

Executive storyteller

Nancy Swanson, BA'80, didn't pursue a journalism career after graduation, but the skills she learned in Ernie Pyle Hall still serve her well in her position as a **vice president at Procter & Gamble**.

by Bryn Mooth

Determination to dig deeper, to find hidden meaning. Willingness to ask the smart questions — and sometimes the not-so-smart ones. Aptitude for crafting engaging stories that change minds and prompt action.

These consummate qualities of a skilled reporter have led Nancy Swanson not to a desk in the newsroom, but to a seat in the boardroom.

Swanson, BA'80, relocated from Bloomington to Cincinnati after graduation to take a brand assistant position at Procter & Gamble. And she never left. Swanson worked her way through the multinational consumer brands company, moving from her first entry-level job working on Attends adult incontinence products through the management ranks and, in 2006, accepting then-CEO AG Lafley's request to become vice president, corporate.

These days, Swanson nimbly shifts from project to project, leading initiatives that cross business units and influencing teams throughout the global organization. And she's become an investor in her community, serving on the boards of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Taft Museum, and representing Procter & Gamble in a public schools improvement initiative.

She spoke with Newswire about how the key skills she acquired at the School of Journalism — critical thinking and communication — come into play in the corporate world.



Newswire: First, talk about your current role at P&G. What are your overall responsibilities?

Swanson: My title is vice president, corporate, which tells even P&G people absolutely nothing about what I do. It is a role that was created a few years ago by our former CEO, AG Lafley, and it's designed to take on projects that don't easily fall under the responsibilities of other executives — projects that span business units and functions and organizations.

One of the great examples is when we acquired Gillette and we needed to integrate the two businesses. There were obvious fits — they had an antiperspirant and deodorant business, an oral-care business, and we had those businesses as well — and it was very clear who was going to integrate those. But another big part of the integration — the razor and blade business, the Duracell battery business, the Braun appliance business — we had to figure out how they were going to fit with P&G. And so that was the work they asked me to take on.

It's very interesting but very undefined, and it changes frequently. I have an ongoing list of opportunity areas that I think we might want to tackle. And there are other projects like the Gillette integration, where they realized they needed someone on the P&G side to work with the Gillette group, and they came to me. I flow to the need, flow to the work.

Newswire: What initially led you, in 1980, to put your B.A. degree from the School of Journalism to work in a corporate environment? How did you land at P&G?

Swanson: I was recruited on campus in two ways: One was through Phil Burton, who was a hugely trusted professor, and a coach and champion of mine. Phil had done some consulting work at P&G and so he knew some of the recruiting team. In a lot of ways, Phil is just the epitome of a lot of the P&G managers I've worked with: incredibly demanding, incredibly bright, but always your biggest cheerleader and fan. And the other way was through the School of Business. I had a business minor, so P&G found me through both schools.

Newswire: In an age and an industry where people tend to transition from job to job over the course of a career, it's noteworthy that you've been at P&G since you graduated from IU. And you've literally worked your way through the organization. What has that career path taught you? And why have you stayed?

Swanson: At P&G, this is more the rule, not the exception. We promote and build from within, so we hire with an eye for growing people for their whole career. We take recruiting and developing people very seriously, because they're the future leaders of our company.

Newswire: Talk about your time at IU and the School of Journalism. How did your education set you up for this lengthy career at P&G?

Swanson: I look back with such great fondness at the education I got at the School of Journalism, and I think it's because it was so demanding. And it was demanding in a couple of ways: One was the requirement that you really think hard and write clearly about what you believe. That's incredible training for anyone in any career, but it particularly makes for an easy transition to business. In the end, when you've got to get people moving, you have to get through the reams of data and boil it down to what's really important, then be able to express that clearly to other people so that we can move quickly. I've come back to that rigorous thinking and writing discipline many times.

And the other thing, which really helps for consumer packaged goods, is this: When I think about really good reporters, they're good at not taking the first answer, at getting to the kernel of truth underneath that first statement. They listen at a deeper level. When I think about what it takes to serve consumers, it means, of course, hearing what they say first off — what they say in a survey or their first statement when you're talking with them. But real insight takes listening at a deeper level, probing a little harder, finding different ways to be sure that you really understand.

It's a different twist on the reporter's skill, but it's the same mindset: asking if that's the whole story, understanding not only what people say but why they say what they say. I find those skills coming through time and again. We teach people the marketing skills they need, but how to think, how to write, how to have an inquiring mind — those are harder to teach in a business setting.

Newswire: Looking at P&G as an organization and at your role, there's a real emphasis on storytelling: telling the brand's story, hearing the customer's story. That's very journalistic at its core, even though you're not exactly writing for publication.

Swanson: And I would add that moving organizations involves storytelling. If you're going to get a group of people to move together, it's about telling them a story about what the opportunity is, creating a really compelling story about why we want to go there and how it will help us, in a way that you unleash their power and creativity. They'll find ways to tackle problems in ways that you never imagined.

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Corrie Schaffield

Newswire: You talked about how your education at the School of Journalism shaped your inquisitiveness and communication skill, and you brought those talents with you to P&G. But leadership is a skill that you’ve acquired over time. How has that capability evolved throughout your career?

Swanson: When I think about the majority of my career, the most important skill is leadership. You can be as smart as you want, you can write as well as you want, you can have the greatest insights, but if it doesn’t translate to action that helps grow brands, delight consumers, grow individuals, then it really doesn’t matter. That takes great communication skills, but it also takes a real willingness to set a direction and to demand that things move forward.

There’s a difference between figuring out what you need to do and doing it yourself, and being able to set the problem, but not be the one who actually gathers the data and solves the problem. My job is to recognize good ideas, to help other people see them and to bring in the resources we need.

Newswire: P&G’s diversity metrics show that about 43 percent of the company’s managers are female. What’s it like to be a woman among the leadership of one of the world’s largest companies? Has that changed over the 20-plus years of your career?

Swanson: I’ve always been one generation back from the very forefront. There weren’t a lot of women when I joined, but there were women who were at the first level of supervising already: brand managers and associate advertising managers.

When I was first promoted to associate advertising manager, Bob Goldstein, who was our chief marketing officer at the time, invited me to lunch. He was one of those quake-in-your boots kind of guys, and I thought, “What am I in for?” And he blew me away. He started talking to me about how he thought that the development of women was a source of competitive advantage for our company. And this was 1986, when there were a few of us but it wasn’t really broad scale.

I walked away with two things: One, stop assuming that I knew what these managers were like without talking with them. And two, I just felt so supported. Knowing that he, as the head of the marketing function, was thinking that way about women gave you a sense that people had your back. It wasn’t always easy, and women have had to deal with work/life balance and that kind of thing. But there was a broader vision and support for women here.

Newswire: How have you stayed connected to the university?

Swanson: IU is one of our biggest sources of talent. I recruited for P&G at IU, and then I ran the IU recruiting team for several years. I’m on the Dean’s Advisory Council for the Kelley School of Business, and I usually drop in to see Dean Hamm and visit the School of Journalism. I have a real heart for both.

Newswire: When you were a student in Bloomington, what did you envision your career to look like? Would you have imagined that you’d end up in the upper echelon of a major corporation?

Swanson: I wrote for the Indiana Daily Student for one semester, when I realized that as much as I loved the School of Journalism and as much as I loved the training, I probably didn’t have the temperament to be a reporter, which is why I ended up with a business minor: I thought I’d work in the business side of a journalistic enterprise. And then the P&G opportunity seemed very broad and mind-opening. I really had no idea what I was getting into, and I was blessed that it turned out to be a good fit. Every day, there’s at least one thing that makes me think, “Wow, that’s so cool.” The fundamental skills that I invested in in those early parts of my education have paid great dividends for me. ●

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