

Point of Difference

An Interview with Kathy Widmer,
Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer, Elizabeth Arden

EDITORS' NOTE Kathy Widmer has held her current post since November 2009. Prior to joining the company, Widmer was with Johnson & Johnson for 21 years and held numerous marketing management positions within the consumer group of companies including Vice President of Marketing for over-the-counter drugs from May 2008 to November 2009. Widmer is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York.



Kathy Widmer

COMPANY BRIEF Elizabeth Arden

(www.elizabetharden.com) is a global prestige beauty products company with an extensive portfolio of prestige beauty brands sold in over 100 countries. Their brand portfolio includes Elizabeth Arden skin care, color, and fragrance products, including the Ceramide, Eight Hour, Visible Difference, and Prevage skin care lines; the celebrity fragrance brands of Britney Spears, Elizabeth Taylor, Mariah Carey, Taylor Swift, and Usher; the designer fragrance brands of Juicy Couture, Alberta Ferretti, Alfred Sung, Bob Mackie, Geoffrey Beene, Halston, John Varvatos, Kate Spade, Lucky Brand, and Rocawear; and the lifestyle fragrance brands Curve, Giorgio Beverly Hills, and PS Fine Cologne.

Are your marketing efforts focused locally by specific markets and is it important for there to be consistent messaging around the world?

You have to do both but there is an order in which that happens. When it comes to global positioning for a brand, it's our job to make sure that we understand the local nuances because they are used to shape the go-to-market strategy. To understand the category in various markets, the channels of distribution in retail, and the consumer and customer insights requires that we do our homework and make sure we're educated in those areas. Once that work has been done, we develop a go-to-market strategy which, as much as possible, needs to be one story, one single positioning for the brand that you build your equity elements around and stick to them no matter where you are in the world.

Is it tough sometimes not to lose sight of the older traditional brands when there is so much focus on those new exciting brands you're launching?

You have to be ambidextrous in order to manage a strong innovation plan for the business while also driving organic growth of the existing base business. A failure to do either of them will result in a flat business or declining at the topline.

Over the past 10 years or so, many companies in the beauty industry have become almost completely dependent on the innovation arm to drive growth, but we and several other companies are restoring some focus to driving the base business. We're focusing

on the classic fragrances that have the scale and positioning to drive overall growth. The same thing is true in our skin care businesses. But at the same time, we're aggressively looking for innovative ways to grow.

Is differentiation more challenging today and is it still possible to show what makes a brand unique in the space?

Consumer access to so much information and so many products, backed by a confusing retail experience, means you can't survive if you can't demonstrate a point of difference. One of the first things a consumer will tell you about Elizabeth Arden is about the original spa heritage of this brand linked to the Red Door Spa. The key as a marketer is to make sure that point of difference always comes through to the consumer and retailer but with modern language and a modern interpretation and products. We know our point of difference and we'll be successful in our ability to generate demand by leveraging that.

Is it challenging within the company to get the message across about the importance of marketing in down times?

Every marketer shares the same concern that in tough times, what is perceived to be the most flexible part of P&L is investment spending and marketing. What probably drives some of that is that while there are pieces of the marketing spend you can attach an immediate ROI to and you can deliver the growth from that investment within the current quarter or year, there are other aspects of the marketing spend that are intended to build for the long term, and it is harder to establish the immediate ROI for those items of spending and, therefore, they can become fair game in tough times.

The leadership team here gets together and long before we're put in a negative position,

we establish contingencies for risk. That is what keeps you out of trouble as a marketer.

Is online the key driver today or is traditional marketing still important?

For awhile it was traditional with a bit of time spent dabbling in the digital and new media space, but it has evolved to where both ends of the spectrum are very important.

It's incumbent upon every CMO to balance time between driving the fundamentals of marketing, which can be traditional, with acting as chief innovator. You have an eye out for where you want to drive the marketing agenda and where the new opportunities are for growth, which often come from the new media space, new technologies, and in information sharing with consumers. All the metrics we're accustomed to using remain important, but now the more relevant measure seems to be the level at which our information and news is shared among consumers because that correlates to a higher level of engagement from them. So it's shifting.

You graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. How did that education help shape your management style?

Even though there was a rank on my shoulder when I was in the military, the single biggest benefit of going to West Point is the focus on the attributes of leadership versus rank or position.

Another key takeaway is accountability – not just holding yourself accountable for delivering results or getting the mission done but, more importantly, being accountable when things are not going well, the willingness to step up and own a problem, which is something I have leveraged many times in my career. It's probably one of the most disarming things you can do in a room full of people who are trying to figure out who caused a problem and allows an organization to move on to solutions much faster.

Are there more opportunities for women to reach senior levels today?

Yes. There are some great examples of women who are getting it done. But women have to take an assertive ownership role in their careers.

Women, like all executives, are accountable for delivering on the commitments they've made, but sometimes the last thing that is attended to is their own career management. To the degree that women prioritize that, there are some great examples of women stepping into key roles and driving success. ●