A flying start

Lynn McKeown is a business consultant working for the animal health company Zoetis, although her working life began as a member of Aer Lingus cabin crew. Here, she describes her unexpected route into animal health, which almost brings her full circle from her childhood experiences as the daughter of a vet.

I WAS immersed in the world of veterinary medicine from my childhood. My father was a vet and his practice was based next to our family home so I was brought up amid rushed meals, out-of-hours rotas and telephone calls diverted onto our home phone. My earliest memories are of accompanying Dad on his calls. I watched caesareans, got involved in lambings and all the other emergencies associated with a busy, rural, mixed practice in Ireland. Needless to say, my love of animals is firmly ingrained – they have always been part of my life.

In Dad’s practice I got the chance to help out with reception duties progressing to payroll and other administrative roles during school holidays – perhaps more of an expectation now that I come to think about it! Painting the large animal theatre and cattle pens was another child labour task imposed on myself and my brothers, and I certainly got a clear understanding of how small businesses operated and what initiatives were necessary for growth. Little did I know at the time how useful my early life would prove to be now as I am back in the same environment, working as a business consultant for Zoetis.

Although I would have loved to become a vet – because of my passion for animals and enjoyment of working with people – I loved music even more and was heading towards a music degree. But, as a result of a variety of circumstances, I was accepted for cabin crew training with Aer Lingus and joined a team of 1500, based in Dublin.

I flew short and long haul for five years, rising to the role of flight manager. I couldn’t have wished for a better grounding in customer service – I didn’t realise at the time how much science was applied to the field of customer service. While with Aer Lingus I completed a human resources (HR) degree and became an HR consultant for the airline. This involved recruiting staff, conducting interviews, managing and training staff, dealing with unions and undertaking disciplinary procedures.

My next job with the airline was as operations manager in Belfast. The Belfast base was a new initiative, so the demands and requirements were substantial. A sound knowledge and comprehensive understanding of financial data incorporating budgeting and business planning was required. A smooth-running base depended heavily on clearly defined working practices and recruiting motivated staff, thereby establishing and maintaining high levels of customer service across Aer Lingus staff as well as third-party staff. There was a great buzz from being involved in planning and enabling staff to deal with unforeseen circumstances. Decisions made in Belfast could have implications throughout the network so communications had to be honed to the highest level. The hours were long and unpredictable, with the odd out-of-hours emergency thrown in every now and then – a bit like veterinary practice sometimes.

The job was great fun and I loved it. I also developed my team so that they were totally empowered to make their own decisions – a skill that has stood me in good stead for my entire career.

Moving on

My interest in people, whether they’re staff, employers or customers, led me back to HR and I then worked as a self-employed HR consultant and trained HR personnel from a variety of companies for the next 18 months.

After this, I heard about and applied for a job as an account manager at Pfizer Animal Health. I saw the role as the opportunity to learn about the veterinary pharmaceutical business, with a view to moving into the business consultancy team, which the company had an interest in developing. I’ve now been a business consultant at Zoetis for two years.

Although the aviation and animal health industries are very different, my background and qualifications, coupled with the ability and experience of dealing with challenges that come from left field,
have been invaluable skill sets in both industries. I had core business and service industry values ingrained into me from working with Dad, combined with the military precision and professionalism required by Aer Lingus.

My role as a business consultant is to understand clients and practices and, where I can, add value by bringing in outside expertise to help practices grow their businesses. A big part of it involves strategic direction and focusing on a practice’s issues in order to devise a programme that will deliver success for them. For instance, yesterday I spoke to two different practices with completely different objectives and agendas. The first wanted to enhance all aspects of the practice, and focusing on a practice’s issues in order to devise a programme that will deliver success for them. For instance, yesterday I spoke to two different practices with completely different objectives and agendas. The first wanted to enhance all aspects of the practice and assist with succession and the veterinary principal’s exit strategy. The second was a multi-branch practice that needed to implement a more uniform approach across its practices, from how clients are welcomed to how to give the best customer care. One was a very strategic approach while the other was a case of rolling up my sleeves and getting the job done.

The satisfaction I achieve from my work is similar to the buzz I felt from the aviation industry. I never know what the day is going to hold until I meet with a practice, and I really enjoy having in-depth discussions and earning the trust of an entire team. The responsibility of being self-employed for a time and constantly wondering where my next pound would come from is still with me, so I feel as involved with my practices as I would if they were my own business.

My career to date is testament to the fact that there is no limit to what you can do. I had planned to study a music degree and help children with special needs but instead I’ve travelled the world and then returned to my family roots. My advice to others is to build up your skill base, consider which skills are transferable and use your knowledge in as diverse a way as possible. No matter what you do, go out every day to make a difference, find what you enjoy and enjoy what you do. Most of all have fun outside of that. For me, I thrive by still getting on a plane and heading off on exciting trips abroad; when I’m at home then its salsa dancing or anything outdoors – you would probably find me walking along the coast with my family and labrador and grabbing an ice cream on the way back.

Ten-minute chat

Simon Boulton recently celebrated a year as marketing manager with the animal health company Virbac, following three years with the company in product management. In November, he will celebrate the two-year anniversary of the launch of Parvo-Alert – a social media initiative to warn of cases of parvovirus by postcode area to raise awareness of the disease.

What inspired you to set up the Parvo-Alert service?
The inspiration behind the initiative was my experience in practice. How can you try to raise the profile of a disease a good proportion of the general public no longer fully understands, quickly and efficiently? The idea born from this was Parvo-Alert. To capture the audience we wanted to talk to we needed to go to somewhere we could get their attention and social media seemed the natural place. Parvo-Alert is a page on Facebook and an account on Twitter with over 9000 followers in total. The service acts as a community, and when parvo cases are reported to us the town and postcode area are shared to warn people in these communities. We then post out a pack to all the practices in this area with a warning letter alongside posters and leaflets for the practice.

How did you get to where you are today?
Following a number of years in small animal practice I moved into industry in 2007. What started as a technical role as a vet adviser moved into product management after a year, and I progressed from this role to a similar role at Virbac, looking after vaccines, antibiotics, diagnostics, Virbagen Omega and many other products. In June 2013, I took on the role of the marketing manager for the small animal team, although I have continued to do some direct product management of new products.

What activities does your job involve?
Where to start? Strategy, forecasting, analysis, key account liaison, sales and marketing coordination and interaction, product launches, new product preparation and agency management, as well as management of our great small animal marketing team consisting of product managers, support and telesales. It’s actually quite difficult to describe but my involvement is at many levels of the business and with many departments, and encompasses all stages of product and business life cycles.

What do you like about your job?
The ability to make a difference, take ownership and drive things forward.

What do you not like?
There are never enough hours in the day.

Why is your job important?
Due to the size of product ranges, the number of products in the pipeline and the changing face of the veterinary market, businesses need to have people who can see the bigger picture and drive strategy and activity in the direction needed. Marketing in a veterinary company is not often what would be thought of as a traditional marketing job and is just the front face of a much deeper role.

The veterinary industry is a much more complex beast than 10 years ago with saturated markets, fierce generic competition and large buying groups and corporates. Companies must keep up to date and look at the road ahead to anticipate what clients will need now and moving forward.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
“You’re only perceived to be as good as your last project” is a mantra I continually repeat to myself, to keep the quality of my work as high as possible and keep ideas fresh.

What was your proudest moment?
Coming away from a launch or a project that is a success, knowing you have put your heart and soul into it, is hugely rewarding, and spurs you on to the next project, and the next.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?
Go for it. High pressure isn’t to everyone’s taste but if you want to make a difference in industry you really can. Be committed, believe in yourself and you will surprise yourself in how quickly you will learn and develop.
Ten-minute chat

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