How to Change an Organization Through Marketing Communications – Interview with Taia Ergueta

This transcript was lightly edited for clarity.

CHRIS	My guest today is Taia Ergueta. She is currently a business consultant and social entrepreneur but she is also an experienced life science executive. She has been the division General Manager at Agilent Technologies for liquid chromatography and mass spectrometry. I had the pleasure of working on her team at Varian where she was the Vice President of Marketing and we overlapped very briefly at Thermo Scientific where she was the Vice President of Strategic Marketing for scientific instruments. She is also currently an executive mentor at the Global Social Benefit Institute. Today we're going to talk about leading with Marcom. Welcome Taia.
TAIA	Thanks Chris, good to be here.
CHRIS	You and I recently had a discussion and I thought a lot of what we talked about would be worth sharing to a broader audience. And I wanted to start with the idea that when we worked together at Varian you introduced this idea of changing an organization through marketing. Can you talk a little bit about that?
TAIA	Sure, I'd probably even be a little bit more radical and assert that you can actually change a whole organization dramatically and make it more successful through marketing communications. And the key principle behind that, as I played it out in a couple of different positions that I had, both in my previous world of tech as well as in life sciences, is that you always are more efficient and more effective at something if you start with your desired end point and work backwards from that as

opposed to starting off and generally doing things that you think are going to be helpful to getting to that end point.

I should probably be a little more specific. Every company's desired end point is really for customers to buy their product but what I found was that instead of focusing on that customer and their desired buying process and even their emotional and psychological makeup, most companies start at the other end -- start with a technology or a product idea and they develop the product, they develop a selling process and eventually they get around to messages and marketing materials.

But using that approach of going from that side toward the end point usually ends up producing under-performance and at best, if the product actually, does meet the customer need, you actually waste time and you waste some resources because you're doing things in a way that makes sense to you but then the customer has to contort to figure that out and to align themselves and their way of thinking and their needs to what you're talking about and producing.

Now, that's kind of in the best case. In the worst case though, what I've seen is that you actually fail because you develop a product that doesn't meet their needs and there's no amount of great selling or marketing communication that can fix that, right?

CHRIS | So can you give an example of the kind of things a marketing communications team might do or an entire marketing team might think about in order to begin at the endpoint? What kinds of things?

TAIA | Sure, yeah. It's interesting, some of those things have started to be brought into the product development cycle. Some people would say that by doing design thinking and by doing customer-focused product development, you can address these issues. I think that's partially true, that's part of what needs to be done.

But I think what I've found certainly, was that as I looked at - I've managed various different kinds of teams - if you try to start from that development side out, you don't really get there. And it's because marketing and Marcom need to bring a different kind of a mindset and a different set of skills to really make that work. They're the ones who can really work to understand the customers and understand things beyond their hard needs like their emotions, the language that they use, how they think, what their real issues are as people as opposed to as users of technology or products. They can bring that into the organization and by actually getting that specific about what you have to say and how you have to say it and when you have to say it to customers.

You can then, by meeting those needs, by setting up those requirements internally and leading the rest of the organization to meet those requirements, bring about a whole range of new types of thinking and awareness that not only make that particular project

more successful, but what I found is it was the one thing that actually made the ah-ha experiences happen, for example the R&D teams, so that they not only did a better job in that project but they did a better job even in the later projects.

CHRIS
Interesting what you talked about there, about those emotional needs and being really specific about the type of person that you're looking to buy your product. Anybody who's done any reading on content marketing knows we're essentially talking about a persona here, which is different than a segment which you would say, "Here is a group of people who work in an industry." Now we're talking about a persona which might exist across industries but there might be different personas within a single industry: there's the person who uses the product, there's a person who may be the technical expert on the product, and there might be someone who just makes the purchasing decisions - and they all have needs to be met, right?

TAIA
Exactly, and sometimes it's even people outside of the customer. I'll give you an example. When I was in the computing arena, we were way behind in mobile computing in Hewlett Packard. And so, the first thing I did, as we were doing a major turnaround of that business, was to hire a very aggressive Marcom person. And I asked her to get us in to set up meetings with the people who were really quite influential at that particular time and those were the industry experts.

There were certain groups of market research organizations and press people who were particularly influential there and we had some very rough meetings where they were very uncomplimentary about [chuckles] our company and its status in the market. But through those meetings we really learned what their criteria were going to be for writing about us in a positive way and even writing us about us at all.

So, in short order, we had a checklist of very specific things that we had to be able to say. I could go back and then organize my team and work with my colleagues to make sure we did the things that enable us to say those things. And I can tell you that within just a few months, we were all of the sudden being written up in all of the major articles and being touted as a company that was serious and was making a big push in this marketplace.

CHRIS
Well, that takes content marketing to a different level. A lot of companies now are thinking about producing media for their company but now we're thinking about how you get journalists to recognize what you're doing and talk about you the way you want them to.

TAIA
Right. And this is the whole thing. It's getting specific enough whether it's people outside of the company or with customers in saying-- I literally do, oftentimes personally and in my consulting, and when I advise groups, is to say, "What would these people need to hear? What are the actual kinds of words that they need to hear in order to believe

or in order to go away with a particular impression?" And that's really, really helpful.

CHRIS: Yeah, that's fantastic. Another thing we talked about with respect to leading with Marcom is, in what ways do you see marketing communications influencing product development? I guess we talked a little bit about that just now. In fact, maybe we just covered that [chuckles].

TAIA: It really comes down to two things though. Maybe you're right to summarize them. The first one is that you can reveal very critical gaps in the assumptions of the organization particularly of the product development team. I remember one time I was working with the team that was wanting to enter a market segment that was adjacent to one where they were very, very strong and everybody was convinced that the company's product and their current strength would really be a big asset in the new segment.

The plan was to call on about five of the major companies in the new segment and really get going. As we started to just simply craft a presentation for those meetings, it became really clear that nobody in the organization knew some core information about the processes and the priorities of that new segment. And as a result-- there was no way to articulate a compelling value proposition to that group, and that was a great thing to really understand, because otherwise the organization would have gone through-- could have actually invested a lot in marketing what they thought were assets to an organization where they didn't really understand the fit.

That changed it and we changed those meetings to be, in part, sharing assets but in part really being fact-finding meetings that allowed the organization to tune its activities going forward. So, I think that's one way that it can help. I think the other one that we've touched on is to just make sure that it's not all about what those factual or operational needs are and that someone's taking into account the things that our friend, Hamid Ghanadan, always talks about which are the emotion and ego factors as well.

CHRIS: Yep. Can we talk a little bit about the possibility of managing marketing communications in the same way we would manage product development?

TAIA: Sure. Yes. I think, depending on how companies manage, most companies have a pretty structured process for managing product development. And then, when it comes to Marcom-- and I should go back, they manage product development through stages. And those stages are pretty similar and I've been in organizations where it was very, very clear exactly what had to happen in any of those stages. In other organizations, it may not be quite as structured, but generally

people know what has to happen in each of those stages and then when you get to Marcom often times there isn't really that.

What you have is projects or worse, tasks. So, many projects. But there's really no reason to run things that way. You really can get all the same benefits as you have in product development in Marcom and marketing by managing it as a process that tends to have all of these different stages.

In fact, by doing so, Marcom can actually create a lot of strength and leadership for itself. Any group that actually has a process can in fact then get the organization to buy into that and it keeps them from being in the position of asking for one-off pieces of information or meetings or insights from the team in order to do their project. All of a sudden it's an established process that is parallel with the product development process. It has legitimacy, and in fact you can actually, in many cases, kind of fold in things into the product development process.

One of my favorite ones is the idea of incorporating into the product development process, a version of the press release for the product early on. I don't know if you've seen that done Chris. I don't know that we did that at Varian?

CHRIS	We certainly talked about it. Yes.
TAIA	[laughter] Okay, but if you actually could build that in to the checkpoint of the development process, that would be great. That really focuses everybody's mind on "Do we have a clear objective with respect to the project?" And "How is it changing as we are needing to make project development decisions?"
CHRIS	I love this idea and I think there's a huge opportunity for marketing communications teams to save lots of effort by doing exactly what we just talked about. Rather than being the victim of random task requests, to build a plan to say, "These are all the things we're going to do." And of course, there are added things when a product launch comes around but underneath that, a process to say, "Here is a schedule", a road map for all the content we're going to produce over the long hall that is kind of our core structure. And certainly there are things that have to happen on top of that but when you can do that, you make yourself less vulnerable to those random requests. If you don't have something that people are happy to look at and say, 'Yes. I feel like we're going the right direction.' they're just going to ask you to fix the latest thing that's bugging them.
TAIA	Exactly. And also you're going to be able to have input. People always react much better and give much better input when they have something to look at. If not often times, you're waiting, waiting, waiting and all of a sudden a product development team will in a hurry,

	develop what they think they want for Marcom at the very last minute which may or may not be the best considered set of activities.
CHRIS	Well I think you've answered my next question which is around marketing communications frequently ending up at the end of the entire launch process trying to gather that information that's needed - for example, for a launch and nothing done in front of that. And they become the victim of lack of planning or whatever and you, I think, have just clearly described ways that we can avoid that situation. Because Marcom will always be at the end of the process [chuckles]. There's no escaping that.
TAIA	Right, right. It's just starting to get some principals developed earlier and I think we can talk more about this perhaps whenever you'd like here which is about those kind of background processes around customer understanding and that kind of thing that Marcom can set up that enable you to actually do some things ahead even before you know what the actual deliverables are.
CHRIS	Let's go ahead and talk about that because my next question was about having had the experience where near the launch the messaging is not yet decided for even well-differentiated products, and my feeling was we could have put something down on paper six months ago but now we're still going back and forth about what we really want to say. So if you have some examples, that would be appreciated [chuckles].
TAIA	[chuckles] Sure. Yes. Well, I do like the idea of Marcom having a place in those development checkpoint meetings. So then comes the question of what would you actually say, whether it's on those checkpoint meetings or in a Marcom process that runs parallel with the product development?
	What you might have are things like Marcom showing what the messaging is from the competitors at that time, doing their own summary of what that messaging looks like and consequently either asking questions or starting to propose ideas about what differentiated messaging might look like. Putting up those kinds of contextual, either market or customer-based information early, so that people can have discussions around those, give feedback and give you an ability to start early even though you don't have all the product details.
	Another one would be to work with sales. [chuckles] It's a really interesting thing, I found, as I-- all of my positions have been worldwide, and one of the things that was consistent was - because I traveled around, particularly worldwide - I was just shocked how often the sales forces gets marketing materials or messages that they simply do not use. It's because they're selling in a different way than is anticipated by the marketing and Marcom teams, or in many cases because they think their customers are different, or in fact their

customers are different, and therefore those materials or messages aren't appropriate.

I think that's another way to get ahead of things, is to work with the sales force on an ongoing basis, to have a proactive process for understanding those local customer segment characteristics or local selling approaches.

In some cases, maybe it's about aligning the marketing communications to that better. In some cases it may be that the selling team, the local selling team, is not selling in the way that the company strategy now wants them to sell and that's also good to know. I think that's another-- one of those backgrounds strategies that can be led by Marcom and marketing that is very, very helpful.

Sometimes it's hard to get ahead of things because there's product uncertainty or because of confidentiality issues. People don't want you talking to the sales force or customers about the product ahead of time. Hopefully, new product teams in that situation should have at least a few customers that they have chosen for confidential early access and those customers are often times used for product development decisions and I would suggest that they really be heavily used by Marcom and marketing as well for their inputs.

CHRIS	Right. There are a number of resources available to marketing communications team well in advance of a launch to get input and start those processes early, whether it's talking to customers, looking at competitors, talking to the sales team, etcetera.
TAIA	And it does create an issue because if your work has traditionally been organized to happen at the end of these products and now we're creating a process that actually spans more time than that, it may be a challenge for a marketing and Marcom team to work this way. But I'm convinced that actually you can be more productive, even though it seems like you're involved in each product for longer.
CHRIS	I think one of those things that I'm trying to get clients and everybody to think about is doing the right things and avoiding those random requests for the thing that we think is going to help right now. It's taking that big picture view to avoid doing all those tasks that take up a lot of time and will require lots of review back and forth at the last minute. I think there's a lot of friction that goes on because of lack of planning.
TAIA	The urgent crowds out the important.
CHRIS	Shifting gears a little bit, you told me at one point that companies in our industry see themselves as a series of product launches. Talk a little bit about that.

TAIA	Yes, this is a real source of loss of value in the industry in my opinion, because managers that think that way are going to allocate resources, generally, incorrectly, and marketing resources in particular will be allocated inappropriately.
	Let me give you an example. I was working with a company that was operating that way, and they used the entire marcom budget, and the marketing teams, on introductions. As a result, they put off adopting what we would call modern marketing automation and even up-to-date web marketing activities and tools. That is a big strategic mistake, since it means that relative to their competitors, who are actually investing in those things, their costs of contacting customers and getting their messages across were really going up, and their effectiveness was probably going down because they weren't being able to get the benefits of those kinds of tools. That's at least one way in which that can really get you.
TAIA	Now, in another case, I saw a different kind of a trade-off. I was doing customer interviews for a client, and I was shocked because over and over in a particular segment that had fairly complicated applications, customers were telling me that their primary purchase decision criterion was the fact that their current vendor knows them very, very well, that the vendor knows their applications, and even knows their company and history, and how they purchase things, and so even though some other companies had better pricing, in many cases, and comparable products to create a bridge
	Using content to share the human side of the company, they were sticking with their vendor because of that.
	Now in that case, if you were focusing a lot on product introductions, and spending your money on that versus spending it on continued development of those customer relationships and that industry knowledge, you'd be making a major mistake. That's a very different place where you would be putting your money.
CHRIS	It's an expensive thing to put all your money into product launch materials and the big-bang items, as opposed to a steady-- however you choose to maintain those relationships, and understand your customers, and keep them up-to-date on applications, or whatever, right?
TAIA	Right, and then the other part is that inherently a product launch is about you, it's about your company, your product - this is the time. And if that launch happens to coincide perfectly with when a customer is interested in buying and has the money to buy, then you win big, because right when they need the information, you're there, and you're firing on all cylinders with all of that.

But as you know, most of the time that's not the case. Customers are buying at various times, and so you're actually spending a lot of money at a time when it's going to have diminishing returns. The chances of them remembering this and going back to that particular piece of information is pretty low when they need it. You're actually sub-optimizing your investment if you do that versus some additional on-demand or really great on-demand information availability, or maybe even content marketing that really allows you to stay relevant with customers, and hit them information and reminders of you all the time and be there when they are ready to buy.

CHRIS Exactly. So in the first scenario you gave, you are firing a big cannon at a very small target.

TAIA [laughter] Very well put, yes, exactly.

CHRIS It looks spectacular, but it may not get you what you wanted.

TAIA Right.

CHRIS So you've mentioned content marketing there, and of course I'm a big fan of content marketing, I know you are, but content marketing probably can't do everything. Can you talk about how content marketing works alongside traditional marketing, what's a smart way to do it, and what are the benefits of adding content marketing to your mix?

TAIA Sure. I think there are limitations, obviously, to content marketing. For example, it obviously can't be promotional or you lose that. But obviously you can get great relevance and credibility and visibility that you don't get any other way when you do content marketing.

I think one of the best things to do, though, is to create the right kinds of ties between the two - between what we would call traditional marketing and content marketing - really create bridges so that, yes, you keep your content marketing pure, but you have stories, for example, or articles that maintain that purity, but also have simple links to other industry materials that you have, for example, or the product material that would be relevant to the topic that you're talking about, and of course, ways to contact a salesperson.

Really make that a very nice bridge so that they don't have to strain and really try to think about how-- they get the cues that prompt them to think about you as a company that has something that could be of value to them to buy, as they're getting the content.

CHRIS So they're looking at content continually, which is obviously, or naturally, more pleasurable to consume, but you're making it easy for them to reach out from the content and initiate an exchange, or a transaction, when they're ready.

TAIA	Right. Another thing that's a little more subtle maybe, but it's fun to think about, and this is how content marketing, and non-print media in general, can help you to reveal and share a more human side of the company.
	Because I think in traditional print, in traditional marcom, we've had a tendency to stay pretty clinical, and pretty dry, and I think through either the editorial bylines of people who actually produce the content and by making that clear and making their existence as human beings clear, and by the tone, you can really actually get across a personality to your company. That, once again, is a differentiating thing, and it can be also a stronger relationship building mechanism.
CHRIS	Exactly. I think it's still a huge differentiation opportunity because so many companies seem fearful of doing that, and yet there are people in your company, of course in sales, and application engineers who essentially are doing that off-line with their customers, and their customers know them well, and that's one of the ways customers bond to a company, like the one you mentioned previously, where we're sticking with this vendor because they know us so well.
TAIA	Yeah, absolutely, and they have the same interests. This was another interesting thing for me in talking to customers recently. I would ask about content marketing, and a number of people would say, "You know, the vendors - yeah, they try. You know, they put out these things, and they put out application notes, but, you know, they don't really have the level of expertise, and many times it's close to what we do, but it's not specific enough so it's not really that relevant."
	So it was interesting how they would-- on the one hand they would sort of pooh-pooh some of the value of this, and yet when you talk to them further, they would talk about, for example, either their sales rep, or their technical person, or a technical person at the factory who really understood their area, and how much they valued that, and how they actually welcomed having discussions with them as opposed to discussions with sales reps who would just come in with the latest product information.
	This was really interesting to me to hear, because it said with content marketing, it is difficult to always try to hit the-- you can't hit the nail on the head with every customer, but it does give them a sense of how much you're interested and knowledgeable about their space, and the fact that you have people, and to the extent that they can get that sense either through materials, and particularly if it's reinforced with periodically either getting to know - virtually, or in reality - the real people who have that expertise and that interest in their area, it really goes a long way.
CHRIS	Thank you. I cannot resist now, because you mentioned this, having those product development people, or whomever that have these

relationships with customers, and the value of those conversations. I published a blog post just this week on the idea that sometimes it's difficult to get content from those people.

If you went someone in R&D and said, "Hey, could you write us an article about this new technology and explain how it works?" that can be a difficult thing for them. One way to make it much easier is to do what you and I are doing right now, which is to record a conversation, because they would love to answer questions about those things. It doesn't take a lot of - how should I say? - sitting down and sweating over a page because you want to get everything just right, and it can be a very simple way to produce content that has that personality that everyone can appreciate.

TAIA

I agree, absolutely. I think that's a great way, I think that's even better than the much refined and edited content piece. And I do think that with content - even with a content strategy - one of the things that I've learned doing some blogging is that you really have to push yourself to get over the idea of it's about writing articles.

It's about more velocity and even covering the same topic from a slightly different angle later, because time moves on, and people are going to be seeing something and they're not going to necessarily be keeping it.

If you hit the same topic later, it's okay if you're adding a slightly different tilt to it. I think there's just no way to have that kind of velocity, and make that kind of offering to the marketplace with the kind of frequency that's required, if you overwork things as you were describing in the first process.

CHRIS

And I think in our industry - and I'm sure it's true in every industry - we overestimate the risk of feeding our customers repetitive content, as if they have all seen it, and they will all remember it if we send it again [chuckles]. When the reality is 10% of them opened that email the first time, if you're really good 30% of them opened it. And among those that opened it, maybe 10% will remember that you sent it two months ago.

TAIA

Correct.

CHRIS

I try to get people to think about that you don't need to make as much as you think, you probably already have something you can use again and not annoy your customers. Well, I want to thank you very much for taking this time, this was really fun, and I really appreciate your time and your thoughtfulness in your answers.

TAIA

My pleasure, Chris. Thanks, it's a great topic, I'm sure we'll have other things to share about it in the future.

CHRIS

Excellent, thank you.

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