

By Robin Robinson

# Client-Agency Partnerships

The secret sauce of successful agency-client teams: transparency, authenticity, and understanding.



## THE DUO

**CYNTHIA ACCUOSTI JONES**

Janssen Oncology

**ERICKA WILHELMS MCKENNA**

21GRAMS, part of Real Chemistry

Cynthia Jones, director of marketing, prostate portfolio, at Janssen Oncology, and Ericka McKenna, executive VP, group account director, at 21GRAMS, part of Real Chemistry, had worked together on several projects at Janssen and were excited to work together again. While their working relationship was well-established they both had to build new teams from the ground up for the Erleada assignment, while in the virtual world of the pandemic. The two had fun using matrimonial language to portray their partnership.

"It was love at first pitch," Ericka says. "Cynthia and I know each other from the past, have always understood each other, and we like partnering with each other. This foundation of trust helped both of us get our teams started on the right foot when the relationship kicked off in earnest in the late March, early April time frame."

"Ericka and I had really developed a lot of respect and trust for one another's thinking and ways of approaching problems, but we now had to build and bring two new teams together all virtually," Cynthia says. "Once we said 'I do' at the offer, we focused on keeping everyone engaged in the relationship from there."

Cynthia was cultivating a brand-new team for the assignment, while also onboarding and getting to know everyone on Ericka's team. It was a lot of "new" to cope with in a foreign virtual environment, but the women met the challenge head-on. "The very first discussion we had after we inked the RFP was how to resolve the

Cynthia Accuosti Jones, director of marketing, prostate portfolio at Janssen Oncology, and Ericka Wilhelms McKenna, executive VP, group account director at 21GRAMS, part of Real Chemistry, have known each other professionally for five years and have worked on projects together while working at Janssen. They jumped at the opportunity to partner again when Janssen was seeking RFPs for a different marketing approach for Erleada, a prescription medicine used for the treatment of prostate cancer, and 21GRAMS won the RFP.

issue of building teams while remote working," she says. "Part of the fun was figuring out how to achieve what usually happens naturally when you're all together in one big conference room. We found ways to work around the virtual environment by setting the intention to create a space for the conversations and interactions that normally happen in hallways and more organic settings. Creating those opportunities for both one-on-one and larger group discussions allowed team alignment to occur."

The two wanted to build teams that would bring fresh thinking to a business challenge that could really "unlock value" for the future. While building the teams, diversity became

a priority. "One of the challenges we set was, how can we actually start building teams that look more like our patient populations overall and can really bring that voice to the table," Cynthia says. "I've learned a lot about the importance of getting the right people in the right roles."

"Your teams have to reflect the world around you," Ericka says. "If you have five people in the room who all come from the same background, chances are they're all going to have the same ideas. We wanted to bring diversity across the board — racial, ethnic, gender, as well as diversity of professional backgrounds — to make sure we were bringing folks to the table with more of a consumer mindset than a traditional healthcare mindset."

In addition to diversity, the two women wanted there to be strong partnerships at every level. For the relationship to be successful, it couldn't be only Ericka and Cynthia who trusted and respected each other. That bond needed to spread throughout both of the teams.

In the end, as soon as the members from both teams started working together, they clicked.

"Culturally, everyone's a really great fit for one another," Ericka says. "Fortunately, the personalities on both teams have made the transition into a working relationship very smooth. You'll hear Cynthia and I use a lot of marriage metaphors, but I think they are useful. For example, 'love is like bread. It needs to be made fresh daily.' We bring that mindset every day to the relationship, and that permeates to all functions on both sides. We set that intention, but it is happening in an organic way as well."



## The COVID Challenge

Creating synergy between two new teams during lockdown was an extreme challenge, but the two set about the task with intention. “We came up with a program that identified who we are as an agency, and how we wanted our partnership with Cynthia’s team to be structured to bring people quickly up to speed,” Ericka says. “We worked closely with Cynthia and her brand to identify learnings that we could share that would be meaningful to their team. We respected there was a certain amount of Zoom burnout from being in long virtual meetings during COVID, so we created structured sessions around our working process: how we get to deep insights and the way that we produce creative work, how we can speed up the work, our philosophy around ‘Be kind to each other, be hard on the work.’ Having those planned conversations and building those into our onboarding was crucial to get that buy-in early on.”

In these meetings, both sides were asked to share their point of view on what each team needed from the other and share thoughts on how the two teams could work effectively

together. “It was so helpful to hear from Cynthia, and from Meg and Juliette who work with her, on what their team would benefit from hearing from us,” Ericka says. “It was collaborative. It was more of a conversation about how we’re going to come together and get our hands around the potter’s wheel together and shape something new. It was more art than science, from my perspective. It worked very well because we were willing to be flexible and hear from each other about what that process needed to look like and the information that we needed to share with each other.”

### Secret Sauce

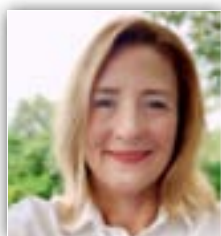
Every relationship has its secret ingredient to making the partnership work. For Cynthia and Ericka, that ingredient lies in the magic of their teams. They were able to build two teams with one mind: it’s not an agency and a brand, but one collective business.

“Our team members all have skin in the game and we’re all respectful,” Cynthia says. “It’s not a matter of our ideas versus your ideas. I wanted my team to believe in Ericka’s team

and consider them part of our team.

I told them we’re not going to hire this agency and then tell them how to do it. We will provide them with the inputs and the insights that we know. I wanted my team to understand that when you bring someone in to make you think differently, you have to open your mind to a different way of looking at a problem. As much as I knew Ericka, she’s an n of 1, and I’m an n of 1 and our teams are really what makes the magic happen.”

The magic between Cynthia and Ericka began on a long bus ride in Rome, surprisingly. On business travel, they discovered they both had a tendency for motion sickness, so they sat up front on the bus. The whole time they talked about being working moms and being away from home. “It’s easy for us to forget in this business, which can be so serious and so deadline-oriented, that relating person to person is what makes this whole thing work,” Ericka says. “I always think back to that bus ride as a little gift from heaven that we got stuck together on that winding road to Rome, which allowed us to get to know each other and understand each other better.”



### THE DUO

#### CHRISTINA (CHRISTY) ENGLAND

Heron Therapeutics

#### MARIE BOYLE

Spectrum Science

May 12, 2021, will always be a special date for Christina (Christy) England, VP marketing, acute care franchise at Heron Therapeutics, and Marie Boyle, senior VP at Spectrum Science. May 12 was the day that Zynrelef, a post-surgical analgesic, was approved by the FDA after two previous setbacks. The drug became commercially available July 1, 2021. The two women worked closely together alongside their teams to prepare for the launch of the new pain reliever, but additionally positioned Zynrelef as a new solution to the medical response to the opioid addiction pandemic.

The two women have worked together for about five years and both have master’s degrees in public health, a shared background they found very helpful for this particular task. Marie was assigned to lead the Spectrum

Christina (Christy) England, VP, marketing, acute care franchise, Heron Therapeutics, and Marie Boyle, senior VP at Spectrum Science, have been working together for five years preparing for the approval and launch of Zynrelef, the first and only extended-release dual-acting local anesthetic for postoperative pain. Heron is redefining postoperative pain management with non-opioid options that may offer healthcare providers better ways to safely and effectively manage postoperative pain, thus reducing the reliance on opioid treatments.

team because of her experience working at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention managing opioid programs. “Part of what makes our partnership work so well is we’re able to be hyper-focused on the science, but also have that broad holistic awareness of the public health space,” Marie says.

“The whole team at Spectrum is amazing but I was so pleased when Marie came on board with her MPH, and I also have my MPH, which is very rare for a marketer,” Christy adds.

Their shared backgrounds were a big benefit in presenting the new campaign for Zynrelef, aimed at not only educating about the new form of painkiller as a substitute for opioids but also how it can help slow the opioid addiction crisis. Heron Therapeutics is dedicated to countering the opioid epidemic, particularly through reducing or eliminating unnecessary opioid use in the postoperative setting.

The effort includes the development of The Surgical Taskforce Organized to Prevent (S.T.O.P.) Opioid Abuse to raise awareness about the surgical setting as a gateway to opioid abuse. Heron Therapeutics has helped form and sponsor the coalition dedicated to inspiring healthcare providers, patients, and payers across the country to take action and commit to reducing unnecessary exposure to opioids in the surgical setting. As one the group’s founding sponsors, Heron brought together various medical societies — surgical, anesthesiology, and nursing — and policy and patient advocate groups to work together. Through the work of the coalition, Heron aims to further understand postoperative prescribing habits and ways to prevent unnecessary exposure to opioids. The coalition will use these findings to improve pain management in the surgical setting, create awareness, and bring change around opioid use and develop an online resource center for best practices in re-



ducing the number of opioids prescribed in the postoperative setting.

While this broader approach had to be sold to Heron's executive team, it wasn't a really hard sell. "We had to roll up the plan, the mission, and the vision ensure the executive team supported the initiative," Christy says. "The leadership team here understands the bigger picture. They understood the benefit of looking at this holistically and taking a public health approach in terms of educating around the disease state. They fully bought in."

"The public health-focused coalition is made up of providers, patients, and folks who are coming together to talk about how to collectively address practice and policies and prevent this crisis," Marie says. "Heron is 100% behind this initiative, because it's all about making an impact in the right way. This is an idea that resonated, and people signed on immediately."

While they were planning for launch, the drug ran into some hiccups. The drug received two FDA complete response letters, the first in May 2019 for manufacturing issues and the second in 2020 for concerns related to quantifying the exposure to certain excipients used in the drug.

"It's definitely been a journey," Christy says. "We had some road bumps along the way, but having a solid PR firm on board to help us navigate was critically important."

The two viewed these setbacks as minor, believing that the science behind Zenrelief was so solid, it was just a matter of time before it got approved.

"At Spectrum, we pride ourselves in being a science-first strategic partner," Marie says. "We put a strategic lens on the science, and we knew the product fulfilled a huge unmet need from both a pain management perspective, but also as an aid for the opioid crisis, in terms of

preventing people from needing to use opioids after surgery. In scenario planning, we always plan for every possible circumstance. To Christy and the team's credit at Heron, we pivoted quickly as a team because of that open communication and the relationship and trust that we have."

"We could have seen the CRLS as our big challenge, but we knew we had this amazing product that can truly have an impact from a preventative perspective, and it would be approved," Christy says.

### COVID Challenges

One challenge they weren't prepared for — who was? — was the pandemic. They had already been working virtually, communicating from East Coast to West Coast daily, as Spectrum Science had been operating virtually for years. However, they still had to deal with how to shift all the launch elements to virtual and do it fast.

"The bigger challenge from a COVID perspective was how do we completely change the in-person plan we developed — from approval to launch," Christy says. "We had in-person events, interviews, media tours, and other things scheduled that we had to quickly transition to virtual while making sure that we were still reaching people in an environment that was turned upside down."

"We have always worked as a virtual group and think of ourselves as one team," Marie says. "This allowed us to pivot quickly and figure out what we needed to do to get things done in a virtual format."

### Secret Sauce

It is this one-team mentality that is their secret sauce for success.

"The best work we've done together is

when we've functioned as one team," Christy says. "We don't consider Spectrum as a vendor partner, but as an integrated part of the Heron team."

"The Heron team is super-helpful," Marie says. "They integrate us in with the other teams that they work with. Christy connects me to the right people within Heron who I need to be in touch with as well as the other agency partners — we are all a collective team, which doesn't always happen. We appreciate that tremendously, and it really helps us produce the best possible results."

According to both Christy and Marie, transparency and collaboration are the two elements that ensure the best results from their teams and others.

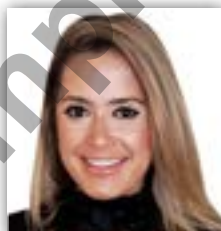
Given today's time pressures it's difficult to not just jump right in and start barking orders, but open, honest, and transparent communication is the best way to go, Marie says. "It was also very important to establish a relationship between the teams first," she adds. "We took the time to understand each other and what we're trying to achieve before the actual work started."

For example, Marie and Christy know that what they have in common forms their close relationship. "We have similar working styles and we're both type A," Marie says. "We're both online late at night just getting it done."

"And we're both mothers of young kids, so we completely understand everything we have on our plates and understand what's got to be done," Christy adds.

The duo's favorite moment was the day Zynrelief was approved. "This is a day I'll never forget," Marie says. "I remember the nervous anxiety, and the waiting. Being able to celebrate together and be joyous together in that moment was just special." Virtually, that is.

"We were sending text messages of champagne," Christy says.



### THE DUO

#### TRICIA YAP

Bristol Myers Squibb

#### RACHEL CHOPRA

Evoke

In less than nine months, Tricia Yap, executive director, dermatology at Bristol Myers Squibb,

Without ever meeting face-to-face, Tricia Yap, executive director, dermatology, Bristol Myers Squibb, and Rachel Chopra, senior VP, client partner, Evoke, started their working relationship from scratch during the COVID lockdown. Quickly, they became a "power working couple." In just a matter of months, they set up their teams to partner well to bring a new product to market.

and Rachel Chopra, senior VP, client partner at Evoke, both working moms, developed a trusting working relationship that blossomed into a true friendship that set a solid foundation for their teams to springboard from as they bring a new product to market.

Even though they didn't meet face to face until just recently, the two women clicked right away.

"Honestly, it was like we had not met," Rachel says. "No matter what relationship you're in, you need to understand each other, and we do."

"Our success is not so much about the agency and client relationship, as it is about our relationship and the relationship of our teams," Tricia says. "The same things that are important to any relationship are just as



important here. Rachel and I took a lot of time early on to make sure that we both got to know each other personally, as well as professionally and we encouraged opportunities for our teams to do the same with virtual happy hours and ways of working sessions. We're all human, and at the end of the day we go the extra mile for people we know."

The successful partnership didn't occur by chance. Tricia was looking for the right person to work with her and her worldwide commercialization team. After being interviewed, Rachel was chosen to be the lead on the Evoke team. "One of the reasons we chose Rachel was because we felt she was going to be such a great fit, not only for me and my director at the time, but for the broader team," Tricia says. "It felt really easy and really smooth."

The two quickly developed a relationship that was founded on trust. They held common principles and working styles. "We knew we could be very transparent with each other," Tricia says. "We are both fully aligned on the importance of urgency and accountability, and we are both fully aligned on the importance of brand stewardship."

Rachel and Tricia spent extra time to get up to speed, both in their relationship and the deliverables required for a successful launch. "We have regular sessions not only to discuss key priorities and specific strategic deliverables, but on the best way for our teams to work well together, the way we can partner and collaborate, and how we can bring our country partners on the journey with us," Rachel says. "It's a partnership."

### COVID Challenges

To facilitate the connectivity that teams need to work well together virtually was initially a challenge, but they took advantage of many of the tools available to help lead online meetings. "The learning and the positive part is that it forces the relationship to be even more transparent," Rachel says. "If you're not transparent and willing to go above and beyond while working virtually, then you're not going to get what you need to be successful."

The challenge is to get the same amount of engagement from everyone in a virtual environment that you do in face-to-face workshop, Tricia adds.

"What's really hard in a virtual environment is making sure everybody is fully engaged and not multitasking," she says.

However, there was one advantage to all the Zoom meetings — it was easier to get to know the other team members and have personal conversations with them because everyone was working from home, where life happens.

"I feel I got to know more about people and their lives than I would have if I was in the office," Rachel says. "I've seen more of what their lives are like from our Zoom calls. For example, people can see my room in the background, and it gives a more personal look of what my life is like."

"The virtual environment made everyone more aware of each other; sometimes there are things we take for granted when we see each other face to face," Tricia says. "We were all in this COVID environment together, and it forced us to pay more attention. COVID got us up on the learning curve quickly as well."

### Secret Sauce

Tricia and Rachel's secret sauce is made up of equal parts transparency and personal connections. They encouraged their team members to get to know each other on a personal level. "If you don't take the time to really dig deep and spend the time with the person you are working with, you won't know their working style or personal style," Rachel says. "For example, Tricia is a night owl. I'm a night owl. Those little things matter."

"I always tell my team the same thing, whether working with an agency partner or working internally — take the time to get to know your partner personally," Tricia adds. "In fact, I always say take the time to get to know each other personally first and all the professional elements become so much easier."

"The key to a great working relationship is transparency," Rachel says. "As things shift, both the agency and the client have to be agile, and we both are. In this way we set each other up for success."

"This includes transparency about what's important to each of us," Tricia adds. "The things that are important to me may not be as readily obvious to Rachel. So, we are transparent with each other on what's working and what's not within our team. Because we're all in this together as we strive for the best decisions and the best output for the brand."

For example, Rachel sits in on the core team meetings at BMS as a silent listener so she is informed in real time on what was being discussed, and this enables her to be proactive. This strategy gave Tricia more time to focus on other tasks and spend less time keeping Rachel up to speed.

"Rachel and I are both straight shooters," Tricia says. "We aren't afraid of conflict. We have common principles. We developed a relationship founded on trust that allowed us to be transparent with each other. We are both fully aligned on the importance of urgency and accountability, and we are both fully aligned on the importance of brand stewardship. We both quickly aligned on a rule for success being an holistic understanding of the brand to make both BMS and Evoke successful in our partnership. This is why this relationship works, ultimately, leading to great outputs from both sides working together." PV

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