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Collaboration in Medical Affairs: Increasing Value and Impact

Dr. Birnholz:

Coming to you from the Medical Affairs Professional Society's Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado, this is ReachMD *MAPSChats*, and I'm Dr. Matt Birnholz. Today, I have the pleasure of being joined by Dr. Renu Juneja. She's the President of ADPAL LLC, which is a boutique company advising consulting firms as well as agency partners.

Renu, it's great to have you with us.

Dr. Juneja:

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Dr. Birnholz:

So let me just dive right into your background, being the president of ADPAL. I'd love to learn more about the work that your boutique consulting firm does.

Dr. Juneja:

I spent 26 years in pharma—16 years at Novo Nordisk, then three years at AstraZeneca, and the last seven years at Johnson & Johnson. So throughout my career, I worked with so many agencies and consulting firms, and they were always my partners because they brought so much creativity and innovation. So I always had them as my partners throughout my career.

As I was retiring from J&J at the end of 2024, my big question was, "What do I want to do next?" And I actually worked with a professional career coach, and I said to her, "I want to make the biggest impact I can with the knowledge and experience I have." So I ended up with this niche thing—I have this huge pharma perspective in three different companies and different functions, like publication, medical education, CME, non-CME, and medical information. It's the whole gamut of medical communication. So I then decided that I could help agency partners as well as consulting firms with that formal perspective. So that's how I ended up where I am today.

Dr. Birnholz:

That's great. It seems like a very natural progression, but one that you fought long and hard about how best to potentially apply those elements. And it sounds like there was some inspiration in which you were working with groups who are providing a lot of these creative things and thinking, "I can get on the other side of that, and I actually have learned the tips and tricks, the workings, the not workings, and other elements of how to consult on doing this better."

Dr. Juneja:

Absolutely. The only thing I am very clear on is that I'm providing only advice; I don't do any sales pitches, I don't do any client meetings, and I don't do any commission. The only thing in my mind is, how can I help agency partners? Because many times I saw they would come and present and I would say, "I wish they knew this" or "I wish they knew that about pharma." So that's my focus; I can help them behind the scenes, and then they can go make that impact.

Dr. Birnholz:

I'm interested—without giving away a lot of your trade secrets—I'm fascinated by the idea of some of these common patterns of stumbling blocks that agencies run into in their work to try to maximize some sort of returns in form of either education or engagement impact—a number of these buzz terms. What are the stumbling blocks that you often encounter that you need to step in on more often than not?

Dr. Juneja:

I think long capability presentations—talking too much about their company. Send it as a pre-read, and let's get into the discussion part from there. And the other thing is, I understand you are in a business, and of course you want business, but don't go in with that big desire to grab business. The desire should be, "What are your problems? What are your challenges? How can we help you? Where can we meet you?" And then let it flow, and see how it comes naturally. So I think those are the best conversations I have had with agency partners.

And in my whole career, I worked for three companies, but you guys work with so many companies. You see so many innovations and so much creativity. So come proactively to suggest things that we don't have the time or we don't have the access to.

Dr. Birnholz:

Yeah. To distill that, it's an element of, "it's not always about you." In fact, it's never about you. It's about the people that you're talking with and what they need. And then don't be afraid to take some pot shots creatively based on thinking outside the box if you have interacted with a number of these groups and you've gained a requisite amount of experience around solutions that might be unorthodox or that have not been tried by some of these companies. Put them out there.

Dr. Juneja:

Absolutely, and even challenge, right? I'm asking you to do this and that, and you have a question: why? "You don't have new data; why do you want to do a CME program at this conference?" Challenge that part—that, "You can spend this grant in a much better way in this place because you have no new data, and you have no new information. Why do you want to do it?" And there may be a good reason that they are thinking about that, but at least challenge it and ask those hard questions.

Dr. Birnholz:

The challenge is a really interesting concept because I imagine when you think back upon your roles within pharma directly, you were likely recruiting agencies with intent to serve a specific function that you had already decided strategically and said, "We need you to fill this box. This is what we need tactically. You guys go and do that." And the agencies might be in a reactive position to some extent. But it sounds like, from your experience, those agencies that challenged that and said, "Let's dig in further, and let's understand better what that means and maybe change the framework by which, we can be most utilizable"—is that something that you're counseling on?

Dr. Juneja:

Absolutely. Especially in today's world, if I'm having an agency come in and I'm looking for publication—a congress presentation and publication—don't just stick to that. Say, "Oh, by the way, we can also do something with plain language. We can also give you a set of slides that you can use for MSLs. We can do this and that." Because now, the main thing is, how do you leverage content? How do you create once and use it in different channels or different places? So if you come with "Oh, we can do this and we can do that," or "What about this?" or "What about that?" That, in my mind, is the winning formula.

Dr. Birnholz:

Yeah, and that sets a precedent by which you now have a relationship or a foundation for trust that I imagine leads to an ongoing capability to keep providing novel solutions for those groups.

Dr. Juneja:

Absolutely. And people believe that on the company side, we are always looking for agencies. No, we want those long-term relationships. We want somebody to come in who has been with us pre-launch to launch to post-launch—who knows the product, the science, where we are going, what our challenges are, and who our target audiences are. So we—I still say "we," but on the company side—we do look for those long-term relationships,

Dr. Birnholz:

Well, that actually serves as a wonderful bastion against another climate that's emerging, where we talk about the perennial value of relationships and how that has not changed in the context of all the sea of changes. But one of those major buzzwords we see change is that we see entrenched in everything around us at this conference is AI. Where does that sit, from your vantage point, as you're helping to consult agencies in terms of not focusing on themselves, but showing that they have a stake in the game of everything that is new? Are they chasing the Joneses? Or is there something about the way that AI is positioned among agencies that helps set a competitive differentiation without sacrificing the age-old concept of relationships first?

Dr. Juneja:

I do believe that that genie is out of the bottle. The AI genie is out; it's not going to go back. So companies or agencies who do not adopt, or are actually at the top of it, will be replaced by companies who are very creative, innovative, and have AI solutions. No doubt in my mind.

But on the other hand, I don't believe in "human in the loop." I don't. I think the human still has to be in charge. "Human in charge," not "human in the loop." So you can do things with AI which would've taken you weeks—to look at the literature and summarize it or find a gap—you may be able to do it in hours or a couple of days. Fantastic, do it. But every step of the way, somebody has to look at it and say, "Does it make sense?" Because AI is not there, and I don't know if it'll be there with human judgment, human experience, and our lived experiences. So I think AI will be a support function almost, but it has to stay under control of humans.

Dr. Birnholz:

Yeah, I think that's really well put.

So as my last question to you here, as you look forward in the work that you're doing and the advice that you're providing, what do you see as the major cornerstones of where agencies need to go to remain relevant, and where those that they're counseling need to go to remain relevant?

Dr. Juneja:

I think it's the value equation. Those days are gone that, "We came here, we are going to do this, and we are going to walk away from this." As I was saying about publications, you can move publication of a paper or data from nine months to four or five months. I don't care about cost; that shrinking is my value. I can get the data out in public domain. I can talk to people. That's huge value. Thousands of abstracts came out at the ASCO congress; it used to take us weeks and weeks to look at which ones are relevant and then summarize them and create slides. If you can do it in 48 hours now, I'm not looking at price tag. I'd still pay you the same.

Similarly, I think CME is at the forefront of creativity, innovation, engagement, and enhancements. But again, the question is, is it good enough where you are, or are you having these case simulations where you can do it on your own, and at every step, you can learn? So sometimes it's the shrinking time value. Sometimes it's cutting the cost value. And sometimes, adding value adds things to it, right? "We did a CME program. We'll give you a quick infographic. We'll give you a plain language summary for nurses and pharmacists." They're just add-ons. But I think with AI, we will look at ROI, but ROI will look different. It's not just the dollars, but the shrinking of timelines, because in pharma, everything is needed yesterday.

Dr. Birnholz:

Well, Renu, it's been a real pleasure being able to speak to you. I feel intuitively you have gravitated towards a very natural type of position in the consulting you do. You're a very natural coach.

Dr. Juneja:

Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Birnholz:

We'll have to do another spot check with you at some point to get a sense of where things are continuing to gravitate, because it seems like you have a real pulse on it in the work that you're doing.

Dr. Juneja:

Thank you. I appreciate it.

Dr. Birnholz:

I've been speaking with Dr. Renu Juneja, president of ADPAL LLC, which, again, is a boutique company advising consulting firms and agency partners. And you've been listening to *MAPSChats* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Matt Birnholz. For more episodes in this series, visit ReachMD.com, where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks so much for listening.