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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE magazine meets with Donna LaVoie, President & CEO, LaVoie Health Science.

Taren: Donna, welcome to our WoW podcast program and congratulations again on being named a PharmaVOICE 100 this year.

Donna: Thank you so much, Taren. It's exciting to be here with you today and also to be part of the PharmaVOICE 100, a real honor. So thank you very much.

Taren: Well, it's very well deserved. It's been great getting to know you over the last couple of months, and I'm excited to explore some of the things that we discussed for your profile for our WoW podcast. What's really interesting to me is that you started your company in 2001, that's the same time we started PharmaVOICE. So we have that in common.

Donna: Oh wow!

Taren: I'd love to know what prompted you to take that entrepreneurial leap.

Donna: It's not something that I set out to do. I think, Taren, you know that I started my career actually in venture capital, which led me to my first job in biotech, which was Genzyme Corporation. So I was working at Advent International, one of the first venture firms that was spun out of TA Associates in Boston and I was working there on the healthcare team, and my boss who was on the board of Genzyme encouraged me to start the agency, and I never looked back. And so honestly, I mentioned to you and I think we're going to talk about this is I worked for Henri Termeer at Genzyme, and Henri said to me that I would have my own agency one day and here I am 19 years later.

Taren: I know, right. Next year is going to be the big 20, so congratulations on that and your continued success. Let's talk about that influence that Henri had on you. He's obviously recognized as one of the most influential people in the biotech industry. What did that relationship mean to you and how did it impact your framework for what the biotech industry is?

Donna: It had tremendous impact on me as an individual and my career for sure, and little did I know that when my former boss John Littlechild at Advent when he made the introduction for me, I had no idea, and that's the truth. I started my first day at Genzyme when we were in the Chinatown district on Neelan Street in Boston. So I had no idea, Taren, and that's the truth.

Henri was an unusual person and a one of a kind entrepreneur. Having worked with both he and the original management team of Genzyme, which many people don't talk about that original team, but that team was phenomenal. I had a very strong and close relationship with all of those people and also many luminaries in the field and that had a dramatic impact as I mentioned. It's really about access to people that mattered. It was like going to Harvard or M.I.T.

Taren: That's great. Talk about really being on the ground floor of the burgeoning biotech sector at the time, very exciting. And with that excitement, what continues to get you jazzed up working with companies in this sector?

Donna: That's really easy for me. I'm excited about the breadth and depth of what we do. The work is infectious and incredibly demanding all at the same time. It's the people that make it work in their quest for making the world better with the focus on making better lives for all of us. The inside view of these companies is pretty darn interesting. It's nothing like working in a large company, for sure. So it's really the insider's view. It's the people that make it happen and their journeys, if you will. We support their journeys. So that's part of what we do as a communications agency.

Taren: Sure. How did that early VC experience, how does that help you because you obviously have to help craft these stories for these small biotech companies and you sort of have the inside scoop of what's attractive to folks who are looking to put their funds some place.

Donna: I mean the charters of these funds are all different and these different things are in vogue at different times. But certainly being part of that in my formative years definitely helped because I got to be a part of a team where we looked at the outflow. So we would get a lot of inbound increase, a lot of business plans, and we'd have to log them in on category and then the team would have to evaluate the inbound request and respond or move forward. So understanding sort of behind the scenes of how it really works is very interesting. So that certainly transcended on my understanding of how investors think about these things, how it really happens, the relationships that matter. It's certainly the story, but it's also relationship.

Taren: Excellent. You started your business almost 20 years ago as a woman, it wasn't nearly as common as it is today. Did you find yourself facing any resistance?

Donna: Yeah. I mean I think the thing that's probably the most interesting thing about it is certainly communications, there's plenty of women in communications, but it's what we do for a living, meaning the specialization. I think that's where it really is unusual – or was unusual – because there weren't many of us around, and I remember this – I'll tell you a story, I won't say who it was.

When I was at Genzyme leading communications, we worked with a couple of fairly high profile at the time male PR professionals, and this person said to me, he said, "You know, you ought to

think about working in fashion or in general healthcare or something like that.” And I thought to myself no way. No way am I going to do that and just for that comment I’m going to keep going.

Taren: Wow, and that’s not that long ago 20 years, but yet that kind of bias was still pretty prevalent back then.

Donna: Absolutely. I mean if you happen to actually like to wear something fashionable it automatically meant that you needed to work in fashion. It’s very interesting.

Taren: Oh wow. It’s so interesting. But I’m glad you did keep going, so good for you. So over these last 20 years you’ve seen a lot of trends come and go and you’ve seen the cycles go up and down. What are some of the top trends you’re tracking right now in PR, and then we’ll talk about what you’re tracking right now for your clients.

Donna: So what we’re seeing right now Taren, I’m sure you’ve seen this too, is this real kind of shift from many of these companies are story companies, they’re not revenue stories and over the 20 years we’ve had shifts from product stories to platform stories, back to product stories again. Now we’re in the platform promise of the future kind of time and regardless of what time we’re in, it is about how you’re putting your story together and how you’re getting it, how you’re tracking, how you’re getting awareness built around your story.

It’s not enough to have all the right things, the people, the technology and the right investors, you’re also... there’s so many. For example, there’s so much happening in cell and gene and we’re getting a lot of calls about well, we need to make sure that we’re differentiated because if you look at one website and then you go to the other, they sound the same, they’re just different company names. And so we’re getting to a point where there’s so many companies now that differentiation is pretty critical and that means really powerful articulation of how you tell that story and make it different, whatever that is, what’s the secret sauce.

Taren: Right. And when we talk about these gene and cell therapy companies, really their commercialization strategies are so much different than...

Donna: Correct, yeah.

Taren: ... other types of therapeutics. So you really do need to be quite specialized and really thinking about access and market access, I would think.

Donna: Correct. Correct. Yeah, there’s a lot of different pieces, for sure. There’s a lot of different pieces. So that’s what we’re seeing is the need for – we have a product that we actually trademarked called LHS Immersion, and it’s a branded methodology around positioning your messaging and then a blueprint plan, and we’re finding that that’s pretty critical to the startup phase of any engagement.

Taren: Excellent. In 2019, you took an interesting turn. You entered into a strategic alliance with Omnicom Public Relations Group. What led you to make this move?

Donna: As you can imagine, there's been a lot of interest in LaVoie over the years by different folks and none of them were really the right situations. I mean as you know this is a specialized business, and aligning with another partner really requires them to understand that we're not big pharma. Big pharma moves in different ways and there's a lot of differences, for sure. Omnicom had reached out to me with interest in coming together around innovation, their desire to work with companies earlier in the development cycle. As you probably can imagine, they typically get involved more at phase 3 and beyond, and we're typically before that. We may work with companies through phase 3 in commercialization, but we're at the table a lot earlier. And so that was their interest and our interest was how do we work with companies as they continue to mature. So that's how we aligned on that premise.

Taren: Obviously, you are a very inspired leader. How would you describe your leadership style?

Donna: Yeah, I guess you'd have to talk to others, but I'm incredibly driven. I'm very curious, for sure. Tenacity is I guess one of my strengths. I'm committed to ensuring that other people succeed, especially the longer I'm in this business, for sure. But I'd say those are my qualities. I'm always learning. I'm always very interested. I'm always thinking about a new approach to the way we're doing something, for example, or how we could do something better.

Taren: And what are those qualities you look for in the folks that you bring on board to lead some of your different teams? What are those leadership qualities? The same as yours or do you look for complementary skills?

Donna: No. I look for different – I mean certainly you have to align around sort of core values, right?

Taren: Sure.

Donna: But I think training and development, which means team collaboration, that's really important in order to take the company forward from here. We've had a lot of success, but we need to keep going as the need for training and development. One of the impediments to this business that we're in is as in the earlier stages of these companies, it's very complex stuff and you just don't come in off the street and necessarily become successful at this. So the training is pretty important and the collaboration and the leadership there.

Taren: You've reached the pinnacle of success with your company and with your vision for what public relations can do. Is there anything you know now that you wish you had known as you were moving up the ranks?

Donna: Well, I mean I guess it depends on the way you look at it. I mean if you had asked me then when John Littlechild said, "Go start your agency and come back to me," if I had really known what it was going to take, it would have been daunting to me, for sure. Yeah, this is not

easy. It's not easy. I mean anything that's worthwhile is not easy. I didn't come from the agency business. I came from industry, so there's that.

But I think it's incredible how complex in the impact that we can have, and especially as the industry matures how important the function is. I think in the earlier days is throw out a few press releases. It's become far more strategic and far more complex. These are complex data sets and readouts in public, private. We were involved in data readout for Alzheimer's last week. It's complex stuff.

Taren: Yeah. I was going to say it's not just the press release anymore; it really does involve crafting the story, as you said earlier, about an organization and understanding what it is they do on a real intimate basis, otherwise the story would fall short, I would imagine, and fall flat.

Donna: Yeah, and in particular around data for example, whether it be positive or negative or neutral data and it's communication really having a seat at the table to say, 'look guys, this is what it is and if we say this, we won't be credible.' So being part of those conversations.

Taren: And finally, Donna, tell me about an accomplishment or a wow moment that shaped your career.

Donna: This is kind of an early story, but when I started my agency in the basement of my house with just my computer and only one other person working with me, you know I had come from a corporate environment, so while they weren't huge companies I still had infrastructure and all of a sudden I'm sitting in the basement of my house by myself with my computer and like I guess this is it. And then when your computer doesn't work – and this is 19 years ago, if something doesn't go well, there's nobody to help you. So you've got to figure these things out, and it's having the tenacity to take it forward. So I guess those moments and luckily now I'm in a much different position, but it's those kind of moments you just say 'am I going to keep doing this,' and then you get through it. So it's getting through every passage, if you will, of the journey. It's always a new challenge.

Taren: Absolutely. It's where you have to learn to be the chef, the bottle washer – you have to do all those things. Yes, and I would say tenacity and resilience are some of those signs of being a successful entrepreneur because you do have to ride out some of those tough moments to get to the crest. So congratulations to you on 19 years of success.

Donna: Thank you.

Taren: And I wish you many, many, many more years of success and congratulations again on being named the PharmaVOICE 100. And thank you for joining us for our WoW podcast program. It was delightful speaking with you.

Donna: Thank you, Taren. Appreciate all the work you're doing and your team as well. It's amazing.



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