



**Susan Flinn Cobian**  
President  
HYC Health

# A Voice for the Times

## *A conversation with Susan Flinn Cobian*

specialty pharmaceutical, medical device, and diagnostic companies. Under her leadership, the agency has grown from a single employee into a multimillion dollar company with four new business wins in 2017, and more than 45 creative awards on its shelves. Cobian herself has been recognized as a PharmaVOICE 100 honoree, a Chicago Business Journal Woman of Influence, a member of MM&M's Hall of Femme, and twice as a PM360 Elite for her entrepreneurship and leadership skills.

### A Pragmatic Beginning

Cobian's path to the top has not been traditional, but that should come as no surprise to anyone who knows her. Armed with a history degree and having rethought a career in law, Cobian needed a job. "I fell into advertising. I could type 120 words a minute and took a position as an executive assistant at KPR," she recalls. At the time, KPR, otherwise known as Kallir, Phillips, Ross, had a chunk of business from the pharma giant GlaxoSmithKline. She worked directly with industry groundbreaker Marcia McLaughlin as an assistant. They recognized Cobian's creativity and strategic thinking and she quickly rose through the ranks from an account coordinator to account executive to account manager.

Cobian has worked at some of the industry's best-known agencies in both New York and Chicago, including Goble & Associates (now Sandbox), Abelson-Taylor, Topin & Associates (now an HCB Health company), Robert A. Becker (now Havas), LLNS, Flaum Communications and Interlink Healthcare Communications. Along the way she developed a powerful Rolodex — relationships that she still deeply values today. She also counts some of the industry's most iconic figures — Sander Flaum, Ron Pantello, Dale Taylor, Al Paz, Terry Wachalter, etc. — as mentors.

In fact, it was Flaum, Paz, and Wachalter who gave Cobian a shot at running an office on her own. Literally, on her own. She opened Becker's Chicago office. "It was me, a fax machine and my Rolodex," she recalls. "I built that Chicago office from scratch. I was there for five years and turned it from zero to about \$15 million in revenue. It was a blast. Then I got a call from a friend, the head of HR, to rebrand Lyons Lavey Nickel Swift in New York. I did that for a while, and then while still in New York

took over Interlink, which was on the verge of bankruptcy."

Cobian's goal was to get back to Chicago (yes, she is a Cubs fan), which resulted in her starting HYC Health.

"All these experiences were as different as could be. I have been very fortunate to be able to take all the good things from all of these great agencies and use the skills I learned," she says. "We did everything from scratch. You just had to figure it out. There were no training programs — it was all on-the-job training. They threw you in the deep end and said fix it. It was an amazing experience and incredibly fun."

### Finding Her Voice

As fun as the entrepreneurial training ground of the 1980s was, Cobian says she paid her dues, and through those experiences she found her voice and management style. "When I started out, I had to pick up my boss's dry cleaning, get coffee, run errands — back then you didn't question it," she says. "It was never, oh, he's pushing me down, it could have been a female boss for all that it mattered."

She was grateful for all she learned, but eventually Cobian was no longer content to sit in the back of the room. "I had my fair share of 'okay, thank you little girl, I don't need you to speak up,'" she says. "That just made me mad and I worked very hard to become the most sought-after voice in the room."

We would like to think those days are all but gone, but Cobian says despite a self-proclaimed affinity for being more strident than most, there is still a patriarchal hangover from the good-old bad days of being a woman in a "man's world." "As recently as 12 months ago during a meeting, a senior-level executive in his 50s sat down and immediately directed his attention to my much younger male colleague. I was obviously the senior-most person in the room, yet he zeroed in on the only other man. Cue the eye rolling," she says.

Happily, she says this doesn't happen nearly as much as it used to, especially with the clients that make up the agency's roster.

She firmly believes that people, especially women, have to ask for what they want. "If you don't ask for it, you're not going to get it, and don't take no for an answer," she says. "Demand what you want. There's a great book,

### Don't tell her she's too intense.

Don't tell her she can't do something because she's a woman. And, definitely don't tell her something won't work because it's never been done before. Susan Flinn Cobian's rise to the top was earned the old-fashioned way — hard work and perseverance. Today, she wants to be the voice in the room that makes a difference for clients and her teams. With her vision set on world domination, Cobian brings an entrepreneurial mindset and visionary leadership to HYC Health.

Having worked at several agencies during her 30-plus year career, including building two agencies from the ground up and bringing three others back to life, she learned a lot of lessons about what to do and what not to do. Today, as president of HYC Health she wants her agency to be the one everybody wants to work with — employees and clients alike.

"I want us to have fun. I want people to learn. I want people to want to come to work every day," Cobian says. "I don't want to be just another agency. I want HYC Health to be the agency that clients are excited to work with. From day one, that's been my approach. And world domination would be good too."

She has been at the helm of HYC Health for the last four years, during which time she has focused the agency's energies on delivering everything from soup to nuts for mid-size

*Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office*, that I read a long time ago. As a woman, you just have to have thicker skin."

Cobian is unabashed in sharing her opinions, especially when it comes to doing what's best for clients and employees. She gets a thrill out of achieving the unachievable and shattering preconceptions about what defines an industry leader.

Not only is she willing to try new things for her clients, but she is teaching new ways of thinking to her agency cohorts as well. Cobian strongly believes that there is a need for the millennial generation to find its voice.

"I'm very vocal about this. When I talk at conferences or to groups of young women or for that matter men, who are just starting out, I urge them to develop a voice and to take a seat at the table and ask for what they want and not to be afraid," she says. "I tell them so what if someone says no; you are not going to get anything if you don't ask. I once had a male boss tell me my voice was too loud and that I needed to tone it down and be more feminine. So at the next meeting, I literally spoke louder. There will always be another job, there will always be a better boss, there will always be somebody who is willing to fight for you. You just need to have the confidence that you're going to find that person."

Cobian has created an environment where everybody has a voice. She consistently encourages people to bring their ideas forward. "New employees are less and less afraid to speak up, whereas previously they might have been hesitant to say something," she says.

To help facilitate the communication process, Cobian once employed a local improv troupe to help team members think differently. And every month two people are selected to present a topic of their choosing to the entire agency. She has even gone so far as to bring in an etiquette coach.

"I don't mean this in a negative way, but we have a lot young people who aren't comfortable starting a conversation or know what fork to use at a fancy dinner," she says. "They need to know how to engage with clients in order to form a relationship with them."

## Wanted: Strategic Thinkers

Make no mistake, Cobian has a "velvet hammer" leadership style. She is a stickler for manners and good grammar. And as supportive as she is, Cobian asks a lot from her folks — starting with the interview — she is looking for strategic thinkers.

"I interviewed two people recently — they had very good agency pedigrees — I asked a very simple question: When's the last time you

came up with a new idea for a client's business. Unfortunately, many times I hear it's a collaborative process or a team effort," she says.

"I want people who can think," she adds. "I want people who can hold a conversation with a client and be persuasive because they're passionate about an idea, not because they are doing what the client asked or saying what they think they should say. I want people who are willing to go out on a limb and say to a client: 'I think you really should look at X.' Then I want them to have the experience to execute on the idea."

Cobian looks for people who can use their brains, who don't ask foolish questions, and who don't need to constantly be told what to do to finish a job. In short, she looks for bold, passionate, hungry people who are not happy with the status quo. And, don't ever, ever tell her that something can't be done differently because it's always been done one way or another.

To stimulate different ways of thinking, the agency sponsors team events like escape rooms and scavenger hunts. She believes this helps people learn how to think on their feet so that they can "punt" if need be. "We want our people to act more like business partners and consultants rather than just agency account people," Cobian says. "This is my philosophy anyway. The better someone can think, the more he or she can be challenged, the better they are going to be."

Cobian also looks to hire generalists rather than specialists. "I want people who have an open mind and a sense of adventure," she says. "Folks are not going to come here and work on the same old, same old every day. They just aren't. Most clients want things that haven't been done before, so I need people who can figure it out as we go. I need people who can say, 'I just had this fabulous idea.' You would be surprised at how many people just don't have that capacity."

Cobian walks the walk and rewards people who have a voice, who have innovative ideas, and who aren't afraid to fail.

"People challenge me all the time and I like that," she says. "I love to debate. The art of conversation is dying, especially with younger kids who text and tweet. They don't have real conversations; they can't hold conversations anymore. We take great pains to take them out of their comfort zone and say figure it out — here's a whiteboard, free think. Too many people don't know how to think for themselves."

## A Marketing Shift

Like many of her peers, Cobian has noted a shift in how client companies develop their

in-house marketing teams — a shift that by default leaves the agency as the one consistent in the life of the brand.

"Marketing used to be a major and coveted position — one became head of marketing and then chief operating officer and then maybe CEO. This isn't the case any longer. Today people don't stay in marketing forever," Cobian says.

At the end of the day, she believes impactful healthcare advertising starts with giving clients what they need, not necessarily what they want, and not necessarily what you sell, and being a good partner.

"I want the agency-client mindset to be that of a relationship, a mutually beneficial relationship," she says. "It goes back to wanting everybody to be happy. What we do is fun. We're not cleaning up the streets here. We're doing pharmaceutical advertising.

And after 33 years in the business, I still love it and I still learn something new every day," Cobian continues. "I think it all starts with a desire to do well and to do good, but ultimately turns into a desire to do better and create something amazing at the end of the day." ■

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