lately is the fact that a lot of these people who are delivering services, who are delivering trainings, delivering different ways of thinking within the industry, when you sit down and talk to them, they will say, "Look, we actually have a pretty good standard of living. We have access to education, we have access to medicine, we have access to pioneering thinking. There are a lot of things that we could be doing to help those at another level." Basic things like making sure that people in other parts of the world are not dying of preventable diseases. I think there is a sense of obligation within a lot of the conferences, and their facilitators, regarding, "What are we meant to be doing right now with the level of education, knowledge, and technical advancement in medical research that we have? How are we meant to use that in an ethical

way?â?? That is definitely an issue. The Bio debate that came to The Windowâ??it was amazing speaking to people during the lunch break. Because they were all talking about what could advance humanity right now, and how they were meant to help. There was a lot of ethical debate.

What is your final message to the international readers of Pharmaceutical Executiveâ??your potential patronsâ??as the Director of The Window Conference Center?

I think from a global perspective, the UK has a unique role to play in the pharmaceutical industry. Obviously, each country has its own history in terms of the structure of the healthcare system. But I think our next step is to figure out how to use the history and experience that we have here to facilitate progress in a global context. I am very aware that at many of the conferences that are going through The Window, a lot of the themes deal with how to provide for the next step on that global level. Somehow, I feel that the UK has the opportunity to make a very significant contribution.

It is a real honor and privilege to have a building, a venue, that helps that kind of creative thinking. Because the last thing we want to do is be mired in a country-centric orientation around issues of health and care, when we are actually a global community, and we have a lot of opportunity to learn from each otherâ??s mistakes and strengths and weaknesses. I feel honored to host, and facilitateâ??maybe in a small way, but hopefully not in an insignificant way.

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