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’d 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 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.

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