

Susman seeks to right a bad rap

Big is not necessarily bad, says Pfizer PR supremo Sally Susman. “Big can be a force for good.” Susman, who is EVP policy, external affairs and communications at Pfizer, has the unenviable task of convincing the public, policymakers and healthcare professionals that big pharma—and her employer, in particular, the biggest of the big—is on the side of the angels.

When Ian Read took the reins of the company at the beginning of the year, he laid out four imperatives for the company—basically, fixing R&D, reallocating capital smartly, boosting morale—and earning society’s respect. “He’s put a spotlight on it in a very pointed and specific way, and I couldn’t be more pleased,” says Susman, “because for people who do the kind of work I do, that’s what you want—a CEO who’s committed.”

To get at the roots of that disconnect, the company has initiated a battery of research, seeking “to really research what it is the public holds and harbors against the industry so we can address it in a new and fresh way,” says Susman.

Pfizer recently stripped out a layer of senior management, and Susman was given responsibility for state-level and global government relations, consolidating public affairs into the broader communications area. She now oversees a 400-person department and reports directly to Read.

She sees some positive movement on the corporate reputation front, thanks in part to improvement in pipelines and corporate and industry transparency initiatives such as Pfizer’s post-

Sally Susman
EVP policy, external affairs & comms., Pfizer

2000-2007
EVP, global communications, Estée Lauder

1995-1998
Head of corporate communications and government relations, American Express

ing of physician interactions.

“Pharma is a long-trend business,” says Susman. “I’ve been here four years and I definitely feel the tides shifting.” She finds the lack of excitement among the press and the public about scientific advancements frustrating, citing “this lag effect taking place where the public view of the industry is not on pace with the dynamism we’re seeing coming out of the science.”

“The enthusiasm coming out of ASCO was palpable and there are real measurable quantitative strides being made,” says Susman.

Companies need to lead on telling their story, says Susman, who, while praising PhRMA’s legislative work, particularly its leadership on healthcare reform, said the fractious trade group can be “like herding cats” when it comes to developing messaging.

Susman came to Pfizer four years ago with a resume full of sterling corporate reputation work on behalf of big blue chip clients—American Express and, most recently, Estée Lauder.

“Each one of these companies has a huge public imprint,” she says, “an interface with the public, whether you’re in somebody’s wallet or putting it on your face or in your mouth. And they’re all companies that rely very much on a public welcome to do what they do. That said, there’s nothing harder than pharmaceuticals,” she adds, paraphrasing John F. Kennedy on the moonshot—“We do these things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.”

Politics was Susman’s first love. After studying at Connecticut College and London School of Economics, where she was a polisci major, Susman started out in government, working on international trade issues for the Department of Commerce and the Senate Committee on Commerce during the Clinton years before heading to London to lead European corporate communications for American Express, where she gained an invaluable global perspective.

She lives in New York with her partner and 17-year-old daughter, and serves as a commissioner on the New York City Commission on Women’s Issues and the International Rescue Committee. She likes to unwind with a book and volunteering on political campaigns.

—Matthew Arnold

“Pharma is a long-trend business. I’ve been here four years and I definitely feel the tides shifting”



PHOTO: DAN DERRICO