

Leslie Dance Kicks Up Her Heels At Motorola



Leslie Dance
VP global marketing
Motorola

How many people do you know who helped bring “Cats” to Broadway, who watched Stephen Sondheim figure out what wasn’t working and how to fix it, who just spent a chunk of time at pediatric wards with U2’s Bono in Africa, who consider Hawaii home and who control if not one of corporate America’s biggest marketing budgets, at least one of its most visible?

Meet Leslie Dance, the wunderkind at Motorola, who began her career as a Broadway press agent. Dance has taken her showmanship dazzle and lacquered it onto a company whose triumphs were all in engineering.

A classic army brat who moved 16 times in 16 years, Dance is the oldest of four siblings. The constant relocations taught her to be flexible, to “stop moping and get out there and learn something” about their new neighborhood, as her dad would say, and to “make stuff happen,” as she would say.

While studying art history at Miami University in Ohio, she visited a close family friend in New York City. He was Broadway producer Emanuel Azenberg, and after a whirlwind of seeing shows, he mentioned he needed a receptionist. Dance decided she’d rather do that than return to her junior year of college. Within three years she was working as a union-certified press agent, determining the write-up in *Playbill*, on the marquee, and to announce and build up the play and sell tickets. Soon she was

collaborating with Steven Sondheim on “Sunday in the Park with George.” At the time she didn’t recognize that watching him watch the show in rehearsal and recognize the weak link and then retreat to figure out how to fix it would be the model for her own creative process.

After ten years, however, in 1976, she tired of the spoiled prima donnas around her and, bemoaning that this wasn’t exactly cancer research, left for Hawaii, where she was born and where she always came to reflect and heal.

(Her dad, then a school teacher in Honolulu, died at age 54; her mom works in a charity shop there.) Within a month she’d taken a job as head of PR for the then Hyatt Regency Waikoloa on the Big Island. With theatrical dash she opened a half dozen other hotels for different companies before leading the consumer division of PR giant Hill & Knowlton in Honolulu, their main Asia Pacific office for five years. That was followed by a move to its London office, where in October, 1999, working on the Motorola account, marketing chief Geoffrey Frost asked her to be his global PR director and “cause some trouble with me.”

She took him up on it and with her English husband (now a pilot, inventor, designer and stay-at-home-dad) and 15 year old daughter Caitlin and 13-year-old son Connor relocated to Lake Bluff, Illinois. Four years ago she was promoted to Corporate VP-global marketing and communications director

for Motorola’s \$37.6 billion Mobile Devices Business, Frost’s old job, as he ascended to chief marketing officer. Then, in a cruel twist of fate, her mentor, friend, and co-conspirator died suddenly at age 56.

Grieving, Dance soldiered on, making the world appreciate how Motorola had made its once brick-like mobile phones sexy and popular. Handsets like its Razr and Pebl have redefined the industry, partly because of the events she’s engineered. Its high-design Q phone named for the fact it contains a full QWERTY keyboard, and is also the name of James Bond’s gadget man, should also take off when introduced later this year. She projected Motorola ads onto city buildings, creating virtually free branding at the Consumer Electronics Show. She set up a booth where fans could play beach volleyball at the 2006 Super Bowl in frigid Detroit. And she was behind a snowboard Mountain in Las Vegas. (Motorola sponsors Burton snowboarders and has developed a “wireless wearable” product line with them called Audex). She was behind a collaboration with MTV to produce a live-action series of eight “Head & Body” mobisodes (visual stories for cell phones). Her boss beams about her pre-trend spotting vision, her ear on the youth market and her tight fist on the budget.

No day, week or month at Motorola is typical, but Dance is on the road on average half her working life. The rest of the time she is meeting with Motorola’s various ad agencies, poring over budgets, tinkering with the story the company wants to tell, seeing agents about athletes Motorola may want to sponsor, planning a press conference, and discussing performance or other issues with her 18 direct reports.

The industry energizes Dance with its fast-paced constant change and innovations. She doesn’t pretend to know how everything works in depth but “knows enough to know that these complex designs can make life easier and more wonderful.” She also knows the value of Motorola’s 75 year heritage—it created the first cell phone, for example—and how she must convey this authenticity to a new generation. In the next few years she’s aiming to have Motorola “be the most watched, talked about, written about brand on the planet—and sell the s--- out of our wickedly cool and compelling products and experiences.” (She’s also aiming to figure out a better work/lifebalance.)

Not everything around which Dance pirouettes lands en pointe but the silver lining is learning from those fumbles. Dance prides herself on the teams she has built in her career which reflect real diversity of thought; she has also made appalling hiring decisions. “I have a strong gut instinct and it has at times led me astray,” she admits. She has learned that people can be completely different in the interview process than who they really are and that you “need to dig deeper and examine references.” She has since set up a McKinsey-like process where others she knows and trusts interview candidates she’s considering.

An even bigger mistake involved allowing a launch campaign to go forward against all her gut instincts. It was over-executed and overly expensive but she was not overly vocal in condemning it. After expressing her doubts about it she deferred to her boss; it went through and bombed. “I should have pushed back harder and have since resolved that I’m never going to stop until I feel I have given it my all,” she says.

Dance thinks she did “the girl thing” then, by acquiescing. Being a woman in a man’s world has other challenges. Paraphrasing Ginger Rogers, “we need to do what Fred does, only backwards and in high heels.”

High heels figure in Dance’s life now, but her recent trip with Bono as a Motorola ambassador to benefit the Global Fund to eliminate AIDS in Africa suggest sneakers may play a bigger role in her future. “I was quite taken with my experience in Africa,” says Dance. Just as her universe was “reframed by coming to Motorola,” it just might have been reframed by the red soil of Africa. Dance adds, “I would very much like to do something good in the world.” ●

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