



Lesley R. Maloney, PharmD

Everyone Loves a Good Story

Lesley learned very early in her career that a good story can be the key to having your message received. She describes how she used real-life stories and analogies to make her case, even using her experience shopping for a dining room table to set herself apart from other residency applicants.

Crafting a compelling and clear story is even more critical to Lesley R. Maloney in her current role as Senior Policy Advisor in the Office of the Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In this role she leads, develops, and coordinates public health regulatory policy for drugs, biologics, devices, and other public health issues. Lesley joined FDA in 2010 as an Industry Liaison in the Commissioner's Office, holding several progressively responsible positions, including Deputy Associate Commissioner for External Affairs and Deputy Chief of Staff. Lesley received her PharmD degree from the University of Oklahoma College of Pharmacy and completed the ASHP Executive Residency in Association Management and Leadership. Before joining FDA, she worked in the pharmaceutical industry, at a quality improvement organization on Medicare Part D, and at a professional pharmacy association.

Lesley's advice is: ***One of the most important stories you need to develop is your own. Everyone loves a good story, so be intentional about making yours great.***

 ***Dear Young Pharmacist,***

Everyone loves a good story. Whether you are sitting on the back porch with family, around a campfire with friends, or in the break room with work colleagues, stories provide a way for us to inspire, to educate, to remember, or to connect. I can't claim to be the kind of person who keeps people on the edge of their seats or doubled over in laughter. But, like a comedian rehearsing a joke in different

clubs until he perfects the punchline, I recognize the value in carefully crafting a message to optimize the impact on the audience. And now in my role as a Senior Policy Advisor in the Commissioner's Office at FDA, I construct "stories" to help the Agency identify and implement workable solutions to complex policy challenges.

My first lesson in professional storytelling occurred during college, when I worked as a small-town bank teller on the weekends. To streamline operations, the bank's policy was to shut down its internal computer network each Friday at closing time and reopen the network on Monday. Unfortunately, that policy resulted in weekend tellers, like me, providing only limited services to customers. It also meant our data lagged a day or two behind. In addition to being inconvenient for tellers, I thought the policy didn't meet our mission of excellent customer service and could potentially put the bank at risk because the data, such as account balances, weren't in real-time. Although everyone patiently explained that was "just the way it was," I was so blinded by youthful confidence that I requested permission to raise the issue to the bank president. I thought carefully about the background and key points I needed to make in my pitch and practiced these points out loud for several days. The bank president listened to my story and agreed with my reasoning. By the next weekend, we had full computer access in the bank drive-thru. This incident solidified my realization that a good story can influence change.

After completing an internship with ASHP, I knew I wanted to embark on a nontraditional pharmacy path, applying the knowledge I had gained in pharmacy school in the field of health policy. I decided to apply for ASHP's Executive Residency in Association Management and Leadership, and I knew I needed a letter of intent that would set me apart from the other candidates. I brainstormed for several weeks and finally decided to write about how choosing the ASHP residency was similar to shopping for my green dining room table. In my letter, I shared that when shopping for a table, I immediately fell in love with a green dining room table at the first store I visited. But, I made myself visit almost every other furniture store in town just to make sure I had found the perfect one, especially since this constituted one of the first big purchases on my own and my mother didn't think it was the most practical long-term decision. Similarly, health policy felt like a perfect fit as soon as I stepped through those ASHP doors, merging my passions about the vital role of pharmacists in healthcare with leadership and problem-solving. Yet, I knew I needed to explore the multitude of possibilities that the pharmacy profession offered in my various experiential rotations before making a decision on my future—just like shopping for my green table. Using an analogy of table shopping to outline my interest in the ASHP residency was a bit of a risk, but that story created the impact I needed. In fact, long after my residency ended, selection

committee staff would refer to my memorable “green table” essay, asking me to share the story with a colleague or a student. I’m also pleased to report that after more than 15 years, that green table still resides in my dining room.

I expanded on the art of storytelling to deliver results as the ASHP executive resident and later as an ASHP staff member. While preparing a presentation on avian influenza and emergency preparedness, I thought about what message would most resonate with the pharmacists in the audience and motivate them to modify their current practices. When I was coordinating ASHP’s official position on a new FDA postmarketing surveillance policy, I collaborated with staff to compile a variety of facts and viewpoints from ASHP members into a cohesive and compelling explanation of our concerns. It was instrumental that we, as staff, connect those policy priorities to the critical work ASHP members were doing in developing ASHP’s leadership agenda and professional policies. And, then, we would utilize those stories to advocate to Congress, other government agencies, professional associations, and the public about the invaluable role of pharmacists on the frontlines of healthcare.

Several years later, I began working for the FDA as Industry Liaison in the Office of External Affairs. I built or worked to strengthen relationships between the Agency and industry trade associations representing the broad range of FDA-regulated products, including human and veterinary drugs, medical devices, and the nation’s food supply. To create these types of connections, it was paramount to understand the “story” of these groups—their priorities and how those priorities intersected with the ongoing initiatives and mission of FDA.

As I became involved in assessing the impact of major Agency announcements on the industry groups I oversaw, it became evident how critical our messaging, or the ability to clearly communicate why FDA took a certain action, was to the success of the announcement. FDA actions have tremendous, and often, global impacts on industry, health professionals, and consumers. How those stakeholders, including the media and Congress, comprehend the importance and the effect of those actions directly relate to the FDA’s ability to explain the policy in a simple and straightforward manner. A poor message could cause confusion, even panic, and could yield negative consequences for the Agency. The story, and how it is delivered, truly matters.

Now in FDA’s Office of Policy, a major component of my work focuses on helping the Agency develop solutions for a specific policy outcome, taking into account limitations stemming from scientific capabilities, regulations, or legislation. For example, to respond to continued interest from Congress, industry, and other stakeholders about FDA’s regulatory oversight of combination medical products—products that include prefilled syringes or drug-eluting stents—it is impera-

tive for the Agency to clearly articulate its current efforts and address any concerns raised. Crafting an effective narrative, or story, of how the solution works while taking into account these various constraints has proven as essential to a successful outcome as the analysis used to construct the solution.

When developing policy recommendations, I first formulate a framework by asking myself, or the group I'm leading, a few critical questions: What problem are we attempting to solve? What behaviors do we want to change? Who is our audience—those affected by the problem and those affected by the potential solution? What newspaper headline would we want to read to let us know that our policy solution had worked? By addressing these questions, we are able to conceptualize the desired outcome and work backwards on what policy options can achieve it. We tell the “future” story in order to make a plan for today.

Policy development, especially at a federal agency like FDA, can be a complicated and sometimes lengthy process with many stops, starts, and twists along the road as new evidence, new input from stakeholders, and new priorities emerge. The message often requires revision over time as issues arise and additional constraints must be considered. Regardless, this storytelling exercise is helpful in moving ideas forward and similar to a “vision board” one might develop as a part of any goal setting—whether personal or professional. Envisioning the story helps establish a map of sorts to measure against as the policy develops, creates a simple narrative that can be used when getting leadership or stakeholder buy-in, and serves to mobilize and motivate the group around its identified mission or desired outcome.

Storytelling is a powerful tool no matter what field of pharmacy you pursue. A personal story can instantly set a patient at ease or create camaraderie with a new colleague or team. You can maximize an educational opportunity—whether it's with a room full of health professionals or with a single patient—by considering not just the facts to be presented but also the best way to organize and present the information so it resonates with the audience in front of you. If you have to advocate to your senior leadership about the desire to start a new service or you need additional resources, it's advantageous to develop a clear narrative, including an illustration of how your request aligns with and helps them accomplish their priorities. When confronted with a difficult or complex problem, imagine the headline you would want someone to write; then, work backwards to identify alternatives that can make your envisioned solution a reality.

Finally, as a young pharmacist, one of the most important stories you need to develop is your own. Spend time talking with leaders in pharmacy and in other disciplines to hear and learn from their personal journeys. Tell others about your career goals so that they can be an advocate for you as future opportunities arise. Perhaps most importantly, define what professional success looks like for you in

30 years, and then work backwards to understand what steps you should take to achieve that goal.

Everyone loves a good story, so be intentional about making yours great.

All the best,

Lesley

