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## Jam Session for Early- to Mid-Career Freelancers

### Session Moderator

**Jennifer Minarcik, MS** / Principal, Jennifer Minarcik Biomedical Communications, LLC, Moorestown, NJ

### By Suzanne Morris, DVM, MWC

About 15 freelancers and freelancers-to-be gathered at the AMWA 2022 Southeast Regional Conference in June to share their early freelance career experiences. Some of the participants had just decided to take the freelance plunge and were eager for tips on setting up a new business whereas others with more experience were wanting to share lessons learned. Session facilitator Jennifer Minarcik, MS, started the discussion by divulging some of the assumptions she had when she first started her freelancing career. She spoke to the misperception that freelance medical writers are all in competition with each other by pointing out the diversity of medical writing genres represented by the session's participants.

Acknowledging that the varied nature of freelance medical writing lends to camaraderie rather than competitiveness among freelance medical writers led to a discussion of networking. Although making connections with other freelancers may not translate to immediate work, networking can develop leads, elevate a freelancer's marketplace presence, and unearth other benefits. One of the more valuable of these benefits may be finding a good mentor. The more experienced session participants extolled the benefits of mentorship in guiding their early freelancing careers. But how does a new freelancer go about finding a mentor? Those who had who have benefitted from mentorship described a relationship which naturally developed from a networking connection.

Another early career misstep Minarcik discussed was the compulsion to take on every project, and the consequent erosion of the work-personal life border. Minarcik and the other more seasoned freelancers agreed that project selectivity fosters a reasonable work schedule and, potentially, better clients. Because part of cultivating a work-life balance entails supporting work hour productivity, the discussion then turned to productivity strategies. For example, creating a schedule with built-in time to respond to distractions like emails supports productivity during work hours. Protecting work time also may require establishing boundaries with clients by responding to clients only during set work hours or at set times during the week.

The conversation turned to some of the other nuts-and-bolts of running a freelance business. As with most freelance medical writing discussions, the topic of contracts arose, albeit briefly. The take-home message for new freelancers was to carefully review contracts, particularly with respect to payment parameters. Some of the freelancer participants who were just forming their businesses asked for advice on insurance and accounting. The responses from the more seasoned participants were mixed—few had insurance, and several used accounting services and software. But the consensus was that some form of accounting assistance was very helpful.

Inevitably, the discussion turned to what may be the most daunting aspect of freelance medical writing or freelancing in general: marketing. The importance of presence online, particularly on platforms like LinkedIn, was discussed at length by several seasoned freelancers. For introverts averse to overt self-promotion, a less intimidating approach may be simply posting about topics of interest, which creates an online presence and can garner attention. Another strategy was to investigate companies associated with relevant forms of medical writing on LinkedIn and make connections with their employees. Whether to solicit potential clients through email was a point of debate, with the more experienced freelancers advising that if done, it should be targeted and could backfire by annoying the targeted client. The discussion of marketing repeatedly circled back to value of networking, which can be done online and in person through, for example, AMWA events. And in keeping with its overriding theme, this AMWA session ended with participants exchanging their business cards.

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## Public Relations in Medical Communication

### Speaker

**Katrina R. Burton, BS** / Public Relations Program Director

### By Lisa Kuhns, PhD

According to the Public Relations Society of America, organizations and their publics use public relations as a communication strategy to build relationships that are mutually beneficial. Medical communicators help educate the public by sharing relevant health information through their own writing, and those with a marketing and public relations

(PR) background offer a unique skill set to health care institutions. Those trained in health care PR can expand their reach through a variety of platforms, including earned media, owned media, and bought media, using public relations as a tool to educate the public on medical and public health information.

PR plays a critical role in health care because it allows institutions and organizations to raise awareness about health, share groundbreaking research, and help people take control of their own health. A new treatment is less impactful if the public is not aware of its launch. PR also helps to highlight important health initiatives, reach underserved populations, and amplify the effectiveness of community and hospital-based programs and treatments. A story of patients sharing their health care journey because of the latest treatment may offer hope to others on the same journey. Accurate and factual information on health initiatives, research developments, and patient programming helps build trust in the medical community. Thus, health care PR helps spread information that can help people live healthier and more fulfilling lives.

In her presentation at the 2022 AMWA Southeast Regional Conference, Katrina R. Burton, Program Director of PR at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, explained why it is important for medical communicators to understand the dynamics of how PR can leverage relationships between medical institutions and the public. Her presentation described best practices for developing a strategic PR plan, discussed how to identify and engage with stakeholders, and provided tips on how to build media relationships.

### **Best Practices for Developing a Public Relations Plan**

PR experts within a department typically develop a PR or media plan. Burton discussed the components of developing a winning plan. In her words, the plan begins by determining the “it” or the “what” that is being promoted. The “it” can be a/an

- Clinical or patient program
- Award or recognition
- Research study
- Sponsorship or partnership
- Important milestone
- Patient and clinical services
- Facility opening or launch
- Patient testimony

Once the “it” has been determined, the stakeholders are engaged, and the supporters or collaborators are identified.

The PR plan also should include the costs and budget. Costs can depend on what is being promoted and may be known or discoverable. Stakeholders and collaborators may be involved, and the budget may involve different departments, divisions, and institutions. The funds may come from grants or donors.

To complete the PR plan, the target audience must be identified, key messages developed, a timeline and deliverables determined, and the desired communication channels established. The communication channels selected may depend on the target audience, content, and timelines.

### **Building Relationships to Execute the Public Relations Strategy**

Every good plan involves more than the PR expert. In fact, it involves a multitude of people who are experts in social media, the web, video, photography, and more. Burton emphasized relationships are the fundamental component of any PR role and important for a successful plan. Building relationships with the internal team, media, and influencers helps to facilitate the plan’s implementation. Relationships also help to build rapport and trust, open communication channels, and strengthen an organization’s personal brand. “Operating in the public relations space as a medical communicator is an opportunity to enhance outreach opportunities, engage with stakeholders, and build collaborative relationships,” said Burton. “It also provides an opportunity to share impactful stories of hope and important health information to help people live healthier lives.”

Building relationships also defines roles and helps manage expectations. Importantly, establishing good relationships creates loyalty. “For me, building relationships with media is understanding their beat or area of focus, learning their reporting style, being familiar with the type of stories they cover, knowing their audience, and understanding how they engage on social media and with others,” said Burton. “The stories I pitch to media are important to me, and I want them to be just as important to media, who in turn cares about their audience.”

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