AALAS' Commercial Partners Identify Ways to Support LAS Pros during COVID-19

By Liz Rozanski, BA, and John Farrar, MBA, CAE

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all AALAS members. From changes in work flows and office locations to postponed events, everyone has been forced to adjust. AALAS commercial partners are not excluded from the chaos and have found opportunities to provide top-notch service while adapting and innovating during this time.

It Takes a Team

Megan MacBride, director of product marketing at Taconic Biosciences, shared that while teamwork and partnering are always important, they are critical ingredients to surviving a crisis like this.

"I have been impressed with how incredibly well our organization has responded to this challenge, with fast action and creative problem solving. Many Taconic employees have been devoting extra hours, from our supply chain personnel working on securing PPE availability for our sites globally, to our front-line animal care and laboratory staff, many of whom have had to shift their work hours," MacBride said.

"Although most employees have experienced disruption to their normal routines and other hardships, we have all pulled together to get the job done because we know how important our animals are, not only to the global fight against COVID-19, but also to find treatments for so many other illnesses that touch every one of us," MacBride added.

Allentown's Director of Marketing, Joe Romano, also emphasized the importance of innovation to deliver quality service.

"We adapted many of our systems and procedures to make certain there are no lapses in service or support." Romano said.

"A prime example was when we performed a virtual factory acceptance test (FAT) with a European client who could not travel to the USA. This multi-faceted, highly technical event was attended by stakeholders both in Europe and the USA and the live group at Allentown conducted reviews of all of the fundamental requirements of the housing project via digital broadcast. A first for Allentown, but one of many adaptations we have made to ensure no lapses in customer care or support."

Allentown was deemed an essential business by the state of New Jersey and their operations continued uninterrupted since the onset of the pandemic.

Beth Collins from Lighthouse Life Sciences also emphasized an "all hands-on deck" approach. Lighthouse provides infection prevention and disinfection technologies.

"This is a time of unprecedented demand, and we are working diligently to support the community and provide products to our customers. Our group is offering resources and support pertaining to best practices for cleaning and disinfection so facilities can ensure they have effective infection prevention measures," Collins said.

Paulina Michaud from Tecniplast shared that like many, COVID-19 presented significant challenges to essential businesses but pivoted quickly to implement remote work, keep all service engineers on the road, and the factory up and running to deliver to customers.

"When a FAT needed to be scheduled for a new installation at Marquette University, the Tecniplast team implemented a livestream approach broadcast to multiple cities and stakeholders in the U.S. This was a "first" for not just Tecniplast, but also for the customer," Michaud explained.

Adapting to Challenges with an Eye on Service

Somark's chief commercial officer, Jay Campbell, like so many of AALAS' commercial members, knew that as facilities closed and stay-at-home orders were issued, companies needed to rise to the challenge and find ways to stay connected and provide services.

"Beyond the health and wellbeing concerns for our collective customers, we also recognized that this may create a void of continued education for everyone. I assumed many other companies serving the AALAS community like Somark would think of ways to stay connected and that likely would have to be through online meetings and web-based presentations," Campbell said.

Campbell was concerned that as companies reached out to customers at the same time, the hundreds of emails would largely be perceived as spam. He contacted some industry colleagues and volunteered to organize some webinars. The response was overwhelming. Seven initial companies committed to developing content and were willing to provide multiple presentations. The webinars are announced on ACE in the Meetings and Events community and the content provided, often by competitors, has filled a void. At publication date, nearly 3,500 lab animal professionals have viewed a webinar.

"It has been rewarding to have everyone join together for the greater good of our collective customers," Campbell said.

Diana Wells with Sentier noted that their staff are all work-

ing from home in an effort to help flatten the curve.

"We've adapted to still reach out to our customers with live demos and in services, tips and tricks, and coming into their clinics. They have had a tough time of it. If open at all, it's a curbside non elective procedure business at best," Wells said.

Wells noted that their company's monitors are portable in nature with a long battery life. This affords the veterinarians and their staff to do ECG, SpO2 and temp – as well as monitor BP on pets in the car or in a remote place within the hospital or parking lot using the free apps available.

"We've also had recent case studies of companion animals coming in for isolation with *Leptospirosis* as well as parvovirus so it's been helpful to leave the animals on monitoring equipment while monitoring them out of the isolation rooms. That's been a huge help," Wells said.

Wells added that through the pandemic many lessons have been learned, but like everyone they are all eager to get back to a normal way of life or the new normal ways of life.

Matthew Buccioni, a Technical Support Specialist at Virox Technologies, Inc., specializes in biosecurity education and technical support for chemical disinfection.

"Before the COVID-19 pandemic gained a foothold, we might have thought more about cleaning and disinfection in the context of animal care surfaces, with the aim of preventing outbreaks in animals. While the importance of this has certainly not gone away, LAS stakeholders are likely thinking more about how cleaning and disinfection can keep everyone healthy," Buccioni said.

Buccioni noted that COVID-19 is changing the game when it comes to infection prevention. Lessons learned by the public are concepts LAS professionals employ daily for infection prevention and biosecurity program. Challenges present new opportunities for improved strategies. Team member health and well-being during this time is a challenge. Absences are bad enough in regular times, but in the context of a pandemic, can be much more serious. It can be difficult for research projects to progress and may impact the ability to provide animal care. Infection prevention helps team members, animal wellbeing, and long-term research program success.

Taconic's MacBride has also noted a focus on education, communication, and excellent service. Many of their PI/scientist customers were sidelined from lab activities due to stay-at-home orders. Taconic found this the perfect time to engage them about planning future projects. Phone and online consultations about study planning, model design, and educational needs are taking place.

"In response to the tremendous surge in demand we've seen for quality educational content, Taconic expanded the educational resources we routinely provide to customers. For example, we organized some of our educational materials into "Learn at Home Series," organized around different therapeutic areas. Efforts like these enable researchers to take this unexpected time at home to catch up on the latest science," MacBride noted.

Technology is playing an important role in communication among AALAS commercial partners and their customers.

Allentown has had to adapt systems and procedures to make certain there are no lapses in service and support.

"We also have been interfacing digitally with our customers on a daily basis, and have had to innovate when necessary," Romano said. "A prime example was when we performed a virtual Factory Acceptance Test with a European client who could not travel to the US. This multi-faceted, highly technical event was attended by stakeholders both in Europe and the US, and the live group at Allentown conducted reviews of all the fundamental requirements of the housing project via digital broadcast. A first for Allentown, but one of many adaptations we have made to ensure no lapses in customer care or support."

Innovation for the Win

When facing unprecedented challenges, all the participating commercial partners recognized and emphasized that innovation and flexibility are key to meeting their goals and customers' needs.

"On the laboratory animal professional side, we know that this is a really tough time. Depending on the institution, they may be running normal operations or working with just a skeleton crew to keep essential experiments and colonies going. We have been working closely with our customers to understand what they need. In times of crisis like these, securing a line through cryopreservation is critical, and so that's one way we've been supporting many institutions. We have also temporarily modified our cancellation policy to provide more flexibility because we know our customers are having to make many unanticipated order changes on short notice," MacBride from Taconic noted.

MacBride explained that their approach to partnering with customers has been invaluable. They have been able to come up with solutions together by focusing on the problem and being flexible. For example, after one customer's vivarium closed to new deliveries, an alternate plan was developed to start the animals on a special diet at Taconic instead of shipping them to the customer site for diet induction. By the time the customer's vivarium reopens, the mice will be ready for the next phase of the experiment. The ability to be flexible and nimble in offering these types of solutions enables progress to continue for customers' research, despite the closure of labs or vivariums.

Austin Fritsch was one of the first Tecniplast customers to attend a virtual factory acceptance testing for a cage washer. He and Alecia Bjerke, an animal facility manager, feel that going virtual for this event has revealed other opportunities for innovation.

Michaud agreed. "The technology and set up used to conduct the virtual FAT for Marquette, can help other purposes in the future, such as training sessions for those who cannot travel due to conflicting schedule or other reasons. It can be used to supervise or assist equipment installation remotely. It also gives possibility for additional team members to join a FAT, such as the architects or other contractors when they cannot travel due to conflicting schedules or budget," she added.

"I think training using an electronic format is terrific! These days we have everything on the palm of our hand. Your customers can pull a video and learn how to change a filter, or

how to replace runners. Being able to do this would be very advantageous," Fritsch said.

"We love having the technicians doing hands-on training, but obviously, this is an option for a situation like COVID-19, or if someone's schedule might get fully booked all of a sudden, and he or she may not be able to attend. Also, it gives people the possibility to watch it online. You can have this recorded, and as you are using the product down the road, you can go back and reference the training to remind yourself of the recommendations," Bjerke added.

Lessons Learned

AALAS commercial partners have learned a variety of lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic. By emphasizing being flexible and agile in their approaches to problems, they have identified ways to meet the challenges that travel and work from home restrictions have presented.

When face-to-face interactions are curtailed, the ability to pivot quickly to technology and present alternative solutions is important. By making their customers the priority and offering innovative resources, commercial members have been able to support and encourage the critical roles their fellow AALAS members and LAS professionals hold.

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