

# Adventures in Staff Engagement

*Susanna Dinnage, EVP & MD of Discovery Networks UK and Ireland, explains to Mary-Anne Baldwin how swimming with sharks is all part of Discovery Communications' creative employee satisfaction scheme*

Susanna Dinnage's CV reads like a wish list for anyone in the creative industries. She began her career at MTV, later moving to Channel 5 where she helped launch their digital channels, and is now EVP & MD of Discovery Networks UK and Ireland.

In Susanna's current role she manages 12 TV brands including the Discovery Channel, TLC, Animal Planet and Eurosport, which collectively are watched by over 23 million viewers a month. But what's missing from the pages of her CV is her worst job, and it's an unlikely one.

Having always been interested in storytelling, Susanna took a short

stint as an actor in a children's theatre while travelling in Australia after university. "I played various different characters in all the famous fairytales, switching between costumes that were pretty old, smelly and moth-eaten," she reveals.

"I thought I could bring it to life for the children, but the guy who ran it was very jaded. He'd probably been in his job a bit too long and wasn't interested in new ideas. I was really disappointed with his lack of passion. I think I lasted two weeks."

This brief blip in an otherwise enviable career carried an important lesson about staff engagement. "A new employee can

come in full of passion but if they meet a brick wall or a boss who's jaded, that enthusiasm dies off pretty quickly," Susanna explains.

Keeping staff energised and passionate is a priority for Susanna, particularly as the company adapts to an increased call for online TV and content streaming.

Still, business is good. Its US-listed parent company, Discovery Communications, showed a 13 per cent revenue increase (rising to \$6.2 billion) in its most recent year-end results; operating income before depreciation and amortisation (OIBDA) climbed four per cent to \$2.4 billion. ▶

Recently, Discovery diversified into sport, which is an exciting new area for the company. As well as winning the rights to broadcast the Olympics Games in Europe from 2018 to 2024 (from 2022 in the UK), Discovery announced that it would take full ownership of the sports network, Eurosport.

Susanna reflects that it's crucial the culture evolves after any big acquisition and it can be an opportunity for people to develop new skills and knowledge. "It's very important for staff to understand what the future looks like," she explains.

"With any change comes opportunity but that means encouraging your team to look beyond their existing roles and responsibilities and think about how they can adapt; perhaps moving into a new role in a growth area for the business. Change can be unsettling and it's vital that leaders introduce it as a natural part of working life," she says.

For an acquisition to succeed, you must appreciate the culture of the other

*“It’s very important for staff to understand what the future looks like”*

company. "You've got to build respect both ways and make sure there's fairness and parity across the whole group," Susanna offers. "Learn who the influencers are in that organisation, engage with them and understand what they're seeing and their fears."

While engagement is important during periods of change, Discovery takes a holistic approach. Indeed, it tries to capture the spirit of its own programmes, such as those with Ed Stafford, whose adventures in places like remote West Papua or the Danakil Desert are Susanna's favourite thing to watch.

"He's incredibly in tune with how something makes you feel. As a viewer, the experience is so visceral you feel like you're living it with him," she enthuses.

In May 2014, Discovery rolled out a brand promise in its new tagline – 'Make Your World Bigger' – which was designed to forge a closer bond with its audience. With it came a scheme under which each employee was given a day to 'live the brand' by expanding their own knowledge or experiences.

In the first year, Susanna took part in a 24 kilometre boat race for charity. Another

staff member learnt to sign so that they could communicate with a deaf relative, while other activities included diving with sharks and learning to fly a plane.

"I'm very interested in biodiversity and this year want to spend a day at Kew Gardens, which has stored hundreds of thousands of seeds," she explains. "I want to understand the impact humans and changing biodiversity have on the planet. Maybe our shrinking biodiversity isn't as worrying as I think, but I want to know more."

It's been a shrewd way of getting staff to not only learn the company ethos but embed it into their most cherished memories. While some companies may only boast a good pension scheme, Discovery enables staff to swim with sharks.

The take home for its employees is that aside from being fun and creative, Discovery is committed to their personal happiness. And, who wouldn't want a piece of that? ■

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#### COMPANY BENEFITS

*Discovery Communications offers a number of employee benefits such as enhanced maternity and paternity leave, free mindfulness coaching, fitness bootcamp and yoga classes, flexible-working hours, and care for children and elderly family members.*

*It also has an onsite medical centre at its London Headquarters which offers 360 degree health assessments, vaccinations, onsite laboratory testing and a London-wide prescription delivery service.*



**Susanna Dinnage**

EVP & MD  
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*Susanna heads Discovery Networks in the UK and Ireland. She joined in 2009 and was promoted to the role of UK business head in October 2010 where she is responsible for the company's growth strategy for its largest market outside the US.*

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