

John Benbrook

The Strategy of Strategy

When John Benbrook was named CEO of Matthews Media Group (MMG), a communications company focused on connecting patients with clinical trial opportunities, a lot had changed for the small business. The founder of MMG had sold the organization to Omnicom Group, which meant it could no longer compete for government contracts as a minority-owned company. "We couldn't re-compete for the work we had lost, and I knew that we needed to quickly get a vision about what the company could do to grow," John remembers. "I felt that moving forward could only be done by looking back at where we had come from, refocusing MMG on the original passion upon which it was founded."

He will never forget that day when he assumed leadership of MMG and stood up before his team to announce where they were going. Since the loss of several contracts had meant the loss of several dozen jobs, tensions were high.

"What can we hope for right now?" one woman asked. "What does the future hold that we can believe in right now?"

"Hope is not a strategy," John quoted. "We come to work and stretch our limits every day. We'll create our vision and our destiny ourselves. It's not about promises, it's about execution and vision. As we navigate toward that vision, we're going to have to be pragmatic. We'll have to recalculate and recalibrate at times, and we're going to have to take risks, but we're going to get there, and this is how."

With that, he proceeded to lay out a detailed description of the strategy MMG would be engaging in to reclaim a company culture and strength it had lost, and today, that vision John so affirmatively imparted is now a reality. "MMG has become a tremendous team of amazingly gifted people that I value each and every day," he avows. "Since recommitting to our core values,

we've sought to create an environment of collaboration, teamwork, stability, and trust, and I think we've achieved that."

What exactly are these core values? Perhaps John's words of inspiration to his staff were lent their resonance because MMG was founded on precisely the same concept: that hope is not a strategy. When the founder's mother was stricken with breast cancer and none of the medications on the market could offer her relief, the founder knew they needed more than just hope.

After growing increasingly frustrated with the lack of information to help her mother's cause, she decided to leave the PR world and start a company whose sole purpose was to help individuals identify clinical trial opportunities. "The founder's grand vision was to provide these individuals with options and with some control over their futures," John explains.

"Her goal was to create a vehicle to connect these patients with clinical trials that could supply them with medical care they might not otherwise have access to."

A dynamic and well-connected woman, the founder had worked for Porter Novelly for many years. When she started MMG, she leveraged those connections and began competing for contracts that were tied to health communications and clinical trials. The Cancer Institute of the National Institute of Health was their first client, and 24 years later, they still retain this client today.

As the founder was honing her PR expertise and launching MMG, John was pursuing a very different professional path that would somehow still arrive at the same end. The oldest of four brothers, he grew up in a very close-knit family in New Jersey. "My brothers and I would always wrestle and roughhouse, and we loved



sports," he remembers fondly. "I think it was that competitiveness that got me into sales later on." His first job out of college was assistant production manager of a printing company, and he then went to work for a typewriter reseller called Information Products.

"My boss there told me he thought my personality, energy, drive, and competitive spirit would make me a natural at sales, so I tried it and loved it right off the bat," he reports. After five years there, he spent another five years working as a sales representative for a company specializing in printer and PC connectivity. That opportunity positioned him for a job offer from Hewlett Packard, which he heartily accepted. "Even with 90,000 employees, HP felt like a family organization," he reminisces. "Its open door policy and culture of team work and training made for an amazing experience."

After eight years at HP, John sought to leave the product sale environment behind to focus more on consultancy and technology information sales. He made his entrée into pharmaceuticals when he accepted a position in business development at Integrated Systems Consulting Group based out of Pennsylvania, but when that company was purchased by First Consulting Group, he began considering his next move. That's when a friend asked him to come meet MMG's founder. "I thought I was doing a favor by agreeing to meet with her, but I quickly realized it had been a tremendous favor to myself," John laughs. "Since I've come to MMG, I've found that it's really nice to do work you believe in, and the process of bringing a molecule to market is incredible."

Though John was hired on at MMG as VP of Business Development, he spent that first year investing his time and effort into really understanding the business, observing where his leadership and teambuilding skills might best be used to maximize its effectiveness. "Certainly, you sell yourself every day, whether it's to your clients or to your kids," John points out. "You sell yourself to your employees, and the day they stop believing in you is the day you have to go start looking for something else." With characteristic tenacity and success, he was able to make this sale to MMG by embracing innovation, excellence, collaboration, integrity, and stewardship. "The hardest thing to do during my leadership here has been to transform the company from a health

communications business to a patient recruitment and retention business, but I also feel that it was the most important thing I've done," he describes.

Though MMG's focus had shifted somewhat throughout its life cycle, it today remains completely dedicated to helping government pharmaceutical, medical device, or biotechnology companies create awareness in both patients and principle investigators doing research about clinical trial opportunities. "The concept of donating blood is widely accepted throughout society, yet participation in clinical trials remains taboo," John points out. "People will tell you how they try to talk family members out of this participation because of fear, uncertainty, and lack of understanding. Therein lies a tremendous opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of clinical trials."

Promoting community understanding and acceptance is certainly a goal of MMG, but another primary focus is the global community. After a product has been tested for safe use on humans, it enters the second phase of clinical development, which tests for effectiveness. This is followed by the third phase, in which the product is tested on a patient population that can be as high as 6,000. Eighty percent of MMG's work falls within phase two or three, and when the company is contracted to support these more advanced projects, the endeavor evolves into a global affair. "When you've got forty or fifty countries to support, you're dealing with translations, messaging, culturally unique ethic committees, and other constraints that are specific to each society," John points out.

Supporting such expansive projects could not be done effectively without a phenomenal team, and John is quick to credit his success to his employees. "MMG is not about I, it's about we," he emphasizes. "I would be nowhere on my own; it's the company and the team that allows us to do what we do." John played sports all his life, and he firmly believes that the tenets of teamwork and perseverance honed on the basketball court have had a major role in his professional development. "In high school, my basketball coach refused to let us stagnate for even one day. The sense of being on a team penetrated my DNA, and I use this instinct at MMG every day," he adds.

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the business world today, John reflects back on decisions made when he graduated from college

and cautions against playing it too safe. “We all have opportunities to make decisions in which we have to assess our appetites for risk, and it’s up to us to strike the right balance with our choices,” he explains. When John graduated from college, he had the opportunity to pursue his athletic career in Europe, yet even though he had fallen in love with basketball the very first time he dribbled, he declined. He had a job offer at the time, and he had heard that sometimes the overseas teams would renege on their contracts without even paying the players enough to buy a ticket back to America.

“In the grand scheme of things, if that was the worst thing that could have happened, would that scenario really have been so bad?” he asks now. “I’m not a big believer in having regrets, but I do think you can learn from every opportunity. Now I take calculated risks in which I weigh the pros and cons, and I remember that experience as having really helped to shape my tolerance for risk.” For this reason, John adamantly encourages today’s youth to find their passion and pursue it.

This passion may evolve over time, so listen and don’t be afraid to readjust and recalibrate as you navigate. Hope may not be a strategy in itself, but having a strategy certainly is.

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