What Drives Sustainable Relationships and Sustainable Brands?

When you talk with Tracy Landau, President and co-founder of the strategic brand firm MarketPlace, expect the conversation to be sprinkled with words like family and partner. And even though she works side-by-side with her husband Phil, co-founder and CEO of MarketPlace, he's not the family nor the partner she is talking about.

Instead, she means *their* customers. Which makes perfect sense when you learn that Landau says the essence of her firm is that "our customers view us as an extension of their business, and together we're partners, aligned towards common missions and goals."



Tracy Landau

The answer is connection. No one understands that more than Tracy Landau, President and co-founder of strategic branding firm MarketPlace.

MarketPlace's mission is "cultivating meaningful nutrition and lifestyle brands for people and pets." Its customers are positioned in the niche that MarketPlace has carved out for itself, one that embraces the food and beverage industry, the pet and animal industry, and the health and wellness industry (the latter, specifically covering supplements and functional foods). It's not that it can't help other industries—after all "good branding is good branding," Landau says. It's just that MarketPlace has found that its industry-specific exclusivity affords the company a deep knowledge pool of the industries it serves.

Much like many of her customers, Landau's company is also agile and entrepreneurial and appreciates the structure that comes with a smart business plan. "One of the things that differentiates us from other agencies is our DNA," she says. "We hire and nurture people in our company who are entrepreneurs, innovators and thinkers. And first and foremost our creative work is grounded by our strategic business approach. Some customers are motivated by a creative tactic or idea, yet we won't jump into production until after we've worked with our customers to hash through and identify business strategies, goals and objectives. Strategy informs our work 100 percent of the time."

It's a lesson that washes over everyone who works at MarketPlace. Take Megan Hook, for example. She embraces the word "connection." As the Growth Strategy Director for MarketPlace, she explains that part of the firm's strategic framework includes connecting consumer insights to ingredients and product development.

"We're big on research, whether it's our own market research studies, including the two we conducted to assess the impact of the coronavirus on the people and pet supple-

ment industries or just our immersion in our core industry cultures, based on ongoing conversations with customers and potential customers."

It is this specialty knowledge that enables MarketPlace to build long-term relationships with clients, helping them mine market opportunity, solve complex business issues, successfully bring products to market, and grow products already in market.

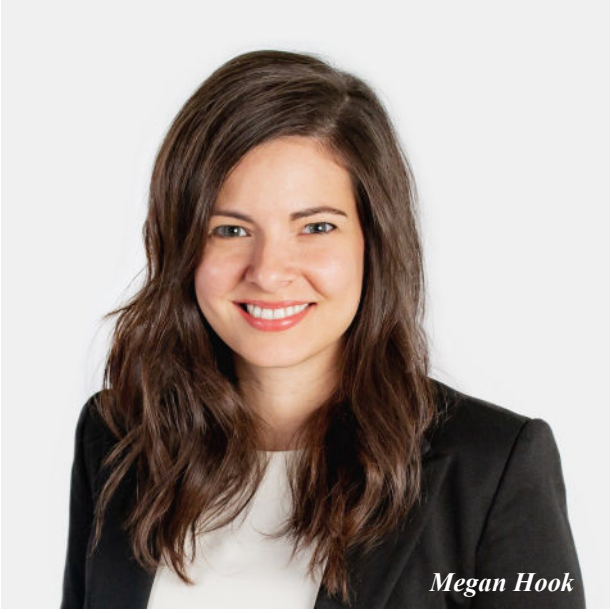
"Our capabilities are broad. We not only develop the strategic plans, but execute day-to-day tactics such as design and web development to turn those plans into reality," Landau says -- all the while helping meet – *and exceed* -- key metrics designed to enable clients to increase revenue and profits while bringing to the marketplace better, healthier, more sustainable products that enrich the lives of people and pets.

For example, Hook says, "Our research tells us that a growing number of consumers are seeking clean label foods, upcycled ingredients, and foods and supplements with added functionality, and they're willing to pay for it."

Because Landau believes that doing business is ultimately about people, she goes out of her way to connect at trade shows, like Natural Products Expo in California, or serve on industry panels and webinars. From there, she connects her clients to partners they need, whether it's finding the right manufacturer or learning who sources a specific protein or understanding how to stay within regulatory label claims.

Hook is especially keen on a new matchmaking program MarketPlace recently introduced, one that includes an investor network that will help from seed to venture. "At MarketPlace, we've developed products from the ground up, so we understand that raising capital is a hard job. It's time consuming and it can be a huge distraction to what companies need to focus on."

She explains that MarketPlace formed a relationship with an investment banking firm that serves the middle market. "It's a powerful value-add that we provide for our partners by making the connection on their behalf, where they otherwise might not have been able to get their foot in the door."



Megan Hook

That's a start, but MarketPlace is always in it with its partners to get to the finish line. *And to finish big,* as Landau says. As you'd expect in a family, "When we don't agree with our customers' strategy, we tell them," she adds. "If something is not going to net the results we feel you need, we're very honest about it, even though it might mean we won't get a broader scope of work for the project."

Although MarketPlace is headquartered in St. Louis, it has strong roots in California, recently made stronger by opening its first satellite office in Orange County. There's a history, and a future, tied in with California: The agency's first customer was a family-owned business based in Irwindale, California, and that relationship is what launched the company.

A number of MarketPlace's customers are California-based, and Landau expects more growth from the state. "It made sense for us to open an office where we could more regularly connect with customers and connect with others in the industries we serve. We have long been a proponent of transparency, sustainability, and wellness, and those are core values that are also at the heart of California's business innovation."

Copyright © 2021 California Business Journal. All Rights Reserved.