

My Journey to Becoming a Communications Dietitian



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with support from Johanna Adenrele

From patient to student

Like many dietitians, my interest in science and food started long before I applied to study nutrition and dietetics. Although, my first taste of dietetics was from the patient perspective. Recovering from spinal surgery in 2012, it was through the care and attentiveness of the hospital's dietitian that I first learnt about the role of nutrition in surgical rehabilitation and recovery. My mind was opened to the possibility of combining a longstanding love of food with science, although my route onto the degree programme wasn't straightforward. Already studying Biomedical Sciences at the time, I left the course and went back to college to get the qualifications I needed to study dietetics. During this time, I also gained hands-on food experience working on supermarket food service counters. It was only then that I applied and was accepted onto the undergraduate nutrition and dietetics degree programme at King's College London.

Those four years at King's were incredible but involved a lot of hard work. As a student, you don't always fully appreciate how those broad modules studied in your earlier years, such as biochemistry and physiology, feed into the bigger picture. It wasn't until my clinical placements in large London teaching hospitals that I truly valued the scientific grounding I'd received, and I relished the opportunity to apply my knowledge.

Outside of the degree programme I found opportunities to develop and apply that knowledge in non-clinical settings. Dietetics didn't begin and end once I'd left the lecture theatre - everywhere I looked there were opportunities to not only develop myself as a student dietitian, but amplify the qualified voices of other nutrition professionals that I admired. I made the most of opportunities made available to me as a student dietitian, such as sitting on the British Dietetic Association (BDA) Board of Directors as the Student Representative (2015-16) and establishing a new student magazine column with CN Magazine.

Approaching my final year, thoughts of post-graduation life were never far from my mind. Unfortunately, my final clinical placement was a struggle due to a new diagnosis of Ehlers Danlos Syndrome. With great sadness, I realised that a career on my feet in the NHS wasn't particularly conducive to managing my condition. I needed a plan B. Until then, a clinical dietitian role was the only route I'd considered and been exposed to. I started to consider how I could apply and utilise

my dietetic and clinical knowledge in a non-clinical setting which motivated and inspired me. Following a period of reflection, it became apparent that I wished to pursue a career in health writing and communications. An inherited entrepreneurial streak for writing and communications, along with my experiences as CN Student Columnist and Fight the Fads Founder, solidified that health writing could be a viable way of bringing together my knowledge and passions.

One man band to agency

After graduating I began working as a copywriter and health intern with Edelman, a global communications firm with head offices in London. After four months, I was offered a permanent role but as much as I enjoyed working for health and food companies in a corporate setting, I didn't want to give up on the clinical skills that I'd worked so hard to develop. I missed being patient-facing. The decision to be a freelance dietitian at a local health club was a daunting proposition but it gave me an opportunity to maintain and develop my clinical skills. Alongside this clinical work, I gradually built up my writing and communications skills.

I recognised the need to upskill if I wanted to pursue health writing as a full-time career. Joining a boutique PR agency part-time enabled me to strike a balance between clinical dietetics and health writing. My role as a nutrition communicator was broad and involved copywriting (press releases/website copy/award applications, etc.), liaising with journalists, conducting research and liaising with clients from food and nutrition companies.

Alongside this, I built up my own portfolio of freelance health writing clients. I reached out to countless contacts and companies who I thought could benefit from evidence-based nutrition-related written content. Initially, I offered to work for free as I was keen to grow my reputation, create a portfolio of clients and get my work published in some reputable publications. As my network and portfolio grew, I had a body of work and experience that I felt able to monetise.

There came a point in time where it was proving difficult to balance existing work with new opportunities that were coming my way. In managing the transition, a great piece of advice I received was to consider the top 20% of clients - the ones I most enjoyed working for and received most value from. These were the clients to carry on working with. However, it hasn't all been plain sailing.

Running a business meant I needed to proactively look for work opportunities and with that came rejection. I also learnt that if you don't ask, you don't get! I built resilience and learnt to put myself out there and champion my skills and experience. I also realised the importance of not burning bridges if the outcome was one that I wasn't hoping for. Leaving the door open and maintaining contact with past clients (as well as those that didn't evolve) can sometimes result in clients coming back at a later date.

One of the biggest challenges has been maintaining a healthy work-life balance, particularly in the early stages of building a business. I found that setting clear boundaries about when I would work (weekdays only) and what I would work on (saying no if a topic was outside my scope of knowledge or collaborating with colleagues with the skills and expertise that I lacked) was beneficial for my own wellbeing but also meant I wasn't taking away opportunities from dietetic voices with more relevant expertise.

Growing a business

As you might expect, business skills weren't taught during the degree programme. I valued hearing from those in a similar position to myself to learn from their mistakes and made decisions based on their advice and lived experience. To this day, networking has played a huge role in building my business. Many of my clients have come via word-of-mouth recommendation and, similarly, I often refer clients that I'm unable to help onto fellow freelancers. In building a supportive network with other freelancers and health writers, I was able to lean on resources that led me to finding a great accountant, a solicitor, a virtual assistant and, more recently, a business coach.

In the early stages, I made do with a basic website and branding, but as time went on. I came to appreciate that an investment in this specific area would be worthwhile. In recognising and accepting where my skills and experience lay, it made relinquishing control (and money) to others easier. When you're growing a business, every expense comes with scrutiny and deliberation but making carefully considered investments. in targeted areas frees me up to excel at what I'm great at. In my opinion, outsourcing work which you don't enjoy and aren't good at is money well spent.

Present Day: HRS Communications Ltd

This brings us to the present day. Since the rebranding of my business as a nutrition communications agency in 2019, HRS

Communications has grown from strength to strength. We've niched down to provide five main services: content strategy, content creation, copywriting, Health and Nutrition claims support and healthcare professional (HCP) outreach work to food, nutrition and medical nutrition companies, as shown in **Table 1**. But this isn't something I'd be able to do alone; I have the pleasure of working with an amazingly talented group of people. The HRS team consists of leading registered dietitians and nutritionists from a broad range of backgrounds, as well as brand strategists and marketeers. **Table 2** summarises our process of working with a client.

Maintaining CPD

Dietitians must undertake continuing professional development (CPD) and this can take many forms. In my specialist area of communications and health

writing, the main ways I go about my CPD is deeply entrenched in my everyday work - writing and editing articles on specific nutrition-related topics, producing webinars, podcasts and interviewing other HCPs, arranging internal training and up-skilling for the HRS team (for example, Dr O'Sullivan recently delivered a training session on European Food Safety Authority health and nutrition claims) and receiving editorial feedback and peer-to-peer review on all the content created.

I'm also part of the BDA Future Leaders Programme - a fantastic opportunity to learn about championing the profession, accountability and leading an organisation. Not to mention the numerous business growth and development groups and networking organisations that I attend to further improve my learning, both with fellow dietitians and business owners outside of our profession.

Table 1: HRS main services

Content strategy	We help our clients control the direction of their overall content creation strategy through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market research • Competitor analysis • Trend analysis.
Content creation	We produce different forms of content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Podcasts • Webinars • Videos • Online course creation • Social media management.
Copywriting	We produce copy for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online articles and blog posts • Information leaflets • Technical reports • Advertorials • Feature articles • Websites • Press releases.
Health and nutrition claims support	We offer an all-encompassing EU Nutrition and Health Claims Regulatory 'MOT' Service, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing current positioning • Checking compliance • Identifying new claims opportunities • Supporting the client through the claims process.
Healthcare professional outreach	Our brand awareness and outreach work can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting as a media spokesperson • Attending/speaking at events and conferences • Sourcing and liaising with brand ambassadors.

Future directions

For many of us, 2020 is a year that we'd rather forget, but there were many learnings that I hope to take into 2021. A global pandemic has highlighted the resilience of the health sector and, in turn, provided opportunities to amplify the voices of the sometimes-overlooked role of nutrition in prevention, treatment and recovery. With this in mind, I plan to continue championing the work of my fellow dietitians and nutritionists through the content that we produce, the clients that we work with and my learnings from the BDA Future Leaders programme.

In the wake of Brexit, HRS is looking at opportunities to expand our clientele reach globally through projects with multinational organisations. This also presents an opportunity to capitalise on the team's unique skill sets, including our work within regulatory aspects of health and nutrition claims.

Getting started

I hope others can gain inspiration from my experiences. Through my own health challenges, I had to rethink and challenge my beliefs about the role of a dietitian. If anything, it has led me to pursue a unique path of my own, one that allows me to still improve the lives of people every day through the content that we produce.

My advice to those who are perhaps considering supplementing their clinical work or even making a career move towards freelancing and health writing would include:

1. Surround yourself with like-minded individuals – Build a supportive network and seek out opportunities to develop your skill set
2. Nurture your interests and passions – Just start writing! Offer up your services to local charities/newspapers/companies/university societies
3. Prioritise CPD and self-development – If you can, find a mentor
4. Reach out – If you don't ask, you don't get! Be on the lookout for opportunities to gain experience and build your portfolio.
5. Know your limitations – Recognise when to ask for support or delegate work to others.

Table 2: HRS Communications client process (in the format of the dietetic care process A, B, C, D, E)

Identification of need	A new client gets in touch and makes an inquiry about our services
Assessment	<p>Client briefing form</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed to outline how HRS can best support the client and their needs and better understand client needs • Focused on gathering relevant information such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Services of interest ◦ How the project fits into their wider business or marketing goals ◦ Key themes, disease areas or topics ◦ Project timeline ◦ Client budget. <p>Initial meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepening understanding of client's business, values and needs • Using the client feedback form to define the brief i.e., exactly what they want.
'Diagnosis' and strategy	<p>The 'proposal' – defining the problem and building a strategy HRS prepares a proposal detailing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed outcome = successful delivery of client brief • Proposed goals = project objectives and success criteria • Proposed actions = targeted solutions. <p>The 'contract' With an agreed proposal, the client and HRS enter in a legal contract that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Details of both companies • Agreed services • Agreed fees and payment schedule • Project timeline and delivery date.
Implementation	<p>Implementation – executing the brief and proposed actions Delegation of tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRS team: allocation of work to existing team members based on workload capacity, skill sets and who is best suited • Outsourcing: some projects require Harriet to look outside of HRS for people with the skills to deliver the project.
Monitor and review	<p>Project delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depending on the project's nature, the monitoring and review process will vary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ For a written article, an outline of what will be discussed is first approved before the full article is completed ◦ For a health and nutrition claims project, it may involve creating a presentation, nutrient analysis or a written report • For a one-off project, we will touch base with the client once during the project and arrange a follow up call once we've delivered the service • For an ongoing project, we will arrange regular meetings at intervals throughout the year to assess our progress <p>The Finished Product</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once the project has been delivered, a follow-up meeting is arranged to discuss their feedback • With the client happy and the project signed off, an invoice is issued
Evaluation	<p>Creating a sustainable business – keep those doors open and nurture those relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After a project has come to an end, HRS stay in touch with the client to update on what's going on in the business and identify other ways in which we could work together.