

July 31, 2019

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In this episode Taren meets with Kim Johnson, President, GSW, a Syneos Health company.

Taren: Kim, welcome to the PharmaVOICE WoW podcast program. I'm so delighted to be speaking with you today.

Kim: Thank you for having me, Taren. I am very pleased to participate in the program.

Taren: Well, let's get started. We know each other a little bit and I know that you're a seasoned executive who has spent time on both sides of the table, meaning both on the agency side as well as the client side. Talk to me about how this duality and perspective helps you bridge the gap as you lead GSW.

Kim: Yeah, sure. Yes. I have spent a majority of my career on the service side, the agency side, but I did have the opportunity to follow a client to Pfizer and I was there for several years to work on the brand team of a blockbuster brand, so both of those experiences really have been full of different challenges and opportunities. I have such a great marketing training opportunity at Pfizer. Understanding all the facets of commercialization and healthcare, I learned that at Pfizer with some terrific mentors. I had the opportunity there to oversee a field-based medical team.

I think being a little bit closer to the frontline is what I had the opportunity to do at Pfizer. I spent real time in the field in front of healthcare professionals seeing their operations first hand. I also had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with patients. We had a large brand ambassador group on the brand I was running at the time, lots of advocates involved in the business, so everything from leading POAs and Congress plans and business plan cycles, that's what our clients do so that allowed me to walk in the shoes of our clients and it provided me with a real appreciation for the complexity of brand marketing and I think it really cultivated my passion for building strategy, really thinking about brand strategy not just our advertising strategy and I don't mean to minimize what we do at the agency side of things, but it just gave me a little bit of a broader context and I think that helped us to hone some of my strategy skills.

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So yes, I'm fortunate now having had the experiences on both sides. I draw upon these experiences regularly as a leader at GSW and a partner to our clients. I think it also helps me to coach and develop our team and also I think it assists our clients in getting the most from our agency partnership.

Taren: I think that's great and I agree, I think that you do bring something unique to the table. Speaking of unique, you are the president of one of the most iconic agency brands in the industry. What is that like for you? And then I want to talk to you about having a footprint on both coasts. It's a little unusual.

Kim: Yeah, it is, it is. Yeah. So GSW is you know I'm privileged to be leading our New York and L.A. offices. We've been in business in healthcare for over 40 years, so it's just a fantastic heritage that the agency has had. We just were awarded the most creative agency in 2019. We've been agency of the year many, many times, so it is, thank you. It's a terrific agency, a terrific brand and I'm lucky to be part of it.

Taren: Congratulations.

Kim: Yeah, thank you.

Taren: Welcome. Now you guys went L.A. Hollywood.

Kim: Yeah, yeah, yes.

Taren: Talk to me about why you decided to put down some roots in L.A.

Kim: Yeah. Well, maybe it has something to do with how much I love the West Coast. I don't know. I do travel there monthly and I love it. I love to go there. We have clients up and down the coast and the GSW L.A. office is in Santa Monica just a few blocks from the beach, but truthfully it's been a great business decision for us. I don't know if you know this Taren, but our heritage on the West Coast dates back to 1999.

So about 20 years ago Ignite Health began in Irvine, California and so they were very progressive digital agency, healthcare focused at the time and following lots of acquisitions and mergers and all that good stuff it always made sense to remain consistent with that heritage, remaining, keeping a footprint out there, leveraging some key West Coast staff that's been with us for a very long time doing great work. So we've got some long standing staff in L.A. that has been with us for a long time and we also enjoy the diversity that the West Coast healthcare business brings.



It's a little different out there and I've learned having worked now for the past five years really spending a lot of time in that market I've learned a lot. We enjoy a lot of work with device companies, med-tech companies, diagnostics companies. Some of the best work we're doing is with early commercial biotech out on the West Coast, companies commercializing for the first time. It's great work and we've been fortunate enough to work with many of these companies to expand our experience, our portfolio.

I think some of the talent, the client talent out there is phenomenal. Some of the best in healthcare today is on the West Coast and we call our clients our partners. We've also recruited outstanding talent from New York. So I think that's also makes our office out there a nice mix. We retained a lot of local team members and staff and we recruit locally in L.A. and Orange County, but we also attract a lot of great New York talent that are just looking for a change in scenery and relocation. I mean all in all, the office continues to grow and thrive and we're really committed at GSW to a bright future out there on the West Coast.

Taren: No pun intended, bright future, I love that.

Kim: Right, right. It's sunny out there.

Taren: Yeah. I do remember the back to the days of Ignite so it's not a real new footprint for you, but it's maybe an enhanced footprint. Maybe that's a better way of saying that.

Kim: Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. We like the idea that we've been there for so long and it's always been a full service agency. I think a lot of agencies have experimented with different clients, different clients, they've had an account team or creative team and they've had feed on the ground out there. But we have always had a full service agency. We operated that really as a satellite office and there's investment in that, but it's definitely we feel like it's paying off and we love the work we're doing out there.

Taren: That's fantastic. I want to touch upon some of the work that you're doing out there because I think you used a really interesting term that used to be used all the time with agencies and the companies they worked with and that's partner and then it came the days of procurement and it felt less like a partnership than it did a transactional relationship. So I love the fact that you're feeling that this biotech community is really embracing this partnership feeling around the relationship. They're not used to commercializing. So talk to me about how you all work with those kinds of clients.

Kim: It's an excellent distinction. They tend to be leaner. Sometimes we're working with the C-suite. It's a couple of core commercial folks that come to start up the commercial operation. They're building a marketing team. Oftentimes we're in there, even sometimes before like a VP

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of Marketing. Sometimes we're involved in that hiring. So yes, there's a little bit of a deeper partnership established with a core focused group of people that are very, very heavily invested in the success of the company as well as the success of the product that we're bringing to market.

It is a different type of relationship in that sense and I think GSW being part of the New York Health gives us an advantage also in those cases working with those types of clients because we're in a position to provide lots of different services to those early commercial clients. We're often involved in their clinical research programs. We are providing other commercial services like consulting. Perhaps we're doing, we're creating their field force, their contract field force for them to help them commercialize faster and more efficiently, so that gives us some deeper roots in with those clients and we do feel like it's a real partnership.

Taren: And I think some of the science too that you're getting into is a little bit different because these are companies that are really addressing specialty needs or even orphan drugs in some cases.

Kim: That's for sure. That's for sure. We love the high science work. We love working in rare disease. One of our major clients out of our L.A. office we launched into the space of Parkinson's disease doing a lot of work now in neurology and there's just such high unmet need in those areas so yes, we really enjoy that work and there's a lot of science and it's also very meaningful work.

Taren: That's wonderful. So it's been about 18 months now I think since you melded GSW and PALIO together speaking of mergers and acquisitions, right?

Kim: Yeah. Good memory. Good memory.

Taren: Any regrets?

Kim: You know what? That's an easy one. No. No regrets. No regrets. We've been really fortunate. That fusion was a very complementary fusion and we knew it going in. You know you always plan and hope that it will all integrate successfully and all the plans will yield the results you're hoping for and you know it doesn't always work that way, but in this case it was so complementary in terms of PALIO and GSW New York and what the two agencies at the time were doing well and what the gaps were and how we filled each other's gaps and how we were able to really take what was working well to the next level, scale the operation in New York, which we've been trying to do for awhile and it just made sense that we got to a point with both of the groups that we were doing quite well in our own right that to put it together was sort of a



one plus one equals three moment and for that past 18 months we've really we've yielded some great results.

We have almost 200 people here now in our New York office at GSW, yeah and we're co-located inside of our Syneos headquarters in New York City. We're doing fantastic work with clients. We have a diverse book of business. We're attracting some terrific talent. I think it's really is exciting time. So yeah, it was the right decision. We still operate even though we've grown. We scaled pretty significantly. My intention was always to continue to operate with a very entrepreneurial culture, senior level leadership on all of our businesses, access to myself and our leadership team for everyone and that becomes part of to do as you grow, but we are committed to operating that way and I think that it's like Steve Jobs said Apple is the biggest startup in the world. I think there's so much to that bringing that kind of spirit and mentality to agencies today.

So I hope no matter how much we grow and thrive and I certainly think we will continue to do that through our scale we're going to maintain that small startup feel and mentality here.

Taren: That's great, and I wish you a lot of success with that because I do know as agencies get bigger it's harder to keep that entrepreneurial kind of feel, and I would be remiss if I didn't ask you how the plug in to Syneos has gone for you.

Kim: Yeah, yeah. Yes.

Taren: Talk about a multitude of integration so...

Kim: Right. I know, well it is. It's a company that has grown so much through acquisition and integration, the latest with our Syneos, Inc., an InVentiv merger. That also is... well, it's about two years ago now where we rebranded, InVentiv Health, at Syneos Health the company has gone public. Listen, I think it's been fantastic. I can say from a commercial standpoint some of the areas that we have been investing and Syneos has been investing in is a real support to our agency work and to all of our agencies and our communications division whether it be our ad agencies, our public relations agencies, our medcom group, Syneos has really partnered with us and invested heavily in areas like data science and insights and market research and strategy and media, all of these areas are so important to us on the agency side.

These are all services we are asked by clients to bring forward everyday and it's worked well that plug in in those areas in particular because we are doing those things at GSW of course, but there's also investment in those areas inside our larger commercial offering that we're able to take advantage of and bring to clients. So I think yeah, I think it's gone quite well particularly



over the last few years where there's been renewed focus around our Syneos branding and our lab to life services.

Taren: I like it. So it's lab to life. So at PharmaVOICE we use molecule to market so—

Kim: Yeah, exactly.

Taren: So it's all on that same continuum, right.

Kim: It's a lot of same continuum and I think there's something really to say about the fact we're not a holding company model. We really have a different model and we talk about the fact that we're a healthcare company just like our clients are healthcare company. We operate from research all the way through full commercialization. So it's large and like any large network like that you have to take care how you plug in and where you focus, but I think that we're learning how to do that better and better every year at GSW and we're plugging in to some fantastic expert and data that is a real advantage to our clients.

Taren: Awesome.

Kim: Yes.

Taren: So you obviously have a lot of passion around healthcare advertising. Tell me what excites you about the medium in which you work.

Kim: I know. Well, it's funny. A lot of us we say that we sort of stumble into healthcare. I mean I know I certainly have, but then I – I mean I've been in healthcare now for over 15 years, so now I sort of say well it's no accident actually that I work in healthcare. I think for me if we do our jobs right I really feel good about the fact that people live longer, fuller, better lives at the end of the day. I think that we play a role in education and education around treatment decisions and I think that that plays a role in people living fuller and better lives and so for me there's no better motivation than that.

Prior to healthcare, I spent the first part of my career in CTG and tech, technology accounts and all that work has its merits, but I was never as interested in the subject matter as I am today in science. It's just healthcare is so dynamic. I mean what's happening in cancer treatment, we're doing a tremendous amount of work in cutting edge oncology and it's just fascinates me how dynamic it is and how transformative it is and there's just a lot of change in how we're consuming information, how we're making decisions and I enjoy the fast pace of the transformation in health today. So it's a great time to be in healthcare advertising and that

excites me. I don't know Taren if you've ever been to the South by Southwest Conference in Austin.

Taren: Oh my God, that was – you were there weren't you?

Kim: I was. I was there. I've attended for the last – I would say the last five years I've been there and it's a phenomenal conference. I highly recommend it. It's a fantastic few days with like-minded, curious intellectual type and the interesting thing about the conference is each year I have seen how the health track, there's always been a small health track inside South by Southwest, but over the years it is just – it's grown exponentially that it increased in content, in prestige, in placement of the conference and in fact even the keynotes now are being given by people in our field at the South by Southwest Conference.

So I just think that that's another great example that it's the right time to be in healthcare advertising. So many companies and industries are looking to break into healthcare and I feel that we who we've been in it, we're well-positioned to contribute to advancing the healthcare conversation in the United States. So I do see I have a sense of responsibility to it and I do get a lot of excitement from working in healthcare and I think it's a great time to be in this space.

Taren: That's fantastic and I think you touched on something really important is that healthcare and health is just now becoming, it's becoming holistic and so you're finding – well, we're seeing a lot of different players enter the field that would never have been part of the health conversation before like there's a list. I mean who would have thought it would have been part of healthcare. So I do agree with you. I think there's a lot of transformation happening and in that regard what are some of the biggest trends that you're seeing? You were just at South by Southwest, so in terms of innovation or media channels or the overall healthcare advertising business, what are you seeing is hot right now?

Kim: Yeah. This is a question that's near and dear because we spend a lot of time inside Syneos putting out our annual trend report. This year we put out the Health Trend 10 in January and because we have access to a lot of data and trends to guide us there's a whole group of people inside the organization that spend time really investigating the trends and tracking them and then reporting out on them. So we have spent a lot of time looking at that and I think a couple of things. I think we're going to continue to see what we're calling radical reorganization inside biopharma or inside the manufacturer whether it be more consolidation, more M&A or even internal changes inside the organization itself to work smarter.

The healthcare companies themselves are determined to innovate. They have to figure out different ways to innovate and they have to flex different cost structures. So I think that sort of is an environment where we're going to keep seeing a lot of changes in the way that they are

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doing business. We have a lot of clients and I'm sure you are aware of the trend to be increasingly interested in agile marketing, it's a little bit of buzzword, but more and more of clients, major clients are asking us to incorporate in collaboration with them, in partnership with them agile ways of working, more iterative cycles, faster turn production cycles and we of course on the agency side we've adopted a lot of this. We have to. We're high volume, high velocity, high production work. We've embraced a lot of the agile ways of working inside the agency so it becomes another area of consultation for us in working with large and even mid-sized pharma and consulting with them on how they can incorporate these agile ways of working.

So I think those are some of the trends, the speed of change that is driving some of these pursuits. We're seeing more collaborations and that's not even just – I mean you mentioned list Taren. It's not even just science, it's service like lists that you just mentioned. There's a big collaboration happening with Merck and Amazon right now to launch a voice navigation challenge for healthcare in the diabetes space called the Alexa Diabetes Challenge and it's a contest to invent upstarts and individual developers to create different apps that can harness Amazon Alexa's voice technology for patients with diabetes.

So I think that we're going to continue to see those types of collaborations inside healthcare with a capital H, so it's inside pharma partnering with technology and service-based companies to really leverage and take advantage of trends. Ultimately, my hope is that the patients will benefit from these types of trends and collaborations.

Taren: Sure. I agree with you. It's this new way of looking and I – this is another one of those often used terms beyond the pill, but it's truly about those wraparound services that provide care for patients.

Kim: Technology is enabling so many new things, things we can't even imagine. That is really, really exciting and ultimately we'll be what catapults healthcare. We used to say well healthcare is a little behind in technology or a little behind in thinking about how they approach marketing from a relationship management standpoint or whatever it might be, I don't feel that way anymore. I really feel like we have the opportunity to be at the forefront, so that's exciting.

Taren: I agree. With all those exciting things that are happening, what keeps you up at night running your business?

Kim: Yeah, yeah, a lot of things beside each other. Yeah. I mean besides healthcare, I look at some broader agency landscape a lot too, just the service, the professional service side of our business even outside of healthcare and I think that our agency model is transforming too. It's almost transforming as fast as our healthcare industry, how we as agency leaders define our



products and services, how we look at our own business model, that's changing, that's changing, how we remain competitive and new competitors are emerging all the time and consulting companies are merging with creative companies.

We're competing with Google and private companies and also our clients who are bringing more and more of our services internal and they're looking to do things even back what we just discussed with speed and agility. Many of our clients are looking at the services that we provided agencies and say you know I can do some of this inside and that's going to create changes with the way that they partner with us on the service side. So I'm thinking a lot about how we continue to evolve.

Our value proposition, our service offering, how we continue to ensure that we have the ability to provide strategic business building value to our clients and remain a step ahead of them so that we can really provide consultative value. I think a lot about that in this changing time and then I think a lot about, talk about entrepreneurial startup sort of philosophy and mentality. I think a lot about that, about the best ways to foster our creative environment. I love the creativity that we have in our agency world and working with our creative, big thinkers and I love the environment that that creates.

So I spend a lot of time thinking about ways to foster that and cultivate that and to continue to look at the potential of that entrepreneurial culture to attract and retain talent because I think the talent is that's our greatest asset. So thinking about how we attract and retain industry best talent is something that's always on my mind.

Taren: And that's no small thing is retaining and keeping that young talent especially inspired and loyal to the agency because we see so many times, and I don't mean this disparagingly, but especially that millennial type. They want to come in, go out, come in, go out. So how do you keep them engaged in your agency through your culture?

Kim: Yeah, it's not easy, it's not easy. It's not easy and I understand, people want to have different experiences and want to feel like they're growing and advancing, forward momentum. I can relate to that. So we try to really get to know our people and at that individual level. I like to think to it as a partnership and I talk about it. People come in everyday. They do their best work. They're here. Hopefully, they're advancing their career and it's a partnership. We have a responsibility in that too, to provide environment where people can do their best work, to provide the environment where people do have diversity of experiences to grow from, so that's a pursuit for us at a leadership level across the board. I think that's the best way we can try and maintain and attract great talent.



Taren: Agreed. As a leader, you are a role model to so many women in the industry and you provide a lot of inspiration to a lot of different women, but who do you draw inspiration from?

Kim: Yeah. Well, thanks. That means a lot to me. As I've grown up in the industry, you're not always aware of that and then you sort of really do realize, at some point you sort of wake up and you say wow, okay.

Taren: Which is a thing now.

Kim: Yeah. This is a thing and other people are looking to me to represent what great looks like and I take that very seriously. So I mean for me I have to be honest I've been lucky. I have drawn a lot of inspiration from my mom and from really being – from the time I was little my mom was always a career woman, a female executive in the 80s of financial services for decades, long career in banking and such and she really instilled in me the pursuit to lead with heart. She's really an epically driven leader.

She just always is so professional in her approach and I think that inspiration around just leading with heart just bringing your passion and your whole self to your work and to your career and to the people you work with that's always been a tremendous inspiration to me. I've also had many mentors, many many women mentors, many terrific male mentors as well. So I've been lucky in that sense to people that have taken an interest in me and my development have given me opportunities to gain more experience. People took a chance on me when they have been a real risk at the time. I've been fortunate and reflect on those and sort of have to pay it forward moment a lot of the time where I say I'm going to mentor too and I believe in investing my time in people and giving people opportunities to do great things.

Taren: So just said reflect so I'm going to ask you to look in the way back machine for a second and see if you can find one piece of advice that you would give to your younger self, like something that you know now that you wish you knew then.

Kim: That's a good one and I have a young daughter, so it is a good – it is important to think about these things. For me, I think I would tell my younger self to be more patient. I tell my older self to be more patient. It's funny when I was in grade school the nuns would just say to me all the time, Ms. Johnson patience is a virtue, but I've never been a patient person. I'm a results-oriented person so I look for results, but I think patience it really is a virtue and the ability to be patient and let some things just occur and know that the right thing is going to happen at the right time. I think there's a level of patience that particularly when you're younger it's a discipline. It's a discipline I've had to, I have to work at as a leader, so be patient would be one and then maybe don't sweat the small stuff and again, I think we all do that sometimes, sort of just sweat the small stuff like I was nervous about this podcast, like you

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worry about things. You want to do well. You want people to think of you in a positive light. You want to succeed, but the ability to discern between the stuff that's really, really important and the smallest stuff that is important but not as important, I think that's something that I would tell my younger self too.

Taren: I agree. I don't think women give themselves enough of a break because this has been brilliant. We've had a wonderful conversation and you're a natural at it.

Kim: Thank you.

Taren: So finally, I have to ask you. You have had a lot of great career successes and memorable moments, can you identify one particular wow moment for me?

Kim: One of my best career moments and I talk about it a lot, it was in 2006, I was working at Wunderman at the time. I had the opportunity to launch, be part of the launch team with Pfizer for Chantix, which was their smoking cessation product and there was something about that experience for me that was very, very pivotal in my career. It was a moment of really autonomous leadership for me. I was really running that launch and all of the facets, so the leadership point, it was exhilarating for me.

I think the other component of that wow moment was back to we taught, we used the word partnership. There was a real, real partnership between the client team and the agency team on that launch so much so there wasn't even a bifurcation. It was just a launch team. It really warms my heart to think about those at that time and the success that we had and what we accomplished together and it was a tremendous success, the launch, a great product. And so I think a lot of those things and the type of marketing that we were doing also really resonated with me.

We're doing a lot of behavior modification type work. It was very focused on consumers and patients for smoking cessation and there was a lot of work with behavioral psychologists and behavioral science and I love I'm very passionate about that in leveraging those principles in marketing. It was a combination of a lot of things, but that was a real wow moment for me in my career. I reflect on that very positively.

Taren: Thank you for sharing and you know I just said finally, but I meant finally now because I have one additional question for you.

Kim: Sure.

Taren: We connected a couple of years ago around your PharmaVOICE 100 and you had a very clear vision for the agency and it was focused on four areas: brilliant ideas, excellent transformative technology and community cultivation and I think you've touched on each of those a little bit during our conversation. I want to ask you, has your vision changed or evolved since then?

Kim: Yeah. Good question, and thank you again for that recognition a few years back – I always like to see who's in that PharmaVOICE 100 Club. It's such an honor to be among those greats in healthcare. But yeah, I think that was a couple of years ago and I have to say the pillars, every year we reevaluate our business plan. We look at the strategic imperative around the agency. I have to say it has not changed, the spirit has not changed. The words may change a little bit, but the spirit of those pillars have not changed for the agency.

We're very focused on strategic excellence, brilliant ideas, of course the transformative tech piece we talked about, I mean I think that absolutely is something that we continue to try and differentiate with and then the focus on our people, our greatest asset, our talent. I think those still are very much central. The one thing that we have evolved at GSW and I think it's fantastic are our terrific, creative leaders developed this idea of creating one core value at the agency. I've been in a lot of agencies and there's different values and different core values and we decided we wanted to be very singular in the value where that we could all understand and represent at the agency across all six offices of North America and we call it greatness starts within and it's GSW, greatness starts within, easy to remember, but the greatness starts within here with our people, with the interactions on the team, with our partnerships with clients, we value that standard at the agency and we want to hold everyone accountable to that.

Taren: Fantastic. And I want to wish you continued great success and congratulate you on your success that you've had since taking over the helm of GSW. It's been great talking with you today and I really enjoyed our conversation. Thank you so much for identifying some really important trends for us and providing some insights into your journey. It's been wonderful.

Kim: Thanks Taren. I really appreciate being part of the program. I think it's wonderful and thanks so much for including me.

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