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## How GE's Beth Comstock Puts Innovation to Work – Part 1

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What does it take to get inducted into the CMO Hall of Fame? Infinite curiosity and, apparently, some ecological know-how. Beth Comstock of GE is a rarity in the clan of CMO's, an innovator who doesn't try to come up with the ideas herself, a leader who seeks insights from startups and a explorer who thinks "the journey is never done." Oh and did I mention she works for a company that sells massively complex machines yet as Beth says, "We're on a real mission to humanize technology."

In this first part of our interview, we talk about how to leverage trends and the kind of dedication needed to produce big ideas — and big results!

**Drew:** How important is it to be a leader who comes up with an idea versus having the ability to build out an idea from your team and build a culture where the ideas are sort of percolating and coming up to you?

**Beth:** I think early on in my career I expected that as a leader, a manager of a team, that I was supposed to come up with the ideas, that's what you did as the team leader. I started realizing that it put a lot of pressure on me. I also started to realize that the ideas actually weren't that good. I think there is a kind of a humble recognition you get when you are an innovation junkie like me but also just as a leader, that ideating is better when it's a team sport. I have learned that there are times when you have to go on your own to think through a problem and then there are times when you need other people to react, make it better.

I think my process is that I like to act like a sponge. I think part of my job and just who I am is to immerse myself externally outside of GE for ideas and look for themes and trends. If I see something interesting twice I ask, 'Is that a coincidence?' If I see it three times I go, 'Ah, this is a trend' and try to draw

those lines. I think it's my job to do that and then bring it back into the organization and say, here's a thought starter. How can we innovate, ideate around that? So that's sort of very loosely my process.

**Drew:** What are some of the hardest sales you've had to make or times where you had to be persistent and not take no as an answer?

**Beth:** When I was at NBC, I was trying to pitch what is now the NBC Experience Store. It's been around for 16 years now and I worked really hard on that one. Bob Wright turned me down many times for a couple reasons. One, the idea just wasn't ready and he was sending me away to make it better, but also, he was testing my commitment to it. Was I really going to back this idea? So that was a very formative experience for me.

Since starting at GE, I've had this passion for digital health and what I think it could mean to GE. Up until recently, I had a hard time articulating it. The space hasn't taken off, and it's only really been this year that we've been able to bring the right forces together as a great team and venture into it. So that's probably my biggest, longest running example of something that I felt like I was pushing for six years and it's just now broken through.

**Drew:** Can you talk about the strategy behind "The Boy Who Beeps" Ad and what message you wanted to send? And in general, do you continue to see television playing an important role in the GE story?

**Beth:** David Lubars who is the creative director of BBDO just had a lot of passion for that ad. I think it means a lot when you're partnered to real passion and he was very passionate about this for good reason. BBDO has been our agency

for 90 years. They just know us so well. In some ways they know us better than we know ourselves, which is why we keep hanging around together.

The Industrial Internet is a very big company strategy and priority. Big data is still confusing, it's kind of scary and people are not entirely sure what it means when machines talk to other machines. We were trying to send the message that technology is headed toward a good purpose. It's about the humanity of technology, rather than just getting excited about technology for technology's sake. We're on a real mission to humanize technology. Most people can't see the technology we make, so we have to use a lot of metaphors.

As for the role TV plays in telling GE's story, I think it depends on the objectives and the business mission for any given campaign or effort. For most of us, I think TV does have a role. With examples like "Boy Who Beeps" or one we did with the Olympics earlier this year, "My Mom Works at GE", you need the space. TV provides a storytelling grandness with some of these big signature events. We do a lot around these kind of signature efforts and there is room for big storytelling to be done well.

A rule I have observed just in working within the digital space is that the size of these markets gets bigger and slices gets smaller. So TV won't have the big slice of the audience that it once had, but it doesn't mean it's not still important.

**Drew:** In regards to some of the ideas or innovations that you have been able to bring to bear in the organization, have any of those had an advantage in the sense that the marketing opportunities are baked into the idea?

**Beth:** Yes. I think one of my earliest examples of this and one that I still think stands the test of time was the development of ecomagination. It's a cute name, but it wasn't just a cute little effort. It was a very serious intention to align our technology to where the market was going. Our customers wanted more energy efficient technology. We saw that in every industry and in every segment where we do business. So that was a clear opportunity to invest in a certain technology tethered to where

the market was going: renewable, clean energy and efficiency. We recognized the need for partnerships that supported that mission, and then to hold ourselves accountable.

To date, we're tracking about \$180 billion of eco-generated sales, billions of dollars of investments in new eco-friendly spaces and a host of partnerships that have made us faster and better. To me, that's market-based innovation. It's kind of a glue.

That's just one of our successful processes. There have been many, many times where that hasn't worked so well. I've given you one example of success but I don't want to make you think we were nirvana here, because we're not.

#### About the author

Drew Neisser is the CEO and founder of Renegade, the NYC-based social media and marketing agency that helps inspired CMOs cut through. He is the champion of Marketing as Service, a philosophy he espouses in his writings on FastCompany.com, PSFK, TheDrewBlog and The Cut, a much-appreciated monthly newsletter. If you have a CMO success story to tell, let Drew know at [dneisser@renegade.com](mailto:dneisser@renegade.com).

