

The art of persuasion

Arlene Dickinson found success through emotional connections

By Marjo Johne

THOSE FAMILIAR WITH Arlene Dickinson—CEO of Venture Communications and one of the venture capitalists on television's *Dragons' Den*—might turn the pages of her high school yearbook expecting to find prescient clues about her inevitable path to fame and fortune.

What they'll find instead is a wildly off-the-mark prediction about Dickinson's likely future as a candlestick maker.

"Whoever wrote that probably just didn't know what to say about me," says Dickinson, who runs her Calgary-based marketing communications company from her home base in Toronto. "I was pretty shy in school—the quiet kid who observed everything and didn't want to cause trouble or attract any attention."

These days, it's hard not to notice Dickinson. Now in her fourth season as a Dragon, she has become a celebrity in Canada, distinguished as much by her trademark red hair, with its forehead-grazing grey streaks, as by her direct but always respectful approach to the entrepreneurs pitching for venture capital on the show.

A number of business awards have also put Dickinson in the spotlight in recent years; to mention a few, she has been named Calgary Business Owner of the Year, one of *Profit* magazine's Top 100 Women Entrepreneurs and one of *Chatelaine's* Top 100 Women Business Owners. In 2007, the Women's Executive Network inducted her into Canada's Most Powerful Women Top 100 Hall of Fame.

This year Dickinson has added another dimension to her celebrity by

writing a book. *Persuasion* is a rich tome of wisdom on how to succeed in life and business by becoming a good persuader. It's a skill Dickinson clearly has in spades, having made millions as a marketer for such companies as SportChek, Subway Restaurants and Lipton Tea.

But being persuasive isn't about manipulative influence, says Dickinson; instead it's about building emotional connections based on three core elements: authenticity, honesty and reciprocity—a process she refers to as "principled" persuasion.

"The word 'persuasion' often has negative connotations," Dickinson tells *The Connection*. "As a marketer whose job is to help companies persuade people to choose their brands, I believe you can accomplish much more with principled persuasion."

Persuasion is part autobiography, tracing Dickinson's difficult childhood from her early years in South Africa to the struggles she faced growing up poor in Calgary. Although her above-average intelligence allowed her to skip several years of grade school, Dickinson, who was raised as a Mormon, decided she was not "university material" and got married at 19. By 27, she was raising four children and working dead-end clerical jobs to support her kids as well as her husband, who was attending university to become a teacher.

The turning point for Dickinson came three years later, when she and her husband divorced. The family court ruled that

Dickinson, who was between jobs, could not have full custody of her kids unless she secured her own place and proved she could support them financially. She got a job selling advertising at a TV station in Calgary and discovered how persuasive she could be. Her success in sales led to her being offered a partnership—together with four other owners, all men—in a start-up marketing firm called Venture Communications.

Ten years later, with two of the original partners no longer at Venture, Dickinson bought out the two remaining partners and became CEO. It wasn't an easy step to take, she recalls, because she had to borrow money to become Venture's sole owner. Today, Venture Communications is one of the largest independent marketing firms in Canada, with about 75 employees in Toronto, Ottawa and Calgary and roughly \$45 million in gross sales.

Dickinson attributes Venture's success to an unwavering commitment to creative storytelling that advances a client's business goals. "We created a niche and identified an opportunity to talk about marketing as a business endeavour—it's art for the sake of commerce, not art for art's sake," she says. "We were one of the first agencies in Canada to say this is what marketing really is. It's not just about winning awards for your creative [work]. It's about delivering results for the client." ❏

Marjo Johne is a Toronto-based journalist.



GREG PAUPST/CBC

member profile

Name: Arlene Dickinson, CEO, Venture Communications

Employees: 75

Address: 411 11th Ave. SE, Calgary, AB T2G 0Y5

Phone: 403-237-2388

Website: www.openminds.ca

Item at Costco: *Persuasion*

Comment on Costco: "I often feel like a kid in a candy store at Costco—there's always new goods to look at and so many real deals. And, seeing as I can't pass up a great deal, it's always fun to see what's in store! I've been a member of Costco for many years through my company membership and my own."