

Moving Money for Better

An Interview with

Christina Hamilton, Vice President, Chief of Staff, Office of the CEO and Chief Communications Officer;
Marie-Elise Droga, Regional Vice President Western Europe, Lebanon; and Aida Diarra, Regional Vice President-Africa, Western Union

EDITORS' NOTE *Christina Hamilton has held her current post since January 2015. Prior to this, she was Vice President, Regional Divisional Director, U.K. and Ireland of Western Union Business Solutions, as well as Divisional Director, Corporate Client Division. Before joining Western Union, she was Head of Relationship Management at Capita Registrars; Director of UBS; and SVP of Citigroup. She received her M.B.A. in International Business from the University of South Carolina Darla Moore School of Business and her B.A. in English and French from Dickinson College.*

Marie-Elise Droga joined Western Union as Network Development Director U.K., Ireland, Nordics in 2004, and in 2008 she became Regional Country Director, General Manager France Benelux. She has held her current post since January 2014. Prior to that, she was also International Sales & Marketing Director for Marietta Corporation; National Sales Manager for American Express; General Manager and National Sales Manager for Image Label Systems; and Export Sales Manager for Bausch & Lomb, as well as National Account Manager. She started her career as a sales representative for Procter & Gamble. She has her M.B.A. from Solvay Business School and her B.B.A. in International Relations and Affairs from ESCP.

Aida Diarra has held her current post since 2014. She obtained an M.B.A. in management and international business at the University of Hartford in Connecticut. At the age of 25, she set up her first business, Electro Ink Jet, with a partner company based on the import-export of telecom equipment. In 1999, Diarra joined Western Union in the United States where she started as Deputy Marketing Manager in charge of flows development in the direction of Africa. She was quickly promoted to Marketing Manager for Africa.

COMPANY BRIEF *The Western Union Company (westernunion.com) is a leader in global payment services. Together with its Vigo, Orlandi Valuta, Pago Facil, and Western Union Business Solutions branded payment services, Western Union provides consumers and businesses with fast, reliable, and convenient ways to send and receive money around the world. Western Union, Vigo, and Orlandi Valuta branded*



Christina Hamilton



Marie-Elise Droga



Aida Diarra

services are offered through a combined network of over 500,000 agent locations in 200 countries and territories, at over 100,000 ATMs and kiosks, and via connections to millions of bank accounts and mobile wallets. In 2014, Western Union completed 255 million consumer to-consumer transactions worldwide, moving \$85 billion of principal among consumers and 484 million business payments.

How is brand messaging coordinated and how important is it to work with the regional leaders on this?

Christina: We are a mission-driven company and our tagline is “Moving money for better.” The belief is that when money moves across borders, better things happen: for example, a father paying for his child going to school; a daughter paying her aging father’s hospital bill in a different country; or a business trying to make a cross-border payment. A key part of that is working closely with our business teams in the regions to make sure that we are capturing those customer needs, and making it as simple and easy as possible for both our consumers and business customers to move money across borders.

Marie-Elise: One example of how the regions connected to this spirit of moving money for better was our 360-degree response to the refugee crisis in Europe. As a company that is so customercentric, we could not ignore this crisis. Our plan of action was implemented in phases. We dispatched employees from key offices in the region to assist mothers and children, we worked with local and global NGOs who understood what the needs were, and we mobilized resources from the business and Western Union Foundation.

This is a truly human company that aims to provide financial services to people and businesses anywhere, anytime and via any channel. I’ve worked for over 22 years at companies that claim to be customer centric, but Western Union really is.

Helping others truly reflects on our global brand and mission to move money for better.

Christina: We take those examples of employees stepping up to support the communities where we operate and bring them back into our communications program so we’re creating, fostering, and nurturing the connection that employees have between their jobs, our brand, and our customers.

Would you talk about Western Union’s business within Africa and how much opportunity the region offers?

Aida: Western Union was one of the first international companies to believe in the opportunity in Africa and to begin to invest in the region, which is why we are extremely proud of our presence in the Africa region for more than 20 years.

We were the first to enable a customer who needed to send money from Chicago to Ghana. We have a lot of pride, experience, and knowledge, but we believe it’s only the beginning.

There are 1.1 billion people in Africa today. When we look at the need to send and receive money, there are 13 million Africans that work or live outside of their countries of origin.

Africa is in a unique position today based on the experience we have, and our 35,000 agent locations today cover more than 50 countries, which puts us in a very unique situation to continue to offer an omni-channel service to consumers. We couple that with the work we’re doing to diversify the portfolio because technology is offering us extraordinary opportunities to make money transfers more convenient for African consumers.

We’ve developed solutions that enable customers to send a transaction to an account and we can today enable a transaction to be received in a mobile wallet.

This is the future and we are listening to the customer.

What are the opportunities for Western Union's business in Europe?

Marie-Elise: Europe is primarily a sending region, so a larger portion of the funds transferred day to day across our agent locations in France, Italy, U.K., Germany, Spain, etc. ultimately end up in someone's hands in cash, in a mobile wallet, or in a bank account somewhere outside of the EU.

One of our key priorities in Europe is to expand and diversify the funding side of our sending network.

One way we are expanding our funds-in capabilities is diversification, and this is enabled by technology. We recently launched a new product, Fast and Simple, which allows a store to complete a transaction more quickly, in addition to a mobile app in France.

With Fast and Simple, customers enter their transactional details on a self-serve kiosk and then pay their transaction at the shop, sometimes along with the rest of their purchases. This is particularly appealing to the supermarket chains across Europe and retail stores who are interested in serving new customers with Western Union services.

Another way we are expanding our funding choice is via digital channels. We now have a site so customers can transact online in all the major markets in Europe, and we're rolling out a mobile application for customers who need to send money on the run, making it easier for them to do so via their smartphones.

How dynamic is this business today for those who think of the old Western Union?

Christina: We still have some people ask, aren't you that telegram company?

We are a global company that is almost 165 years young, and we have continued to transform during that time, and continue to disrupt ourselves and the industry. We're now at an exciting point in that rich history. We recently launched a platform called WU Connect that integrates our global payment capabilities with strategic third-party global messaging, social, and other digital network partners.

Marie-Elise: One of our fastest growing distribution channels today is the digital channel, which includes our transactional apps and websites. But that channel relies on the strength of our ability to pay out via our global network – which allows a customer to initiate a transfer online in Europe, for example, and to pay it out to any of our 500,000 agent locations worldwide, or onto a card, a mobile wallet, or bank account where these services are available.

Aida: From the Africa perspective, we have long been the pioneer in enabling money transfer and with new technology. It's estimated in 2017 that Africa will have nine billion cell phones in usage and we hope to be part of the transformation.

But it's just the beginning, so we have what it takes to continue to be relevant in that space.

Christina: As Marie-Elise said, the digital arm of WU is one of our fastest growing business units. We're looking at opening a digital hub in Asia-Pacific for our digital business and we expect to continue to see the perception of our brand evolve when people connect Western Union with those digital capabilities.

How critical is that close coordination among each of the regional leaders, not only for messaging but for business, and how do you put in seamless communication?

Marie-Elise: It is critical to remember that each transaction represents two customers – a sender and a receiver of the payment. The journey starts on the send side. When we set out to serve a new community or area in France, we learn as much as we possibly can about the customer needs and preferences in that community.

We define a product, a price, and a communication strategy in close cooperation with our colleagues on the receive side. Our interdependency is strong so it is a prerequisite that all our actions are well aligned and coordinated among regional teams and leaders.

Aida: When someone leaves her or his country of origin and goes to stay in France, for example, she or he becomes a "dual-belonger." It is critical to address the need to send money home on both sides of the transaction: ensure that, as Marie-Elise does, what it takes to reach out to the sender, we on the receive side do all it takes to make sure we effectively service the receiver.

It takes that joint planning, coordination, and promotion to make sure we service customers on both sides of the transaction.

Marie-Elise: Also in a market like France, where so much of our business depends on transactions performed by foreign migrants, the face of our local team reflects that cultural diversity.

Nothing beats personal experience.

Aida: It's about the way we leverage our expertise and connection in the send market to prioritize investments and resources that meet the needs of our customers. As an example, we participate in a program called the African Diaspora Marketplace, which allows someone in the Diaspora to invest back in her or his country of origin by providing technical assistance and financial support. We have seen a tremendous response.

The African Diaspora has a priority to support their community back home. They want to leverage their experience and the skills they have built in their country and for their families.

The first year we participated in this program, a large number of business cases that

were submitted were from entrepreneurs in the U.S. who were willing to have some form of entrepreneurial activity in their countries of origin.

Christina: One final way in which we leverage our in-market expertise and leadership relates to the expansion of products and services in the regions.

For example, on the Business-to-Business side, when we're considering going into a new market, we'll leverage the expertise and market knowledge of regional leaders, like Aida and Marie-Elise, that they have built up over time.

How important is it to still have actual locations?

Christina: It's very important for this company and more importantly, for our customers. We don't see the need for cash going away anytime soon. Among many of our customers, it's a trust issue – they still prefer bringing cash to an agent location knowing it can be collected by the recipient in a matter of minutes.

Marie-Elise: People like to interact with someone who understands the service and can advise them. Customers like to engage with our Front Line Associates at a location. This makes them go back to one of our 500,000 agent locations.

How important has it been to be with a company that supports diversity?

Aida: Diversity has been one of the reasons behind the success of Western Union over the past several years. The direction that the organization has put in place to hire people who understand the customers and who understand our agents has made us a unique organization.

Christina: It's hugely important. Women make up almost 50 percent of international migrants and a recent study revealed almost 51 percent of our customers are female. Our employee base is likewise gender balanced.

This is one of the key reasons a number of my women leader colleagues enjoy working at WU. We are purpose driven, we have an emotional connection to the brand, and we know we are supported from the very top.

Is work-life balance really achievable?

Marie-Elise: For me, technology has been a real lifesaver. Having a smartphone allows me the flexibility of optimizing my downtime when I am on the go, for example, so that I can ultimately spend more time with my family. I could not have done it this way 10 years ago.

Do you take the time to step back and celebrate all that you do?

Christina: Our moments of celebration are hearing the stories about how our business supports our customers every day in moving money for better – that's 30 transactions per second. ●