



Michelle Morgan

Business Development Manager, Saint-Gobain

WE CAUGHT UP WITH MICHELLE MORGAN, THE CREATIVE, DYNAMIC BUSINESSWOMAN BEHIND THE NORTON BRAND AND DISCOVERED THE TRAILBLAZING CAREER PATH THAT HAS PAVED THE WAY FOR THE CURRENT GENERATION OF WOMEN IN OUR INDUSTRY.

While Michelle is relatively well known in the industry, we kicked off the discussion by asking her to take a walk down memory lane and tell us a bit about herself and her journey in the industry. "My connection with the industry began once I completed my formal education. When I was young, I was always creative and loved to draw and paint,

so after secondary school I completed a Diploma in Fine Arts at the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE. I subsequently found an interest in air-brushing, which led me to the collision repair industry."

Her first job was a "prepper" at the RACV Accident Repair Centre in Nunawading. She went on to take up a spray-painting

apprenticeship at Kangan Institute in Richmond, which she was able to fast-track, and continued to work in the industry for seven years. In addition to her time at the RACV ARC, Michelle had the opportunity to work in some great panel shops, including Gary McMillan Toyota, Summerhill Crash Repairs and Lacey Panel Works.

With the decision to start a family, Michelle looked to take a step back from spray painting and jumped at the opportunity to join PPG, initially as a customer service technical consultant before moving on to a product specialist role looking after PPG's consumable brands. "This gave me the opportunity to work directly with distributors and end user customers. Training on our product portfolio was one of the things I loved most about the role. However, after 10 great years with PPG I decided to specialise in abrasives and took my career on a different path."

Michelle further developed her skills in product management and expanded her horizons by moving into a sales role where, once again, she was attracted by the front-line customer interaction. "Three years ago I joined Saint-Gobain, where I moved into my current role as Business Development Manager Automotive Aftermarket, and I have never been happier."

When I ask what it was that attracted her to Saint-Gobain, Michelle is unequivocal. "I've known Saint-Gobain and their brands since my days as an apprentice, but as I learnt more about the company's principles of conduct and action, they



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really resonated with me. As a global organisation awarded employer of the year, I was confident that this would provide a stable future with opportunities to grow and develop, and the opportunity to make a lasting contribution.”

We briefly reflected on last year, and in Michelle’s own inimitable style, she is able to see the silver lining in a year like no other. “What a roller coaster year, especially here in Victoria. I, like so many others, have been working remotely and although I’ve adapted to the home office environment, I really missed the interaction with colleagues and customers as the restrictions dragged on.”

We touch on the impact on the Abrasives Division, and find that notwithstanding the commercial impact, there have been some significant upsides. For example, the team has quickly adapted, introduced new programs and implemented new ways of working. “The whole organisation has developed strong technological capabilities as we all adjusted to video conferencing and the field sales team became better connected to our central team at head office.”

Saint-Gobain expects that there will be lasting benefits with so many streamlined processes and procedures, along with the development of new skills throughout the year. Although the team appreciates the impact that the pandemic had, and is still having,

on the personal and business lives of so many, there is still much to take away from the unexpected journey that was 2020.

We move on and I ask Michelle, as a professional businesswoman, what she sees as the highlights of her career thus far. She has no hesitation in going back to her apprenticeship days, citing completion of her apprenticeship as a key milestone as this is where it all began, particularly as the body shop environment was not as attractive a place to work then as it is today.

However, it is in the various product, marketing and sales functions that she really made her mark on the industry. “Launching new product ranges from start to finish has always given me great satisfaction. Creating a solution to improve or omit a process step for the ultimate customer, the end user, is really rewarding. Seeing the positive impact it can have on productivity and the bottom line really is a key driver for me.”

Michelle has also had the opportunity to travel the world for further training to bring new skills, techniques, technical knowledge and, of course, new products back to Australia, which has also given her a real buzz. “When I reflect on my career journey, it’s rewarding to see the process improvements that I have been able to implement in my various roles and organisations, bridging the

connection between the technicians and the suppliers to improve the productivity and communication, and ultimately enriching the customer experience with that brand.”

Michelle believes that her shop floor experience enables her to better understand the needs of the end user, and building these into the value proposition really does make a huge difference as Saint-Gobain engages with the customer. In essence, like all good organisation, they start with the end in mind. “Something that I am passionate about is developing pathways for the next generation of technicians to be connected, as well as further developing the skills of those who are already in the industry. I think most manufacturers of products supplied into the industry would agree that it is our responsibility to positively contribute to the future generations of the industry.”

As with all careers and journeys, there have been challenges along the way, although Michelle is keen to focus on how she overcame them to become the person she is today. “The biggest single challenge has been working in a male-dominated industry, especially in the early years when at times I found it difficult to navigate. In addition, even as my career developed, there were times when it also felt like ‘a bit of a boy’s club’. However, I never really let it get to me as I love what I do and I’m passionate



Michelle in her apprentice days.



The 2019 WorldSkills Nationals.



about the refinish industry, which is what really keeps me going.”

When she looks back, she says it is so good to see how far the industry has come in support of women, which makes the path for the next generation of women much more equitable – as it always should have been. Michelle even admits to being a little bit jealous of the girls today when she thinks back to what she had to go through, but it’s actually because of women like Michelle who laid the foundation for this current generation of women in our industry that it is a much more exciting and positive space in which to build a career.

Michelle is also quick to point out that she has been inspired by so many people throughout her journey, having been fortunate to have had many mentors during her career, all the way back to one of her early supervisors with whom she is still friends today. In the corporate world, she says she has also been fortunate to work with some amazing managers and leaders who encouraged and inspired her. “It was the support I received from my early mentors that gave me the confidence to always try and approach projects from a different angle and look outside the box for innovative solutions. I never imagined when I finished studying fine art that I would spend the next 20 odd years in the refinish industry covering such diverse roles as technical support, product management, marketing and sales through to my current position as a business development manager.

I wouldn’t change any of it. I have really enjoyed each and every role and all the people I have met along the way.”

I then ask Michelle to share some of her wisdom in terms of advice she would give other women considering a career in our industry. Unsurprisingly, she is direct and straight to the point. “Go for it! Take the initiative. If you think working on cars may be of interest, visit the local panel shop and ask to do some work experience and get a real taste of what the trade has to offer. If you like it – go for it! Believe in yourself and then anything is possible. Don’t let anyone else’s pre-conceived ideas of the industry get in the way. Try it for yourself and make up your own mind. It can be a truly rewarding experience.”

Michelle highlights that women can really enrich the industry by bringing a different perspective, much of which comes naturally with the diversity between men and women. “This, of course, leads to a plethora of opportunities in all aspects of the industry. Within the workshop there are technical trade roles or various administration and supervision roles, through to running the business. Outside of the body shop there’s the supply side of the industry – where I’ve spent the latter half of my career – with opportunities such as sales, demonstration, training, marketing, manufacturing, R&D, management – the list is endless.”

We return to discuss her current organisation and what it is that differentiates the Norton brand from

the competition. “Saint-Gobain is a global company that is 355 years old, and today employs over 170,000 staff. Globally, the Abrasives Division is top 3 in the market segments in which we operate”. Michelle goes on to say that it is the decades of innovation, product development and investment in the Norton brand that has placed Saint-Gobain as a pillar of the industry, and it is the reliability, consistency and quality that sets them apart. “Our support, training and technical expertise complement the product quality. We have always focused on the value-added approach and will continue to do so into the future.”

As I always do, I invited Michelle to provide a final message for you, our readers, and she sums it up in one word: opportunity. “In the collision repair sector of the automotive industry there are no shortage of exciting career paths available today. These opportunities are open to both women and men, whether you are ‘on the tools’ or running the business, whether you are trade qualified or tertiary educated, the industry is dynamic, forward-looking, and very much a hi-tech industry of the future.”

She goes on to say: “If you’re not sure where to go, ask someone. One of the strengths of the collision repair industry is the great people you meet along the way, always happy to offer advice and guide and mentor others to help them achieve their potential.”



Australasian Head Office.



At the 2019 Collision Repair Expo.