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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE magazine meets with Maria Tender, Head of Strategy, Syneos Health.

Taren: Maria, welcome to the PharmaVOICE WoW podcast program.

Maria: Thank you very much.

Taren: You recently joined Syneos Health as Head of Strategy Communications after more than two decades at DDB. Please tell us about this next chapter of your journey.

Maria: Wow. Yeah. Two decades at one agency it's a really long time. A key reason why I was able to stay there for so long and truly enjoy my time at DDB was because I was able to really build the healthcare group there. So while I had the opportunity to work on the next pharma and non-pharma because DDB was a general market agency with a healthcare practice within it, I was really able to be a part of some of the most significant launches in healthcare history. So when you think about brands that are basically world changing, like Gardasil and Keytruda, being a part of that was pretty, pretty profound.

What I see now at Syneos is that this next chapter is really an extension of that work, and I think the biggest difference for me in this role is that everyone around me at Syneos – and there are 24,000 people in fact – they have that same commitment to health that I do.

So that's, I think, the difference. I'm extending the work that I have been doing and just privileged to be a part of it.

Taren: That's exciting, and we'll talk a little bit later on about some of those launches that you were instrumental in. But let's talk first about what are your top three priorities in the next six months in this new role.

Maria: It's a great question. I would say that first and foremost unleashing the talent that's already at Syneos. Every time I open up a new door or get on to a new call or a new Zoom, there's a group of people who are really passionate about healthcare. They know that they can make a real and a positive difference in people's lives and that kind of comes through. A lot of these people – barely any of these people have I ever met in person, but it's palpable. It comes through on the screen as I'm talking to them and knowing that they and I have the freedom and flexibility to make that difference in people's lives is really key. So I would say unleashing talent is probably the first thing.

The other thing is Tim Pantello who is the president, he and I have known each for the better part of a decade and he brought me in, and he knows how important strategic planning is for our clients. I think he and I agree that it needs to be the right combination of rationale and emotional and structure. So I'm really here to challenge, elevate our thinking and bring enhanced value to our current and to our future clients.

The other thing I would say again, and it's so interesting to experience a new job after 24 years and meeting everyone virtually, but what I'm finding is that Syneos has such a strong and inclusive and collaborative culture that my goal would be to break down really any remaining silos that might exist across strategy creative, data analytics, behavioral sciences, all of which Syneos has. But what I'm really looking to do is bring together the best talent and thinking across our organization really each and everyday. Like I said, I discover something new each and everyday and it's always a welcome aha as I'm navigating my day because I realize oh, we have that, that's a good thing, I don't have to go anywhere for that, we have it right here. So there's something just very refreshing about that. There's something energizing about that. Just, again, a group of great people and I'm privileged to be a part of the company.

Taren: That's awesome and what a way to start, right, in the middle of a pandemic. That's just not good timing I would think. But I would think it also offers some unique opportunities to get to know people that across as you said the thousands and thousands of folks at Syneos Health that maybe you wouldn't get to meet because of this new technology and this new digital era that we're living in.

Maria: It's so funny that you say that because part of my remit is bringing together all of the different disparate agencies and helping us all be one cohesive whole. And when I'm on these calls and we use Teams, when I'm on these Teams calls I have no idea where anyone is sitting. I don't know what office they're in. I have no preconceived notions of who does what. So for me, it's we're all in it together.

Taren: It's great.

Maria: It is. And just bringing together these virtual teams like people are – I have people from Columbus, I have people from LA, and we have people from New York and they're all on the team and it really doesn't matter where they're sitting or what their official hub is, they're all on this collective team together and it's great to see it. And again, for me not knowing and not having any background on mostly everyone, it's easy to just make it happen. So that's another part that I think has been sort of a silver lining maybe in all of this.

Taren: And we need to look for those silver linings wherever we go, wherever we go for sure. You outlined those top three priorities for the next six months or so, but let's talk about what is your longer term vision for the communications division?

Maria: Wow. That's a good question, and there's probably several visions, but because of the kind of company that I'm finding Syneos – and not just Syneos Health Comms, but also the fact that we do have a clinical side to our business, which really is just life changing for everyone and the fact that we have the ability to – we are the *only* company that can really take people from lab to life.

From a communications standpoint, I would say that for us, my vision would be to be the most revered, most innovative, most consumer-centric healthcare communication group in the world and I can see that. I can say that actually because only Syneos comes from and it's a part of a global healthcare company. It's not an agency network. I come from an agency network and there's nothing wrong with agency networks, but we are a healthcare company with everything except the actual compounds. We don't manufacture the compounds, so there's something very important about that because you have a line into clinical when you need it.

If I'm doing a project and I need to talk to an expert in hemophilia, I'm able to pick up the phone and call someone in clinical and ask them about hemophilia and this person is an expert. This person is a physician. This person is on the frontlines of clinical. Those are the types of things that I have the ability to now tap into because I'm a part of Syneos. And because I'm able to tap into that, I do think that the longer term vision can be something that we achieve together. Let's all strike that thing about together and it's just together. Maybe it is something that I think that we can achieve and truly realize our goal of being the most customer-centric healthcare communications group in the world.

Taren: That's fantastic. That's a lofty goal.

Maria: It is. It is. But I think if anything, I'm finding that it's not just the talent, but it's also the resource. It's the business that we're in.

Taren: I love that.

Maria: Yeah, that's what it is. It's what we do.

Taren: Right. I love that 'that's the business that we're in'. That's fantastic.

Maria: Healthcare isn't a condiment at Syneos. We are the full meal. We are it.

Taren: That's a great sound bite. 'Healthcare is not a condiment.' I love it. So let's talk about some of the key learnings that you're bringing to the table from your launching of some of these worldwide brands and how is that like leading into your efforts at Syneos?

Maria: I started out in advertising a really long time ago, but we won't talk about that. And specifically when I started at DDB, I started working on the Hershey account, and ironically when I left DDB I was working on a diabetes business. So I've really been able to kind of like see the

full spectrum of what causes and then how we cure diseases. But I think ultimately I think what I can bring to my role is respect I'd say for patients and for those really in great need.

It's one thing to sell someone a Pepsi – and not to pick on Pepsi – but it's another thing to inform them about their options for treating what could be a life altering disease. So it's critical to really have reference for the work that HCPs do, the knowledge they have and the relationship that we want to own with the patient. So those are some of the things that I feel I want to bring forward into my new role.

Taren: That's awesome. That's a very funny analogy. So it really is the circle of life, right?

Maria: It is. It is.

Taren: So one of the things that we hear a lot about is that there are so many outlets today for communications and there's so much noise out there. How can brands break through in today's uber heightened environment?

Maria: Yeah, isn't that the golden question? It really is. I mean I don't know if I have the magic answer, but I would just say that it's about fundamentals. It's about communication that really moves people. It has to be more than just linear and functional. It has to be emotional, especially in our categories. We need to help people understand something that they didn't before know, learn something new that they didn't know, and ultimately look for them to act based on the results of our communication.

Now I know that's very, very basic, but ultimately that's what we're looking to do. These are really important subjects that we look to handle and we look to handle them really hopefully with care and compassion, whether it's diabetes or osteoporosis or advanced cancers; we really need to ensure that what we communicate to both the healthcare professional and to the patient that we're really understanding their unique situation, their motivations and we're really able to deliver them something meaningful and of timely value. So breaking through is really about understanding. It's about empathy. It's about being real and being helpful.

Taren: That's fantastic. When I hear you talk about the health and wellness of patients, there's a real passion to it. Where does that passion come from?

Maria: I mean this is the industry, right? It's the one that possesses I think the technology that cares and cures, and we all have family, friends that have struggled with health. Never before has that been more acute than the last four months. So here I think we can connect with people who need that help and we can deliver compelling information, solutions and then ultimately change lives for the better and help. I mean ultimately that's really what it's about and that's what drives my passion.

I also just like I love fitness, I love trying to eat well, so that's part of it too. It's just a part of like who I am as a person. But being able to draw on that from within myself and kind of put it out

there to help people think about how they might heal and feel better, those are the things probably that give me the most gratification.

Taren: Fantastic. Switch tacks a little bit here. You obviously are accustomed to leading diverse teams, global teams, big teams, what are some of the tools you use to effectively lead and manage teams to achieve their goals?

Maria: I believe in a tool set really that's built around simplicity and to help create and then elevate and really not overpower the idea. I think too often what we see is that there are overly layered processes and they really don't help to facilitate big idea generation or they might quash the strength and overwrought formatting like too many different things that we're trying to do. And when I think about at Syneos and what I've seen so far is that we're extremely fortunate to be able to offer clients proprietary tools that have actual utility and that are differentiated – data analytics, behavioral science experts in-house – where other agencies I think tend to rely more on secondhand data and freelance or off-the-shelf behavioral science; we can offer a more customized in-house generated rich data set. It's this deeper level of data and insights that really allow us to deliver what I would say is more compelling and successful strategies for our consumers.

So there isn't any one tool that I could point to, but I would say that I like to keep the process simple so that the content can shine and where possible use interesting tools like behavioral science and data analytics to help us unlock and unleash something that maybe we haven't thought about before.

Taren: Fantastic. And when you go to put your teams together, what are those qualities you look for in others that might help them rise to senior leadership positions?

Maria: I think that's a really good question. When I think about qualities, you could say I need someone with eight years of experience, or I need someone with this specific therapeutic experience, but for me it's pretty simple. It's really about finding people who have passion, finding people who have a good instinct, hard work, really important, people who volunteer to do things and come up with really interesting ideas to the table. Something simple like people who don't have to be reminded, they're curious and they have fun at what they do. It's really that's basically it. It's not that hard.

Some of the best ideas come from someone who has about six months of experience in the business and others come from people who have 16 years of experience in the business, but it's truly about having that passion and that interest and that instinct to learn and share and share original of thinking and ideas.

Taren: Fantastic. What are some of the unique pressures and challenges there are for women in executive roles?

Maria: I can tell you that I have always operated by the credo that I want to be judged solely by the value I bring to the organization. And to be honest, that's worked in my favor and sometimes it hasn't. But I think it's important that we all be aware of promoting an environment of equality, inclusiveness and really a merit-based upward mobility.

Taren: Excellent. When you think about that, there are obviously there's tons of studies out there that show that women don't rise to the top nearly as quickly or nearly as often as men do. Do you think there are some skills that women need to develop to navigate to reach the top ranks?

Maria: I can't say that this philosophy works for everyone at every organization, but for me and those that I've mentored over the years I would say what works is really a focus on consistently delivering effort and value. It's okay to be competitive and to stand firm for your ideas you think are strong and the values that you think are right. But I do think that just caring and doing the right thing, and especially in this category because so much is at stake, making sure that you have the patient's best interest as you think about what it is that you're looking to do.

Taren: Excellent. You just mentioned mentoring; is that a big part of your toolkit and are you a mentor still?

Maria: Yeah. I would say that I'm a daily mentor. I'm not like I have officially mentored in the past, but I tend to reach out when I see talent in the organization and I've been discovering some – a lot of it actually at Syneos over the last few months, and I will kind of silently mentor someone whether it's through a text, whether it's through an email, whether it's through a 'hey, how about this,' or 'I love that, let's build on it this way,' or 'hey, can you help me with this.' So I don't do what I think in a formal or structured way, but I do it all the time.

Taren: Excellent. Now, if you were to dial up the way back machine, is there anything you know now that you wish you had known as you were moving up the ranks?

Maria: I would say trust your gut. I would say be brave, but I also think it's very important to be grounded. Read the entire RFP. Do your research before a meeting. Know the facts. Basically it will make the work more interesting and it'll make your work better.

Taren: Excellent. And then finally, because it is our WoW podcast program, tell me about an accomplishment or a wow moment that shaped your career.

Maria: I've probably had a few because I've, again, had the privilege of working in so many therapeutic categories from Alzheimer's, which we have yet to find something for, to osteoporosis, diabetes, but having had the privilege to work on the launch of Keytruda and to be a part of all the promise it holds for people that need it most, to talk with patients and HCPs to understand their unique and what really are Herculean struggles, accomplishments and even setbacks and to be able to create a strategy that comes from their strengths and resonated with them and for them, I'm really truly proud of that work. I think that helped to shape my career I

would say in a way even though it came later in my career, but it probably also helped me make the leap to an all healthcare company like Syneos so that I can be around people with like-minded interests.

Taren: That's a great one. Thank you so much for sharing. And thank you, Maria, for being part of our WoW podcast program. It was truly great to get a chance to know you a little bit better. I want to wish you sincere good luck as you forge ahead over the next months and years.

Maria: Oh, thank you so much and thank you for putting a spotlight on women.

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