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Communications 307 009

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March 10, 2021 5:30 PM

A Discussion on Healthcare Communications with John Englehart

On February 4, 2021, I had the opportunity to interview John Englehart, Senior Vice President (SVP) and Chief Communications and Marketing Officer (CMO) for Hospital for Special Surgery (HSS). Englehart said he is “responsible for managing reputation, awareness, and culture,” which puts him in charge of everything from HSS’s public image to internal communications and work culture. He studied at Syracuse University and has been in his position at HSS since 2014, following an impressive career that took him all over the world to places like Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, and London. While his background was not in healthcare communications, Englehart has successfully led HSS marketing and communications for seven years and maintained the hospital’s reputation as the best orthopedic hospital in the United States. His advice and stories were not only incredibly valuable to me but also provided me with insights into what my future could look like as an aspiring healthcare communications professional.

As SVP and CMO of HSS, Englehart’s day “starts early and runs late.” He works directly with a team of around twenty-two people but emphasized that there are another dozen people across the organization who are incredibly important to the communications process. Englehart’s goals for himself and those on his team are complex and focus on growing the HSS brand both internally and externally. He said, “[Many of my] days are filled with meetings with people all across the organization... mostly related to growth.” I asked Englehart what a typical day looks like in his position, to which he emphatically responded, “I’ve been at HSS for seven years and no two days have been alike which is part of what makes the role invigorating and exciting.”

Englehart certainly does not shy away from the challenges of the unknown. A glance at his LinkedIn profile shows years of travel and a dynamic career. I asked why he chose to work in healthcare; his answer surprised me:

I'm here by accident... the creative person who came up with ['where the world comes to get back in the game' campaign¹] was a friend of mine and he asked me to get involved. My background is on the services side. I'd never before worked on the inside of any company.... My background is mostly with corporate and consumer brand development and management, never actually managing a brand or a company directly.

As someone who has spent the better half of her life very familiar with HSS as a brand and as a family, I never thought of someone coming into such an impressive role "by accident." But it seemed that Englehart shared my fondness for the healthcare industry and more specifically the hospital. He elaborated on his first interactions with HSS:

I had never heard of HSS and came to a meeting as a favor but what struck me about [the hospital] was several-fold: It matters to apply your talent with a sense of noble purpose... Healthcare is different [than other industries]... it really *matters* and that is really appealing. I get to work with a small team of people who really are, by definition, the best in the world at what they do and that is an awesome privilege. Given the social value of healthcare... who wouldn't want to [do what I do?]"

The value of working in an industry that's primary goal is wellness over capital gains seems immeasurable. As Englehart said, "Musculoskeletal health is massively relevant to our society... [it drives] everything from quality of life to business performance, and HSS is driven by a sense of purpose in making the highest quality of care more widely available to more people." This philanthropic drive is unique to an industry like this and Englehart's appreciation of it is evident. His advice to me when I told him I want to enter healthcare communications was inspirational: "Be as much as you can be and go as high as you can go. There really are no limitations on [working in the healthcare industry]."

¹ Slogan that was workshopped and later became "How you move is why we're here"

The emergence of Zoom and telehealth has allowed Englehart and all HSS employees to work from home when they want to. I was curious to know the way that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Englehart personally. He was candid in his explanation of the nature of his job and working from home in a digital environment:

The thing—and it’s both a good and bad thing— about being in marketing and communications in a hospital environment is you have to be flexible about boundaries... I work very closely with the CEO... We communicate almost constantly seven days a week [via] phone, text, video conference, email, everything. That helps me do my job better because we’re really in sync. In some ways, it’s unhealthy because boundaries, I think, are really healthy and I have none.... My background for many years has been rooted in virtual collaboration. I was responsible for very large, very widely distributed teams [while based internationally]... working virtually. Over the past fourteen years, I have spent an enormous amount of time using these kinds of video technologies... so this doesn’t really impact me.

The trade-offs of virtual collaboration via videoconference software seem worth it for Englehart and he emphasized that it has greatly improved HSS internally and externally. Internally, it forced staff to adapt to and appreciate the value of the video feature that was previously ignored when the hospital used Skype as its main method of internal communication. Highlights of this include fully virtual grand rounds and incredible feats like Surgeon-in-Chief Brian Kelly’s collaboration on a surgery with other doctors based around the country. On the external side, Englehart said, “Telehealth is here to stay.” He believes that the pandemic accelerated the growth and acceptance of virtual visits, but even without it growth was inevitable. Before the pandemic, telehealth visits averaged around 1,000 visits per year. In the last year, those numbers have risen to around 100,000 visits. That said, Englehart believes there are rational and emotional limitations to telehealth. “Consumers prefer in-person visits and feel safer coming in person for care at HSS [because it is a specialized hospital.] We don’t treat Covid patients,” Englehart said. He also explained that some visits are not practical for telehealth. Regardless, the digital age of medicine is upon us, and Englehart is ready to adapt.

I was curious to hear what Englehart recalled as his hardest challenge at HSS. He said, internally, the hardest thing he had to do was change the way HSS staff understood marketing and communications. He said many people see it “as a utility, like electricity, when it’s more of a strategic tool... if [a brand] treats its marketing resources like a utility or a switch you turn off and on, [it] will run out of resources without achieving anything.” Englehart aims to “earn the confidence of the medical staff that we are as good at what we do as they are at what they do.” Externally, Englehart says that HSS faces different kinds of perception barriers. The three most common misconceptions are: “HSS is only for surgery and special surgery.... HSS is only for the rich and famous.... [and] HSS is a boutique hospital on the Upper East Side of New York City.” He said that the ongoing goals of his department and the hospital as a whole are to earn the trust of the consumer and to shift these deep-rooted and false perceptions towards the truth: “How you move is why we’re here.”

As the world of marketing and communications shifts towards social media and the digital landscape, brands are forced to catch up with the times or get forgotten in the age of print. Englehart said his goal for HSS is to “go where consumers are and engage in the ways most relevant to them.” This aligns with the evolution of the HSS logo and the rebranding I asked Englehart to explain. The logo called “The Mobility Man” was 11 years old when Englehart identified the problem that drove the rebranding (Figure 1). He said, “[We wanted to move] from an identity that was about special surgery to an identity that was about a better quality of life through better quality of movement.” To achieve this, HSS conducted research with the question “How do people perceive the mobility man?” They found that very few people knew what it was when presented with the logo without the hospital’s name alongside it; others thought it was a handicap symbol. Englehart said they then transitioned to a blue box around the words “Hospital

for Special Surgery” but ran into problems because first, most HSS locations are satellites, not hospitals, and second, most visits to HSS are not surgeries (Figure 2). This logo was a bit too misleading and so Englehart and his team came up with the current HSS logo: the letters “HSS” in that same familiar blue box (Figure 3). This simplistic change was inspired by Englehart’s time working with Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) during their launch as a global brand because he learned from their success. More people know the brand “HSBC” than what those letters stand for. Englehart said that the new HSS logo was a new way of introducing the brand to those unfamiliar with the hospital in a way that was still familiar to those who already knew and loved it. To Englehart, “[Rebranding] wasn’t just about a logo change it was about the expression of an evolved identity that happened to be signed with a logo.”

Identity is everything to Englehart, and at this point in the interview, I had one pressing question on my mind: How do you become the best of the best at what you do? Englehart responded to the question in four parts:

First, with a ferocious obsession with understanding psychology and how people think and behave. People don’t behave the way that they think that they behave, so really understanding actual behavior and how perception is influenced/how influence works are the psychology of the modern consumer.

Second, by having a very keen interest in defining and understanding problems because I believe that good marketing is rooted in problem-solving.... Make sure you have a clearly defined problem.

Third, by keeping an ongoing and dynamic interest in media in the broadest sense.... How does influence happen in our society? It’s very complex and it changes continuously... the more familiar you are and the more objective you can be looking at the media landscape the better.

And finally, by sharpening one’s understanding of brands and what brands really are. [Make sure you] understand the brand you represent and their core truths and potential. How do you connect that and all the stuff in between with the audience?

He made sure I understood the importance of these things before reminding me again that success in marketing is “good detective work.” He told me that “Most people who excel in marketing and communications are drawn [to these things]. It’s exciting. It’s a pursuit. I would

encourage anyone with an interest in marketing in this field to really focus on excellence and a dynamic that is a pursuit of excellence.” I intend to pursue excellence and understanding of the world around me in everything that I do; clearly, it has served Englehart well.

Englehart and I parted with the question “What is the biggest lesson you’ve learned in your career?” He gave me three:

The first is professional integrity and respect for our discipline of marketing and communications. That means the way you think about what you do as being strategically valuable as opposed to a utility. We have a responsibility to be really good at [our job] from a consumer standpoint. It’s not just doing what others want you to do, it’s advocating for the *right* thing to do.

I will frame the second key lesson in a quote from *Gladiator* where Marcus Aurelius said, ‘Win the crowd, and you will win your freedom.’ That goes back to demonstrating and providing evidence to earn the confidence of skeptics and cynics that you know what you’re doing. Once you win that crowd you win the freedom to advance a better quality of work and effective work going forward.

The third and most valuable is a recipe for change. It’s so simple it’s shocking how regularly it is not followed. Change requires four things and if any of those things are absent, change will not happen. . . . The first is pressure for change. Why do we *need* to do things differently? Understanding, defining, framing, and communicating the pressure is our job. [The second] is a clear vision for change. What does success *look* like? What is the other side of the ocean that is our destination? I [want to] see clearly what is possible. The third is the capacity for change. Capacity includes capability, resource, time, all of that. If I know what to do with no way of doing it, it won’t happen. The fourth piece is actionable next steps. What are the specific actionable next steps? There is importance in that as a model because at the end of the day if you’re not a utility, so much of what you do is creating change.

I could see that he truly does follow his advice even in our short conversation. From talking about earning the trust and confidence of both consumers and staff to the way he used the recipe for change in rebranding HSS, Englehart is an expert in his field and I appreciated his time.

After our conversation, I found myself more excited about working in healthcare communications than I was before. Englehart’s passion for what he does is infectious and he

clearly loves the HSS environment and brand. He said coming to HSS “was like destiny,” and I can’t help but hope that I will feel the same way about my future career.

Appendix



Figure 1. "The Mobility Man"



Figure 2. New Logo first iteration



Figure 3. HSS Current Logo

References

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