

SHIELD Marketing Interview

Melissa Harris, CEO of M. Harris and Company

Benjamin Taylor, marketing communications lead for SHIELD Illinois, and also Associate Director of Economic Development and Innovation for the U of I system

Fri, Dec 20, 2022 11:00AM • 53:32

SPEAKERS

Melissa Harris, Jessie Knoles, Benjamin Taylor

Melissa Harris 00:00

clarify really quickly. I got already.

Jessie Knoles 00:02

We are ready. All right. Hello, my name is Jessie Knoles. I am a Project research associate with the University of Illinois Archives. Today's date is Tuesday, December 20, 2022. I am meeting with Melissa Harris and Benjamin Taylor to discuss marketing efforts put in place by SHIELD for inclusion in the University of Illinois COVID-19 documentation project. Our interview is being conducted today over zoom, Melissa, and Benjamin, would you both please introduce yourselves? Name and title, please.

Melissa Harris 00:32

I'm Melissa Harris, I'm the CEO of M. Harris and Company. We're a marketing agency here in Chicago. And we were con- we are contracted currently to do work with SHIELD Illinois, SHIELD T3, and the Discovery Partners Institute, all like three integral parts of this kind of effort. So, we-so I lead our project. I lead the team on all three of these clients.

Jessie Knoles 00:59

Great, thank you.

Benjamin Taylor 01:02

And I'm Ben Taylor, marketing communications lead for SHIELD Illinois, and also Associate Director of Economic Development and Innovation for the U of I system.

Jessie Knoles 01:11

Great. Thank you. Just to start off, when did the COVID 19 pandemic come onto both of your radars? And what were your first thoughts?

Melissa Harris 01:23

I'll start well, so for me, I mean, COVID-19 obviously came on the radar when it came on the radar for the rest of the world. But for me, I was brought in to SHIELD Illinois, and SHIELD T3 in the fall of 2020, right after there had been some issues with the organiza- with the emergency use authorization for the test. So, I was brought in right after that issue popped in the in the in the media. Ben was there before me. Ben is an OG.

Benjamin Taylor 02:04

Yeah, so I got in involved with the SHIELD Illinois project in early August of 2020. Shortly after it kind of spun up. They're looking for somebody, somebody in the within the system who you know, had some marketing communications background, and could help get the SHIELD Illinois project off the ground.

Jessie Knoles 02:26

Great. And when you both started with SHIELD, what were your primary responsibilities? And did those responsibilities ever evolve over time?

Melissa Harris 02:39

Yeah, go ahead, Ben. Yeah.

Benjamin Taylor 02:40

How about I start on this one, Melissa? So yeah, they've definitely evolved over time. When it started, I was the only person from a marketing standpoint with SHIELD Illinois. And we were, you know, growing by the day, it started out really is just a handful of people, led by Ron Watkins, and he was starting to kind of figure out what he needed from an organizational standpoint. And early on, it was, you know, quick one page summary documents and pitch decks and things like that explaining what this concept was, that was SHIELD Illinois. We had a lot of, shouldn't say a lot. We had a good number of College of Business students, Gies. {Benjamin temporarily drops out of the call}

Jessie Knoles 03:39

I think we lost him.

Melissa Harris 03:41

We lost him. Okay. I'm glad I'm still here.

Jessie Knoles 03:45

Melissa, if you like to take over until he returns.

Melissa Harris 03:48

Yeah. So, when, when I was when I was brought on, I, I reported to a lot of people. I reported, (I kind of want him [Ben] to hear), I reported to Beth Heller, his colleague, who's the Director of External Relations for SHIELD Illinois. I reported to Ben because we worked closely. I also reported to whomever the CEO of SHIELD T3 was at the time, and there have been three. So, I reported to them. And then I also reported to Bill Jackson, who has been involved in most every aspect of this project. So, my role was to really serve those individuals when it came, and- is Ben back?

Jessie Knoles 04:40

Yeah.

Melissa Harris 04:40

Ben are you back?

Benjamin Taylor 04:41

I am Yes, sorry about that.

Melissa Harris 04:42

It's really just served all of those organizations, as it pertained primarily in the beginning to media relations, really supporting efforts to ensure that we were in regular contact, regular positive dialogue with the press. And then our world grew over time to include advertising, social media. Some- a little bit of design, video production. And then over at SHIELD T3, website construction, website writing, dig- paid digital marketing. You name it. We've pretty much done it. But you know, not usually all at once. Definitely there were various strategies that were emphasized at various times. And so, we really needed to be nimble to turn on and off channels as directed by Ben and Beth and others.

Jessie Knoles 05:06

Great.

Melissa Harris 05:17

Ben, I think we lost you before. So, do you want to pick that up?

Jessie Knoles 06:01

Yeah.

Benjamin Taylor 06:02

Yeah, what was kind of the last thing that you got from me? I don't know where it cut off.

Jessie Knoles 06:07

Um, I think you you'd mentioned that a number of Gies students had been in marketing?

Benjamin Taylor 06:13

Okay. Yep. So, we got a lot of assistance from a core group of, of Gies students, you know, kind of as market analysts and market research type of folks. And they provide a lot of assistance, really, with the early pitch decks as well. As we were trying to figure out who the target markets were who the, you know, the really the target should be for the SHIELD, Illinois operation. Then, you know, it really, it has evolved over time quite a bit from, you know, being the lone marketing person with SHIELD Illinois to be a part of a team, where now, you know, at our peak, I would say we probably had five or six people on the marketing team. In addition to Melissa and her team, from an outside consultant, that really, we've worked with pretty seamlessly to, like Melissa said, to kind of address whatever needs of the day were as well as plan and figure out which channels, we needed to touch people through.

Jessie Knoles 07:27

Ben, I'm curious; you mentioned that peak, could you just for the sake of the recording, when would you say that marketing peak was?

Benjamin Taylor 07:37

So, I would say, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on this to Melissa. But I think the peak for a marketing team was probably, if I think back, it would have been the summer of 2021. And like late July, early August period, as we were really trying to win, there had been a lot of groundwork laid with the state of Illinois, to make the test free for K-12 schools across the state, and those announcements really hit in like late July, early August of 2021. That coincided with a marketing campaign we had launched that included some social media and some billboards and radio advertising around Chicagoland. So, you know, it's, it's interesting to look back through the SHIELD kind of progress, because it really, like the marketing team was busier first. And then the, we call them "relationship managers" got very busy, because then those, those schools, and entities kind of entered the pipeline. And so, to get them set up and started up, that team got really busy. And then the client integration team got really busy, like actually starting to pick up samples and get into the labs. And then the labs got really busy. So, it was kind of interesting to see those waves of activity ripple through the organization.

Melissa Harris 09:10

Exactly right. The governor issued several executive orders in the summer of 2021, and other policy changes that radically reshaped SHIELD Illinois. One [was] teachers were mandated to test [regularly for COVID-19], it was now free for all, the state would pay for the cost of the testing. And there was a third executive order that was issued that summer, and I'm trying to remember all the details, but basically, suddenly, it became very clear to schools that they needed to offer some sort of testing operation in the fall of 2021, but they were given maybe only six to eight weeks' notice of that, and they were just slammed. I've never seen anything like it just like. It was like a tsunami, just like crashing down on the organization with, you know, superintendents, beleaguered superintendents, who, though had known for more than a year that a pandemic was here, and just simply waited till the last minute to get testing in place for the 2021-2022 school year. Yeah, the years blur. So, it was just it was it was it was Whoa. And we had we had started ads in Marketing, including an amazing spot with Wilson Contreras from the Cubs, like, just a few months earlier, because we were trying to get as many schools sign up as possible. But we wanted them to sign up like, in June, and you know, in May, instead of when so many came in, in August and September. So, it was it was it was wow, I mean, wow. That was the peak. That was, that was insane. It was crazy.

Jessie Knoles 11:22

During this time, this peak, were you both- were you or ever? Were you ever working together? Were you working on separate projects?

Melissa Harris 11:25

We were always working together; Ben and I had our height were on like three almost calls daily. We were working together. We had standing meetings twice a week. And we there was like, I didn't go to the bathroom some weeks without Ben knowing it. Right Ben?

Benjamin Taylor 11:43

Almost it seemed like yeah, we there was near daily, you know, communication for sure. Just because there's still so many different projects and sub projects going on that we had to had to stay linked up on.

Jessie Knoles 12:02

Um, Melissa, I'm curious, because I don't think I realized this, but um, you said you supported Media Relations initially, how did you approach working with the press?

Melissa Harris 12:19

Ben why don't you start on that one? {laughs} And then I'll jump on after that, how did I approach working with the press? Okay, Ben, I think you are more, I'm gonna have to let you take that one that's on you. But

Benjamin Taylor 12:36

it's so interesting, the asset, Jesse, because, you know, Melissa and I both have pretty deep background with media and working with media, Melissa was a was a reporter for a number of major, you know, regional and national publications over her career before she moved into consulting. And I've worked media relations for more than a decade in different roles. And so, we really kind of connected over a project in December of 2020, is where we started working together. Where we had, we had some outreach, some inquiries from a Chicago Tribune reporter. About, like Melissa said about the questions about the authorization of the COVID SHIELD test. And from the, from the FDA, the Food and Drug Administration. And so we really, I mean, this is where the near daily communication or multiple times daily, you know, talking to each other, and, and others in leadership to figure out what we could say how we could say it, so that it, you know, put the university and the SHIELD project in the best light, without, you know, without saying anything untrue or misleading, we wanted to obviously say what was true, but figuring out where that, you know, what, how much was enough to share how much was too much, and really getting a feel for each other style in how we wanted to respond to media. Because, I think, trying to remember, I think Melissa had a pre you know, a knowledge of this reporter, she knew she knew this reporter from her previous work. And so, kind of getting an idea of how this reporter was going about, you know, reporting the story and researching it, and how we could try to position our project in the best light. And then over that, you know, I think we would gained a respect for each other, and, you know, wanted to- we're glad we're able to work more together in the future and really, you know, then we're able to figure out how, yes, sometimes, you know, Melissa wouldn't need to take something If we or sometimes, you know, I would, I would grab a piece of it and respond to a reporter's inquiry over the next few months. But honestly, it was just really helpful to have an- you know, Beth Heller is another big piece of this our Senior Director of External Relations, because among the three of us, we all have, you know, responded to media inquiries, we've all, you know, done interviews, you know, just multiple times, numerous times throughout our careers. So, we're all very comfortable and experienced. And so, we know what to say. And we know how to say it, to give the reporter what they need, without giving too much away.

Melissa Harris 15:40

That was two points to that. One is that it completely ruined our holiday. The- all that work, and that inquiry came in, in the middle of it's like, right, just before Christmas. It was it was terrible. And then I think the second part of that, though, is that the issue- why we were struggling with what to say, and what not to say is that we were days away from getting the EUA. We got the EUA in January of 2021. Right, Ben,

Benjamin Taylor 16:16

in February, we are days away from submitting the application, I think,

Melissa Harris 16:20

Oh, that's right. We were days away from submitting. And so, but that application, like, has so many requirements. That's right. We were days away from submitting applications and just weeks away from approval. And it was yet, yet we needed to operate. Because we had people dying. Like if you recall, that was Omicron {Editor's Note: Melissa means the Delta variant, not Omicron}. That was that first. No, yeah, that was that first Omicron. Wait, right, or am I getting that confused the next year? That was?

Benjamin Taylor 16:53

Yeah, yeah,

Melissa Harris 16:54

Yes. But we still had people like who needed- like we had visitors that weren't open. We had schools that weren't able to open, we had kids in remote learning, which we know now is a disaster for children. We needed to operate, we needed that we had a test that saved lives. And so, we were beginning to operate. And we were days away from submitting the application and just weeks away from approval. And so, we were we were so frightened that anything that we would say or do in the press would put that authorization at risk. We were so scared. I mean, we just- we needed- the authorization was the most important thing. And we needed to balance the need for the authorization with our- the need to be open and accountable to the media, and to respect the rights of the press to ask good questions, and to get honest, and truthful answers. So that was really the balance was we needed to be truthful, we needed to be transparent. We needed to respond quickly. Yeah, we had we knew that the FDA was watching our every move, and we had an application and a and an approval in the balance. And we could not do anything to jeopardize that approval. I mean, if we made a wrong move, it- there was a lot at stake. So, you know, that's what Ben's referring to, in terms of just how sensitive and diligent and hard and difficult it was to you know, to strike that balance. The reporter was asking all the right questions, the reporter was doing a very good job. And we just had a lot on the line.

Jessie Knoles 18:56

Yeah. Yeah. So, within SHIELD. Who were you also primarily working with? Especially like regarding the emergency use authorization. Or just like how, how, who and how are you both getting that information so that you could market it and lead communications?

Benjamin Taylor 19:23

So, at that time,

Melissa Harris 19:24

yeah, go ahead.

Benjamin Taylor 19:25

Yeah, there was a lot of, of interaction with Jay Walsh, Vice President of Economic Development, and Innovation, who was really leading the application process. And then we had to coordinate with Ron Watkins and Bill Jackson, who are leading the SHIELD Illinois and SHIELD T3 units respectively. So, there's a lot just a lot of, you know, back and forth and sharing of information across those folks. And I know, you know, Melissa talked about the approval process and there was I know Jay was one working really closely with the- there's a RADx team on the U of I, the Urbana campus, who was had was connected into the National Institutes of Health NIH has this program called RADx, that was really giving a lot of input and feedback on the, the test itself and the clinical trials that the, you know, that Jay had been overseeing, to try to help facilitate that process. And so, there was a lot of, you know, him, him getting input from them, and, you know, feedback from them. And then, you know, bring it to us. And we will try to frame it up and kind of figure out exactly how we would say it in the clearest and most concise and most truthful and transparent way, like Melissa was saying.

Melissa Harris 20:54

You know, because I report to Bill Jackson and the CEO of [SHIELD] T3 and Ben and Beth, I was getting information from all around. But I was not in direct contact with the scientists, I will tell you having a very, very long career, that that period of time where I kind of arrived, and the moment until up to the moment where we got our EUA was some of the most difficult communications work of my career. Because we needed to respond to a pandemic, we needed to protect the people of Illinois, we needed to move, we knew the test was sound, we had thought we had had an EUA before I arrived when it was announced in August. And so, you know, you can't stop saving people's lives. So, it was just a very, very, very difficult period from, you know, October to- I think I arrived in October of 2020, October to February. And we were getting information from everywhere. I was I mean; it was it was I was on call daily.

Jessie Knoles 22:11

So, Did either of you receive any guidance or input regarding how you messaged SHIELD Illinois or SHIELD? T3?

Melissa Harris 22:23

No, we that was our job. Just set that and from an external perspective. You know, that was what our job was. And, you know, I think that Beth Heller, I really think of her [and] Ben is kind of the point and the key on that. She often had a very, very good idea, but it was always collaborative, and we were always working together to- we were always working together to get that right.

Benjamin Taylor 22:53

And at the same time, I think we were taking a lot of input from people like Jay and Ron and Bill. Yeah. Because they would always come with, you know, ideas on what they thought we should say or how we should say it.

Jessie Knoles 23:10

If your, your targets, or your audiences changed without your work with SHIELD, how did you determine how to approach communicating and marketing with those specific audiences?

Melissa Harris 23:29

I see-

Benjamin Taylor 23:29

definitely.

Benjamin Taylor 23:31

Go ahead, Melissa.

Melissa Harris 23:32

I think that later, you know, the primary focus for most of our time, in SHIELD has been on, you know, school leaders and administrators, because they're the ones that have to decide whether to test, how often to test, how to test and whom to test. And so, for so long our priority was like that organization. I think that there was a period of time, however, later, and I'm a little less involved in this, where we really need to focus on the legislature and elected officials. I'm not as central to that as Ben is, but that certainly has been a very, very important dialogue as well, in the sense that, you know, the funding for SHIELD comes from IDPH, the Illinois Department of Public Health, we I was in- Ben and I have been in constant contact with their Comms [Communication] team. And, you know, I think that it didn't transition to government for a period. Ben, would you agree with that?

Benjamin Taylor 24:52

Yeah, there was definitely a period where we had to respond to and interact with that sector. And I think Jessie, I think it's also, you know, interesting to see how those targets have, you know, kind of adapted over time or change over time, because I remember, you know, start, when we first started out, we really were trying to figure out how SHIELD would look for lots of different market segments, you know, whether it was schools or companies or, you know, health care facilities, or long term care facilities, things like that. I mean, we, over the course of a number of months, we talked to all those different entities and all those different sectors. And probably, you know, for various reasons, none of most of them didn't really amount to much. But there was a lot of, you know, we had multiple different versions of, of materials for companies or for healthcare systems or things like that. When it was really the K 12 education that became what SHIELD Illinois was known for.

Jessie Knoles 26:08

With those different entities, schools, companies, health care facilities, how did you approach how you marketed SHIELD Illinois for those different sectors?

Melissa Harris 26:23

Look, you know, this year, what you have to understand about COVID testing systems is that these systems, it's a beat, what it's a b2b sale, it's an it's a b2b conversation, these the price of a company like Rivian, running testing for all of its factory workers, to get Rivian back up and running, which is what

SHIELD did, you know, it is very, very costly, but it is more costly to that company to keep that factory shuttered. And so, when you think about it, it's like every single sale is a conversation, there is no one who is going to like buy SHIELD Illinois without being on at least some kind of call with typically Beth Heller, who led and oversaw sales, to have like a full conversation about what this means and often multiple conversations about what this means. So, the idea that, you know, this would be the that's the way that that that this product grew is through like public policy changes that made it very, very important and critical to do and then followed up by individual conversations and Zooms and webinars where people learned about the product in the program.

Melissa Harris 27:52

would you agree?

Benjamin Taylor 27:55

Completely Yep, nothing bad.

Melissa Harris 27:58

Yeah.

Jessie Knoles 28:00

Was there a difference? How SHIELD Illinois and then SHIELD T3 operated in terms of its marketing and communication strategies?

Melissa Harris 28:12

Yes, SHIELD T3 is a for-profit business wholly owned by the University of Illinois system. So, by definition, they operated differently. You know, they did not receive IDPH funding, they needed to, you know, have customers who paid for their product or paid for their product and their services and, you know, at their height, they had customers all over the nation. They played a key role in like providing COVID testing to not just the University of Maine, but all of Maine because Maine had like a- was basically a testing desert. They were one of the main suppliers of testing in Maine, University of Maine opened up its testing to the public. There was huge, big national coverage about that. They supply all of the testing to Baltimore City Schools and the Washington DC public schools, as well as five universities in DC. They provided testing to many colleges in the state of California. With their first lab opening at Bloom Energy and Sunnyvale, California, and Silicon Valley. I mean, it was a moment of pride, enormous pride for this institution that, you know, so many of the so much of the technology we use in our daily lives has come from the West Coast, to, you know, to the Midwest, but this was one of the times where the University of Illinois was the innovator, was the leader and was saving companies in Silicon Valley and enabling them to reopen. To me this project is the crowning achievement in modern times of the University of Illinois. It's why you're spending the time interviewing us. I mean, for hundreds of 1000s of people, this test kept them safe. At the peak, maybe millions.

Jessie Knoles 30:18

Yeah, thank you. That kind of goes into my next question. Because of the massive public impacts that this health-related marketing and communications had. Did you approach your work with SHIELD

differently than you would if you were marketing or communicating running communication with a different product or program?

Melissa Harris 30:43

The same values apply, the same values apply. I think that the difference is, is that the level of pressure and what was at stake, especially as we were working to get the EUA was- is another level. I mean, when you are essentially the state's official testing system, the level of pressure to deliver and get it right is enormous. So, the values stay the same. I think the spotlight on us it was it, you know, was at times incredibly big and intense. As was warranted, given what was it given what we were doing and what was at stake. So, I think the answer, the short answer is the values were the same, but the stakes were bigger.

Jessie Knoles 31:39

Yeah. Great. And I'm not sure if we've touched on this already. I don't think we have but we're either of you involved in outreach or education regarding SHIELD Illinois or SHIELD T3, perhaps as an extension of marketing work?

Melissa Harris 32:05

Not really.

Jessie Knoles 32:07

No

Benjamin Taylor 32:08

I think just from the standpoint of helping prepare the materials that were you know, presented, like if you want to consider like slide decks and things that were shared during webinars, that would be you know, I think the extent of it from my end.

Jessie Knoles 32:24

Great. And then, um, Melissa, you mentioned you later worked on like, Video Production Design website for T3, could you maybe talk about like, visually how you approached building T three websites or designs and then also like, kind of like what you were trying to embody within those visual aspects of the program?

Melissa Harris 32:58

Well, hardest thing about visuals Is it the best visuals so show people show us helping people and so you know, to go into a school and shoot film or to go into university and shoot film requires a ton of paperwork and permissions. And so, we were able to do that I think that's the biggest challenge is getting you want to show yourself you're or you're the company you work for actually doing the work and helping people, but you also have to balance that with people's privacy. So some of the best, you know, visuals that we got from like the whole program were, frankly, you know, of those trucks pulling into you know, at SHIELD T3, those trucks pulling into the lots, you know, you know, kind of riding on is almost like riding it as the as the, as the, you know, protective layer for these communities, the staff inside the labs working diligently. And then, you know, through SHIELD Illinois, we were able to get

some access to, to school schools to enable us to, you know, tell those stories as well... I hope these are charged. Are these charged? No, no, they are not. Okay, of course. Okay. So, I'm gonna, like start moving locations. So, I'm gonna like, I'm going to sign off and but let me let me just- Ben, do you remember the story that Mary Schmich did for the Tribune, the front-page story, my name Kevin Suchinski, you know, the superintendent for district 93. And, you know, this is a guy who, you know, through this like his mother died and yet kept on soldiering on and ended up opening testing from his school for his entire community. And you think about those moments. Another heroic moment was when SHIELD Illinois stood up like extra locations for holiday testing for that first post-holiday surge for Thanksgiving and Christmas so that people in the state of Illinois could enjoy their holiday- could safely be confident that the people who are going into their holiday celebrations were COVID-free. You know, there were some, you know, kind of heroic tales, like when SHIELD Illinois, parachuted in a following a major outbreak at Oak Park High School- River Forest high school that nearly shut down. They parachuted in, identified I can't remember dozens and dozens of people who are positive got them out of the school and enabled the school to continue to operate. There were moments when testing was so over overflowing that the number of tests coming in were so exceeding demand that the university stood up something that they jokingly called "SHIELD air," and they flew planes back and forth from Illinois to the SHIELD T three lab in Kentucky serving Toyota to get test times down within 24 hours. I mean, some of the efforts, they literally were running their own airline for a period for I think six to eight weeks. So, there were just a lot of like heroic stories that, you know, some of which I didn't learn till later, unfortunately, that were just but some of which we were able to tell in real time of people really stepping up and doing what they could to protect their community.

Jessie Knoles 36:29

Mhm. Thanks for sharing that. I don't think I had heard of SHIELD Air before. So, I'm gonna have to do some research there.

Benjamin Taylor 36:41

It was kind of our colloquial name for that that chartered plane, just like Melissa said, to utilize the lab capacity that we had, even if it was just outside our state borders. And that was a great example of the two units working together, you know, because that was a T3 lab and it was SHIELD Illinois samples, but it was quite, you know, we didn't always use the same materials, which is interesting, you know, sometimes the test tubes might be different or something like that. So, it wasn't always compatible. But in that case, it was, and we were able to use that capacity and get those results quickly enough for it to really be effective. Because that's the whole key with the process is, is the speed that you need to process that.

Jessie Knoles 37:28

I mean, yeah.

Melissa Harris 37:36

the people who, like there were moments when Ben and I needed to work kind of insanity. But there were other people, especially on our lab and operations team, who, you know, gave up their lives for this. Nothing short of like, gave up their lives. I mean, I think there was a period where Ron Watkins- like we didn't have a day off for like, three months. It was it was it was, again, I, you know, I can't

emphasize how- be a level of dedication and commitment and integrity that the people in this organization have.

Jessie Knoles 38:18

Melissa, I am curious, as someone who runs your own company, was this SHIELD project, something that you were working on while working on other projects? Or did you take time away to work solely on SHIELD, Illinois, and SHIELD T3?

Melissa Harris 38:38

My company now- is we did \$4.5 million in revenue this past year. So, I had other clients. You know, you have to emphasize I had a team of people working under me, I still do. I think that the thing that the role that I served, you know, that could not be replaced by other team members was just as an important sounding board on key external decisions. You know, Ben and Beth would consistently call to just say, "what do you think of this? What do you think of that?" You know, they were in the, you know, in the trenches that it was just, I think, really important to have an external voice, just a sounding board. So that function was solely mine. But you know, I didn't run the social media channels, an immediate member of my team ran the social media channels. So that was, you know, so I had a team of supporting.

Jessie Knoles 39:35

Okay, and are you both still involved with SHIELD on? If not, when did your work with SHIELD end?

Melissa Harris 39:44

Yes, we are both still involved with SHIELD. And I think Ben, that a member of my team is going to re-embed with the organization for six months. Beth and I are working that out now. And then I still am very involved in SHIELD T3, and then the legacy part of SHIELD Illinois is going to come over to my client, DPI. So, believe it or not, even though I'm the external person, the legacy, like the long tail of the organization is going to sit more with me than Ben, just because I run Marketing and Communications at DPI. Um, but Ben was definitely more involved in this, you know, than I was throughout the whole thing. But the legacy is going to eventually come over to DPI.

Jessie Knoles 40:42

Ben, are you still working with SHIELD Illinois?

Benjamin Taylor 40:45

Yes, I still am.

Jessie Knoles 40:47

What does your work look like right now? I'm I correct me if I'm wrong, they think SHIELD Illinois is coming to a close at some point next year, correct?

Benjamin Taylor 40:59

Yes, yeah. Aiming right now for some time during the summer is kind of the plan date, I would say it's a much less intensive, day to day responsibility for me than it was the peak. But there's still quite a bit of

like Melissa said, as this lab project that will get spun into DPI kind of progresses and is built. You know, there's some there's some interaction there with folks as, as far as planning goes, and how to how do we present that as a new project? And how do we get kind of get that ready for public consumption. So, working on different things with that, and then also the kind of kind of the SHIELD Wrap Up project that we've we're trying to get going and make some progress on for, to kind of be ready, when that announcement is ready to be made. So, we've, you know, continual progress on both of those, but definitely not the, you know, the day-to-day workload that there once was a SHIELD.

Jessie Knoles 42:10

And I am curious, I know, SHIELD kind of extended from this campus SHIELD test that was created earlier in 2020. Were either of you working with campus SHIELD, anyone working on campus SHIELD, or were you- did you research? Or were you informed by how they were marketing their own testing program?

Melissa Harris 42:37

No, currently different university setting is just so- a campus-enclosed university setting is so different than most of the people we were involved with, but I had nothing about, Ben was more involved.

Benjamin Taylor 42:51

And really, I was only involved with the campus folks from the standpoint of maybe sharing materials, and templates that they had already developed for like the on-campus testing locations, and signage and things like that, that were able to repurpose for SHIELD Illinois when we needed them. But that was really the extent of my involvement with the campus folks.

Jessie Knoles 43:17

And Ben, could you maybe talk a bit more about your involvement with Illinois State or the Department of Public Health? How you worked with those sectors to communicate about SHIELD Illinois as a testing program?

Benjamin Taylor 43:37

I think the main avenues of involvement with you know, the state of Illinois or the State Department of Public Health were when we had kind of major announcements that we were going to make, you know, I think back to when the test was made free for different segments of K 12 schools, and kind of the progression that they made as, as the state between the Department of Public Health and the State Board of Education, they kind of work together to figure out, you know, which tier of schools where it was going to have it free first, and then how they would expand that over time, as they got a better grasp on how much funding they had available from the federal government. So really working with those groups' communications units to figure out how and when to announce that and go through the process of getting those materials ready for those announcements. And then, like we you know, like we said earlier, how do we then feel the inquiries after the announcement because there's always reporters who want to follow up and get additional information in quotes.

Jessie Knoles 44:56

Did either of you experience any some backlash or specific challenges regarding SHIELD that you might not have experience with other marketing or communications projects,

Melissa Harris 45:12

Ben, why don't you take that one?

Benjamin Taylor 45:16

I don't feel like I have. I mean, I feel like especially, you know, among people with the U of I, it's been, you know, kind of a project that it's one of the, the, you can really, you know, put in your portfolio as, as a brag point or a thing that an interesting thing that you worked on. I don't feel like I've gotten any, any backlash or, you know, negative ramifications of being involved with SHIELD.

Melissa Harris 45:53

I don't think any of us had personally, though, I think I'll just say is, you know, my team did have to deal with all the crazies on social media. And you know, there are a lot of companies and organizations that have to deal with crazies on social media. This is not like the only institution or organization that has to deal with it. And we just, you know, had to deal with it in a professional way. You know, there are people out there who have insane conspiracy theories is the best way that I can describe them. And, you know, every, most any brand that matters does. And so, you know, that's never pleasant, but definitely manageable.

Jessie Knoles 46:36

We might have touched on this, but are there any other like, specific challenges that you faced in either like, creating like the story of SHIELD or just working to like those backend communications with SHIELD and those external stakeholders?

Melissa Harris 47:02

I really feel like that, once we had that EUA, it's hard to tell a story about a company whose technology isn't yet approved by the federal government. And so, I just can't emphasize enough how difficult that first period was. And so, once we were cleared, once the skies were cleared, essentially, air traffic control said, "All systems are go, you know, ready for takeoff." Once you had that, it was pretty, it was pretty smooth sailing, it was neat, the toughest part was meeting to communicate for a period of several months. Because remember, they thought they had the EUA back in the summer, so having to communicate for a period of five months when you really weren't yet authorized to operate. Like once, once that once the EUA was in hand, it felt it felt pretty. It felt, you know, like, it was like, "Okay, now we have a product, it's approved, we're ready to go, all systems are launched." And we've had plenty of time to prepare, you know, the space shuttle, you know, took off from the, from the from the launch pad, with pretty good success. And then I think that the toughest part, and we were not on the cutting edge of this. The second toughest part came when you as I said, the governor instituted those changes that essentially made testing mandatory for that school year and all, to all intents and purposes, the rush, you know, having to explain to people, we cannot turn on a testing system for, you know, 10,000 students in one week, that's not how it works, right. And by the way, you're kind of late to the game. You're, you're like one-hundredth, in line. So that is those are those are you two unique challenges.

That I don't think any other, you know, any other client of mine has faced or will face and it's in its in its history. So, I'll put that, like once in a lifetime.

Benjamin Taylor 49:18

Yeah. And to kind of add on to that, I think just the level of, of flexibility and agility that we had to show in responding to those changes, because there were definitely periods where it felt like the ground would just shift beneath you in a given week or a given day. And, you know, like the when those executive orders came out, or, you know, different things like that would happen and you have to quickly figure out the landscape and you know what, the best thing to say or the best way to react was.

Melissa Harris 49:56

There was periods where people were just dying around us! I had a client whose parent died of COVID; I had another client whose parent died of COVID. You know, people were dying. So, it was just like, it was. You know, I had a relative's husband died, like a cousin's husband die of COVID. I mean, it was scary. And so, it was just those early days, my God. You know, the level of urgency to Ben's point of flexibility. You know, academic institutions are often criticized for being slow? Not this team! This team moves at the speed of frickin light.

Jessie Knoles 50:43

You had to. Yeah.

Melissa Harris 50:45

You had no choice?

Jessie Knoles 50:48

Yeah. Do you think that there's anything that either of you would have done differently if you could have?

Melissa Harris 50:58

Ben, this is gonna have to be the last question for me. No. I cannot think of one thing, and I would tell you if I did, and that's not always the case on every client. No.

Jessie Knoles 51:17

Great. Well, Melissa, I thank you for joining us this morning.

Melissa Harris 51:21

Thank you so much. I'll talk to you later, Ben.

Benjamin Taylor 51:23

See'ya, Melissa. And I can't, I can't think of anything that I would have done differently. No, I think I stand by it. All. Right.

Jessie Knoles 51:33

I do just have one final question. What would you say are some of like, the biggest lessons that you've learned working with SHIELD Illinois, in terms of, well, just working through the pandemic, or working on marketing and communications with SHIELD?

Benjamin Taylor 51:58

I think, you know, one of the biggest ones that was really hammered home, I think, is just a need to get as full a view of the situation as you can, you know, get as much input as you can as quickly as possible, from the key stakeholders, whether that's, you know, people in charge or people that you're going to be reporting to, or whatever, and did determine what you think is the best path forward, and then figure out the best way to present that to them to your, your leadership, and try to get them on board with that. And then hear their feedback, and be able to take that in, in a you know, understanding that it isn't a personal if it is a negative. If it is negative feedback, understanding that it's just, you know, their take on the situation. And they probably got some different experiences and different understanding, and you do. So, helping that you're taking that in and then using that to work together to come up with the best response or the best tactic for the current situation.

Jessie Knoles 53:12

Great. Is there anything else that you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Benjamin Taylor 53:20

Not that I can think of.

Jessie Knoles 53:21

Right. Well, then I thank you for joining us this morning, and I really appreciate hearing your story.

Benjamin Taylor 53:28

All right. Thank you. Good luck with the rest of your project.