Can you describe your role at Unilever?

Kathy O’Brien: It’s a fairly new role that’s focused completely on shoppers and shopping behavior because the media landscape and shoppers’ approach to purchase has become so different over the past couple of years.

This function involves a number of different teams—digital and ecommerce, shopper marketing and shopper insights, which is probably the most important part. Social media, public relations and in-store promotions also fall within my domain.

I try to explain to people that we’re responsible for consumers throughout their path to purchase and all the different touchpoints along the way.

“It’s all about delivering relevant content when shoppers are most open to it so you can influence them in a positive way.”

You mentioned shopper insights playing a crucial role. How do they play into the path to purchase?

O’Brien: It’s important to understand where shoppers are throughout the path to purchase. Not long ago, you would influence them through television or print. But now, with multiple screens and all the different things bombarding shoppers throughout the day, you really have to focus and understand what they’re thinking and what they’re open to.

It’s all about delivering relevant content when shoppers are most open to it so you can influence them in a positive way. Understanding the shopper and those insights is critical to developing the marketing plan.
Can you share an example of an insight that evolved into a marketing program?

O’Brien: For example, TRESemmé recently did a program with YouTube. The insight was that hair is one of the categories people search for the most on the internet, and they are looking not only for what products to use, but also styles to wear. We created a YouTube brand store for TRESemmé that includes ratings, reviews, tips, recommendations and a full complement of videos to help people achieve the looks they want. We based this on a simple insight about what shoppers search for online.

How does eMarketer help you lay the groundwork to arrive at insights like this one?

O’Brien: We look for current trends, and we get a lot of that from eMarketer. We also look to see how people are using different media vehicles. This information helps us validate our thinking.

“We really view eMarketer as a trusted third-party source of information.”

We really view eMarketer as a trusted third-party source of information. We use it in two ways: Sometimes an idea sparks our interest, and then we do more research to help round it out. Then, as we’re moving in a certain direction, we’ll see something on eMarketer and think, “Perfect. We’re moving in the right direction.” We kind of use it as a thought starter, as well as a validator.

eMarketer provides great content on current trends. We like that we find actionable insights. It really allows our teams to get to the crux of issues and then turn the insights into actionable marketing opportunities.

Describe your key business priorities.

O’Brien: The Unilever US business spent most of last year on an initiative that defines our strategy through 2015 and outlines key capabilities we need to develop to deliver on the strategy. One of these capabilities is digital and ecommerce, which is within my remit. How do we develop this capability and embed it into the organization? I’m spending a lot of time on that priority.

The path to purchase now involves so many touchpoints. For digital and ecommerce, it’s about maximizing Unilever’s digital real estate and conversation with shoppers. There’s so much we can do through technology. Shoppers can enter the purchase funnel anywhere and anytime in so many different ways. We are optimizing our content regardless of where it resides and what form it takes so shoppers can engage with, talk about and buy our brands consistently in the most convenient ways possible.

For me, ecommerce is like a fast-moving train coming right at us. We have to get in front of it and understand it. Having the ability to understand how we can influence people and their purchases is really exciting to me.

What are some of Unilever’s biggest challenges?

O’Brien: One of the biggest challenges—but it’s also the most fun part of marketing right now—is the changing media landscape. There are just so many ways to get to consumers now, and it requires us to develop content at a much faster rate than we ever have before.

So the biggest challenge is getting used to the ever-changing media landscape and then figuring out how to test things quickly. You win quickly or you lose quickly, but it’s such an iterative process that it’s almost as if it’s continuous improvement. You put it out there, see how it’s doing, improve on it—and you can do that within days.

Given the velocity of change, how does a large company like Unilever manage?

O’Brien: At Unilever, we’ve done a good job of aligning resources behind the changing media landscape. We have an unbelievable media team. We have very strong marketeers. We have people who are always looking to the future to say, “OK, what’s out there? How do we partner with companies to learn quickly and to test things before others do?” We’ve set the organization up in a way that really helps our marketeers try things out.
Unilever is moving quite quickly. One area that’s accelerating is what we call the digital shelf initiative. This year we’ll have 10 times the number of product description pages than we did last year. We’re optimizing these pages for search. They’re highly engaging and thoroughly represent our brands and products vs. the basic pages one usually encounters. We’re expanding the ability for shoppers to rate and review our brands. I like the pace in which we are moving to keep up with this changing landscape.

**How are you using eMarketer to help navigate the pace of change?**

**O’Brien:** It’s a resource we rely on. Our shopper insights people use it quite a bit to understand how shoppers are moving in a digital space, and our market research team uses it to help with understanding the data. We also have a market research team that only supports media, so eMarketer is extremely helpful for that group. The pace of change in media is just so fast right now that we can’t always do our own research, so we have to look to others to help us understand what’s going on.