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CEO SPOTLIGHT

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In the late 1990s, Laura Liotta knew she needed a change. Restless in her role as a corporate communications executive, she felt the calling towards a new and different challenge. Having worked closely with many public relations agencies during her career, she saw the sector as ripe for disruption to increase quality. Her vision was to bring forward a new agency model that could maximize client service and value by bringing seasoned communications experts together in a "virtual" workplace – something that was unheard of at that time. It was out of this bold vision that Laura founded Sam Brown Healthcare Communications in 1999, naming it in homage to her grandfather.

The modern practice of public relations (PR) is a challenging arena. With the rise of social media and the 24-7 news cycle, competition for attention is fiercer than ever before. Generating a compelling story, attracting media attention, and building brand awareness and social presence with diverse audiences can be daunting. In the life sciences industry, the bar for creating impact through PR is even higher. To translate and amplify an often-complicated scientific story that garners headlines and educates existing and potential patients and investors, life science companies typically rely heavily on PR agency providers.

Becoming a trusted PR partner doesn't happen overnight. Competition is fierce, particularly in healthcare. Independent agencies either struggle to survive or are gobbled up by larger agency behemoths as part of the field's ongoing trend of agency consolidations and roll-ups. In the age of giant global PR firms, how does an independent PR agency not only survive but thrive?

For 25 years, Sam Brown Healthcare Communications has relied on a unique playbook that has been the catalyst of its success. Founder Laura Liotta has always been way ahead of the curve.

Who is Sam Brown?

In the early 1920s, Laura's grandfather, Samuel Mastrangelo Sr., started a big band orchestra in Atlantic City, New Jersey, that he coined "The Sam Brown Orchestra" because the family name Mastrangelo was too long for the marquee. From that day forward, everyone called him Sam Brown. He was very well known, holding many public offices, including Sheriff.

"As a kid, I remember being at the local diner or walking down the street with him, and someone was sure to yell out, "Hey Sam Brown," says Laura. "My father, Samuel Mastrangelo Jr., inherited the nickname. Throughout high school, during the war, around town, and over the course of his long career as a mathematics teacher, everyone called my dad Sam Brown."

"Naming the agency Sam Brown was my way of honoring them. My father was the single greatest influence in my life. My personal drive, ambition, and success developed from the confidence he gave me to always be a leader, believe in myself, and take a risk. He was able to see Sam Brown's early success and was very proud. Family is everything, and I am now very proud to also be Sam Brown."

The Power of Virtual Work...Decades Before Zoom

Sam Brown has been raising the bar in PR agency practice from Day 1 because Laura imagined a new way of working decades before virtual work became commonplace. When the workplace changed so drastically in 2020, it was barely a blip on the radar for Sam Brown because the agency had been set up this way from the beginning. Considering that Zoom didn't make its way onto PCs until 2011 and only truly became a way of life over the past several years, Laura was far ahead of the curve in envisioning the benefits of remote work, for personal balance but also because it allowed her to recruit a wider range of talent without the limitations of geography that were the norm in the late 90s.

"Our domain is life sciences and healthcare," says Laura. "In that space, no two client partners are the same. Some are coming out of stealth and ready to launch. Others are just beginning clinical trials of an innovative new drug that could improve the lives of patients with life-threatening diseases. And there are companies who have advanced to the commercial stage and are focused on marketing their newly approved medicines."

"What they do share is the need for high service and expertise from professionals who intimately understand their business opportunities and issues today and in the future. Our virtual hybrid model enables us to hire and retain the most senior-level team with diverse and proven skillsets as employees and consultants. This ensures that our clients have the right people with the right experience supporting them on a day-to-day basis. It's a level of trust and support that has always set Sam Brown apart," adds Laura.

A New Perspective on PR: Secrets to Success

As Sam Brown approaches the start of its 25th year in business this fall, the agency has entrenched itself as a respected communications and PR partner to high-performing companies in the hottest scientific fields across the life sciences industry. The agency's growth has translated into a steady rise in its revenue: Sam Brown is on track to hit \$15 million in annual billings this year.

"The pandemic has been an equalizer with so many businesses now embracing a virtual work model," says Laura. "The unique approach we enjoyed for so long is no longer unique. But our continued success is predicated on much more than that. As a team, we have always had an enduring commitment to five value drivers that are important to the successful operation of any modern service-oriented business."

- **Your people are your product, so set them up to flourish.**
Throughout her tenure leading Sam Brown, Laura was searching for that ever-elusive work-life balance as a working mother. Although she believes there is never truly a perfect balance of the two, this fueled her deep empathy and focus on providing the best possible culture for her team – the majority of whom are working fathers and mothers themselves – to find personal and professional fulfillment. As a result, turnover is virtually non-existent at the agency – enabling Laura to retain a satisfied and trusted team.
- **Be selective.**
Laura describes her business development strategy as selective. "We're picky," says Laura. "Bigger is not better – interesting and needed therapies are better. We look to collaborate with the industry changemakers who become colleagues, not just clients. Success comes from working relationships where there is mutual respect, where our values align, and our people can do their best work. When you refuse to work with toxic clients, your team solidifies. We are a business, but we are not guided by money alone. We choose nice clients."
- **All 'hands on' deck. No job is too small in the services business.**
As Sam Brown has expanded to support its business growth over the years, Laura has remained a hands-on CEO. She prioritizes her role as a trusted advisor to c-suite executives of Sam Brown's client companies, augmenting the agency's unique value proposition.
- **Success is the best marketing tool.**
Impact and results are kings in the agency business. And for Sam Brown building a bank of satisfied clients and proven success stories like GSK, Medivation, Biohaven, and GW Pharmaceuticals (both of which were acquired for billions) have helped the agency grow through the benefit of its stellar reputation and power of its proven track record. New clients find their way to Laura and the Sam Brown team principally through the referrals of existing and prior ones.
- **Celebrate the tribe.**
Twenty-five years of entrepreneurship have taught Laura that you not only have to love what you do; you need to love the people you are doing it with. To Laura, her team is not her employees; they are what she fondly calls the "Sam Brownies," a spirited, tight-knit, and fun-loving group. It's a spirit that starts with Laura and permeates all that is unique about Sam Brown. Every spring, the virtual network of Sam Brownies comes together for an annual retreat to fortify the values that bond them and have a lot of fun too.

Big Wins

Delivering impactful results through trusted and experienced support has made Sam Brown admired and respected as a PR agency – its name is synonymous with communications expertise, high-quality service, and high-profile wins for the industry it serves. The small but mighty agency has never been afraid to take big swings, as evidenced by its work for change-making life sciences companies such as Biohaven. In 2018, when Biohaven was rapidly growing from an entrepreneurial startup into a publicly traded company, it hired the Sam Brown team to tell its extraordinary industry success story. Sam Brown strategically built Biohaven's unique brand as a modern, patient-first, tech-savvy pharma company. The agency spearheaded the communications of Biohaven's pivotal clinical trials for its breakthrough small molecule therapy for migraine, Rimegepant, and then championed the launch of the drug under the name Nurtec ODT in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Planning and implementing a digital-first media and social campaign with celebrity influencer Khloe Kardashian as the centerpiece, Sam Brown helped Biohaven take on the headwinds of COVID-19 and outdistance several Big Pharma competitors on the way to making Nurtec ODT the #1 prescribed migraine drug in the early spring of 2022 – just prior to Biohaven's acquisition by Pfizer for \$11.6 billion. Today, Pfizer is launching a new ad campaign with Lady Gaga as the spokesperson, a celebrity engagement that was initiated by Laura and her team.

What's next for Sam Brown? Laura is always ready to adapt and remains open to new options for growth but intends to continue to follow her intuition and the key principles that have made Sam Brown successful.

"I am proud and humbled every day by what we continue to achieve as an agency," says Laura. "We identified a winning playbook that we have stayed true to throughout the inevitable ups and downs of the business we are in. We'll continue to adapt and be forward-thinking as well. But Sam Brown's focus on people, service, and values will continue to guide us above all."

Have you read?

- Book Review: 'Why Not Win', Larry Thornton.
- Mindful Leadership from the CEO Perspective: Cultivating Presence and Purpose.
- The Future of Work: How not to lose out to AI.
- China's Days as the World's Manufacturing Hub Are Slowly Coming to an End.
- WiseStamp's Daniel Zweig on the Impact of AI on Digital Marketing.

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