

Aurelia Lewis is the president and founder of Lewis Media Partners, an integrated media agency in Richmond, Virginia. Lewis graduated in 1981 from the University of Virginia with a degree in art history. She started her marketing career at the Martin Agency where she was promoted to associate media director prior to starting her own agency in 1998. She has worked in the marketing and advertising industry for over 35 years.

Lewis gave the following interview on Jan. 31, 2023, to Lillian Barnes for a media writing assignment at Virginia Tech.

[Edited for content]

Who or what influenced you to pursue a career in marketing?

I first worked for a small museum in Danville, Virginia, which was my hometown. I got to be friends with a consultant down there at Dan River Mills. We just happened to get to know each other on an airplane going to Atlanta. When I got on the airplane, he was reading his book and I was reading my book. At the end [of the flight], I just happened to say something to him and that sparked a conversation. That was when I was trying to figure out my next step [in my career]. After talking to me, he was the one who said, “You would really enjoy marketing and advertising.” He was the one that pushed me down that path. He was just this stranger; I couldn’t even tell you his name *[Laughs]*. It was pretty wild; I mean he literally was a stranger. *[Laughs]*.

When you were starting your career at the Martin Agency, how did you know you had chosen the right career path?

I first worked with a smaller agency before going to the Martin Agency. I was No. 3 there; that’s how small it was. I was there for two years. I learned a lot about the structure of an advertising agency, such as account management, project management, media buyers and new business. After two years of that, I realized I didn’t want to be a generalist. I wanted to specialize in something. I really liked the media piece. I like math, even though I’m not very good at it. That’s when I applied to the Martin Agency. I moved up while I was there to associate media director. I had experience with TV buying, but I was doing more of the strategy piece and design of a media plan than broadcast buying.

At what point did you decide to leave the Martin Agency and start your own company?

About a year and a half before I actually left the Martin Agency, I knew was interested in starting my own agency. I realized I needed a little bit more balance in my life. I had young kids, and I felt like my work-life balance was not what I wanted it to be. I felt that I was expected to give 150% to the agency like I saw other people were, and I was not interested in doing this. I realized that it was really not fair; it just didn’t feel right.

How did the environment at the Martin Agency hinder your work-life balance?

They were constantly after new business. If I was going to work with that new business, then that meant working on weekends which was going to pull me away from my family. It wasn't like I wasn't doing my job; it was just the extra time that I wasn't willing to do.

Did you have any mentors early in your career?

I don't know that I can really pinpoint a mentor, to be honest. I think that's unfortunate. The good thing about Martin is that I had a lot of really good friends there and the upper management was really supportive of me. However, I wouldn't necessarily say I had a mentor there.

What advice would you give to a marketing or advertising major who would like to have your job or a similar one?

I actually just wrote a blog on the fundamentals of media planning. We tend to get lost in the tactics of running out-of-home advertisements or running television advertisements and not really knowing why. There's more to it. Before you even begin to come up with the tactics, you must really understand why and do the research. You must understand consumers and their behavior. That piece is fascinating. You must have a curiosity and you have to go beyond just what you're told to do. Really good marketing professionals have natural instincts. They listen to what people are doing, what blogs they're reading, what podcasts they're listening to, what social media they use and what influencers they follow. You must listen to your peers and understand what everyone is doing and what sorts of media they are consuming. For example, I know you can reach my friends on Jeopardy [Laughs]. I'm trying to tell my team that now. You have to listen; you have to be observant.

How has the marketing industry changed over the course of your career?

[The industry] has changed a lot, and it just keeps changing. For instance, retail media techniques are very new. It used to be all Google searches. Now consumers search for products on Amazon, not Google. TV viewership is going down and newspapers are closing. The trends have changed. People are not reading the newspaper anymore; people are reading the news online. People aren't subscribing to cable anymore. A lot of reps are leaving their jobs because they are closing the doors and shutting down. For example, The Washington Post just laid off 30 journalists. There are going to be even more shifts; I can just feel it. You must shift with all of that. It's because of the new generations that are coming in; they are shifting. If you think about Generation Z, they don't even know what cable TV is. The rapid changes that are happening in technology are interesting. The technology changes are changing consumer behavior. For instance, mobile is going to be really big, I think. People use their mobile devices for everything. I was shocked when a client said that they get job applications that people fill out on their mobile phones [Laughs]. I can't imagine that, but it's true!

What do you love most about your job?

It's the change and working around really smart people that I really love. Data is big now, and we have all that data at our fingertips. Years ago, we didn't have the data points; we didn't have all that information. Now that we do, we can be more precise with our targeting and be more efficient and effective. That makes [my job] more exciting. Gosh, when I first started my career, there were only four cable networks [Laughs]. Look at what it is now and what's happened with cable. It grew so much and now all the streaming devices, like Netflix and Hulu, have come in with a vengeance. If I were anybody in the TV industry, I would be nervous. Publishing companies are also having a hard time, so you're seeing layoffs. I really love working with clients and improving their businesses; that's what I love about agency work. I love that we're not specialists in one industry. I was just talking to a guy in the generator business. I find that fascinating. I want to grow his business. I want to generate leads for my clients. I like being a part of building their businesses. For me, in the bigger agencies, you get pigeonholed because you work on just one brand. I enjoy working with smaller brands. I like growing them and giving them advice on ways to make [their business] better.

Lewis Media Partners works with a wide range of clients in over 13 industries. Is it difficult juggling this many clients and keeping up with nuances in their respective fields?

No, I don't think it really is. We have account leads on each one and we're constantly learning. I don't think that has been an issue at all. There are actually a lot of things that we learn with one industry that we can easily transfer to another. Again, I don't think pigeonholing is always a good thing.

What technical skills have you relied on to get you to where you are today?

You have to be open to learning more and adapting to change. That's not as much a part of my job; that's more for the younger generation that is learning the skills for new platforms that we use. It's more difficult for people like me who are a little bit set in our ways [Laughs]. For instance, we have just recently introduced new platforms like Resonate and Sky. The team has been great transitioning from Adobe to Sky for all of our search campaigns. Getting adapted to new platforms is difficult. It's a whole new platform that they have to learn. It does create some stress because you're trying to do your work and you're trying to learn this new technology. In the end, that new platform is going to help with performance. If you want to grow and learn, you have to use that artificial intelligence and be adaptive to new technology. Change is hard. A lot of people don't like change, but it is necessary and important.

As the president of Lewis Media Partners, what do you consider your management style and how do you manage your employees?

A lot of people have told me that I will never succeed or that it's going to be almost impossible. I try to emphasize the work-life balance. I do think they should enjoy their work when they're here and their lives outside of work as well. You have to have that flexibility and balance, but you also have to have that inner motivation. If you want to grow your team, you have to be a part of it and give more. You're also going to have the tradeoff if you need to work from home

or if you need to be away. I want my employees to have that flexibility. I don't have stringent lines; my lines are blurred. I also want people who work here to be motivated. Since we're a small company, your contributions are going to be huge as we move forward. You can't just look at this as a 9-to-5.

Where do you see the future of your career, Lewis Media Partners, and the industry in the next five to 10 years?

As for me, I'm aging out, but I still love the business. I still love media planning, research, and designing plans. I also love mentoring and working with the new professionals coming in. I make sure they know how to develop and design a media plan. I feel like there's an education that is not being done at the bigger agencies because they have so much business and the training is lacking. I enjoy teaching. I love the collaboration with teams. I don't enjoy all the HR stuff and the mechanics of running an agency, to be honest. That piece has no interest to me. As for the future of Lewis Media Partners, we just brought in a consultant, and we are going to try to identify the agency's future over the next few months. In terms of the industry, it is all moving to the digital space. We are losing our reach mediums like television and newspapers, which is unfortunate. When I say reach, I mean being able to reach a lot of people at once. You're not going to be able to do that anymore. It's already starting to shred. You have to be really precise about [whom] you want as your audience. You have to start building your reach and figure out how to exponentially grow that base. You have to be precise with your targeting while also reaching as many people as possible. That is going to be a challenge.

Tell me about the lowest point of your career or any challenges you have faced as the president of Lewis Media Partners.

Oh, that's a good question [Laughs]. It's funny how I don't think about those times often. The lowest point for me at Lewis Media Partners was when I was working with a resort in the Northern Neck of Virginia. It was just me back then, so I didn't even have contracts. Everything was done through a handshake. I spent \$75,000 in media for them. The business went bankrupt, and I was caught; that was a gulp. Fortunately, I got 85% of my money back, but that was a very stressful time for me financially. My husband and I were young and had just had kids, so thinking about losing \$75,000 was very scary. We now have contracts, lawyers and an HR person. After that, I realized the legal part of running a business that I don't like is necessary. I also realized that I had to be more careful about [whom] I worked with and build a relationship with clients. I haven't thought about that time in a while, but that was stressful. You should always protect yourself. I have faced challenges with the logistics of running an agency, but I have learned along the way. There have also been stressful employee situations. Fortunately, I don't have a lot of that. Recruitment has also been very difficult. Last year, I hired a recruiter, Kay Lawson, and she has been wonderful in helping with the recruitment process.