

ThinkGen Spotlight On:

# Heather Flaherty

Vice President, ThinkGen



## Specializing in Rare Disease Research

When Heather graduated with a degree in History, she wasn't sure where her career path would lead her, but one thing she did know was that she always loved research. She began exploring potential job opportunities that would allow her to pursue her passion and found an entry-level position in marketing research. Heather now has 18 years of marketing research experience.

Heather especially loves the healthcare sector. While she has done some consumer work, it never had the same attraction for her that the healthcare industry does. The way Heather looks at it, if a new flavor of potato chips tanks, it will not have the same impact on the world as a new therapy failing—especially for an underserved patient demographic. In her view, the healthcare sector is the area of marketing research where one can make a significant difference. Healthcare marketing research enables patients and caregivers the opportunity to tell their story. And the insights they provide directly contribute to making better medicines and services.

While Heather enjoys all aspects of market research projects, she finds her greatest interest is in the bookends. Especially in a company the size of ThinkGen, Heather enjoys brainstorming ideas with clients and understanding their aspirations and challenges from the very beginning of a project. She loves investigating the different possibilities at the proposal stage to conceive the right approach for the project. Then on the other end, Heather enjoys taking the results from the research to look at what it means and how they can use it to make informed decisions. For Heather, being able to think about these things in a deep way is incredibly satisfying.

The most significant experience Heather has had in her career occurred a few years ago, following the conclusion of research for a client that was launching a new treatment for Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD). Heather was invited to present findings to the client team on site. The team was so moved by what they learned they asked Heather to present the findings at the company's national sales meeting and also host a breakout workshop.

During this meeting Heather shared the results of research that was comprised of 70 90-minute interviews with DMD caregivers. DMD is a devastating disease that affects primarily boys, who typically lose ambulation by age 11 or 12 and pass in their early 20s. Very little had been happening in that treatment area for a long time. Heather recalls that speaking with those parents was one of the hardest things she's ever done in her career. One conversation was especially poignant for her. She was talking with one mother of six boys, of which the two oldest had DMD. This mother had just lost her oldest son, and it wouldn't be much longer before she would lose the other.

While this was a difficult project to work on, coming up with the way to present these findings to help people truly empathize with what it's like to be the caregiver of one of these children was incredibly important—and rewarding—for Heather. Her findings were used to train the client's internal team so that the staff members would gain a deeper understanding of the patients and families they were trying to support.



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Heather had already worked in rare diseases for a while, but when she got to ThinkGen, she found herself able to truly specialize. She has since co-authored a whitepaper on how to optimize clinical trial design in rare disease (which was presented at Global Genes in 2019) and presented a workshop at Intellus on how to include empathy in product and program design.

What she likes most about this niche is that only five percent of all rare diseases have a disease-modifying treatment—which is astounding when you consider that there are more than 7,000 of them. Most rare diseases are related to genetic conditions and many are life-limiting. As a population, these patients are underserved. For example, there's only a handful of medications for something like spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), while at the same time there are many treatment options available for diabetes. Participating in marketing research enables those rare disease patients and their care givers to develop relationships with the pharmaceutical companies and Heather is encouraged that pharmaceutical companies are becoming more interested in rare diseases. She is pleased to be a facilitator for this patient population—to really listen and hear them and translate what they have to say into something meaningful.

When Heather joined ThinkGen, she was employee number four, and has now been with the company for almost six years, watching the company grow to more than 30 employees in that time. Before joining ThinkGen, Heather was one of 100

employees. What she enjoys about working for ThinkGen most is the excitement of getting to wear a lot of hats and grow at a velocity she wouldn't otherwise. She also loves working with Founder and CEO Noah Pines. When she first joined ThinkGen, she worked closely with Noah and learned an incredible amount from him. She also met many great clients that shaped her professional experience. Heather is confident that joining ThinkGen is the smartest thing she's ever done professionally.

Heather says the difference in working at ThinkGen now versus when she started is like night and day in that everything is different now logistically and procedurally. However, what she says hasn't changed is that if she ever has any issue she can still always pick up the phone and call Noah. No matter what, there's always a way to talk to anyone in the organization, regardless of that person's role or title, which Heather acknowledges is a level of investment you don't get at other companies.

If Heather were ever going to pursue another career outside of market research, she would take advantage of her master's degree in Library and Information Science and work in a library academically or doing research in another capacity. Whatever she pursued as a career, it would have to involve knowledge gathering.

When she's not working, Heather stays busy caring for her two children and four pets. She also enjoys reading or (when there's not a pandemic) just hanging out with friends and family.

