



Beth Comstock
Chief Marketing Officer, General Electric
CMO LEADERSHIP AWARD WINNER

How GE's Beth Comstock Puts Innovation to Work – Part 2

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In part one of my interview with CMO Hall of Fame Inductee Beth Comstock, we talked about the innovative marketing campaigns she's enabled as the CMO of GE. In this second part, we talk more about how personal passions and inspirations can translate into exciting campaigns and a culture of creativity. I was surprised by her background in biology but not by her sharp insights on what it means to be a marketing leader and how to helm innovative campaigns.

Drew: I couldn't help to notice that you were biology major, which is not exactly the typical liberal arts path of a future marketer. Did you imagine yourself being a marketer when you were studying biology?

Beth: Not at all. I was torn between anthropology, psychology, and biology and I picked biology because I thought I wanted to go to medical school. But it turns out that biology is actually a great background for marketing. Something that Biology and Marketing have in common is that they both deal with the interconnectivity of each individual living thing to a broader system and that's the world we live in. We are all connected. We can't innovate without partnership. I think my study of ecology and my study of systems has trained me to think in a more systematic way and view the world – and certainly the business world – more systematically.

Drew: How important is it to you that you spend time managing personal brand activities on social media?

Beth: I think it's important to do it to learn. Again, if you believe your mandate is to connect to outside of yourself and your company, you have to use the best mechanisms to do that. If you look at my Twitter for the past few months I haven't been as active as I need to be, but I kind of go through cycles. I love it as my daily newsfeed and I love it as way to connect with people and ideas.

For me, LinkedIn has unearthed a passion. There are a lot of people who I actually want to connect with; people whom I want to come and work with GE or potentially our customers. LinkedIn is a really good place to do that. As a marketer, our jobs aren't easy, so I try to use it as a way to share lessons and say, 'hey, we're all in this together'. We've all been in those tough situations. For me, it's been a bit cathartic to just kind of share some of those talks.

Drew: I know you've talked about spending upwards of 25 percent of your time in Silicon Valley, talking to your GE team out there. That's a lot of time relative to all the things that you have to do. How do you rationalize that investment relative to other ways of spending your time?

Beth: I would say that may be skewing a little bit more but we are investing a lot of the company in the Industrial Internet and in partnerships that help us get to be that market. Silicon Valley is kind of a metaphor for where innovation is happening. Just to give you an example, last week I was in Asia for a week and spent time in three cities in China and in Seoul, Korea. In every city I went to, 75 percent of my time was spent on GE or customer efforts, but I also made time to see what was happening in the marketplace. In Beijing, I spent time with the Xiaomi team. In Chengdu, I got to meet the Camera360 startup guys who have developed apps and in Seoul, I participated in a roundtable innovation discussion with some incubators and founders. I do it with my venture cap, but more importantly I do it to keep the company tethered externally. It's partly my job but it's also a metaphoric way to describe that kind of sense of where innovation is happening.

Drew: Looking ahead either in terms of trends that you're seeing or just personal things that you would really like to get a handle on next year, what is on your priority list for 2015?

Beth: For the marketing mandate, I think just continuing to create stories that connect and scale. I think the journey is never done. I want to continue to find these different partners, media and ways to tell stories that connect them in scale. We don't have a big budget so there's a lot of ongoing pressure for us as a team to raise the bar. That's always on our list.

I am a big believer in this idea of what we call the global brain. It's this idea of using digital connections to tap into people who don't work for us. It's called open innovation but you can also call it a digital workforce. There are a lot of ways you can get people who have insights and capabilities to do work with your company and I think it will continue to take off.

We have a culture of speed and simplicity and kind of delight in things that can explain what we do at GE. I feel very committed to being a part of that in this coming year. The discovery agenda is still looming large. By the end of 2015, I hope to find three new trends of things that are just absolutely exciting.

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.

