

CAREER PATHS: NO ONE WAY TO THE TOP

As four highly regarded execs tell **Larry Dobrow**, the road to a rewarding career in pharma and healthcare marketing can include anything from a high school teaching stint to a gig as an athletic trainer in the Toronto Blue Jays organization



ILLUSTRATION: A.E. KIEREN



JOHN BUTLER, President and CEO, Akebia

Time in the industry: 28 years

Original career goal: I knew what I loved to do, which was science.

Previous jobs: Sales representative, sales training and product management, president, CEO and then president and CEO

How did you get into healthcare/pharma?

My undergraduate degree was in chemistry and I have an MBA. I love science. Pharmaceutical sales allowed me to combine the two, so I sent résumés to every pharma company in the country. Roche called.

What skills did you pick up from your previous roles?

I was never the best sales rep in the company, but that job gave me a foundation for my professional life and made me better at every job that followed. That experience and opportunity are invaluable.

What was your eureka moment, the moment when you first realized that you were in the right place professionally?

I went into a dialysis center early in my career with Amgen. A patient found out I was from Amgen and came up to hug me. Epogen, my product, had fundamentally changed her life. I realized that what I was doing could make a huge difference.

What were some of the challenges along the way—and how did you get past them?

The first challenge I ever had to face was simply what to do with a chemistry degree when I didn't want to be chemist. If you look at every challenge as a challenge you will get overwhelmed. You have to dissect what you think is a challenge into the problem, the opportunity and the parts that are easy to address, so that you can see what needs to be accomplished. You get past challenges by pulling them apart to see what the root of the challenge is because that is the key to coming up with a solution.

What has surprised you most about working in the industry?

I am constantly amazed by how close-knit and helpful folks are. The Massachusetts biotech community is amazing. Everyone is willing to offer help, guidance, support—whatever you need!

To whom do you owe your success?

My family. My mother was always there to support me growing up. My father and grandmother gave me my work ethic and taught me values that matter. My wife and children keep me centered. My work family makes me look good every day.

Who were your inspirations and mentors, both professionally and personally?

My father was my greatest inspiration. He was never afraid to take chances and worked as hard as anyone I've ever met but always behaved with integrity. I've had many mentors over the years, the most significant of whom was Henri Termeer, Genzyme's CEO. He gave me my most significant leadership opportunities.

What do you consider to be your most useful career skill or greatest professional strength and how did you develop it?

This business is so much about people, the ability to put together a team of people who complement one another and you as a leader, and the intelligence to stay out of their way and let them do their job is what I do, and like to do, best. I honestly believe it develops from the basic skills I learned as a sales rep; it's more important to listen than talk—two ears, one mouth theory.

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?

Why would I have done anything differently? I might not have ended up in the great spot I'm in today! You have to embrace your successes and your mistakes. That's what life is all about!

What advice would you give others looking to get into the industry or move up the ranks?

Never say no to an opportunity. Whenever a new project was presented to me, I took it on. It's how you learn and get noticed. I was fortunate to be at companies that valued people with that attitude.



LORI TIERNEY, VP US Commercial Operations, AstraZeneca

Time in the industry: 23 years

Original career goal: Something in advertising/marketing/sales

Previous jobs: Before AstraZeneca VP of commercial operations and SVP, commercial innovation and customer solutions

How did you get into healthcare/pharma?

I got my start in pharma right out of college at Wyeth Ayerst as a temporary employee in R&D human resources. I got to experience multiple junior roles in HR and project management and had my first commercial experiences as a forecasting analyst and ultimately a primary care office-based sales representative.

What skills did you pick up from your previous roles?

Reading people, assessing talent and understanding what it takes to build high-performing teams. Being in a junior role, I read people at all levels in the organization. I saw what would happen to people—managers and leaders—based on how they treated others. As a junior person, I was highly responsive to those I deemed strong and fair leaders. R&D helped prepare me for my later jobs in marketing and gave me a better appreciation of what it takes to bring a molecule to market and how to make fact-based, strategic choices.

What was your eureka moment, the moment when you first realized that you were in the right place professionally?

My first sales job, when I was in a physician's office and seeing the patients. I gained an understanding of what it took for doctors and staff to inspire treatment, compliance and adherence in a North Philadelphia patient population. The impact of the business decisions on patient care made the job real and valuable.

NO ONE WAY TO THE TOP

What were some of the challenges along the way—and how did you get past them?

The biggest challenge was dealing with highly educated and intelligent people while I was young and inexperienced. I had to be quite brave to get leaders to help move me along in my career by asking directly for their help. I am not a natural networker. I believe my performance should stand on its own but I've learned that often it's important to ensure you are building networks of individuals who support you personally and help you get things done.

To whom do you owe your success?

To myself, to my parents for raising me right and to the many people along the way that helped me either because they saw my potential or I wore them down!

Who were your inspirations and mentors, both professionally and personally?

My husband was diagnosed with cancer at 25 and we got up close and personal with the healthcare system at a young age. He's a living miracle 20 years and eight relapses later and inspires me to do amazing things in support of patients and the pursuit of science.

What do you consider to be your most useful career skill or greatest professional strength and how did you develop it?

Simplifying the complex, engendering "followship," connecting people with the organization's priorities and being humble enough to ask for help when I need it.

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?

No, there truly isn't. All of the bumps and bruises taught me valuable lessons and made me a better leader.

What advice would you give others looking to get into the industry or move up the ranks?

Performance speaks for itself. Be kind, passionate and indefatigable.



PETER JUSTASON, Director, eMarketing, Purdue Pharma

Time in the industry: 31 years

Original career goal: Junior high school teacher

Previous jobs: Night watchman, a junior high school teacher and an athletic trainer in the Toronto Blue Jays organization

How did you get into healthcare/pharma?

One of my fellow teachers said, "Have I got the job for you?" ... which usually meant I would take over her library period and she would mark tests in the staff room. "No," she said. "You sell drugs to doctors." Long story short, her brother was in the industry but relocating to another part of Canada and he could get a referral bonus if he found a replacement. He was willing to split that with his sister, so she was very motivated to get me my first pharma job. Two weeks later I was hired and in training.

What skills did you pick up from your previous roles?

In every role you pick up skills that can be applied to your current one. The most important skill that I learned early on was to listen. It helps you understand what you need to do.

What was your eureka moment, the moment when you first realized that you were in the right place professionally?

Back in the day, being a representative was a very lucrative position. You got a company car, travel expenses, a decent salary, bonus checks, a boss you saw once every two months and doctors who actually liked seeing you in their offices. So compared to teaching, it was a great switch.

What were some of the challenges along the way—and how did you get past them?

Everyone in pharma recognizes that access to HCPs is getting more and more limited. I realized that the trend was only going to get worse, so switching to e-marketing allowed me to leverage what I had learned as a brand marketer to the non-personal promotion channels.

What has surprised you most about working in the industry?

Having worked in Canada and the United States, as well as attended company meetings in Europe, it surprised me how similar the practice of medicine and pharma marketing are in the different markets. Sure, there are differences, but they are more similar than different despite socialists and capitalists running the different countries.

To whom do you owe your success?

At each stage of my career I was lucky enough to have an excellent manager. There are too many names to mention and I am afraid that I will forget one and feel bad reading this in print. But they all provided great direction and gave me enough room to be successful ... but not let me get into too much trouble.

Who were your inspirations and mentors, both professionally and personally?

Like any good Canadian boy, I have to point to Wayne Gretzky. Wayne thought and executed hockey plays in a different way than anyone else. That was an inspiration for me as I approached e-marketing.

What do you consider to be your most useful career skill or greatest professional strength and how did you develop it?

Listening. That skill is valuable at every level in the organization and not everyone is good at it. You already know what you know but you don't know everything that customers, coworkers and bosses know. When you listen, you learn things you don't know. Also, people will think you are really smart—because you are listening to them—and you haven't said anything to get yourself in trouble.

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?

Not much, but I didn't work in market research or US managed markets. I regret not working in market research, as it took longer for me to understand the data and studies when I made the switch from sales representative to marketer. As an e-marketer, having a deeper understanding of the complex and changing managed markets would have been helpful, in order to be able capture insights and design more impactful non-personal promotions in the managed market space for my company.

NO ONE WAY TO THE TOP

What advice would you give others looking to get into the industry or move up the ranks?

The advice I would give would be to “live in the moment” in the role you’re in, know what success is within the context of that role and to achieve that success. Always listen—it will take you a long way and not get you in trouble. Don’t be the smartest person in the room. Select your boss very carefully, as he or she will be the reason you get promoted or you quit. “Up” is not necessarily the way to the top. Sometimes you need to go sideways to get where you want to be. And don’t burn bridges. It is a very small industry.



LISA FLAIZ, Group product director, digital marketing, Janssen

Time in the industry: Over 20 years

Original career goal: Healthcare marketing

Previous jobs: I grew up entirely on the agency side, always 100% dedicated to healthcare/pharma clients.

How did you get into healthcare/pharma?

My mom was one of the first nurses hired by Merck to do professional tele-detailing. You might say I followed in her footsteps.

What skills did you pick up from your previous roles?

My previous roles taught me the art of evaluating creative and to consider everything through the view of a customer. While leveraging customer insights is core to any communications agency, words like user and customer experience were brought to life for me in my previous roles at digital agencies. And while traditional agency roles helped me develop my brand-building and strategy muscles, heading digital agency teams helped me develop an approach to leading change and innovation. Also, being a client-service professional, you learn early how to win friends and influence people! This comes in handy when your role includes “agent for change”!

What was your eureka moment, the moment when you first realized that you were in the right place professionally?

There are two instances I can pinpoint that made me feel good about where I am. The first was when I started teaching pharmaceutical marketing classes and realized that, with my experience, I could add value to the careers of the new guard and rising stars. The second was when I joined Janssen and realized the extent to which not only the drugs but also the experiences we create and the content we put out could contribute to a person’s overall health and well-being.

What were some of the challenges along the way—and how did you get past them?

Probably the biggest challenge in a role like mine is breaking through some of the traditional ways we do things as an industry. Our heritage runs deep and change is hard at large organizations.

What has surprised you most about working in the industry?

I don’t know that I would characterize it as a surprise, but between healthcare and digital, I’m at the intersection of two of the most

dynamic and constantly shifting spaces. Year after year the landscape changes. Whether it’s the speed of technology, the government and policy aspects, the nuances of each new emerging media channel, the changing payer and ever-increasing competitive environment or any number of other external or internal influences, there is always the next new “thing” to be considered when developing business plans. Discussions around all-digital trial protocols, EMRs, real-world evidence, payer reform, community management ... a long list of other “hot” topics are new to the table, and each year this industry sees new exciting topics like these make their way to the forefront.

To whom do you owe your success?

While I won’t single out an individual, I have to admit I sometimes feel like I was in the right place at the right time when digital started becoming an important part of the marketing mix. I am by no means a “digital native” and I was never a techie. I will always refer to myself as a marketer. But being at an agency that saw the future and wanted to start building websites in the early days of pharma’s entry into the digital arena, I was set up nicely to adapt with the changing marketing world. I was lucky to have amazing clients at pharmaceutical companies that had an appetite to do things differently.

Who were your inspirations and mentors, both professionally and personally?

There are several men and women that I worked closely with in my agency days that I would love to mention. It’s a long list. But one person in particular who stands out is Nancy Phelan. Nancy is currently at BMS, but I met her when she was at Wyeth. She has always been an inspiration due to her unflappable grace-under-pressure nature. She is successful managing incredibly complex and challenging initiatives with large-scale business impact. She is an incredibly competent and credible woman who recognizes others, shares in successes, seeks solutions, propels her team, watches the big picture and never lets you see her sweat!

What do you consider to be your most useful career skill or greatest professional strength and how did you develop it?

I believe my leadership skills are probably what have helped me the most. In an agency environment, as you take on roles with greater responsibility, you go from working broadly across a number of things to working deeply on pieces of business that you own. Your exposure to the many angles of any business challenge is increased and you learn to be resourceful. I have also been privileged to be part of the larger pharmaceutical industry community by sitting on boards, speaking at conferences, teaching classes, consulting with analysts, etc. All these activities have served me well.

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?

No regrets here. I’m in a great role on a great team in a great organization and I’d hate to change anything that would have changed the path that got me here.

What advice would you give others looking to get into the industry or move up the ranks?

I would advise them to network extensively and to look for opportunities outside their role and demonstrate contributions to the industry. Performing in your role at your company is only half the battle. It’s a small industry, so it’s very competitive. ■