

MECCA's Jo Horgan on the gender gap and dark side of the web

By **SHELLEY REYS AND JO HORGAN**

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They are role models for women in corporate Australia, but these leaders are also keen to learn from their peers. The Deal paired eight high-profile executives, founders and directors and asked them to probe the secrets of success. They took it from there.

SHELLEY REYS: Do you see yourself as a disrupter?

JO HORGAN: I think it's easy in retrospect to create a narrative that suits the end point. I would say that to begin with it wasn't really just about these new emerging brands coming into the marketplace; it was much more about the fact that, having come from the beauty industry, I felt that the act of trying on and buying cosmetics was not the empowering, exhilarating, fun experience it should be. And so, it was all about putting the customer first and foremost, and giving her back control. I'd say that's what MECCA has done, it's put the customer front and centre from day one, 23 years ago, when retail was a much more transactional experience.

SR: How have you built the customer base and created loyalty?

JH: I have an unwavering belief in the intelligence of customers, and I think that if they sniff out authenticity — even if it's authenticity that doesn't always get it right — if they believe you are being authentic and ultimately see that you are trying to do absolutely the right thing by them, they will follow you through thick and thin.

SR: What have you done internally to help you survive COVID?

JH: I talk about luck a lot and I think luck favours the prepared mind. Our luck is that we are in a category that has been impacted less than travel and hospitality, for example. Our luck is that even within the retail sector, the beauty and wellness category has been less impacted than others, such as fashion. MECCA has always prided itself on being very agile, moving quickly, pivoting before the market even knows it wants to pivot. I think the team is used to that and has exercised that muscle over many, many years. We went, okay, we're going to have to pivot everything online. So for the customer that means we need to put on a lot more content, we need to reintroduce MECCA Live, which was basically a broadcasting channel where customers

could access masterclasses live. They could access all the sorts of experiences they could get in the store. We introduced virtual services so customers could book a FaceTime consultation with team members and get the product couriered out and collected. Education's always been our thing. How do we continue to educate our teams during this time? So, we're like, 'okay, let's launch MECCAiversity' which is an online learning platform. At the warehouse, we moved to 24 hours operation. We literally had between 600 to 1000 per cent uplift that we had to absorb online.

SR: Do you see the face of leadership changing a little (for women)?

JH: I think there's no question (of) that. If I think back to when I started MECCA 23 years ago to now, there are so many more women at so many more touch points across every area for business that I touch, which is fabulous and is absolutely what it should be. I will say that when I'm exposed to the most senior leaders in Australia, in the room, they are predominantly still men. There are still very few women. I think we are moving in the right direction, but there is so much more work to do. In the entrepreneurial space, all you have to do is look at the funding. Of all the funding that was made available to entrepreneurs in 2018, just 3 per cent was made available to women-only start-ups. There are so many other pockets where the layers have not yet been peeled back, where the light has not yet been shone on (the statistics). If you actually looked at the whole picture, there's still a long way to go.

SR: You share the CEO role with your husband, Peter Wetenhall, yet you seem to be the face of MECCA. Do you think you would have been less successful if he was the face of a beauty line business?

JH: I'd have to say no, because most major cosmetics companies are still run by men. But I am in a very fortunate position. (Facebook chief operating officer) Sheryl Sandberg says in her book, *Lean In*, the single biggest career choice you make is if you choose to have a partner; it's having a supportive partner. I've got the partner. Absolutely from the outset, when he joined the business it was crystal clear that I had founded the business, I had the vision. I was really clear on what the customer was looking for. I think he's very happy for me to have the front-facing role and for him to really drive the back end of the business.

SR: Do you see yourself as successful?

JH: I always think of a quote someone gave me: "Success is like a horizon; the closer you get to it, the further it moves away." For me that is absolutely the case. There is so much that needs to be achieved, both for business, for women, for family. There is just so much to do.

SR: I imagine you must be ambitious? It's a tough decision to make to go into business for yourself and (beauty) is a tough business to be in.

JH: I think any business is tough to be in. I have chosen a business that I love and that I'm super passionate about. In terms of ambition, at school I was competitive, but super ambitious? No. I think that I have a very clear view of who I want to be surrounded by and I couldn't actually find that in the corporate environment. I had a very clear view of what I think is fair, be that in a work environment or in a retail exchange. Who has the power in a retail exchange? So, am I deeply ambitious? For me, no, not necessarily. Do I think that MECCA should be bigger so that it touches more women and empowers more people? Yes, I see that. So maybe that is a form of ambition for the business and the people in the business.

SR: There's a perception that the beauty industry places unhealthy pressure on women? Does that concern you?

JH: If you take the beauty industry in and of itself, I would say that I think it actually contributes more to the empowerment of women than not. I think it makes women feel good, and the beauty industry covers everything from having a beautiful soap that feels lovely, right through to the sparkliest eyeshadow. I think it can give enormous confidence. If I think back to the early years of MECCA, we never showed any photographs of models because we believed it wasn't about one form of beauty. That was at a time when the industry did really push one version of beauty and so we didn't partake in that conversation. Beauty is about health and wellness, which is for everybody. It's about self-expression, which is for everyone. But what I would say now, actually, I think there is a dark side of social media that does objectify unrealistic norms. And I think that's across every aspect, whether it's from fitness through to fashion, through to sport, through to beauty, through to acquisitiveness. I think it can amplify the unrealistic nature of any area. At the same time, I do think that social media has put the power so firmly in the hands of the customer. The customers are saying, "Excuse me, beauty comes in all forms. Whether I'm a man, you know it doesn't matter what gender I am, what colour my skin is, whether I wear a hijab, whether I am trans, whether I am big, small, tall, short. I'm not going to be told what is beautiful. I own my own beauty". And that I think ties back to what MECCA originally was: just make us look and, more importantly, feel our best. I actually believe that the industry is being taught how to make sure everybody can feel their best participating in the beauty world.

SR: What's left for you to do? What's next?

JH: Do I see myself always being the chief executive of MECCA? No, I don't. I think there are so many people who are coming up through the business who will be much better placed to be CEO than I will. And I think there are seismic shifts in the different generations and what they want, and there would be someone much better placed than me to ensure that MECCA stays ahead of that. So, I will happily hand the baton on to someone. I started MECCA, I was working in the cosmetics industry, where it was run by men, advertising agencies telling the cosmetics industry what to say to their customers. They were run by men. And so, for me next there's a

piece around gender equality. I'm learning through the Australian Women Donors Network about putting a gender lens on philanthropy. I come from a family that talks about education beyond all else. And the more I peel back the layers on just how important education is — there are 130 million girls who are not being educated at the moment. So I am deeply, deeply passionate about this and would love to get more involved. And, Black Lives Matter and this entire movement — there's been a real sort of shining the light on a broader diversity and inclusion agenda.

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JH: Well, I'm fascinated you started your own business (Arrilla). What were the critical things to be able to carve out that new path?

SR: My cousin Darren opened the business in Sydney originally. I joined him to help him establish it. He died shortly after. I don't know if dealing with the grief was more difficult than starting my own business but it certainly was pretty tough. I didn't know any other women at the time who had their own business, let alone anyone who was doing anything that I was doing. But what helps you get through the toughest times is a sense of purpose. It took a long time for me to feel as though I found my feet and that the business found its feet, but I never doubted what my single purpose was. And that was to help Indigenous Australians and the wider community to understand each other better in order to work together better. And in doing so, we would create a nation that had better relationships and had the capacity to find a new path together.

JH: You then made the decision to join forces with KPMG (which bought shares in Arrilla in 2016)

SR: They had been a client of mine for about six or seven years, and we already knew each other very well. We shared the same values and so there were some important boxes that were ticked from the outset. So I sold minority shares in the business to them in order to get access to expertise that I didn't have. It wasn't so much about a growth strategy again, it was about getting access to expertise so that we could have a bigger impact.

JH: What is the next big thing you would love to see for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

SR: I have a theory that when you put the terms Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, reconciliation, First Nations — all of those words — on top of something, then good-natured, fantastic people all of a sudden get a bit nervous. Terrific professionals and leaders who would normally be quite confident dealing with a new topic become afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing, making a

mistake, or sounding racist. They start to walk on eggshells. And if they walk on eggshells we're not going to get anywhere as a business, let alone as a nation. The way I describe my work is, we remove the eggshells by giving people, as well as whole organisations, the skills and confidence to work in the space better. What I'm trying to do is to create a culturally competent Australia, one workplace at a time. We've got a lot more work to do but I don't see it as an impossible dream; I see it as something that's achievable, no matter how long it takes. I feel, by and large, there's a large group of Australians wanting that same outcome and I'm happy for them to walk beside me.