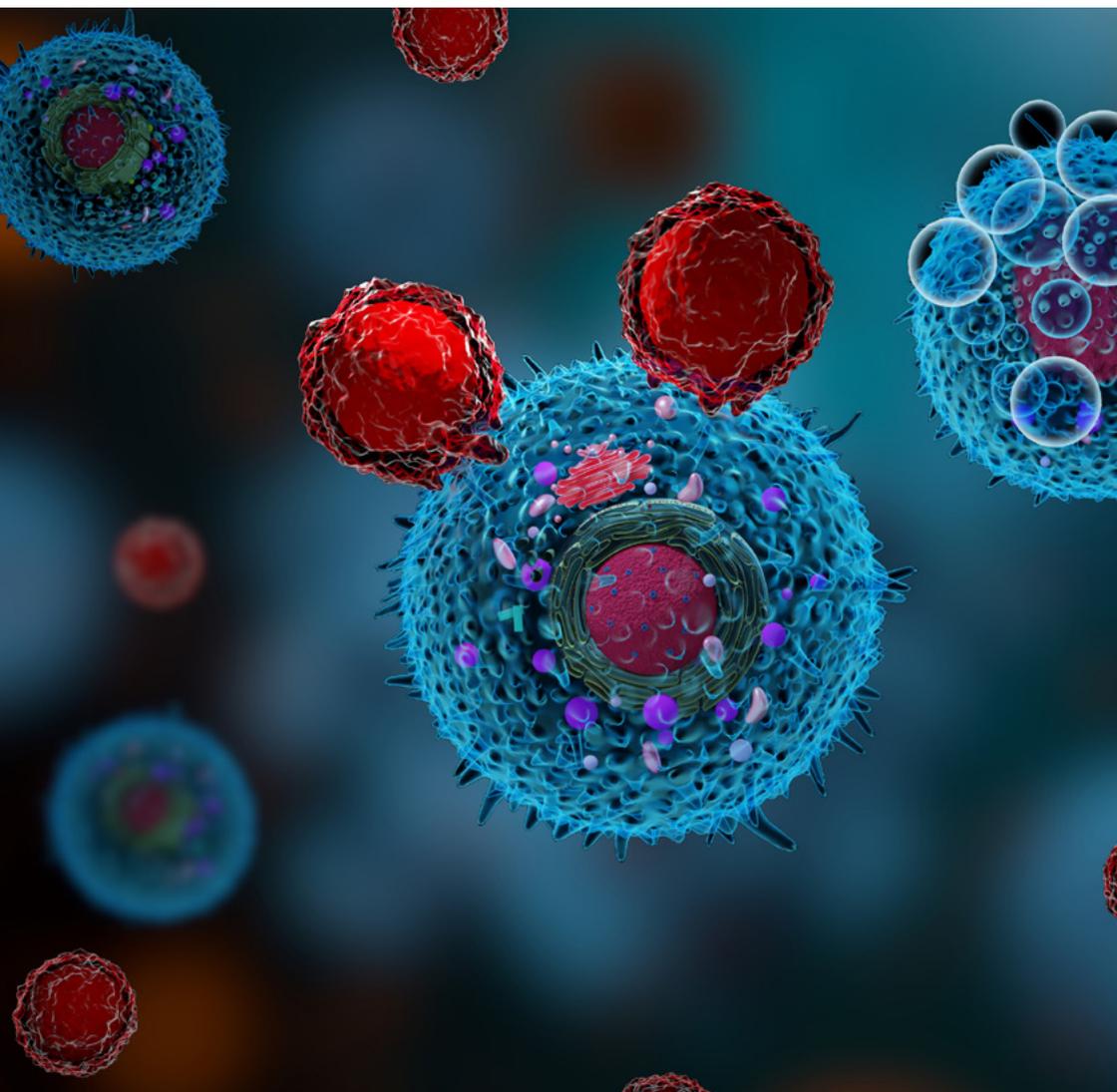


# Outsourcing in Clinical Trials 2026

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# A Strategic Guide to Becoming a Sponsor of Choice

By **Carrie Lewis**, Executive Director, Clinical Program Optimization at Keenova Therapeutics

**H**ave you ever wondered what truly sets a Sponsor of Choice apart in the eyes of clinical research sites? As a leader in the industry, this is a question worth reflecting on every day. At Endo, we once launched a theme called “The Year of the Site”—a theme that had such an impact on what we did, it continues because of its importance..

In the complex landscape of clinical research, sites play a pivotal role. Sponsors cannot run successful studies without strong site partnerships. Behind every success story lies a solid relationship, and while we often focus on internal and vendor relationships, the connection with our sites has historically been overlooked.

According to some published industry surveys the inclusion of site feedback in protocol design dropped. Satisfaction with overall site payment amounts fell, indicating that compensation may not be keeping pace with rising costs. These numerous statistics highlight the challenges sites face—getting up and running, staying operational and retaining skilled staff. In an industry that depends on site success to ensure high-quality studies, Sponsors must actively support their sites.

A key change to be a Sponsor of Choice for Endo was the addition of our **Site Relationship Manager** who plays a crucial role in strengthening site partnerships. This role serves as a liaison between the site and Sponsor, ensuring the site’s perspective is considered. For example, after we receive site feedback on the protocol draft, we do a protocol walkthrough. During this meeting, our

Site Relationship Manager assumes the role of a Study Coordinator while another team member is a potential participant, helping us identify and address issues before finalizing protocols and ensures the protocol is logistically aligned with site practice. While perfection is elusive, this proactive approach helps us integrate site feedback and point of view early in the process.

Additionally, the Site Relationship Manager collaborates with the Clinical Operations team to review site-facing documents such as email blasts, newsletters, Informed Consent Forms, and more to ensure they are clear, engaging, and actionable. Her experience as a former Site Director helps us improve our communications with sites. This is ever present when she collaborates internally with Data Management team on queries and CRF guidelines. Places where sites can sometimes struggle with guidance, so we work to have the site point of view in those processes as well. Lastly, the Site Relationship Manager engages with sites both in person and virtually to cultivate strong, trust-based relationships. This strategic engagement ensures sites have a dependable advocate and partner throughout the trial.

Another area we try to succeed at is simply **listening!** That sounds easy but can be surprisingly difficult at times. We are mindful of their concerns and make a conscious effort to implement meaningful change on their behalf. For example, we have had internal meetings where we address site frustrations that were shared directly, or just from online forums. Then revamped processes such as outlining our training expectations more directly in advance or streamlining communication to sites to be more effective.

Listening has also brought change to our query process. We use direct outreach to ensure we pick up the phone instead of re-querying and are cautious to avoid simply querying to confirm what is already stated. We actively seek input from our sites through an annual survey, which they can choose to complete anonymously. When a site provides constructive feedback and identifies themselves, we follow up with a personal call to better understand their experience and explore ways we can provide meaningful support.

Site teams are not a one-size-fits-all, thus we have spent time internally training our clinical operations team to **get to know their sites**. Know what works for each site and doing our best to customize our work flow per each site's needs. For example, ask the site if they prefer paper or electronic files, phone calls or emails. That may also mean making personnel changes based on personalities. In any partnership, you must get to know each other. Sometimes the simple things can have a huge impact on a relationship.

**Fair payments** are another critical factor to becoming a Sponsor of Choice. Work to pay on time and pay fairly, including paying for screen failures. At the end of the day, sites are businesses and many of them operate on small margins where keeping the doors open can be difficult. Lastly, listen to them if they need to re-negotiate at any point. I look at paying sites the same way as paying vendors, and we pay all vendors for the work done so why do we continually tell sites that is part of business? We need to listen and compromise in ways that are reasonable and beneficial for both organizations.

Another strategy to become a Sponsor of Choice is **supporting naïve site staff**. While it's tempting to rely on familiar sites, embracing new ones is essential. High turnover among Principal Investigators (PIs) can disrupt trials and cause delays. Expanding our pool of sites to include diverse locations and new faces strengthens our research infrastructure. Recognizing the challenges faced by naïve sites

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is key to effective engagement. By offering tailored support, we empower these sites to contribute meaningfully to clinical trials. Implementing targeted strategies fosters stronger collaboration and improves trial outcomes.

Finally, one of my favorite initiatives we implemented to better listen to our sites, and drive internal and vendor improvements, was the creation of a **Site Operational Advisory Board**. Each year, we bring together approximately ten sites to provide feedback on key topics such as startup and feasibility, contracts and budgets, training, and vendor interactions. We welcome all feedback and genuinely seek areas for improvement. One area where I personally gained valuable insight from this board was site expectations around detailed budgets. We discovered that despite our good intentions, some internal practices inadvertently made site budget review more difficult. These open and sometimes challenging conversations helped us understand site needs and allow us to explain our processes—leading to mutual understanding and improvement.

In conclusion, becoming a **Sponsor of Choice** requires intentional effort, open communication, being adaptable, self-reflection, and a strong commitment to site success. By valuing our site partnerships and continuously seeking improvement, we pave the way for more effective and impactful clinical research.