

# "Your time for receiving praise is now finished. It is time to step up and offer that to others"

Ffyona Dawber, managing director and founder of Synergy Vision

## What inspired you to a career in pharma, and how did you find your way into your current role?

My career has run from healthcare to pharmaceuticals and then to agency work. I founded Synergy Vision, a medical communications agency, nine years ago following a ten-year career in GlaxoSmithKline (GSK).

I originally trained as a nurse, and after qualifying worked on the wards for two years. I then got a job as a research nurse, managing patient clinical trials. At this time I was very interested in research and studying for my BSc. It was while working as a research nurse that I became aware of clinical trials run by pharmaceutical companies, and the options of a career in pharma opened up to me.

My first role in pharma was as a senior research nurse in a GlaxoWellcome (GW) Phase I trials unit, running healthy volunteer clinical trials. I worked in many roles in GW (which then became GSK) over ten years, mostly across clinical and communications sectors. My work included delivering landmark Phase III clinical trials, setting up an asthma clinical research unit in Australia, and establishing the pivotal Clinical Imaging Centre in collaboration with the MRC and Imperial College. Each of my roles was varied and challenging.

Throughout my time at GSK, I worked with many medical communications agencies. My nursing background and deep understanding of the pharma industry gave me a vision to create my own unique agency – one that really understands the pharma industry, and is able to support them as a partner. I also felt that a big focus should be on the patient, since helping patients is ultimately the reason we are all in this industry.

I founded Synergy Vision in 2007, and have been managing director (MD) of the company for almost ten years.

## Briefly, how would you summarise a typical day in your working life?

The day for me usually starts early; I aim to be in the office at 7.30am. This allows me to pick up with our Sydney office, and get a head start on planning and preparation for the day before other demands are made on my time.

It is hard to define the content of a typical day. I may have meetings with clients in the UK or Switzerland; work with the Synergy Vision team on developing and delivering client projects; or spend a day devoted to the time-consuming work of running a

business, which involves accountability for operations and finance as well as supporting the client projects. I mostly support projects where patient work or interaction is included, and this includes patient interviews, facilitating patient groups or strategic planning for patient education.

Outside my role as MD of Synergy Vision I am trustee on the board of the Cystic Fibrosis Trust. This takes up a few days a month and includes board meetings, senior leadership recruitment and advising on communication and clinical trial sites.

## How is your field changing?

There are a number of areas that are changing in the pharmaceutical industry, particularly in communication. Digital and patient-led social media has created a complex conundrum for the industry and the regulators, and both are still trying to find the right way to engage with it.

Resources in the pharma industry are also lower than they were in the past, which means that drug development and communications spending must be managed effectively. As an agency who works closely with and understands the industry, I see it as part of our role to ensure clients can maximise their ROI from limited budgets. We understand the challenges pharma is facing, we are realistic about spend for medical education and communications, and we focus on adding value – targeting the right audience using the right medium.

## What are the most enjoyable aspects of your role?

Working with such a knowledgeable team is one of the best parts of my job. I love it when the team is working on a new project and we get together to brainstorm ideas, bringing together our experiences and getting up to speed on new areas. The varied expertise that everyone brings to the table leads to a lively debate and pushes us to think 'outside the box', and challenge ourselves and our clients.

I am also often proud of the team when a client gives us good feedback on a project and gives us repeat business or recommends us to a colleague.

## And what are the least enjoyable or most challenging?

In the past we have been asked by clients to turn around poorly executed communication plans, and I find it disappointing when the expectations of a client have not been met, and patients and healthcare professionals (HCPs) have been let down. These



blunders often come from agencies or marketers jumping ahead of themselves, deciding on which media to use before they have agreed the basics of the core communication. I feel that communication based on insight into the HCP and patient viewpoints is key to any well executed communication plan.

## What are some of the most common misconceptions you encounter about your field/industry?

The most common misconception about the pharmaceutical industry that I come up against is inevitably about cost, as the pharma industry has a bad reputation for being too focused on money. There are of course a few rotten apples, but in my experience most people in this industry are motivated by a desire to help patients or by a passion for science. That is certainly true for myself and for the team at Synergy Vision.

## Is there someone in your field who has inspired you or from whom you have learned a lot?

I was lucky enough to have had some fantastic managers in the pharmaceutical industry over the years. I can think of five or six who were truly inspirational. Each of them

taught me valuable lessons, including how to challenge, how to manage upwards (a strong manager does not fear this I learned), and how to set my own goals and achieve them. I hope I can now offer such inspiration and positive feedback to others.

One piece of feedback that has stuck with me to this day was given to me from a previous manager in GSK when I moved up to director level. As I started my new role, he told me: 'Your time for receiving praise is now finished. It is time to step up and offer that to others, and to inspire and support them.'

## Also, is there someone outside of your profession who has been a source of inspiration?

Throughout my work with patients and patient groups, I am continually inspired by the resilience and drive of people with long-term illnesses to understand their disease and take control of their environment where they can.

## What is the secret to a happy working life?

It has taken me a few years to realise that for me, the secret to a happy life (both working and personal) is having a clear vision. Having three young children and running a company is

certainly a challenge and it is easy to sweat the small stuff, but having a vision can sometimes help you rise above that. If I know my medium- and long-term vision I don't need to focus on the small parts of each day. I have a clear vision for my personal life as well as my working life, and feel it is essential to have both. These are two sides of the same coin and it is difficult to enjoy one area of your life if you are unhappy in the other.

I see part of my role as a leader in the company to set a vision for the company and to support others to with their career visions.

## If you had any advice for someone just starting out a career in your industry, what would it be?

There are so many career options within the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries; it is often unclear where the opportunities are and it can be daunting to someone starting out. I am very lucky to have worked across many areas of the industry, from early research to marketing, so I have quite a good understanding.

I would just say that if you enjoy science, like working as a team, and are good at problem solving, there is a career path for you and you just have to go for it.