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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE Magazine meets with Dawn Fallon, Practice Lead, Health, Makovsky.

Taren: Dawn, welcome to the PharmaVOICE WoW Podcast Program.

Dawn: Thank you, Taren. It's great to meet you.

Taren: It's great to have you with us. Dawn, you've had a really successful career leading a variety of healthcare campaigns for biotechnology, medical device, health insurance, hospitals, medical associations and pharmaceutical companies. That is a broad swath of clients. Tell us a bit about your career journey.

Dawn: Sure. Actually I started not in healthcare at the beginning of my career. I started in nonprofits and food and wine and travel and tourism, and then I landed in an agency where I was exposed to various healthcare accounts, hospital systems and pharmaceutical companies. That's where I really felt that I can really make a difference working with patients and clinicians.

So from there, I had worked with some of the leading hospital systems, as well as insurance companies, and then also working with some leading medical device companies from Johnson & Johnson to Medtronic. And then following that, I had the opportunity to work with some smaller pharmaceutical companies to large companies, like Merck and GSK.

But all in all, it's one of those things for me that working in the healthcare space really gave me that opportunity to make a difference without what they say having the M.D., but being able to shape the narrative as it relates to my client's story and really elevating them as thought leaders in their particular space.

Taren: I love that. You know I often say that people who work in the life sciences industry could work in any industry and you're a perfect example of that, but yet they choose to use their talents and resources for the greater good. So that's fantastic. You must get a great deal of satisfaction about working with your clients and helping to shape their stories.

Dawn: Absolutely. It's one of those things that we all do it for the patient and the patient journey and the patient voice, and I feel like there's so many patients out there with various conditions from chronic conditions like diabetes and cancer, to other conditions like morbid obesity which is now considered a disease. I feel like there's a lot of patients out there that

need to have a voice, and our goal is to get that voice through educational awareness campaigns or campaigns that really elevate the new technology and the new drug treatment that we're bringing to the forefront to help address their needs.

Taren: It's a perfect lead into my question. Given the current environment with so many different channels available, what are some of the biggest challenges for healthcare communicators today?

Dawn: There are many challenges I guess out there, and I think that the big one is again the patient. The patient continues to evolve, and the patient is now more informed than ever. So working with clients, getting their narrative straight and really shaping that narrative is really the messages for those key stakeholders. So whether it's investors to clinicians, to those patients, everything is shaping that narrative for the patient and how they're going to view like pharmaceutical or medical device or health tech company. I feel like we have to really shape our narrative around the patient and go where they are.

The patient is, again, more educated. They're reading various sources with the media or social media. We're seeing various age categories turning to social media, going to the Facebook groups and really engaging with various patients about how they should go through their journey. I think that's something that us communicators we have to really tailor every program that we do around that patient and that disease category. Some diseases we know are more vocal than others; so like oncology for example, a lot of patients in the breast cancer community are very vocal, and one influencer can say something and they basically help in your campaign.

So I think we really need to look at those channels for the patient and make sure that we're giving the right message at that time.

Taren: Do you think your clients are understanding the power of social media more now than they were maybe even three or four years ago? Because it's not going away obviously, but they've been hesitant to jump into that social media foray as well.

Dawn: I think it depends on the client. Working with startup companies they seem to embrace social media a lot more easily because there's less regulation needed I guess. But the bigger or the large ones there is still a concern of approach.

So again, we work with clients. We try to make the most powerful message for those social media platform, whether it's Facebook or Twitter, and then the client of course going through legal and medical review process, they sometimes have to make it less likely controversial. And it's one of the things, we always try to give that strong a story for our clients and have that happy medium to make sure the voices are heard, but also understand that we're in an environment that has to be in a regulatory and legal medical review process as well.

So they are, again, depending on their scope of the nature of the bigger accounts with pharmaceutical accounts, they're more inclined to be more conservative than others.

Taren: Sure. Do you think that that patient journey is evolving more everyday? Because we've been talking about a patient journey five or 10 years, but is it getting more sophisticated?

Dawn: Absolutely. I think, again, with the iPhone and smartphones, for that matter, people are getting information as they go. The media landscape as we know is also changing, but that's also shaping the narrative. The patients are going online to get information all hours of the day, so we have to be able to understand that and know that at any given point a patient could be going late at night after their work is done and they're going to receive that information and I feel like that's definitely not going to go away anytime soon.

Taren: Fantastic. When you look to the future, where do you see some of the biggest opportunities ahead for the industry in terms of communications?

Dawn: I think there's various opportunities out there. Again, I think that what we're seeing now definitely among the healthcare area is that there are those voices out there, influencers for that matter continue to become another voice that has not yet been tapped into. And those voices – they don't have to have a huge following, but they have those particular members or those groups that have that voice. And I feel like influencers can definitely become more of a voice for a lot of different companies based on the disease category. People want to hear from people. Companies are important, but it's the people behind those companies that make the difference.

Taren: Absolutely. Well said. Having worked on so many different types of campaigns, what are some of the keys to developing a successful initiative? What are some of those tips that you provide to clients?

Dawn: Before we go in the campaign we always look at the various – where the client is and where their narrative is. So whether it's a startup company or a larger company, we always try to look at the best way of who they want to target first, whether it's investors, whether it's clinicians, whether it's those patients.

Each client has their story – storyline. So if it's one that's launching a new pharmaceutical drug, it's one of those things and it is getting to ready to launch, we have to figure out what the narrative is going to look like. If it's a startup company that's launching a new technology, it's one of those things that we have to create the need to get there. So everything evolves and is tailored to the specific client. I think that's super important. Everything can't be what they call cookie cutter. It has to be tailored to the specific client need to really reach those KPIs that are needed to make sure we can measure success.

Taren: Absolutely. And that's perfect again to my next question. So everything has to be measured obviously to justify cost, resources, etc. So how do you measure the success of a campaign?

Dawn: So I think it all depends on the client and their need and when we go into a campaign, we look up those particular measurement tools in terms of like are we measuring sales, are we measuring click rates to a website. Those things are really important for various clients. Other times it could be how are we talking about it in that space. Are we bringing awareness of something that has never been talked about?

For example, there was a condition that we worked with Medtronic on a condition called respiratory compromise and no one knew what it was about. The goal was to, again, create that narrative as a condition so there was a need that was involved, and then we would see how that coverage was penetrated throughout our media coverage and then also social media. Again, everything is very tailored to clients and success is measured based on various KPIs based on what the client provides and ones that we develop strategically at the beginning of the campaign.

Taren: Awesome. Thank you. We talked a little bit ago about the different stakeholders that are involved. How do you knit together those number of voices from those stakeholders and to create like collaborative outcomes? because they all have different agendas, I would think.

Dawn: Absolutely. And it's one of those things that, again, based on the pharmaceutical company we're working with where they are in their narrative story. So for example, if you're working with COVID and the vaccine, are we trying to educate the drug community about what's going on with the vaccine and then part two, how are we going to change that narrative when we have the vaccine approved and then educate the public about it. So that's how we look at campaigns.

We look at the stage of where the development of the technology of the drug is and then develop it based on the stakeholder, whether it's patients or clinicians or even investors. Sometimes we need to shape the narrative around the investor community because we're working with a startup pharmaceutical company who's looking for capital to raise funds to support that drug development and delivery.

Taren: I have to ask, have you ever had to push back on a client based on your recommended strategy, and how did you manage to navigate this tricky negotiation?

Dawn: That's a very good question and it's one of those things, especially in the nuance of drug development, is always a challenge sometimes with clients. I think that one of the things is that sometimes clients want to go forward with their narrative sooner than it's ready. So we all know that clinical data, whether it's a medical meeting, a published study in a medical journal is that much more important than with just getting the word out about their actual drug treatment.

And so what we try to do is advise clients if they want to talk to the consumer, that they have to slowly build their narrative from the scientific perspective in order to validate what's going to happen later down the road with consumers. So that is something that in the media landscape,

again, the media is very challenging and shrinking that the more clinical and hard data we have, the better our story. I think that sometimes challenges clients when they want to first go after the patient, when you still have to build that narrative that's involved in building that scientific data and foundation.

Taren: So it's really a series of building blocks and you understand what those one thing leads to the next thing to it leads to the next thing. So there's a lot of education you have to do with your clients as well, I would think.

Dawn: Absolutely. It's one of those things that, especially for the more startup companies to midsize companies, they're still beginning their story, they're just super excited about their treatment option and they want to get the story out there. But there's, again, like you said, those stepping blocks that are needed, so again educating the clinicians who would be embracing that treatment to eventually treat those patients. You can't jump from point A to point D. You have to go through A, B, C and D to get there. I think that's something that a lot of companies that are the small ones to midsize, they're still kind of learning their narrative, and it's important to kind of get them in the right track and letting them know that they'll get there eventually, but there's certain moments in time that they have to hit and check off before they get there.

Taren: That's great. I don't know that people really understand that there's such a science behind public relations and communications because they think they can write a post and that's what is involved, but it's so much more than that. And how do you explain when you bring in new folks to the practice, how do you lead them through this education process for them as well?

Dawn: So kind of like I guess when you go back to what do people reflect about, and it's really understanding and reading up on the disease category and the disease treatment and how that is affecting the journey of the treatment option for the patient. So, again, arming them with information, again medical journals, you can't go wrong with them, sending them to those websites, but also looking up those leading society groups that have been those voices for those disease categories.

So I think that that's really critical to get your team up to speed on the disease category before they are onboarded to clients, and then also ask questions along the way. They always say there's never a dumb question and it's true, and I encourage team members to ask those questions before we onboard them for a new client that would expect you to be an expert in that particular area or category.

Taren: How would you describe your leadership style?

Dawn: So for me, I think again with clients I tailor it based on the individual. Everyone takes leaders differently. Some of them need more handholding than others, so I kind of pivot based on the person I work with. So for example, if there's someone who really just needs to check in

every week, others may need it every two weeks, and I think that you have to give people the time to breathe and then also that time of moments of making sure that person is learning everyday and becoming the better person as an employee.

Taren: Certainly, there are a lot of younger people that come into the public relations communications field. We're dealing with Gen-Zs now and then you have to manage folks that maybe are in the millennial and maybe even some more we call of as myself, we call ourselves maybe more senior folks. How do you have to adjust your management style for all these different employee cohort groups?

Dawn: Again, similarly I think it's based on the individual person. And from what I've done in my 20+ years working in public relations I've noticed that I don't look at a person at their age; I look at their skill level and where they are in their journey. So people come from different backgrounds and they have different skill levels, and what I notice is that, again, there's someone that will be passionate about other things and others in various skill categories, and I try to embrace that, and then in other areas where they want to learn, but they're not there yet, I give them those tools to get there. And I think it's very important as leaders to continue to shape your people because your people are your best assets.

Taren: Exactly. That goes back to that mentoring and sponsorship. How important is that to you personally to mentor that next generation?

Dawn: It's extremely important. Everyone from an AAE to an SVP on my team I think is very important to be a mentor to them at any given moment. In my journey working at various agencies I still keep in touch with other colleagues that I worked with over the course of the years because I just want to invest in their career. And for me, it's so important to give back. I always joke and say 'you know one day I'll be working for you.' And I've seen that. I've seen some former colleagues of mine that I've mentored that they're now working in health.

It's about giving back to the people that you really want to invest in and really help them grow because they're the future leaders, and I think it's really imperative as communication experts and senior leaders to invest in the future because they're going to be running the show one day, and I think it's great. It gives them an opportunity to straighten those legs in those moments and really help us fill the narrative that's needed in today's environment.

Taren: Along that vein, what are some of those leadership traits you look for in others when you're building your teams and you're looking to move folks up the ranks?

Dawn: Definitely one of the things is passion. I think, especially in healthcare, you have to have the passion that goes within. There's nothing like passion that really drives that person to do their best. I think that's so important for every team member that comes on to my team and people I engage with, whether it's through networking associations that I belong to. But I really think that passion is super important, that people bring that to the table.

I also think that drive and vision. I think that, again, goes hand in hand with passion and drive is that the ones that are looking to do better everyday, it's not about they're up here, but it's about themselves. And I think that's critical for everyone is that when we look at ourselves is that be the best person you can be. We know that definitely during this difficult time now that we're dealing with right now, people are struggling, and so like how do we get them to get there. And I think that give those people those tools to be empowered to really bring on the best performance they can given what's been going on these days.

Taren: And let's talk about what's going on these days. We are facing a number of different issues between diversity, COVID-19 and so on. So I know you're doing some work around diversity inclusion with your global agency partners. Tell me about that work.

Dawn: Sure. So I belong – or actually Makovsky belongs – to a group called IPREX which is a global platform of about 1500 professionals and about 100 offices, and the goal that the network was actually founded by Ken Makovsky who is the president of our agency, and so his vision was really to bring a collected group of agencies that were independent that we could work together for a common vision. And with the dialogue that's been going on and the climate that you had mentioned about diversity and inclusion, that's something that we really feel deep about in terms of IPREX but also at Makovsky. For IPREX we're trying to really continue to encourage that dialogue by sharing those resources that are working for our teams and our agencies globally. But also encourage in engagement and action. Because I'm hearing from folks all the time and you read all the time is that people keep talking but there's no action.

So again, starting that plan but also executing and it's sticking to your word is super important. In July, I'll be speaking on an upcoming panel at their annual global conference and we're going to be focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and then we'll also be talking about what we could be doing better and what we should be doing now and then in the future. I think that's critical for today's future generation and as we retain and recruit more talent into communication.

Taren: Excellent, and I love that that you're looking to see what you can do better. It's not just about what we've done, but how do we move the ball forward in a purposeful way.

Dawn: Absolutely. And it's one of those things that we've got to continue to do it. We read in various publications that we've got to do a lot more and it's true, we do. And I think that we just got to pick and choose how we're going to do it the best way we can because we can't hit everything. I think that it's an opportunity for us, it's an opportunity for us to embrace change and make a difference, and I think we could do it as a group, whether it's communicators to working with our partners globally.

Taren: Excellent. Well, I wish you much luck with that and I look forward to seeing what the results are of this initiative. Dawn, finally, throughout your career it's been real successful. You've had a number of touch points with a number of clients. Tell me about a wow moment in

your career that has either left a lasting impression on you or maybe changed the trajectory of your career.

Dawn: So for about nine years, I had the opportunity to work with actually one of the largest bariatric surgery nonprofit, the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery, and that really for me was a critical moment in my career in changing the way we talk about a disease, morbid obesity. Working with a nonprofit and elevating them as an expert in that space was really rewarding in terms of creating that narrative but, again, that is not a health condition but a disease, and I feel like that moment in time really helped me understand why we do what we do and how we can change the narrative. And as a result of the efforts, working with the largest society group, we were able to get some national press about why we changed the name from the American Society of Bariatric Surgery to the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery due to the issue that obesity was not just a health condition, but a disease.

Through that moment we were able to change various things and voices and also influence clinicians who were working in the frontline about weight loss surgery and what was happening there. I feel like there was always a stigmatism with various patients and their obesity story. And I think that's something you got to look at too; when we look at campaigns and everything and that was something that really, to me, was a pinnacle part in my career about really knowing how we can shape a narrative to really make the change and how we talk about a condition.

Taren: That's fantastic. Thanks so much for sharing that and the important role that public relations and communications plays in shaping the narrative around so many critical diseases in the industry and the good work that companies are doing to eradicate those conditions. Thank you for being part of our WoW podcast program. I certainly appreciate your insights and your time.

Dawn: Great. Thanks so much for having me today.

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