



Q+A: Michele Anderson on Passion, Persistence, and Looking Ahead

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This interview with [Michele Anderson](#), Senior Vice President of Retail at Shutterfly, was conducted and condensed by [Jen Swetsoff](#).



What were your early years like?

I grew up in Sydney, Australia. When I was about 14 years old, I made a pact with two of my best friends at Sydney Girls High that one day we'd all get our MBAs together at Harvard's Kennedy School in America. Of course, there was some confusion because we didn't realize back then that the Kennedy School doesn't offer MBAs. But nonetheless, that was our goal.

What led you to consulting?

The law, actually. Studying the law as an undergrad at the University of New South Wales was great—it probably taught me more about analytics and peeling apart a problem than anything else I've done. But when I was looking for a job after graduation, I realized that attorneys often focus on looking backwards, because so much of the work is based on precedents, and that way of thinking seemed suffocating to me. I thought consulting,

particularly with a focus on growth strategy and innovation, would be a better fit. I wanted to be forward-looking.

Why Strategy&?

When I interviewed with Strategy& (then Booz Allen Hamilton), I was drawn to the people I met and to the problem-solving element of the work. Plus, the firm had just opened an office in Australia, so I felt that there I could make a strong contribution, even as a junior person on the team, because I knew about the local market. I also loved the idea that the firm would consider sponsoring me to attend business school because that was one of my early ambitions.

You received your MBA in the United States. How was the cultural transition from Australia?

It was eye-opening, even before I arrived. Here's an example: After working with Booz Allen in Sydney for two years, I decided to apply to Wharton Business School. But when an American mentor reviewed my first draft of the essay, she tossed it on the ground and told me it was terrible and that I had to promote myself much more if I wanted to be seriously considered. In Australia, it's more powerful to be understated about your achievements than to trumpet them. So, that kind of self-promotion was uncomfortable for me. But America has become my second home, of course, and I've had such wonderful personal and professional experiences here—from Philadelphia to New York to California, where I live with my husband now.

Can you share an example of your most memorable work with Strategy&?

I loved my work with the media, technology, and entertainment sector in New York. It gave me an incredible chance to work on some really important projects, such as helping transform the liquid crystal display sector and helping to shape the role of digital in traditional publishing companies.

What's one of the most important lessons you learned at Strategy&?

When you conduct analysis, don't just look at *what* is happening but also consider *why* it is happening. That level of understanding changes the risk profile. It has definitely helped me become more comfortable as an executive investing time and money into new things.

Does that apply to your current role at Shutterfly?

Certainly. I'm responsible for working out how the company's assets and capabilities can be used to tap growth in new categories. So Shutterfly, for example, is the biggest four-color digital printer in the United States. It's critical for me to understand how and why that asset puts us in a position to deliver on quality and execution, as we take the capability into new sectors to serve new audiences. At the same time, I need to understand how and why we can grow by taking our main audience—more than 10 million moms with kids—into new product categories and experiences. We have a very ambitious growth plan, and I know I can deliver it.

What's the most valuable advice you've received?

A venture capitalist mentor once told me to always put time aside at the beginning of your day to work on your most important agenda item. And by that, I mean your big-picture agenda, maybe your year's agenda, not what you have planned for a particular day. That way, if all hell breaks loose later, as it often does when you're running a business, you've already gotten the most important thing done. For me, here at Shutterfly, that means I carve time out in the morning for where we're headed on a macro level, before getting caught up in the day-to-day mechanics of the business. It has really helped me appreciate the value of prioritization.

What do you look for when you hire?

I look for people with passion and a keen interest in problem solving—both solving problems for customers and in the data itself and in the *why* behind the data. I also have a strict no-jerks policy. I look for people without a big ego who can be successful as part of a team.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

I'm most proud of becoming a Master of Wine in 2011. With a four-day theory exam and a three-day tasting component, it's by far the most difficult thing I've ever done. While most of us have honed our senses of sight and hearing through our work and studies, it can be a great challenge to hone our senses of taste and smell. But I had a passion for wine and I wanted to see if I could do it. Beyond what it does for my personal life—getting great restaurant reservations, wonderful trips all over the world, and the chance to judge wine competitions—it has taught me so much that's relevant to my career.

What words would people use to describe you?

Persistent, passionate, and collaborative. I try to get things done by bringing people along.

Outside of the office, where are you happiest?

On the beach and swimming in the ocean.

Who or what do you most admire?

Women, like Margaret Thatcher, who demonstrate tenacity and leadership.

What's the one thing that you couldn't live without?

Wine.

What is the one thing you could live without?

Hate. To fear difference is just so shortsighted; I think we should celebrate and reward it.

Do you still take advantage of the Strategy& network?

Well, one of my former Strategy& colleagues is the CEO of Shutterfly and he's largely the reason I took my current job. So, I think that our professional reconnection—nearly 25 years after working together as consultants—speaks loudly to the power of this network.