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Major U.S. Conferences in the Clinical Research Industry

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The major non-scientific U.S. clinical research conferences that appeal to a relatively broad audience include the following:

- ACRP's Global Conference & Exhibition
- DIA Annual Meeting
- MAGI's Clinical Research Conference
- Site Solutions Summit
- SCOPE Summit for Clinical Ops Executives
- SoCRA Annual Conference
- Partnerships in Clinical Trials

This article discusses the conferences listed above. Other major, but more specialized, conferences, include the following:

- PRIM&R Advancing Ethical Research Conference (Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research)
- RAPS (Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society)
- SQA Annual Meeting & Quality College (Society of Quality Assurance)

There are also a number of conferences that address clinical research in specific therapeutic areas.

These conferences, as well as smaller conferences and other training and educational events, are listed in the First Clinical Research directory at http://firstclinical.com/directories/events.html.

Conferences

ACRP's Global Conference & Exhibition (April 2014)

Organizer:	Association of Clinical Research Professionals (ACRP)
Website:	http://www.acrpnet.org
Tracks:	15: business & finance, career development, clinical data management and statistics, communications, ethics and human subjects protections, globalization, medical devices, medical writing, operations management for clinical sites, operations management for sponsors and CROs, quality assurance, regulatory, subject recruitment, technology and innovation, trends in healthcare
Length:	4.5 days
Attendees:	1,824
Sessions:	135
Speakers:	191
Exhibitors:	87

DIA Annual Meeting (June 2014)

Organizer:	Drug Information Association (DIA)
Website:	http://www.diahome.org

Tracks: 19: clinical operations; project/portfolio management and strategic planning; nonclinical and translational development/early phase clinical development; regulation of product advertising and marketing in an ever-changing market; medical communication, medical writing, and medical science; processes and technologies for medical research; regulatory affairs and submissions; medical devices, *in vitro* diagnostics, and combination products; public policy/health care compliance/law; innovative approaches to ensuring quality in clinical trials and compliance to Good Clinical Practice; pharmaceutical quality; comparative effectiveness research/global health outcomes and economics; clinical safety and pharmacovigilance; statistical science and quantitative thinking; professional development; rare/orphan diseases; global regulatory; executive program; late-breaking topics
Length: 4.5 days
Attendees: 7,003
Sessions: 327
Speakers: 484
Exhibitors: 486

MAGI's Clinical Research Conference (2013/2014*)

Organizer: Model Agreements & Guidelines International (MAGI)
Website: http://www.magiworld.org
Tracks: 6: Sponsor operations, site operations, regulatory compliance, contracts, budgets & billing, quality, special topics
Length: 3.5 days
Attendees: 563
Sessions: 97
Speakers: 212
Exhibitors: 21

* MAGI conferences are held semi-annually, so the data in this article is an average of the October 2013 and May 2014 conferences.

Partnerships in Clinical Trials (March-April 2014)

Organizer: Institute for International Research (IIR)
Website: http://www.iirusa.com/cropartners/welcome-to-CROs.xml#
Tracks: 5: partnerships 2.0, drug development of the future, risk-based study management, strategic sourcing and procurement, best practices in medical device and diagnostic trials
Length: 2.7 days
Attendees: 1,068
Sessions: 51
Speakers: 109
Exhibitors: 50

Site Solutions Summit (SSS) (September 2014*)

Organizer: Society for Clinical Research Sites (SCRS)
Website: http://sitesolutionssummit.com
Tracks: 1 (numerous discussion groups)
Length: 2.5 days
Attendees: 470
Sessions: 54
Speakers: 11
Exhibitors: 32

* Attendee numbers are from the 2013 conference. Other numbers are as of publication date.

SCOPE Summit for Clinical Ops Executives (February 2014)

Organizer:	Cambridge Healthtech Institute (CHI)
Website:	http://www.scopesummit.com
Topics:	11: electronic data in clinical trials; global site selection, feasibility assessment, operations and site management; enrollment planning and patient recruitment; aggregate spend and transparency reporting in clinical trials; managing post-marketing studies and registries; sample and biospecimen management in clinical trials; integrating and leveraging clinical trial operations data; improving site-study activation and performance; subject retention and compliance in studies and registries; clinical trial forecasting, budgeting and project management; patient-centered technologies for post-marketing and real world data research
Length:	2.7 days
Attendees:	674
Sessions:	154
Speakers:	164
Exhibitors:	90

SoCRA Annual Conference (September 2014*)

Organizer:	Society of Clinical Research Associates (SoCRA)
Website:	http://www.socra.org
Tracks:	17: scientific, project management, data management/EDC, device research, Canadian regulatory, enrollment/retention, advanced management, monitoring/auditing, translational research, oncology research, site management, complementary/alternative medicine, risk management, international research, research ethics, pediatric research, behavioral research
Length:	3 days
Attendees:	928
Sessions:	192
Speakers:	95
Exhibitors:	27

* Attendee and exhibitor numbers are from the 2013 conference. Other numbers are as of publication date.

Educational Content

There are five educational dimensions in a conference:

- **Focus.** Does the conference address topics that are important to you?
- **Breadth.** Does the conference cover the range of topics that interest you?
- **Depth.** How many sessions does the conference offer on topics that interest you?
- **Level.** Are the sessions at an introductory, intermediate or advanced level?
- **Quality.** Is the educational material on topic, accurate, useful and well presented?

The educational profile also reflects networking opportunities. Does the program address topics that are important to people you want to meet? A program with a narrow focus will attract attendees with that narrow focus. A program with a broad focus will attract diverse attendees. An introductory-level program will attract relatively inexperienced people. An advanced-level program will attract relatively experienced people.

As Table 1 shows, conferences with more attendees (ACRP, DIA) generally offer more substantial educational programs than conferences with fewer attendees. However, there are exceptions. MAGI and SCOPE offer educational programs that are relatively large for their attendance, while Partnerships and SSS offer relatively small educational programs.

Table 1. Educational Profile

Conference	Attendees	Speakers	Sessions	Tracks	Concurrent*
ACRP	1,824	191	135	15	8 to 10
DIA	7,003	484	327	19	18 to 26
MAGI	563	212	97	6	6 to 8
Partnerships	1,068	109	51	5	2 to 5
SSS	470	11	54	1	9 to 14
SCOPE	674	154	154	11	6
SoCRA	928	95	102	17	8

* Number of concurrent sessions, workshops or roundtable discussions, not counting plenary sessions

Session lengths vary by conference. Sessions can consist of lectures, workshops (often just long lectures), panel discussions, and roundtable discussions. In this article, all are classified as sessions.

Different conferences structure their educational programs differently. Disruptive Innovations has a single track. SSS offers a single-track, followed by 37 roundtable discussions over three time slots. MAGI offers a full program for each of six tracks. The other conferences offer a partial program for each track.

Some conferences provide information on level of sessions, e.g., "introductory" or "advanced." Conferences that offer continuing education contact hours have to meet the quality standards of the accrediting organization.

It is hard to judge the quality of the faculty based on speaker job titles and organizations. However, executives often address topics from a strategic perspective, while individual contributors often address them from a hands-on perspective. Directors and managers often provide a combined perspective. Speakers typically provide the perspectives of their organization. Consultants are often highly expert in their specialties, with exposure to multiple organizations. Speakers from exhibitors are often experts but might be promotional. Most speakers have some bias, whether they know it or not, but most try to present their material in an objective manner. MAGI is the only organization that publishes statistics on the quality of its educational program.

Speakers generally prefer large audiences, while attendees might prefer smaller audiences that offer more opportunity to interact with the speakers and other attendees. It is difficult to estimate audience sizes from the metrics above because the number of concurrent sessions varies by conference and within conferences. Attendees are free to arrive late, skip sessions, and leave early. Exhibitor booth personnel tend not to attend sessions, sometimes because the conference organizer prohibits it without payment of an additional fee.

Attendee Demographics

Attendee demographics vary substantially. (In this article, attendees include all conference participants, including speakers and booth personnel.) Table 2 shows the demographics in two dimensions: seniority and industry sector.

“Senior” refers to attendees who have job titles that include words like “director,” “vice president,” “partner,” “professor,” “chief” and “head.” People with these job titles generally have more decision-making authority than people without such job titles. This article does not analyze seniority by organizational type or size.

“Sponsor” refers to attendees employed by study sponsors, i.e., pharmaceutical, device, equipment and diagnostics companies. “CRO” refers to attendees employed by full-service contract research organizations. “Site” refers to attendees employed by research sites. “Other” refers to everybody else: service providers, product suppliers, consultants, lawyers, government, etc.

Some organizations are difficult to categorize. For example, diagnostics, equipment and chemical/pharmaceutical companies can be both study sponsors and product suppliers.

Table 2. Attendee Demographics

Conference	Attendees	Senior %	Sponsor %	CRO %	Site %	Other %
ACRP	1,824	23	20	10	50	20
DIA	7,003	60	53	7	6	34
MAGI	563	44	21	10	49	20
Partnerships	1,068	72	21	30	5	44
SSS	470	69	9	6	64	21
SCOPE	674	70	27	11	13	49
SoCRA	928	15	15	5	69	11

Partnerships, SCOPE and SSS have the highest percentages of senior attendees, while ACRP and probably SoCRA have the lowest. DIA has, by far, the highest percentage of sponsor attendees, while SSS has, by far, the lowest. Partnerships has, by far, the highest percentage of CRO attendees, while SoCRA, SSS and, surprisingly, DIA have the lowest. SSS and SoCRA have the highest percentage of site attendees, while Partnerships, DIA and SCOPE have the lowest. SCOPE and Partnerships have the highest percentage of Other attendees, while SoCRA has the lowest. ACRP and MAGI have the most balanced sponsor/CRO/site demographics.

The educational programs reflect the functional specialties of conference attendees. Some of the conferences demographics are not reflected in Table 2:

- DIA has extremely diverse demographics that go well beyond clinical research, with strong governmental and international representation. Numerous study sponsors (mostly pharmaceutical companies) participate, but a small number account for a high percentage of attendees, with 13 represented by over 50 attendees each.
- MAGI has strong representation at the senior functional level, i.e., directors and managers. Sites are predominantly large. Study sponsors are split about 70% biopharma and 30% medical device.
- SSS attendees are mostly from small, independent research sites.

Commercial Intensity

Although some conference attendees shy away from the commercial aspects of a conference, exhibitors make important contributions. In addition to their financial support for the conference, they are often willing to share valuable knowledge with attendees. And, of course, some attendees are interested in their products and services — a 2012 survey of MAGI attendees showed that 39% might buy something from an exhibitor.

Exhibitors are especially interested in the balance between sellers and buyers, but it also affects the experience of other attendees because it helps determine the commercial vs. educational character of the conference. Some attendees prefer conferences with a high level of commercial activity; others do not.

Conferences that emphasize outsourcing, e.g., Partnerships, naturally attract exhibitors. Conferences that attract study sponsors (especially DIA and SCOPE) attract exhibitors that market to study sponsors. Conferences that attract research sites (especially ACRP, MAGI, SSS, SoCRA) attract exhibitors that market to research sites. Conferences that attract sponsors plus CROs attract exhibitors from research sites, although not in large numbers.

Attendee demographics also influence speaker demographics and the demographics of other attendees. For example, employees of service providers that serve study sponsor clients are more likely to speak at or attend conferences that attract study sponsors.

Study sponsors tend to prefer conferences with a high concentration of study sponsors, as do organizations that provide services to study sponsors. (However, some conference attendees are more interested in talking to service providers than attending the educational program.) If the ratio of service providers to potential customers grows beyond a certain level, two dynamics tend to rebalance the mix. First, some potential customers can feel overwhelmed by the commercial attention. They might attend a different conference or just stay out of the exhibit hall. Second, competition for customer attention grows, making participation less productive for service providers. In other words, if there are too many wolves and not enough sheep, the sheep flee and the wolves move on to new hunting grounds — it’s the cycle of life. (This analogy is not meant to be derogatory, since exhibitors play valuable roles at conferences and, normally, do not eat their customers. They provide useful information, subsidize attendee registration fees, and, of course, make themselves available to organizations that need service providers.) These dynamics help explain why some exhibitors participate in smaller conferences or those with a lower concentration of potential customers. There may be fewer sheep but there are even fewer wolves.

Based on attendee demographics, we can perform a very rough analysis of the Commercial Intensity of the conferences (Table 3). Commercial Intensity measures the level of competition for the attention of attendees with the authority to make buying decisions. This analysis is very rough because the classification of attendees into buyer vs. seller categories is imprecise. For example, a CRO attendee might be a buyer, a seller, both or neither. A sponsor attendee with decision-making authority over one department probably does not have decision-making authority over other departments. The actual decision-maker might not be the CEO but an individual contributor. Many attendees are neither buyers nor sellers, and have little or no influence on buying decisions. Other metrics may be equally useful.

With respect to seller vs. buyer demographics, there are three types of conferences:

- Sponsors are the main buyers. CROs, Sites and “Other” are the main sellers. Conferences: DIA, Partnerships, SCOPE
- Sites are the main buyers. “Other” are the main sellers. Conferences: SSS, SoCRA
- Sponsors, CROs and Sites are the main buyers. “Other” are the main sellers. Conferences: ACRP, MAGI

Table 3. Commercial Intensity

	Sellers *	Buyers *	Exhibits	Sr. Buyers **	Sellers *	Sellers/ Sr. Buyers	Exhibits/ Sr. Buyers	Commercial Intensity ***
ACRP	O	R S C	87	336	365	1.1	.26	.26
DIA	O C S	S	486	2,227	3,291	1.5	.22	.30
MAGI	O	R S C	21	198	113	0.6	.11	.12
Partnerships	O C S	R S C	109	431	844	5.2	.67	1.00
SSS	O	R	32	208	98	0.5	.15	.13
SCOPE	O C S	S	90	127	492	3.9	.71	.84
SoCRA	O	R	27	96	102	1.1	.28	.27

* Sellers are attendees in the industry sectors that are most likely to be selling to the Buyers, which are in the industry sectors most likely to be buying.
S = Sponsor, C = CRO, R = Research Site, O = Other

** Sr. Buyers are potential customers with senior job titles, i.e., they have decision authority. Numbers assume seniority is distributed equally across industry segments.

***Commercial Intensity = Average of Sellers/Sr. Buyers and Exhibits/Sr. Buyers ratios, normalized so the highest value = 1.00.

This analysis is far from definitive, but it can be useful for organizations without experience exhibiting at a particular conference or at any conferences at all. Conferences, markets and marketing strategies evolve over time, requiring periodic reassessment.

The ratios in Table 3 show that there is a lot of competition for buyers. Sellers want to make contact with as many potential customers as possible, but they outnumber Sr. Buyers at five of the seven conferences. While DIA has, by far, the highest number of Sr. Buyers, getting their attention is especially difficult, which explains the many exhibitor-hosted parties. It is easier to make contact at smaller conferences that have fewer exhibitors, even though the ratios may be inferior from the exhibitor's perspective.

If all the conferences had similar natures, marketplace dynamics should cause them all to have similar Commercial Intensity scores. However, the wide variation in the measure indicates that the conferences are not similar. A high degree of differentiation among conferences indicates a healthy marketplace, with each conference finding its own niche.

Commercial Intensity scores reflect the nature of the conferences:

- **Partnerships** has the highest score (1.00) because, although the proportion of Sr. Buyers is relatively low, they have high buying power. In addition, Partnerships is designed to emphasize commerce.
- **SCOPE** has the second-highest score (.84) because, although the proportion of Sr. Buyers is relatively low, they have high buying power.
- **DIA** has the third-highest score (.30), but it is much lower because it has, by far, the largest number of Sr. Buyers, which are from sponsors, and so have high buying power. However, it also has, by far, the most exhibits and attendees from selling organizations.
- **SoCRA** has the fourth-highest score (.27) because there are relatively few Sr. Buyers and most of them are from research sites.
- **ACRP** is essentially tied for the fourth highest score (.26), for the same reasons.
- **SSS** has the second-lowest score (.13) because the Sr. Buyers (i.e., decision-makers) are mostly from independent research sites, with limited purchasing power.

- **MAGI** has the lowest score (.12) because 60% of the Sr. Buyers are from sites, principally academic medical centers and healthcare systems. The rest are from sponsors and CROs. The low Commercial Intensity score may also be due to the fact that MAGI has a strong educational emphasis, with, by far, the highest ratio of speakers to total attendees (38%).

These findings demonstrate, in part, that the buying power of the Sr. Buyers is more important than their sheer numbers. One sale to a large study sponsor can be worth a thousand sales to an independent research site. For exhibitors, the challenge is to find conferences with enough *potential buying power* for *that exhibitor's services* where the exhibitor can *actually engage* with people who will *make or influence the buying decision*.

An exhibitor might prefer a conference with low commercial intensity, i.e., relatively little competition. Or, it might prefer a conference with high commercial intensity because current exhibitors apparently think it is worthwhile. This decision will hinge, in part, on how well that exhibitor is able to compete for participant attention.

Exhibitors also participate in conferences for commercial reasons other than finding new customers. They can build on existing relationships. They can publicize their company or new product offering, and assess the market's reaction. They can evaluate their competition and the condition of the market. In addition to commerce, they can also take advantage of the educational programs.

The best measure for exhibitors is a conference's track record in generating qualified leads and actual sales. This analysis can help identify conferences likely to be productive and explain why a conference that should have been productive was not.

Conclusion

The educational program, networking opportunities (including business development), and numerous other factors, such as the meeting facilities and layout, organization, and customer service, determine the productivity and quality of a conference. Each of the conferences profiled in this article has its own character and appeal. The challenge for potential participants is to identify conferences that best meet the needs of that specific participant.

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