



Learning from experience

Delia Ray is Head of Marketing at Motability Operations, an organisation that has been bringing the Motability scheme to over 600,000 disabled people for 40 years. Motability Operations buy around 10% of the new cars in the UK each year, working with all the major manufacturers, and supply vehicles through around 5,000 dealerships across the UK.

A journalist by training, Delia opens up about her motivations to join the organisation, finding leaders with integrity, creating a 'personal board' and what the future holds for us all!

Can you tell us more about your role and your organisation?

As Head of Marketing, I am responsible for all promotional aspects of the Motability Scheme across channels. I joined Motability 16 years ago, although my role has changed a lot since then. The first car on the scheme went out in 1978, bringing us to 40 years of operations in 2018. The scheme enables people to use their mobility allowance to obtain a brand new car with an all-inclusive package covering servicing, maintenance, breakdown cover and insurance. The scheme brings a critical mass of our customers together, leading to good engagement with our manufacturers, partner organisations and providers (KwikFit, RAC etc.). The shared goal with our partners lets us provide exceptional value to disabled people – turning £1 of their allowance into £2 of extended value.

How did you join the organisation?

My degree is not technical – I studied English and Theatre. I trained as a journalist working for regional newspapers for 4 years. After that, I moved into Higher Education managing PR and Communication in universities. Then I came to Motability Operations. At the time I joined, the organisation was undergoing a fundamental overhaul to improve customer service and become a more customer-centric organisation. I was excited to be part of such a big change programme, which successfully established a strong and supportive culture in the business.

You could have gone anywhere, why did you choose automotive industry and why Motability?

My mother had meningitis when she was 48, and became a wheelchair user for 10 years before she died. I saw what my parents had to go through in order to adjust to having a disabled person in the household. I didn't suddenly want to change the world, but thought I could bring that experience, as well as my communication skills into an organisation like Motability, and perhaps make a difference.

Even organising the simplest activities came with huge stress and strain. Initially my mother started as a front seat passenger, transferring from her wheelchair into the seat of an ordinary car. As my father got older and the lifting became more physically demanding, we opted for a Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle (WAV), which was initially a shock. In my father's own words, my mother went from being a fellow passenger to a being like a parcel in the back. The vehicles, back then, weren't optimally designed with (wheelchair) accessibility needs in mind. Moreover the Motability scheme didn't have the same (good) reputation that it has today. It has been fantastic to be part of the overall journey that has so vastly improved the experience of our customers, and to really put them at the heart of everything we do now.

**What are some of the shifts you have seen in customer experience?**

Affordability has improved to an extent where over 350 vehicles are now available a no more than the allowance of around £57 per month, giving customers more value. There is also better understanding of the expected condition of a 3 year old car. The quality of service that is expected and given has changed significantly. Motability Operations is the highest performing customer service organisation in the country, as measured by the Institute of Customer Services, above many household names. This is largely because of ethos in the team which is to really listen to our customers, and take ownership of finding solutions.

What is your favourite thing about working in this industry? What inspires you to stay in this industry?

The essence of the automotive (industry) is that it brings human beings together with transportation that enables them to lead fuller lives. It is particularly inspiring to be part of that experience for people who have more need than most for worry-free mobility. Motability Operations organises open days called One Big Days where manufacturers, dealers, adaptation specialists and scheme partners come together in front of our customers. It is humbling to meet the struggling families for whom a reliable car makes an enormous difference to their day-to-day living. That passion extends itself to the organisation and makes it an incredibly rewarding space to work in.

What women inspire you and why?

There are plenty of inspiring women in public eye, but you gain a huge amount from those you engage with on a day-to-day basis. There are teachers who give you really important support at an early stage of development. People at universities who said one or two things that clicked and suddenly made everything possible for you. There have been inspiring bosses I've had who have demonstrated faith in me. They were open enough to say to me 'you have the capability of getting to senior management', when at the time, I hadn't given it much thought, given this was at the early stages of my career. But that faith gave me the confidence to push forward. One public figure I have always admired is Martha Lane Fox, who worked in technical roles in her start-up had met with an accident and continued after injury. She is an eminent voice who has showed both resilience and the will to keep moving forward.

What is leadership to you? What do you consider to be one of the most important leadership skills?

I have learnt tremendously from people I have worked with, and through that seen a spectrum of what works and what doesn't. Being an **empowering** leader is really important, where you show someone the faith but also let them find their own way. Some of the best leaders I worked with set the objective but let me experiment and chart my own trajectory. I respect (people with) integrity, where people are true to who they really are in any and every circumstance they work in with you – under stress, relaxed, all of it. This industry is classically macho, and so there are parts of this industry where it is tougher to demonstrate such integrity.



What surprised me moving into this world are car dealers - if you had ever said to me that I would enjoy spending the evening with car dealers, I would have been quite surprised, but it is absolutely true! There are some people who conform to the stereotypes, but there are quite a few women working in dealerships now. Albeit I've been in some meetings at dealerships, where the only other woman in the room is the one who brings tea.

Did you have a mentor? A sponsor? How did that relationship start and evolve?

I didn't have a formal mentoring structure. But during my career, I have sought the advice and support of men and women. I have also had a coach, as well as mentored younger people. E.g., my old school has a network through which I have mentored some young women starting out on their career, and I really enjoy it. You want to have the capacity to share something in a non-judgemental way. I have had people outside the organisation that I've asked for a coffee to discuss things. My coach described it as a 'Personal Board' - network of people one can trust. My personal board also includes peers that inspire me.

What are the most exciting things happening in this sector?

The industry is at a point of convergence. The future will be about the experience, and less about the distinguishing parts of the vehicle. Think of the added value from connected journey. Many years ago, I had an old wreck of a car that broke down on the M25 with our kids in the back. The incident immediately had me looking for a reliable car that could at a minimum get us safely from A to B. Fast forward a few years, I went out for lunch few weeks ago and the restaurant was fully booked. My car recommended the next best place for us! The expectations from my car will completely change - It will not be about 0-to-60, but about being able to use a smartphone seamlessly with my car, finding the next parking lot etc. Women will have the opportunity to create and shape differentiated experiences related to car and mobility.

Self-driving holds tremendous opportunity and will be fantastic for disabled drivers, older people and those people who are less mobile. Even before we get to Level 4/5 autonomous, we will see mobility needs solved such as find your car, find your parking etc. I am not sure how quickly this will happen though.

There is also a growing interest in EVs. Few years ago there were few enquiries about the EVs within the scheme due to range anxiety. Now we are getting more interest, with increase in charging points, which is reflective of the society. Our customers are expecting more variety of EVs in the scheme, which is a challenge given EVs are not as affordable. We are working with the manufacturers to resolve this. In future, I do think wireless charging would be a game changer especially in cities like London.

People worry about Virtual Reality (VR), but VR will not take over. While I love the idea of a street without cars, nothing replaces face-to-face interactions and experiences.

Changing demographics are another change to watch – one of my sons has never learned to drive, primarily because he doesn't see the benefit of driving a car. We need to be prepared for that future.

**What will be the biggest challenge for the next female generation (women behind you)?**

Expectations on the women of next generations are huge. Social media is not helping either. Everyone is under scrutiny, constantly being observed and judged by peers. The social pressures of conformity, compounded with the airbrushed experience of the media makes everything look perfect. In reality, you muddle through. Not everything is perfect in every area, and one cannot be a perfect mother, perfect career person and perfect daughter. As a mother I used to feel guilty leaving children at the nursery. Fantastically now they tell me they really enjoyed nursery! Having big career gaps can be challenging – for example, I feel like I would have missed the arrival of the internet if I hadn't kept working between my two children being born. But people have to find a balance that works for them and their family.

I'd say to people who are starting out, don't try to punish yourself. Support yourself and know that you can't be everything.

Constant connectivity, the 24/7 type of environment in organisations, is something that the next generation will also have to grapple with.

If you could give one piece of advice to women who want to start and grow their career in automotive, what would it be?

Keep an eye on the future directions. While some developments might take longer, some may surprise us as well. If you are not attuned to these directions, you could find yourself stuck with a less relevant business model. Also focus on the 'human part' of the experience – there are multiple opportunities to improve that in this industry. I'd like to see women given an opportunity to design, market and interpret in future planning.

What can an initiative like Women at the Wheel bring to the table?

This is a traditional industry with parts that are slow to shift. The industry should be looking at the best talent to take it forward from everywhere. This includes ensuring there are no overt or intrinsic barriers. Such an initiative brings a special focus – men and women would be very supportive as they want the best brains and creative thinking in this space.

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