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*In this episode, Taren Grom, editor-in-chief of PharmaVOICE Magazine meets with Ahnal Purohit, Ph.D., Founder and CEO, Purohit Navigation.*

**Taren:** Ahnal, welcome to the PharmaVOICE WoW podcast program.

**Ahnal:** Thank you so much.

**Taren:** I want to congratulate you again on being recognized as a PharmaVOICE Red Jacket honorary this year. And for those of you all who are listening to this podcast who don't know what that word entails, Ahnal was recognized for her long list of leadership achievements and inspirational qualities, as well as for her decades long pursuit of breaking barriers across the industry. Truly an inspiration to so many people. And really, I couldn't be prouder to have recognized you this year.

Let's start with talking about some of your career highlights and your journey. Let's start with your current position as CEO of Purohit Navigation. You are redefining how traditional advertising agencies fit into the healthcare ecosystem. Talk to me about that evolution and why this is important. And then as a follow up on that how the company interacts with clients.

**Ahnal:** A really important and good question, Taren. First of all, I believe that we all agree that healthcare ecosystem is changing and will continue to change. And as the ecosystem changes how can we be comfortable in thinking of marketing and advertising in a traditional way. I don't think that it is going to survive. So even for our survival we must rethink and redefine to be relevant.

And I believe that most of the clients also agree that the ecosystem is changing. So when we have our conversations with the clients, it's not about whether the ecosystem is changing or not; it's about where is it changing, how is it changing, and how fast is it changing. And therefore, the communication that we have with our clients really relate back to what kind of novel solutions we can bring to the table and how we can uncover opportunities specific to the challenges.

Some examples would be that when we communicate with our clients we talk about what we have done to adopt the changing ecosystem and what we can do for them. And sometimes we even start about why we renamed our company a few years ago, and how Purohit Navigation, the word navigation included in our company name. We talk about that we're not an advertising or communications agency, but our role now is to navigate the brand, a franchise or company to its fullest potential.

Traditional advertising in a journal I don't think it's going to work as well all of the time. There are time and places and products where it's appropriate, but for some of them it may not be. Even banner ads may not be. So we have to think outside of the box and look at the continuum and see what is it that is going to be more relevant. And that's why we believe that the important thing that we can bring to the table is navigating either a brand or a franchise or a company.

We tell our clients that our job is to help you uncover opportunities. For example, there's opportunities in rare diseases may be uncovered not in the traditional decision making pain points on a patient journey, or by analyzing big data; the opportunity may lie in another dimension of decision making. The opportunity space cannot be one dimensional, that we typically have the algorithms and decision making that we talk about must be examined and studied in a multi-dimensional space often considering small data that makes it even more difficult. Because on one hand, we are talking about multivariate analysis and multi-dimensionality, and on the other hand we are talking about small data in rare diseases, because frankly, big data are not even available.

**Taren:** That's very true, especially...

**Ahna:** This provides relevancy based on how we can contribute if a company is in an early stage of commercialization, how our strategic approaches challenges that status quo and how we bring in outside of the box thinking based on the client and who we are talking to.

And finally, we talk about the fact that we do not really have a cookie cutter approach. We believe that each brand has a unique opportunity, and we must think beyond for our client, and that's the message that we give to our clients. We learn from our experiences from the past, however we do not replicate strategies and tactics just because they were successful somewhere else. We definitely look at the learnings from it and if there's any application, but it should not be just automatically applied because we did it somewhere else. And we start with a blank piece of paper. We tell our clients that we develop individualized strategies that relate back to the identified opportunities and the tactics and recommendations are based on leveraging those opportunities.

The bottom line is, Taren, that we have to increase the comfort level of our clients in thinking approach that we have, and by showing successes of our approach and work, if that makes sense to you.

**Taren:** Absolutely. There's a lot to unpack in there, and I just want to touch on a piece of the insights that you brought to bear, and that's about small data. I think that we in the industry have been talking about big data for so long that we've forgotten about those small data pieces. Can you talk a little bit more about why you think this is going to be a sustainable trend?

**Ahna:** I think that we all go through these trends, there's like one after another. But we have to go back to the basics, and even defining big data.

It's kind of interesting, there was a book on small data, and what the book also talks about there is more about you learn about big data and trends and some of the aspects of the human behavior, but then you want to really understand the depth of it, we have to do more investigating and go deeper into it that big data may not be able to provide and cannot provide.

Also on top of it I believe, and this is my opinion, that in rare diseases where the number of patients are very, very limited, and the specialty physicians that treat those diseases or conditions are very limited. Small data is where we need to go to understand the hows and whys of what is happening. Big data, I do not think that can provide it. Big data may be able to provide us in terms of how many patients are there, or through artificial intelligence, algorithms, etc. But when it comes to the hows and the whys and multi-dimensional patient journey, I don't think we'll be able to get that information.

**Taren:** That's another big point that you just brought up is about the rare disease patients. With 7,000 rare diseases still to be for treatments, still unmet need, and physicians are taught to look for when they hear footsteps or to identify horses, not the zebras. But with small data it could potentially identify some of these rare disease much earlier, which is a huge issue for that patient population.

**Ahna:** Absolutely. One stat that I had read somewhere, and I don't remember exactly where, was that on an average it takes about seven years on an average to diagnose a rare disease. And quite often when the patient understands and is given the diagnosis, even though the diagnosis may be chronic and not that great, they are happy because now they know that it's not their mental status or state that kind of made them complain about what

they were going through, but that they really have a condition, and that that is rare. But now they feel relieved that they're diagnosed.

**Taren:** Absolutely. I've heard that from multiple rare disease patients that it's just nice to have an answer.

**Ahna:** Yes, right. And then they will manage it or they'll go on from it. But just to have that answer is extremely important for them.

**Taren:** Absolutely. Along your career you've broken a lot of barriers. You were instrumental in some really early breakthroughs in terms of clients and identifying different strategies for brand positioning. Can you talk about one of your earlier successes that you look back now and go, 'oh my gosh, it was such a breakthrough and now it's become standard almost.' I know there are a couple that you have.

**Ahna:** Yeah. One of the earliest ones that I remember is patient starter kit. I'm talking about at least about 33-34 years ago, which is a long, long time ago. My goodness, like most of the people were not even born then that are in this industry.

But anyway, we were working in the dermatology area, specifically in rosacea. And at that time rosacea was considered... actually Metrogel when it was approved was approved as an orphan drug. It just so happened that later on in terms of the development and understanding, people realize that there are many, many more patients than what was recognized at that time even by FDA in terms of how many patients have rosacea.

But one of the things that we wanted to do was to really start developing database for patients who are diagnosed with rosacea. And at that time there was no data, no information available for these patients, what the life journey was like except for some of the market research that we had done, but we wanted to expand and also communicate with these patients based on what they were going through, and just kind of develop the CRM track.

It was kind of interesting, one of the things that our client at the time also complained was that when you give the topical products in tubes that the physicians had a tendency at that time to give many, many tubes. Rather than making it a trial tube, they would give like instead of 1 they may give 10 of them to a patient. One patient may get 10 tubes and the other one may not get any. And that was pretty much the standard and everyone would talk about.

And one of the things when we started looking at it in terms of insight we said that ‘look, we don’t have information about these patients. We don’t have any opt-ins. We don’t know who they are.’ That’s number one.

We know that there is a challenge in terms of physicians kind of giving a lot of sample tubes to one patient and not any to another. We know that physicians even at that time, even though they talked about communicating and educating patients about the condition of rosacea, but frankly, it was very different, or patients would forget – as you know, most of the patients forget what they were told in the physician’s office as soon as they get out of the office, right?

**Taren:** Yes.

**Ahna:** So we looked at all those things and we came up... One of the first ones I believe, we came up with a patient starter kit. So that one little kit had two tubes, educational materials, what rosacea was, how to use the product, and also an opt-in so that we could start developing patient database. And that was done about 34 years ago.

**Taren:** That’s excellent. So way ahead of the curve there. And while we’ve got the...

**Ahna:** Absolutely. And now if you talk to anybody, would anyone have a product that will talk about a starter kit kind of thing, or some kind of a patient kit for when the patient is diagnosed. Everybody talks about it, but at that time go back to the history, you will see that you wouldn’t find much.

**Taren:** That’s amazing. And while we’ve got the way back machine dialed up, let’s talk about those early days of the agency – or the company now. You were one of the first women to own a healthcare advertising agency. What were those days like and how did those experiences help shape your career and leadership philosophy?

**Taren:** When we started the company, and before that I was at another agency for two to three years. But anyways, at that time it was a man’s world then, no denying about it. But initially the barrier, Taren, was not only that I was a woman, but that a woman of Indian origin and Indian immigrant woman of color. Many men at that time were really not necessarily against not working with me, but it was... frankly, they didn’t know what to do with me.

Like you enter an office and they will look at me and they didn’t know how to greet me, how to talk to me, whatever. I think it was almost like the fear of unknown. And what I felt that partly it was really my responsibility to make them comfortable. So they needed

to feel comfortable, and not only in my capabilities, but also overall. I had to convince them in a way that I may look different, I talk differently, and I do present a group that you may not know but at the end of the day, my thinking is similar to what they want and that I'm approachable.

One way that I did that was I listened, I learned, and I tried to understand their fears. I empathize with them and I provided strategic solutions that included outside of the box thinking. I figured that most want to be associated with individuals who somehow help them succeed in the jobs and their careers. And so I thought that, 'hey, you know what, if I can help them to be successful, success will also come to me.' I really kept it all about work and not about me at all, and I think that that helped.

But of course, Taren, frankly, there were many men at that time and some leaders in pharma companies that felt that I did not belong in this industry. They were vocal then, and actually some of the things that they said, if they said right now would be considered abhorrent, to say the least.

I remember one, exactly the pharma company of one... An executive of one pharma company telling my partner Ed Donahoe not to bring me to any of the meetings because of my Indian origin. And this pharma company is a very large company even now. They at that time had a policy to not include any doctors of Indian origin in primary market research. Can you believe that?

**Taren:** It's amazing.

**Ahna:** But you know what, Taren; there were many, many men and company executives that were very supportive of me. I think that they saw that I was trying and that I wanted to be successful and I had something to offer, and they really appreciated that and helped me.

What this taught me is that there are enough good people out there in our industry, and that I should concentrate on them and appreciate the opportunities that they were giving to me, and be positive. Even now I always tell my staff that appreciate all of our clients that give us business; they believe in us and they trust in us. That is why they give us business, right?

**Taren:** Right.

**Ahna:** So we need to do the best for them, and if at all we should complain about all those people who do not give us business. Just go out and complain about them, I say. Don't complain about our clients at all. It's not acceptable.

**Taren:** That's a great philosophy.

**Ahna:** The second part is really an important one in terms of how did that shape my career and leadership. If you think in terms of my career, I guess I'm very competitive by nature. And so when those who discriminate really motivate me. It gave me even more energy because I want to prove them wrong. I want to show them even more the excellence of our work and our service, and excellence of my team and how we help our clients to succeed. I want to show those naysayers that we are talented, hardworking people who can make a difference. And I want to show them that hard work and talent are equally distributed by gender, by race, by age, etc. And because of these things, at Purohit Navigation we hire only based on talent. We don't see anything else.

One of the things that I'm really, really proud of for my team and my company is that, one of the proudest moments for me was the fact that this year our company was recognized as most diverse in our industry.

**Taren:** Congratulations.

**Ahna:** Thank you. And I know what it feels like to be discriminated against, and I don't want anyone to feel this.

**Taren:** What a wonderful – what a great achievement.

**Ahna:** But I think that maybe partly this is because of who I am. Because when you have gone through some things, you don't want anyone to go through it because you know that regardless of background of any which way that you look at it, if people are talented they're talented. It doesn't really matter. It's not my decision to judge anybody outside of the work that they do. So we just focus on that.

**Taren:** That's great. You talk about the diversity of your organization. I also know that it's a woman-owned business, and so mentoring is very important to you. Let's talk about...

**Ahna:** By the way, women and minority-owned business, so we have certification for both.

**Taren:** Yes, yes. Sorry about that. Talk about your philosophy about mentoring that next generation of leaders and what does that mean to the other senior executives in your company.

**Ahna:** I believe, Taren, that mentoring is extremely important at all levels and for all individuals. I think about myself and I wonder what would have happened to me if I did not have good mentors for example. And mentoring should exist in all companies regardless of whether they are women-owned, minority-owned, or whatever.

Actually as a leader of the company I believe that one of my primary roles within the organization is to mentor the next generation of leaders. And I started from Anshal. And of course Anshal is my daughter who is the president now of the company. And of course my two other co-members, Monica and Kim.

And my certain that by mentoring them they will do well, and they in turn will mentor another generation of navigators, the third generation of navigators in our firm. And as a matter of fact I'm so proud of it. I'm already seeing the third generation being mentored by my core. And it's just the best feeling that you can have.

At the end of the day I think for any leader, and specifically at least I feel for mine, that part of my leadership and my legacy must be judged by how I built and mentored the next generation of leaders in my firm, because that's important.

**Taren:** Yes, it is important. And so, again, congratulations to you. And I know that you have really developed a loyal cadre of employees. Much of that is due to your leadership style and personality. When you hear those kind of things that people stay a long time what does that mean to you as a leader? And it's because of you. How does that make you feel?

**Ahna:** First of all, I'm grateful that people said that is because of you. But nothing works one way. It's always two ways. Everybody gives in a relationship, whether it is personal or in business. I am really grateful that even my direct reports may say that it's because of me but I think it's also as much because of them and what they believe in.

At the end of the day, it comes to like minded people I believe, and I am very lucky that all of my direct reports think the way I do and we are really similar, like-minded people. And so partly this is because of who they are, how they came into the organization and our company, and how we are going together. I mentor them but frankly, they mentor me as much as I mentor them. They are my bone. So thank you to them.

**Taren:** Let's talk a little bit too about what's on the horizon. We've talked about some terms that you identified, small data looking at the rare disease population. But what else does the company see on the horizon in terms of trends or factors that you think are going to impact the life sciences in the next couple of years. Where do you have your finger on?

**Ahna:** There are many. There's so much happening. We can talk about the disruptive companies coming along to AI. The list really goes on. But then let's start narrowing down in terms of where can we make the impact. And we feel that we can make a lot of impact in terms of strategies to communication, etc., more in certain parts of that ecosystem and chain. And we think that we can make a lot of impact in rare diseases given our thinking and the small data that we talked about. For rare diseases, it is even more important that we don't have a cookie cutter approach because it's not going to work. And I think that's our expertise. So if you look at it, I think that we are going to more in that direction.

The other one I believe that is going to impact where we are going and where we'll end up going is also based on a smaller pharma and biotech companies arising. They have different needs. They have fantastic technologies. Sometimes they want to sell one, see one, and do one kind of an approach. But when they want to start working closer and closer to introducing brands themselves, or even when they sell sometimes they want to say how can they maximize the value of their company; I think that we can come in very handy and help those smaller companies in developing their highest potential given our background and what we have done.

There are so many different trends but when you start looking at it, I feel that... You and I have talked about it many years ago in terms of how we went into diagnostics, because that was really important for us to understand where the pharma was going and what was happening in terms of that part of technology and pairing diagnostics to treatment.

We will definitely continue in that regard and it's going to be even more at the micro level because of the rare disease, but we will definitely continue. We'll continue more in terms of the rare diseases. But I think there's a whole big new approach that is going to be needed for this smaller biotech companies, small to midsize. And they're going to need help. Their infrastructure is different. They have sometimes a lot to lose on an individual basis than a large pharma, large organization with a huge weighed approach.

**Taren:** Right. Somebody likened it to being like the house is on fire all the time. You're constantly having to put out fires because you need to keep the house strong. Because when you only have one drug or one technology, everything's riding on it.

**Ahna:** Yes. You're so right. And it's also kind of interesting because... and a lot of these individuals are like... I put them kind of in two buckets. One is that a lot of them have fantastic science, they're very science oriented but they have not gone to marketing yet. So they're more science oriented and they need that commercialization expertise, not necessarily... communication and commercialization expertise and identifying opportunities, which is very different than a large pharma would have.

It's really, again, important because the house is always on fire in terms of how do you identify and what you identify. And they are very, very open and they are quick decision makers in a way because they have to survive. And we do really well in those kind of situations, I think.

**Taren:** Excellent. Finally, with a lifetime of accomplishments and accolades, talk to me about a wow moment in your career that shaped where you are today.

**Ahna:** Obviously so many things that have shaped me that I don't even know where I can begin. But when I think about it... I'm going to give you an example of one that I think that really made an impact for me.

When I started in this industry I was learning and was not confident at all in terms of my capability in what I was doing. I was in academia. What do I know about business, right? And I was actually even questioning myself if I had made the right choice to leave my secured tenure position. I was secure, I was tenured, I was doing my thing, I was publishing a lot. In that world I was known. Here I am not known at all and had no clue what the heck I was doing in the beginning. I mean I knew what I was doing but not in terms of everything that I was exposed to.

At one point I remember I was asked to attend a strategy meeting along with the senior agency management. This was just like I started working one year later or something like that. And the meeting was at an office of a president of one of the large pharma companies, and it was a strategy meeting. I think frankly, the agency was small at that time so maybe they just didn't have enough warm bodies to take with them to fill the room when the president was there. To me, that's why they took me along. I don't know why they took me. But anyways...

When they invited me and when I went I was asked to listen during the meeting and take notes, and was asked to speak and contribute only if I was asked. They said, "Keep your mouth shut. Just listen. Take notes. Look intelligent. But you don't have to say anything unless we specifically ask you." And so I said okay.

But what happened was that during the meeting there was a question regarding suggested strategy based on some minimal data that was available at that time. And somewhere along the line because it was data I was asked to provide my opinion of what I thought. And based on what I listened during the meeting I provided some insights. And the president listened to the insight and liked my approach. And overall he nodded in agreement kind of thing, kind of ‘yeah, that makes sense.’ And then the meeting was done, we came back to our office and nothing happened after that. About a month later there was a follow up meeting. And the president of the company asked the senior manager to bring that Indian girl. He said, “Bring that Indian girl with you.” Because he believed it was the contribution that I had made, but he didn’t know who I was or what my name was.

This is really like... it’s funny now, but it’s so true. But this incident really did boost my confidence and I said for the first time I felt like, “Wow, I can do this. I can be good at this.” And my career got a significant boost because after that, all the senior management people in this agency started taking me to all of the prime meetings. Because they saw that one worked so why not take her along for some other things. But the real moment for me came a few years later when that president became our partner in another venture.

**Taren:** That is a wow. That’s amazing how one meeting could change everything for you.

**Ahnal:** Yeah. He just kind of said, “Bring the Indian girl.”

**Taren:** And that’s being today, right? So we’re talking 35 years ago.

**Ahnal:** It’s about 36-37 years ago.

**Taren:** Thirty-seven years ago, how things have changed, and how things haven’t changed, right?

**Ahnal:** Yeah. I don’t think anyone out loud would say, “Bring that Indian girl.”

**Taren:** No, let’s hope not.

**Ahnal:** But he was really open. And like I said, he became our partner in one of the ventures because that was the way he talked but there was nothing negative in his head. And I think sometimes you become very sensitive to some things that people say when

they don't even mean it. We have to be sensitive to why people say what they say and how they say it, rather than just put them all in a bucket and say, "Isn't that bad?"

**Taren:** I agree. I think that's a very good perspective on it. As always I've so enjoyed speaking with you and thank you for being part of our WoW podcast program.

**Ahnal:** Thank you very much and thank you for inviting me. I enjoyed it.

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