



## Episode 6 – Sales & Marketing

**Rebecca Pearson, President & Chief Marketing Officer – WEConnect International**

**Stacie Berdan, International Careers Expert (Podcast Host)**

[Music]

### **Stacie Berdan:**

Welcome to the Global Careers podcast, sponsored by GW-CIBER! THE source for inspiring stories from seasoned professionals who have embraced a global role and reaped the benefits. We offer practical advice and insider tips across a broad swath of industries and fields around the world about what it's like to work globally. If you love adventure and thrive on taking risks and operating outside your comfort zone, join us as we explore the ins and outs of pursuing an international career! My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan, and I'll be your host! Our First Season dives into what it's like **Working Globally Through the Pandemic** – and the outlook for global careers in a post-COVID-19 world.

One of the many challenges facing organizations amidst this pandemic is figuring out how to do business – especially in sales and marketing where relationships and personal interactions are critical. Today's guest shares how learning to pivot creatively and to adapt to changing circumstances without skipping a beat is a mark of success. Rebecca Pearson is President and Chief Marketing Officer of WEConnect International – a new position she took up after a long career at Exxon Mobil. It's no surprise she's in this new position. She's leading a global organization designed to empower women entrepreneurs around the world. And – she is a GW alumna. Rebecca takes us into a world that connects large-scale global corporations and women-owned enterprises of all sizes that operate all over the world. She talks about the importance of technology and analytics as critical to success now as well as the need for flexibility, authenticity, and entrepreneurship – for both job seekers and employers. Have a listen as she dishes out tips for working globally, shares marketing trends, and stresses the importance of having a positive impact no matter what path you take.

Welcome, Rebecca, it's a pleasure to have you!

### **Rebecca Pearson:**

Thank you, Stacie, and it's a pleasure to be here.

### **Stacie Berdan:**

Fabulous; so, let's get started! You've had quite the career so far, having worked for a Fortune 50 company across six continents as well as a global non-profit. Well, it looks like you are just getting started on act 2 or 3, is it? Tell us about it!

### **Rebecca Pearson:**

[Chuckles] So I am in act 3 and loving every minute of it. I work at a non-profit organization in Washington, DC called WEConnect International, and our mission is putting money in the hands of women enabling them to compete in the global marketplace. So, what does that mean? It means that I essentially bring buyers and sellers together to do business with each other. And we are focused on women-owned businesses specifically in the context of what somebody might know as supplier diversity, inclusive sourcing, gender inclusive sourcing, something like that. And women-owned businesses for us need to be 51% or more owned, managed, and controlled. So that takes out leadership positions and anybody who has partnerships where the woman is not 51% or more owning the business where they are in control of making all the decisions.



**Stacie Berdan:**

What a great organization Rebecca, and I absolutely love the focus on women. I imagine though it must have been a pretty dramatic transition from the private sector. What's the most interesting aspect of your job, what excites you the most these days?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

Moving into the non-profit space and into a much smaller organization that's about ten-years old, and what's exciting is the growth trajectory that this organization is on, and the fact that so many member companies (and I'll tell you about who our members are) are interested in helping us grow and meet our mission of really trying to drive money into the hands of women so that they can compete in the global marketplace. And what we are doing is bringing in together large buyers, which tend to be corporations – the who's who of the Fortune 500 around the world. And they are a member (we are a member-based organization so they have a membership with us) but then they also do a lot of extra activities with us to try to help women-owned businesses improve their capabilities for competing for their money basically, and their supply chain.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Well, that's fantastic, and I envy you. You are one of the lucky ones working in a growth industry during the middle of a pandemic. Brava to you and your organization! I have to say again – I'm jealous; it sounds like a great place to work. Why did you decide to make the leap from corporate to non-profit?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

So, making the leap took a little while to just think through at the time – whether I was ready to leave behind a very successful and very rewarding corporate career and go into the non-profit space. But I'm a consummate learner, so I am always interested in doing something new, trying something new. And this is a completely new space for me because some of our funding comes from government grants, multilateral relationships, development banks – it's a whole new space that I did not work in when I was in Exxon Mobil and even some of my previous jobs before that. And then, focusing on women's economic empowerment – especially in the broader sense, beyond workforce – was very appealing to me. In addition to, although I love strategy and feel that I have capabilities there, I love being a little more hands-on and making things happen. And this has really allowed me to do more hands-on work and apply my marketing expertise, which I love but in today's current world with digital marketing and things, I didn't have a chance to do specifically hands on in my Exxon Mobil later years, let's say. So, it's been fun to make the leap, love every minute of it, going from for-profit to non-profit has its own interesting things to examine and understand, you know – how does that work, and what's different, and what's the same.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's really inspiring Rebecca. Especially knowing that you took up this new role at the beginning of the pandemic, so a lot of change was happening. We've all had to challenge ourselves and learn new things and you've had to do so on a pretty big scale. Tell us, what are you seeing with respect to the effects of COVID-19?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

So, it's very noticeable in my current role because we work with all industries. And of course, as you know and you hear from the news, the hospitality industries are definitely severely affected. But it's interesting to also see which industries are seeing the benefit of what's going on, so certainly in the packaged goods anywhere when you think about consumer goods being produced or groceries or, you know, any of these things that I think are intuitive when you think about it, I see the same thing. But also, technology firms, parts of firms will be very successful and one part of the organization and then another part of the organization isn't doing well. So, even with these highly diversified large companies you are seeing different parts of them doing better than others. So, from that perspective it's a wide swath of it; and then I think the other implication that we see is the level of focus and effort



today on diversity and inclusion for any number of reasons around the world as propelled forward even more activity in the space of people and companies are even more and more interested in having an impact. Not that they weren't doing something already in having an impact... and, so, they are reaching out to organizations they already work with and new organizations to help them figure out 'how do we do more, how do we have a greater impact?'.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's a really positive aspect to come out of these unfortunate times, isn't it? You know, I notice people now take the time to ask how is everybody doing, checking in, how are your parents, your grandparents, the kids dealing with school... Much different that the rushed 'hey, let's get this meeting started, I've got another one in twenty minutes'... so, just recent past... And I really hope this trend continues because, you know, relationships matter – you know that! Your business is very relationship driven. How has that aspect of your own work changed now that we are all working virtually?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

Finding additional ways to build and maintain relationships which is so critical to do in person, but you can't do it. How you not be overwhelmed with emails because that's the way people communicate today and you don't have other alternatives... So, just a lot of things that are affecting us, but again, a lot of opportunities as we see what's going on with our population, not only our member population, which is our funding base, and some of those industries aren't doing as well. What's happening with our women-owned businesses, as they tend to be small and medium enterprises, although very significant ones (these are not small-small organizations but very significant ones as well), and how they have been impacted. We've been doing a survey of our women-owned businesses in our network (we have more than 10,000) and getting feedback from them as to how they are being impacted, what they are doing, and you know, what innovation coming out of, I would say, small and medium enterprises, I want to say out of our women in particular, because I am a women's economic empowerment believer and I think women just have a lot more to offer than we don't get to showcase... And, so, I'm thrilled to be able to showcase how many women were able to adjust and survive through this, although they have definitely been impacted like the other small and medium enterprises out there.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Do you see these new ways of doing business continuing?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

It hard for me to imagine that it doesn't. I think that it's been a catalyst for many companies, organizations, or people, that knew that was the way to go but just it's sometimes hard to change and when you are forced to change and you look back and you say 'wow, you know, what was I missing all this time... when I could've been doing things virtually, I could've leveraged the talent that I have now because I have more accessible to me...' or look how much more we can cram in a day because we don't have to travel. You know, there are some good things and some bad things that come with that... But yes, they are going to persist, and what's exciting to me is looking at how all people – no matter small, medium, big, no matter what background or mindset that they have – are creating and innovating in this space. Because looking at these new technologies, particularly for things like networking and having that relationship surrogate when you can't be in person is such a rich space of opportunity...

**Stacie Berdan:**

Pretty exciting stuff, huh? Besides technology though, what else will be part of the global workforce of the future? You know, what skills are needed, what are you seeing?



**Rebecca Pearson:**

So, for me, I think adaptability comes to mind. Adaptability, flexibility, the willingness to learn, to go with the flow, to try things. I think the concept of agility and test-and-learn is so embedded in some of these trends that I mentioned that things that have sort of come from the IT world that are common words in my marketing space but are also common words now for CEOs because all of those changes happened so much more quickly that we all have to be able to respond and be willing to learn and be adaptable. And I know this from a talent perspective because I'm so involved with identifying talent. Even from a statistical basis there's a lot of work I've done in the last five years around assessing talent through quantitative measures to know what people are naturally good at. And some people are more adaptable naturally than others. And I think the trick is to understand if those things don't come to you naturally then how do you put help around yourself, resources around yourself, so that you can get comfortable trying new things, taking risks. There's all levels of people that want to take risk... And then also being comfortable that if those are not your things then don't set yourself up for failure in positions, or work activities, or life for that matter where those things are critical. And knowing yourself and knowing what you're good at is sort of fundamental; and one of the things that I would recommend for people to understand going forward is how well do you know yourself. I've spent an incredible amount of time during my life doing all these various inventories. We're well beyond Myers-Briggs at this point; there are so many things to help you, so many tools to help you understand what you are good at, how to apply those skills and knowledge to types of roles or types of activities, how to apply them in your life, how you are different in your work life vs. your home life and how you are the same. I think these are all part of globalization because we just got more and more access to different types of people, different ways of thinking, and we need to appreciate all of that natural talent for sort of a more harmonious way of working together around the world.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That is a thoughtful perspective, Rebecca. And is both exciting and a little bit daunting, isn't it? Knowing that there are so many people that are part of the global job pool around the world... You know, when it comes to marketing you are global expert, having worked all over the world for years. What are some of the marketing trends you see?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

The trends are that everything is on a global scale. You know, I think about this sometimes and say 'are they really trends or are they just the way we do business today?' But I would say the trends I see today are the same ones I saw 10, 15, 20 years ago. I think we are getting faster at responding... And all of this of course is underpinned by technology. There's no way to be asked today about trends and not mention how technology plays a role in all of that. So, what I see is just the increasing expectation at integration of technology to all things. Marketing, that includes to me also taking some of the best practices coming out of the IT world on design thinking. For me, if you start in marketing or sales, you learn that the customer is at the heart of that, customer, consumer are at the heart of that. Everything needs to be pointed towards them. So, if you never lose that mindset, you will also never be behind on the trends. Because what's happening in the trends is just more of that. There's personalization, which we talked about decades ago but the level of personalization you can have today because of data is phenomenal, vs. how we had to do it twenty years ago. So, I would say, personalization, design thinking, all things technology including what's going on behind the scenes with blockchain, AI...you know, a lot of that you don't see but it's all making things more efficient or more effective. And then, it's hard not to talk about analytics. While this is nothing new, I'm sure everybody you ask this question to is going to say the same thing – technology and analytics are behind all of this. Those are the continuing trends that you want to stay on top of. Now, the implication to that, how you take advantage of that – to me those are the things that change more often. So, just looking at the evolution of which social media platforms are popular, the fact that social media platforms are not the same in every country. I'm just working on something right now where Facebook just isn't really the thing to do and it's Instagram in Brazil for example. But in my other country it's Facebook, and in my other country to reach my audience Facebook doesn't work at all and I've got to do it on LinkedIn – and it's the same type of audience wherever I go.



**Stacie Berdan:**

Wow, you have described a complex fast-paced world that students need to be ready for. What advice do you have for them as they get started on their careers?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

It's funny... I think of entrepreneurship a lot. It's partly generational because it's so much easier to start your own business and move your own ideas forward as well as the idea of working for large organizations which in my generation was sort of Nirvana, but not always because it wasn't a fit for everyone but there was just corporations, long-term careers – this concept of joining one company and being there long time. All these paradigms are all blown up and what all the tools that had been made available to us because of globalization, because of technology, means that people can start their own business tomorrow. Start up on the internet, set up a web page, and put up a store if they have something to sell, and get all kinds of advice. Webinars are free everywhere on how to run your business, on how to be a business owner... There's so much available that I think the thing I would say I see the most of is entrepreneurship in general. And even if it's not an individual company or an individual effort, the entrepreneurship that is required inside organizations, whether they are medium or larger enterprises, the amount of entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity that needs to be fostered and allowed inside large organizations in order for them to be competitive is taking advantage of that same concept and same spirit.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yes, that is a great observation. Everyone today benefits from being able to respond to the needs right in front of us. Even pivoting creatively, right, in another direction! I know I've had to do the same to some extent for my business. Stepping back a bit, is there a piece of advice you wish you'd been given, what point in your career?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

I can speak to some of the things personally that I wished I had known, and I think they probably would be more meaningful to women at this stage but thinking about the guys that are out there and listening to this you know I don't think it's something you want to ignore either. But – having confidence and demonstrating and showing that confidence to others. I wish I had known that that was an issue for me. And what's funny about that is when I was in Brussels, I mentioned that I got a little help from that in realizing that the company thought more of me in Exxon Mobil than I had thought as far as career trajectory. My boss at the time identified and told me that I didn't exude this level of confidence and I said, 'you've got to be kidding me, I'm the most confident person in the world!' I mean, I got opinions left and right, you ask me what to do and I'm like go straight... You know, I like to incorporate other opinions but I will make a decision and we are off, right? So, the thought of me not exuding any confidence was totally foreign until he mentioned it to me. And then I saw what he was talking about. And it was because I liked to incorporate other people's ideas. And even today I'll get feedback like this sometimes, where I'm just so interested in factoring in other thought processes and putting it into my own before I give an opinion or direction. People sometimes just want to know what I think, right... just, 'what do you think?' And the more years you have under your belt, the more important that is, I think, because you do actually have experience. I would say, understanding your confidence, exuding that confidence, gaining that confidence, and whatever you have to do there will help you reign your full talents to there. It's not about confidence to lead and be the next entrepreneur running your own company or the next corner office. If you are not a natural born leader or don't want to be a leader, there's... you know, not everybody needs to be a leader. That's something that everybody needs to understand that there's a lot of options for you. So, knowing your strengths, knowing your confidence level to display those strengths, and then stay true, just stay true to who you are.



**Stacie Berdan:**

That’s some really, really good advice, Rebecca. As we begin to wrap up, I’d like to ask you to share a favorite global experience. I know you have worked all over the world and have some really fun ones to share. But just pick one, one of your favorites, to bring the global experience to life for listeners.

**Rebecca Pearson:**

Oh sure, I have stores from every country I’ve ever been... So, the first time I went to China was in 2005, which feels like yesterday to me but we’re talking 15 years ago (I can’t believe it), and I get off the plane in downtown Shanghai, and they had literally, I don’t know – probably a few years before, just had streets that were opened up and we were sharing the streets with masses of bicycles, and so half the streets were filled with hundreds and thousands of bicycles. Every morning people pedaling to work right next to the BMW and the Cadillac, and at that time the cars that were in the country were the high-end cars because that’s where they were in the evolution. So I have memories of sitting in, whatever, Cadillac or whatever car I was in, next to the thousands of bicycles and all the people going to work. And of course, you could tell, unfortunately, kind of a different group of people as well – who was riding a bicycle and who was in a car. Going back ten years later and there’s no bicycles; not even ten years later, probably like five or six years later, and there’s just no bicycles – they’re all gone.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yes, the growth in China is astounding. Across all of Asia actually. I’ve similar memories – tens of thousands of bicycles across the wide boulevards in Beijing, colossal skyscrapers going up in a year/two years; and it’s so fast, it is absolutely amazing. Well, Rebecca, this has been a super pleasure to talk with you. You’ve given us so much terrific advice, good laughs, and a whole lot of interesting things to think about. Before we close, is there anything else you’d like to add?

**Rebecca Pearson:**

Thank you! I feel I should say ‘Go Colonials’ or something, you know, to GW students. But, also to know that GW was a great school, I was very fortunate to attend there. And stick with what you love, study, learn, ask questions, and thanks for listening, and thanks for having me, Stacie. It was a blast and I really appreciate the opportunity.

**Stacie Berdan:**

You are so welcome. But really, Rebecca, all the thanks go to you for taking the time to share your vast experience and insightful observations with us. Thanks again, I really appreciate it.

**Rebecca Pearson:**

Thank you.

[Music]

**Stacie Berdan:**

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast “Working Globally Through the Pandemic” and the outlook for global careers in a post COVID-19 world. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!