

AAF Nomination Application: Erika Nardini

The Starting Line

The world of digital marketing is a lot like competitive sports--you're only as good as your last play. And the secret to being a great marketer is keeping the big picture front and center, strategically aggregating all the critical information you need to win the business. Erika Nardini is an all-star marketer. Her tenacity, determination and bullish commitment to execute high-level ideas keep her at the top of her game. Erika continuously drives innovation with forward-thinking strategies and open dialogues in partnership with clients.

Erika's drive and passion for making things happen began in college where she captained Colby College's field hockey and lacrosse teams. It was here on the playing field that she learned the core skills— teamwork, courage, willpower, confidence, perseverance, discipline—the driving motivation behind her future success.

The Early Years

Erika's first position at Fidelity Investments was a continuance of a successful summer internship where she worked as a paralegal on investment accounts for the Fortune 100. Although excited to be working Erika soon realized that something wasn't quite right. "I was bored; the law didn't appeal to me. I found the lack of room for flair and ideas restrictive; I didn't like the idea of preventing risk, I wanted to take risks."

She began exploring other options, energized by a visit to the advertising and marketing floors. "I remember walking around and feeling at home with the fast pace, the creative energy. I loved that there were more women in leadership positions, I knew this is where I wanted to be." Erika met with significant resistance from her human resources advocate. "The person told me this would be the single worst decision of my career and I was a fool to consider it. I pushed, and she resisted, laying out the math for me. She was insistent that this was an inferior position, with a 60% cut in pay. I wouldn't budge. It was the best decision I ever made."

In 1999, Erika had the opportunity to start Fidelity's digital media practice which included the product release of e401k, the country's first 401(k) plan sold and serviced over the Internet. "Back then, I bought the keyword AOL for multiple millions...we weren't even sure what it was or how it would impact our business." Erika continued to pioneer early branding programs for Fidelity, partnering with leaders in the finance sector like The Street and CBS Marketwatch, implementing DoubleClick, and sowing the seed of what would become one of the most significant drivers of their awareness and acquisition marketing strategies. In 2000, Erika launched Insurance.com, a Fidelity venture, that kicked off the development of the online insurance marketplace and introduced digital acquisition and brand building to her repertoire.

"The accomplishment of establishing two acquisition machines across Fidelity Brokerage and Insurance.com was rewarding, but I was still craving creativity, and being closer to the idea, not just buying and maximizing on it. I deeply and passionately wanted to work for an ad agency."

Agency Life

In 1999, Erika joined Arnold Worldwide to oversee the Fidelity and Volkswagen businesses from a digital marketing and creative perspective. It was an exciting time to be at an agency. "Digital was exploding, and we were on the precipice of this new buying structure where companies were partnering to create advertising and content experiences." Erika and her team brought Volkswagen's "Drivers Wanted" campaign to life online, a bold play in the company's comeback strategy. Together they launched the new VW Beetle to a re-energized audience of creative, confident and adventurous drivers partnering with young brands like Weather.com, Discovery, and Away.com. Working on this campaign grew Erika's purview (and portfolio) to orchestrate the buying and media strategy for leaders across the travel, CPG, tech, packaged goods and PSA categories; brands like Royal Caribbean, Bounty, Vonage, Jack Daniels, and The Truth. Also, she created the first branded entertainment experience with MSN for Volkswagen called Spin Cycle. Spin Cycle lived within the MSN Music vertical (pre-iTunes) and served a series of lifestyle playlists (open road, bad hair day, etc.) and curated consumer playlists. Tied deeply to Volkswagen's music pillar, Spin Cycle became the anchor in their go-to cross-marketing platform and digital strategy for two years running.

Shortly after that Erika joined Digitas to manage the Cingular business and further explore the digital thinking mindset. Overseeing Cingular's triple-digit e-commerce acquisition strategy, she led the launch of the first Apple/Cingular device - the Rokr phone (a precursor to the iPhone). During her tenure, Erika had the opportunity to develop and enhance her marketing discipline hands-on through applied creativity, emerging analytics and the observation of the agency landscape.

"I first began to notice that the growth and explosion of ideas at Arnold and Digitas was happening at the digital publisher level. The web was the first medium without borders, all that undeveloped frontier...the world felt very big, everything possible. I saw a tremendous opportunity to tap into the potential of global digital marketing, merging content and advertising, exploring how we could invest in the consumer experience."

Back to Brands

Erika joined Microsoft/MSN in 2003 to build their international branded entertainment (BEET) operation. BEET launched multinational experiences and global digital platforms for brands like Visa, Adidas and Unilever's Dove, with offices in Tokyo, London, and Amsterdam. Erika played an integral part of relaunching Dove's Real Beauty philosophy. She created the go-to-market messaging and integrated Dove's new product lines into the creation of a global channel for women. In addition to establishing a global presence for women in the beauty sector, Erika collaborated with colleagues in Hollywood to launch one of the first branded content partnerships. MSN/BEET together with TV production house, Reveille would release five new original programs later that year.

“At that moment, I fell head over heels in love with digital content and all of its possibilities. It’s the expansion of the space, the possibility of what will be, the unwieldiness of the medium. All of that is available to us, right here at our fingertips.”

It’s all about content

By mid-millennium, content providers had begun to realize that a web presence was imperative to their brand’s evolution. The key to creating an emotional connection with customers: understand what they want, and create an online experience that is engaging, memorable and interactive. Brands began to experiment with the idea of cross-platform publishing-- print, web, TV--and to explore the power of their content’s impact on the user experience.

During this time, Bravo debuted Project Runway, a fashion-competition reality series where up and coming designers had the opportunity to work with some of the industry’s top models. Erika together with the producers of the show co-founded Modelinia, independent content creation and web destination to complement the prime time series. “We produced over 3000 pieces of original content and offered, for the first time, an original and curated look into the world of fashion and models.”

Experience at scale

Erika continued to add assets to her digital toolbox: marketer, digital strategist, content publisher. By 2009, all of her perseverance and discipline led her to Yahoo! where together with Joanne Bradford she reinvented and structured their entire go-to-market operation. “We began with branded entertainment as the foundation, then added in research, packaging, we redefined the B2B position. Our efforts broadened Yahoo’s portfolio of production partners to include up and coming cross-media production companies like Electus. We didn’t stop there; we continued to structure multi-platform partnerships with brands like Walmart, General Mills, Bank of America--all centered around content experiences.”

Erika began to see the changes happening with search and the potential for content to be more personal, more specific and more data-driven. She joined Demand Media pre-IPO with the intent to harness its burgeoning content development platform for marquis partners like Home Depot, L’Oreal, and Johnson & Johnson. Erika’s vast knowledge and expertise led to the building of their marketing operation, go-to-market messaging and sales infrastructure. Her efforts contributed to the company’s overall revenue growth and optimized functional capabilities that led to IPO in January 2012.

AOL: Present

In January of 2013, Erika joined AOL to bring it all together. As Head of Marketing Solutions, Erika successfully leads a team of marketing and creative strategists to build a portfolio of enviable, dynamic brands through cross-platform strength and innovation.

“The true epicenter of the web right now is melding programmatic buying with the efficient return from premium experiences. It’s bringing digital-forward, physically expanding the heartbeat of

the brands through big ideas. I love ideas. The creative process of bringing words and pictures together, to life, to tell a story, that is how we're going to establish the partnerships of today and tomorrow."

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