



| How to win client trust as a CRO

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OTHER

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Afshin Safavi is a veteran biochemist with extensive experience establishing and leading bioanalytical teams in pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and manufacturing companies, as well as CROs. He and his teams have supported the development of a broad range of therapeutics in pre-clinical and clinical-trial laboratories. Prior to founding BioAgilytix, he was the Director of Ligand Binding and Immunoassay, operating under GLP at AAIPharma. At Talecris BioTherapeutics, he led the Preclinical and Clinical Assay Development team, building on his experience as a senior scientist at Nobex Corporation, GlaxoSmithKline and IGEN International.



Safavi is considered an expert in the area of immunoassays, with a wide working knowledge of various platforms. He obtained his BS in Biochemistry from UCLA (CA, USA), his PhD in Biochemistry from the University of Kentucky's Medical School (Department of Biochemistry) (KY, USA), and he completed a 2 year postdoctoral assignment at Emory University's Department of Pathology (GA, USA).

In my previous articles published in July and August 2015 on Bioanalysis Zone, I briefly described how I



established a successful CRO using personal credit, and how I surrounded myself with an 'A' team. In this article, I would like to share with you perhaps the most important element in a successful CRO/Client relationship, and that is: TRUST. The act of building trust with your pharmaceutical and biotech clients is similar to how trust is built between friends – both require time, mutual respect and appreciation. However, the components required to build trust between a CRO and its clients are complicated due to the involvement of various teams in this matrix relationship. I will discuss how numerous teams within the CRO and sponsor organization work together to establish trust, and ultimately a fruitful partnership.

I would like to begin by noting a common challenge faced when building a strong partnership based on trust. No client will start by giving you their biggest and most important project without first having an opportunity to see how you perform on a 'pilot' task. There are instances that may shorten the timeline to receiving a large project, such as the caliber of the CRO's scientific team, but patience is key. Most clients prefer to approach the vendor relationship cautiously and determine how the CRO will perform before entrusting them with vital projects. Therefore, trust in our industry can only be gained over time through the demonstration of scientific acumen and transparent business strategies. Additionally, a successful CRO will ensure that client trust is established amongst all parties involved in the business transaction. The various teams within individual CRO, biotech and pharma companies may differ slightly in name, but the functionalities of these teams are similar. Companies on both sides of the business transaction usually possess executive, finance, scientific, quality assurance and sales teams.

First, let us begin by examining the components of a typical scientific team. Ultimately, scientific groups at the respective CRO and client organization will spend the largest amount of time together as they design, test and implement ideas and experiments. Therefore, trust must be established through the CRO's display of scientific expertise and problem solving abilities. Common questions posed by the client's scientific team will likely consist of the following: Are we confident in the level of technical knowledge and training possessed by the vendor's scientific team? Can they troubleshoot independently, or will we need to be involved at every step? Will they alert us of any major issues, or do we have to constantly inquire? Will they be transparent when a mistake happens?

The CRO's scientific team will also ask a series of questions to tailor their collaborative approach to best fit the needs of the client. Their main goal is to provide excellent service to the sponsor by successfully executing their requests. However, they too will be evaluating the client's level of scientific knowledge around their request to determine the appropriate consultative style. Is the client looking for joint thinking and planning, or do they prefer to design the experiments and simply ask us to execute? What level of communication will the client require throughout the process?



It may take a few weeks before both groups learn how to work best with each other, but trust will quickly begin to form once the ability to make sound scientific decisions and execute appropriately is verified. Therefore, it is critical for each team to have a seasoned and mature leader who will provide guidance and advance the project forward in the case of any small scientific and/or personality glitches. Once trust is built at the scientific level, then the business partnership can begin to flourish.

The second fundamental aspect in building a strong partnership requires the triangular interaction between the CRO's sales team and the internal and external scientific teams. The role of the average CRO sales person has evolved over the past several years as more scientists have moved into business development positions, sometimes even acting as project managers. However, regardless of how the CRO utilizes its sales team, they need to cultivate a culture of transparency: tell the clients what the CRO can do, do not sell services when there is no expertise, and communicate the facts to the internal and external scientific teams. Relationship growth may be stunted if the sponsor perceives the CRO's sales team of 'overselling' for monetary incentives. As a buyer, this is something that we have all experienced. Therefore, CROs must design commission plans so that sales goals and the scientific goals align with the ultimate objective of delivering quality data to the client.

The next level of trust must be established between the respective Quality Assurance teams at the CRO and sponsor companies. Regardless of the specific regulatory services provided by the CRO, there must be individuals on both sides who understand the regulatory requirements needed to support the project at hand and ultimately position the product for market approval. In my experience, the project will advance swiftly and avoid delays if cooperative communication begins immediately between quality teams at both organizations.

Once trust is established at a quality level, then sequential trust can be built between the sponsor's procurement team and those at the CRO who manage pricing and contractual terms. In today's world, several pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies are focused on cutting costs, and consequently, CROs are feeling the pricing pressure. Contract labs are popping up in countries where the cost of labor is low, and traditional CROs in North America and Europe are finding price competition to be a challenging issue. The responsibility for determining pricing and contractual terms may vary from CRO to CRO, but these duties typically involve proposal writers, business development managers and members of the executive team. It is only natural for the sponsor and service provider to want the best possible terms for their company. But I have found that as long as both sides begin the negotiation process with mutual respect and understanding, then trust will be achieved and the partnership will flourish. As cliché and overused as the phrase 'win-win situation' has become, it is a scenario that I personally work towards and frequently experience through my work in the CRO industry!



The final layer that is absolutely necessary in growing a vital partnership is building trust between the executive teams at the sponsor and contract lab. Depending on the CROs culture and practices, some executives only interact with the client after the completion of several projects or when issues arise. In my experience, the strongest partnerships have resulted from early dialogue between the executive teams. This provides the extra support and assurance that is sometimes needed to build trust. The ultimate goal for the executive teams should be to openly provide positive reinforcement and constructive criticism on a regular basis, as the most beneficial partnerships are formed from mutual feedback. Although some sponsors prefer a one-way feedback process which may not be ideal for long term partnerships, the CRO must respect that decision as the service provider.

Lastly, I would like to leave you with one final piece of advice for building the ultimate trusting partnership: follow the 'Golden Rule' and treat others the way you would like to be treated. Sponsors and CROs should strive to maintain an understanding of each other's responsibilities, for only then will both parties develop the respect and appreciation required to cultivate a positive partnership. Next month, I look forward to sharing my ensuing article with you which focuses on 'Building Relationships with Other CROs'.

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