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Graziadio School of Business and Management

Dean's Executive Leadership Series - 2011-2012

Transcript of Q&A with Jerry S. Wilson, Senior Vice President, Chief Customer and Commercial Officer, The Coca-Cola Company

About DELS: The Dean's Executive Leadership Series at the [Graziadio School of Business and Management](#) features in-depth audio or video interviews with today's top business practitioners and thought leaders. [Listen or subscribe](#) to the podcasts to hear their views and insight on the current challenges and opportunities facing the business community.

Start

Rick Gibson: Hello, and welcome. My name is Rick Gibson, Associate Vice President for Public Affairs here at Pepperdine University, and I am joined today by Dr. Linda Livingstone, Dean of the Graziadio School of Business and Management. Welcome, Linda.

Linda Livingstone: Well, thank you, Rick. It is a pleasure to be here today.

Rick Gibson: Well, the Dean's Executive Leadership Series is off to a great start this year.

Linda Livingstone: It is. We started with Richard Goudis, Chief Operating Officer of Herbalife, and now today we move on to Jerry Wilson, who is Senior Vice President for Coca-Cola Company.

Rick Gibson: Well, it seems that you continue to bring just very impressive speakers to this series, obviously a benefit to your students, and I'm sure that there are faculty and others who participate in these and enjoy access to these kinds of leaders. Tell us a little bit about Jerry.

Linda Livingstone: Well, Jerry is one of the senior leadership members on the team at Coca-Cola, and he has worldwide responsibility for growing sales and profits. So they have 20 million customers who serve 1.7 billion consumers.

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Rick Gibson: Wow, that is staggering.

Linda Livingstone: So if you want a global perspective on business, he is the person to provide it. So it is going to be a fascinating evening.

Rick Gibson: Well, we certainly look forward to this conversation. Let me invite our listeners to sit back and relax and enjoy this interview with Jerry Wilson.

Linda Livingstone: Well, we are back again with another Dean's Executive Leadership Series and we are really pleased to have with us Jerry Wilson, who is the Senior Vice President of the Coca-Cola Company and Chief Customer and Commercial Officer. Jerry, it is really great to have you with us.

Jerry S. Wilson: It is a pleasure.

Linda Livingstone: Well, I have a bio here, and I could go over that, but I think it is actually more interesting if you share with our audience a little bit about your background and how you got to this position because you have been with Coca-Cola for many, many years, and had a long career there. And you were with Volkswagen before that. Interesting transition, how you go there and then how you got the position that you are in now?

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, that is right. And it is great to be with you today. It is an honor. I have been with the Coca-Cola Company for 23 years, and prior to that, I was in the automobile business for 10 years, Ford retail experience and Volkswagen of America with the manufacturer. The common thread between that 33-year story is great consumer brands, great strategic leadership, and a franchised system. And what is interesting to me is today when I look at the success of Coca-Cola, it really is a function of a great alignment between our bottling system and our company and working in conjunction with our customers to serve our consumers. Now, my background is a little bit interesting because I worked my way through junior college. I then worked my way through university and graduated, and then worked for many years and went back to night school to earn my MBA. And so as I look back on my career, when I decided to leave Volkswagen of America, I made a pretty big decision at that point to leave a brand management position for the US to step back to really reboot, if you will, to move forward with Coca-Cola. So I went from a brand manager of the US with Volkswagen to an area account executive with the Coca-Cola Company. I was on the top of a small mountain, if you will, came down to base camp, and went back up. And 23 years later, I am delighted I did that. I have had the pleasure of working all around the world with

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the company. I have led our strategic planning for the United States. I led our Western US foodservice operations. I spent 10 years serving one customer, McDonald's, which is an interesting story.

Linda Livingstone: Pretty big customers.

Jerry S. Wilson: Yeah. Very, very interesting learnings working with McDonald's for the decade that I had the pleasure of working with them, and then now working with all of our customers worldwide is quite an honor.

Linda Livingstone: Just as a little bit of an aside, it is interesting to hear your educational background because so many of our students in the business school are working full-time while they go to school, both at the bachelor's level and at the master's level. So to hear that you had that experience and how that sort of informed and prepared you for what you are doing is really interesting, and it will be wonderful for our alums to hear about what you are doing now given that your path through the educational system was very similar to our alums.

Jerry S. Wilson: Yes, the thing that I learned during that era is that there were two independent bosses, neither of which cared about the other.

Linda Livingstone: That does happen.

Jerry S. Wilson: And so I can tell you that I respect anyone who is working full-time and going to school basically full-time because neither one of those two masters care if you succeed in the other one, and so you have to really learn to juggle two very big areas of interest at the same time.

Linda Livingstone: Exactly. So I am reading in your biography and it says that you are responsible for enhancing the strategic alliance with all customers globally through consumer and commercial leadership. That sounds really important and you do it for an iconic company. What does that really mean that you do?

Jerry S. Wilson: That is a great question and I will go back to my background. For 10 years, I was an operating president of our customer McDonald's, and so in a role like that, and I think many people on this podcast can relate, is you have full P&L accountability and authority and you are really in control of

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making those decisions. The role that I was promoted into following that role is an enterprise-wide C Suite role. So you have really got to learn much more about influencing a network, influencing the entire enterprise because all of our customer teams are based within our operating units, and so setting the strategy, ensuring we have the right capabilities in place, and then working very closely with our bottlers to deliver that promise locally. It has been a very different role but very interesting in the sense of taking experience in the operating leadership role and then putting it to work on influencing a global, 206 country enterprise-wide role, and this group services 20 million customers a week. So it is huge in the scheme of bigness, but having clarity of strategy, having the right networks in place, and then having the right kind of metrics really helps make this role a great role.

Linda Livingstone: Coca-Cola is one of the true global companies, and I believe over half of your revenues come from outside the US now from some of the things that I read. And this summer, I was actually in Atlanta, and we went to the museum, which is fascinating, and there is this section in the museum where you get to taste all the Coke products from all over the world, many of which we have never heard of or seen and some are quite interesting to taste. So talk about how you have managed the globalness of it, yet the individual nature or the product focus at such an individual level in different parts of the world and how do you bring that about from a customer perspective?

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, first, I am glad you visited the World of Coca-Cola and had our Taste of the World experience. Over a million visitors go through that one single venue annually.

Linda Livingstone: Yes, and I recommend it highly. It was a great experience.

Jerry S. Wilson: I love going there. I go there frequently. In fact, we just recently had a huge big piece of news where the actual secret formula that has been stored in a bank vault for years moved to the World of Coca-Cola in its own private vault, so it is a very big deal. This global trademark, which operates locally with over 500 different brands in the portfolio, creates both a huge opportunity and challenges. The thing that our customers, whether it is a Ralph's here in California or a CarreFour in France, is looking for is simplicity and winning with their shoppers and winning with their customers. And so we really have to have our arms and legs on the ground in the local markets understanding what makes sense zip code by zip code all around the world. That is why the people become such an important part of our future strategy and our success is having the right people with the right skills and the right roles to be able to guide those decisions locally. We find that when the market demands are met and we are in alignment with that that our business grows very well. When we are trying to push something centrally down, so many times, that gets hung up along the way. And so it is a real collaborative ecosystem, if you will.

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Linda Livingstone: You talk about people development, and much of what I have read about you focuses on how important the people in your organization are and people development. Talk a little bit about your philosophy in that regard and then how you do push that throughout a global organization that taps into so many different cultures from a people perspective.

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, when I joined Coca-Cola, the first leadership role that I had was actually in Denver, Colorado. So I was relocated from Orlando to Denver. And I only had at that time six people reporting to me. I had realized quite quickly that Coca-Cola is an extremely competitive organization. It is a large brand with high expectations with big budgets, big goals, and profit and share and all kinds of growth targets. And I decided early that I may or may not be able to achieve my annual business plan every year. I do not know what brought me to that conclusion, but I began to think about that deeply. But I did realize I could always be the best place for people to work. I could control that situation. And so it started simply by providing people with a two-way communication, an open-door policy. Then it led to setting very clear objectives in a conversational approach. Then it led to meaningful performance reviews, which I know sounds very elementary, but how many of us have been through performance reviews at our company that were a water sandwich? And so I made it a very important part of “brand Jerry.” Now, as I have progressed and now I lead a worldwide organization, I have never missed a business plan. It is interesting that I look back and I think the reason for that is empowering people to have a very strong connection with developing people, allowing people to take risk, to make mistakes, to learn from those mistakes, and move forward. And so I am a very strong proponent that many times the highest individual contributor is promoted to a people manager, which is a vocation change. It is not a promotion; it is a complete vocation change. But there is no transition training. And so, frequently, what we see in organizations is that we lose a great individual contributor and we gain a poor manager, a poor leader of people. And so I have spent a lot of time over the years mentoring people about that change to help them realize that 50% of their new job is making sure their people are successful, they have the right teams in place, and dealing with the high performers, marginal performers, and poor performers in a very transparent and honest way.

Linda Livingstone: One of the things that you have done is write a book that kind of connects your expertise and knowledge in branding with this people side of things, and it really focuses on managing “brand you” and the unique step-and-step process. Can you talk a little bit about your experience at Coca-Cola and how that has informed the development of that philosophy and what brought you to the point of wanting to write a book about it?

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, first, I am very proud to have published a book. I did this, also, while I was working full-time, and remember sitting at the Compaq keyboard typing this. So this is not a ghostwriter type of

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book with my co-author obviously engaged as well. The concept is this. After 30 years of working in a consumer-branded field, I began to wonder if we could take some of the precepts of great successful brands and put them to work for us as people, and I think that is consistent with my kind of passion around people. And so I gave a keynote speech to the inaugural mentoring group at Coca-Cola North America. This was many years ago. And it was really just a simple idea, a little speech about what if you thought of yourself as a brand. At the end of that speech, I had so much positive feedback, and people quickly got the idea, but then they wanted to understand the process. What could they go do after this idea? And so it led me to then decompose what great brands do step by step to position their brands. And then I put that into a simple seven-step approach that anyone can do on their own terms, on their own timeline, as public as they want or as private as they want. So the steps are very straightforward, and it is meant to be very pragmatic with all the tools that people can use for themselves. It starts with a simple brand you audit, which is we are a function of everything that has happened to us life to date, and it allows you to do a bit of a swab analysis on yourself and who you are today. It is a very interesting introspective into our chronology. What makes us who we are today? Then it goes into step two, which is what is your brand view image, which is the total perception that others have of us today, which is so important in today's world. And then it allows you to move into a five-step proactive positioning process: identify the identity you want to stand for, then develop your goals, set a positioning statement against those goals, and then set your strategies and implementation plan against that. It is a very logical approach. I am a firm believer that great brands are authentic. They are true to themselves. They are not copycat brands. And so many times we as people try to copy others. When we look at great brands, whether that is Bono or whether it is Oprah Winfrey, they have always been true to themselves. And so I am a firm believer that we can be true to ourselves, be authentic, and create a great brand that is unique and differentiated into its marketplace.

Linda Livingstone: Interesting and certainly applicable to our students as they think about changing jobs or looking for opportunities and even how you advance in your own organization.

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, I think it changes the trajectory for many people because so many people are aiming toward a job posting when what they need to do is write their own job description and then find their way. And so many companies need people that can break through and make a difference in their companies, and the idea is that it is a very empowering process for people.

Linda Livingstone: Wonderful. You know, one of the big issues in business today we hear so much about is social responsibility, sustainability, and especially in global companies that are trying to figure out what that means, especially in different countries, in different cultural contexts. Talk about kind of Coca-

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Cola's philosophy of that and what role you're playing in your position to address those issues at Coca-Cola.

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, first, I think what you are leading here at Pepperdine is spot on. I mean it is a value-based program, it is student-focused, and it is experience-led. And when you think about the global reality of today's business, many of your students will end up experiencing roles and responsibilities far beyond the United States, and sometimes the rules get a little bit murky, especially when you get into emerging markets and you get into different types of state-run governments, etcetera. But if you have a principal-based foundation, you will always have a true north on your compass on how to lead your own dealings with your role. I think this is more important now than ever and it is going to become even more important going forward. Coca-Cola is a brand that every day we have taken 125 years to build and in 125 seconds on the Internet could be destroyed. And so we constantly not only inform our people about their responsibilities but actually take them through training, through code of ethics training, required training that they must go through on a regular basis to understand what's in bounds and what's clearly out of bounds. And when you are talking about an enterprise of 750,000 people around the world, it is a big group to try and keep in the corridors. But our customers, our consumers keep us in great check. They expect a high level from a brand like Coca-Cola and when we deliver it, we have great results. And when we stray, we get into trouble. Fortunately, we have a leader in our chairman and CEO that is very committed to a value-based enterprise, and I, as well, as part of his executive leadership team, feel personally accountable to make sure that that happens.

Linda Livingstone: A little bit more about you. What is a day in your life like? I know there is probably no typical day, but maybe even what might a typical week look like? I mean you travel a lot. Is there any routine to it at all, or how do you sort of prepare for that kind of a hectic life?

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, what I love about my job is the variety of the job. I fly anywhere from 150 to 200,000 miles a year on one airline, and so Delta is very happy with Jerry.

Linda Livingstone: Living in Atlanta, that is a good thing.

Jerry S. Wilson: Living in Atlanta, that is an easy correlation, and they are a great customer of Coca-Cola, as well, so it works out well. But a typical day for me could very well be an example of being in Nairobi, where I will awaken in a country that is 40% unemployment, work with our bottling organization, go in the trade, meet with our customers, independent, small, tiny customers in poverty zones in Nairobi, all the way to one of the most modern retailers that you would see in the city of Nairobi. If I am in Europe,

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it would mean trying to ensure that our entire European business is clicking at the right momentum. If I am in Atlanta, it would mean getting up early in order to work the Asian markets on timeline. I try to always realize that the people overseas deserve a higher level of comfort than me, so I try to set my clock to work with their timeline. But there are many, many weeks where I will leave home on a weekend, fly Saturday to be where I need to be on Sunday and to get ready to go Monday morning. Typical week, I never check luggage. I have a pattern for travel: carry-on rolling bag, one briefcase, and off I go. So I am kind of a simple guy. I do not have an entourage that travels with me. I believe in a very streamlined approach and believe in being very close to the market in our customers' outlets, just as often as I possibly can.

Linda Livingstone: So that kind of a lifestyle, it is hectic and challenging and very interesting, but also a family and the personal side of things can be very challenging. Do you have any sort of advice for our audience about how you manage that part of it? I don't really like the word balance because I think that it is hard to do that, but how do you manage that and any tips for that that has worked for you and your family?

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, I am very blessed to have been married to my best friend for 32 years, Jenny, and we have a 23-year-old daughter, Abby, who is a doctorate of physical therapy student right now. Look, I could not have done this without a great partnership with Jenny. It is just that simple. And you are exactly right. I do not live what I would consider a balanced life at all. It is over-indexed for the Coca-Cola Company while I am working, and then when I am home, I try to over-index on home. I always stay connected with Jenny. I will call her many times a day from wherever I am, and I know that that is an expense that I incur, but it is an investment to stay close to home. So no matter where I am or whatever time it is, I want to check in with her on a regular basis. And then Jenny and Abby and I have a few little simple things that we do as rituals together that keeps us tight as a family unit. I think that the thrill of the work for me maintains my inspiration and motivation because there is nothing that I enjoy more than being in the market with our team, with a customer, and seeing our consumers interact with our brands. Frankly, I wish I could clone myself because I would rather be home with my wife on the screened porch feeding our birds in the back yard, watching them come to the feeder while I am also in Turkey with one of our great retailers.

Linda Livingstone: Someday someone will figure that one out.

Jerry S. Wilson: Perhaps, we hope not.

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Linda Livingstone: Probably not in our lifetime, but I am not sure. Well, I am going to conclude with I don't think it will be a difficult question, but do you have a personal favorite Coca-Cola product or beverage, or do you love them all?

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, you know what? I do love them all, but I have some favorites. Today for lunch, I had a great Coke Zero, which I thoroughly love. Prior to that, Coke Light or Diet Coke was my sparkling brand of choice. I love our Odwalla brand, which is a great healthy juice, all-natural juice product, which I really enjoy. I love SmartWater, which is my favorite water, and of course, VitaminWater, also, which is a great lifestyle brand. So I have got plenty to drink within my Coca-Cola portfolio.

Linda Livingstone: My daughter's a volleyball player, and SmartWater is the water of choice for her volleyball team.

Jerry S. Wilson: Well, then that's a smart volleyball team.

Linda Livingstone: Exactly, exactly. Well, Jerry, thank you so much for your time. It has been such a pleasure learning about your experiences, and I know it will be valuable to our listeners and they will appreciate it. So thank you for your time and being with us.

Jerry S. Wilson: And thank you, as well.

Rick Gibson: Well, Linda, that was a very fascinating interview with Jerry Wilson.

Linda Livingstone: It was, and we heard his interesting perspective on what is going on globally in the economy and how that's affecting a company like Coca-Cola. So it will be interesting to watch them in the months and years ahead.

Rick Gibson: Certainly. Well, tell us what we can expect next.

Linda Livingstone: Well, our next speaker is Blake Irving, who is Executive Vice President and Chief Products Officer at Yahoo!, and we are particularly pleased to have Blake because he has actually taught for us in the past.

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Rick Gibson: Oh, excellent. That is terrific. Well, let me invite our listeners who want to learn more about the Dean's Executive Leadership Series or more about the Graziadio School, let me invite you to visit us online at BSchool.Pepperdine.edu/DELS, that's D-E-L-S. Until next time, thanks for listening.

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