



MARKETING STAR



Amanda Vega: Founder and CEO of Amanda Vega Consulting

[By Anique Gonzalez]

At the age of 15, during a time when most teenagers are only concerned with who's dating who, how they can get out of doing their homework, and what their plans are for the upcoming weekend, Amanda Vega was honing her marketing skills at a burgeoning company known as America Online (AOL).

Vega's uncle, who created a software program called Fontographer, was acquainted with AOL co-founder Steve Case. When the company began looking for high school students to serve as chat moderators, Vega's uncle recommended her. "Basically, our job was to talk online for *x* number of hours per day and then to funnel reports back up to their marketing department talking about 'here's the top five things people discussed this week,' and I just kind of naturally took it to the next level."

In addition to providing those reports, Vega began informing the marketing team about trends that she saw over periods of several months, as well as those that she found to occur around certain holidays. As she explained, "I somehow just had a good knack of connecting the dots longer term." Recognizing Vega's aptitude for marketing, AOL gave her opportunities to strengthen this inherent talent by assigning her special projects such as developing the instant messenger feature and Love@Aol.

When it finally came time to attend college, Vega was faced with a difficult decision: attend Harvard as she had originally planned, or stay in California to continue her career with AOL. Vega eventually decided to continue with her then-current career path. She attended San Diego State University and earned a degree in organizational psychology and organizational development, "which kind of sounds like it doesn't correlate, but it really does. What I've learned is that in order to do amazing marketing and public relations and all that is that you have to understand audience. And understanding audience is just understanding human nature," Vega explained. (She eventually went on to obtain her MBA from Cornell University.)

Q: What do you like to do in your free time?

A: I am a big travel snob; I'm a big traveler. I love to travel. And I'm weird because unlike a lot of people, the part about travel that I seem to like the most is the travel part. Like, I love to be on a plane; for me because I'm so busy and work 18-hour days, it's literally, like, probably the only time that you catch me disconnected. I like to surf and wakeboard. I like a lot of very modern art. Art that other people don't think is art. Like, show me a big red canvas with a yellow dot, and I think it's cool. I'm a big shopper, big fashion monster. A lot of wine tasting. I love cupcakes and champagne. Yes, cupcakes and champagne; that's what we call a well-balanced meal.

Q: Throughout your lifetime, what movie have you watched the most?

A: *Clueless*. It's true, though; it's, like, 'let's be honest'-you got to be honest about it. I've watched *Clueless* more than any other movie, and I've also watched *Wall Street* a lot.

Q: What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?

A: Everything But The by Ben and Jerry's. I can't decide which flavor, and it has, like, all the pieces. It has every little treat that you want in there.

Q: What was the last CD you listened to?

A: Do people buy CDs? Like, my last iPod tune? The very last one was the newest Justin Timberlake song. I have an affinity for ridiculous pop culture music. I love it.

Q: If you had an extra hour in the day, what would you spend it doing?

A: I would take a nap. I really want to take a nap.

At the age of 23, having worked for AOL for eight years, Vega decided to start her own consulting firm. She noticed that large advertising agencies were beginning to enter into the online space, and according to Vega, were doing so poorly. "So I basically because I didn't know any better-called up the president of BBDO Worldwide and said, 'I want to start a consulting business, and I want to learn all about traditional media and marketing and advertising, and I want to learn from you, and I know all of this stuff that you don't know, and this is how much I want to get paid.'"

Impressed by her bold attitude and tenacity, he agreed to meet her. After one meeting, Vega was hired as a consultant. "That's really where I cut my teeth on traditional marketing and learned from the best."

After her time with BBDO, Vega subsequently founded a web development company in Hawaii, which she sold to Ogilvy, and then bought into an interactive agency after moving to New York. The New York firm struggled, however, after six employees were lost during the World Trade Center attacks. It eventually closed in 2002.

Amanda Vega Consulting, which Vega founded in 2000 as an arm of the New York firm, was created specifically for the media portal. Consequently, it focuses now, as it did then, extensively on technology. "We run a very specific type of firm with very different rules and very different types of engagements," she said.

"That's really not right for everyone. A lot of people usually like to come into an office and work from 8 to 5 and know exactly what



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their tasks are, and don't like anything unknown. We're kind of sporadic; there's not a lot of hand holding in our agency." What Amanda Vega Consulting lacks in tradition, though, the firm makes up for with forward thinking. Every employee has the opportunity to telecommute, receives unlimited vacation and profit-sharing, manages his or her own clients, and receives bonuses off of clients regardless of where the work is going in the organization.

In some sense, Vega is doing to the agency model what technology is doing to the field of marketing. "The onset of online advertising and everything that's available, simply by virtue of how accessible everything is, has flipped the traditional model [of marketing] on its back."

According to Vega, large corporations have come under increased scrutiny as they've lost part of their market shares to more

nimble, technology-focused competitors. It has not only financially tested these companies, which in the past have been slow to incorporate these new mediums, but has forced them to reassess the manner in which they communicate with consumers. As Vega said, "You're going to see the industry move into the same sort of accountability that online has had from day one."

Although Vega does not discount the use of traditional marketing in this increasingly interactive age, she believes that every marketer should at least be aware of the technological "tools" available to them. "We believe that it's your responsibility as an agency to learn what else is out there, whether you're using them for every client or not. It's your job to educate yourself; you're there to be the expert and do everything it takes to reach their customer and reach their goals."

It is this comprehensive understanding of interactive and traditional marketing tactics, and the ability to effectively employ a combination of both, that has resulted in Vega's success—that and maybe the fact that she discovered and began cultivating her marketing talents at the ripe age of 15.

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