



# Paula Hilditch

## Head of Product Management and Marketing, Hella Australia

WE CAUGHT UP WITH PAULA HILDITCH AND DISCOVERED AN INSPIRATIONAL MARKETING PROFESSIONAL WHO BRINGS EXTENSIVE GLOBAL AUTOMOTIVE EXPERIENCE AND A PASSION FOR MENTORING NEW TALENT TO HER NEW ROLE.

We got the discussion underway with a “walk down memory lane” as Paula took us back to where it all began, which interestingly is her university days back in the UK, where she studied materials engineering with a focus on glass and ceramics.

Following her degree, Paula went to work for Pilkington, the British based multinational

glass manufacturing company, where she began her career in research and development in the building products division. “This role was multi-faceted as it gave me the opportunity to travel the world visiting mine sites, buying raw materials and designing glass

compositions. It really was a very specialised and very technical role.” This also gave Paula exposure to capital projects, such as constructing processing plants around the world and working with the people who were putting the business cases together, a function that was to serve her well later in her career.

After five years in the building products division, Paula secured a role in Pilkington’s automotive division as Business Planning Manager, Specialised Transport, supplying glass into the truck, bus and agricultural machinery sectors. “This was my first commercial role and my introduction to the automotive industry. However, I was only in the role two years before I moved to the Global Product Manager’s position in the OEM business unit, with responsibility for managing Pilkington’s windscreen portfolio across all major markets.”

Paula speaks fondly of this period of her career as she got to work with designers, stylists and engineers at all the major car manufacturers around the world, to understand their needs and therefore prioritise Pilkington’s windscreen product development programs. “At the time, we were supplying approximately one third of the global windscreens, so it really was a key part of our business, and a testament to the strength of our engineering capabilities. I had access to the global design centres in North America, Japan and Europe, which gave me a fascinating insight into the OEM world and, in particular, what was coming next. It really was a very privileged position.”

It was at this time that Paula first



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became exposed to the then embryonic active and passive safety systems, the predecessors to the now omnipresent advanced driver assist systems, and their inextricable link to windscreen technology, which really did auger well for the next steps in her career.

“Almost 10 years ago, my partner and I moved to Australia and, although I was initially focused on suppliers to the automotive sector, I was able to continue my automotive career at GM Holden in a newly-created role, Collision Business Manager.” From a blank canvas, Paula spent the next six years creating and developing Holden’s aftersales business, working with the various stakeholders, such as repairers, insurers, dealers and even industry associations. “The role had the level of complexity that I was looking for, and it gave me the opportunity to really build something from the ground up. It was fascinating to work with so many stakeholders whose interests were not always aligned, but it was in all of our best interests to make it work.”

Paula was quick to realise that although the company’s objective was to maximise revenue, the enablers were much more subtle, particularly around engaging with those who were using the parts. She focused on providing the complete technical information to ensure the end user could deliver a safe and proper repair. It was at this time she

created the Holden Technical Hotline – but we will hear more on this later. After three years “in collision”, Paula went on to become Holden’s General Manager – Aftersales Parts, followed by a stint as General Manager – Retail and Dealer Marketing, focusing on GM’s sponsorship activities in motorsport, before, as we all know, GM wound up the business.

After a short sabbatical – although this turned out to be longer than expected due to COVID-19 – Paula joined her current organisation, Hella Australia, just as Victoria was beginning to emerge from the extended lockdown of 2020. “I was really looking for an organisation with great values where I could work with a wonderful team and get back to product marketing. Of course, knowing the Hella brand, I really welcomed the opportunity to meet the team and the more I saw and heard, the more I became engaged in the process. Although we are part of a global organisation, the Australian business is a close, compact team underpinned by a great culture, so I have the opportunity to work across all of the moving parts in the business.”

Paula went on to explain that there are two key aspects to her role. Firstly, the product management area means she has full responsibility for the product lifecycle management, including sourcing the right products

for our market, creating the business cases and, of course, new product introduction. “I have a team of four product managers supporting both the lighting, electrical and electronics divisions. We are so much more than the lighting business for which we are so well known.”

The other key aspect of Paula’s role is the marketing function, which is fundamentally to ensure that the value propositions of all the products are communicated effectively through the various print, digital and event management outlets. “My two marketers both have keys roles in ensuring we deliver the message effectively to both our existing and potential customers, especially when you consider we have a range of brands across various markets.”

The extensive brand portfolio for which Paula and her team are responsible includes: the main Hella brand, Hella Marine, Hella-Gutmann Solutions in the automotive aftermarket, and Hella Pagid in the automotive braking market. In addition, Hella also distributes Scangrip handheld work lamps and Mahle thermal products, such as radiators and condensers.

As a professional businesswoman with an extensive career predominately in the automotive sector, I asked Paula to discuss the



Paula with the Hella team.



achievements of which she is most proud. Interestingly, with a career that spans the globe, she speaks about the initial role at Holden.

“As Collision Business Manager I had to engage the support of the broader Holden organisation for the technical aspect of repairing cars. The collision business within an OE is generally not well understood, so getting commitment and support can be extremely challenging. My plan was to set up a technical hotline, so I needed access to internal technical resources – and funds to communicate with the industry – so I built the business case and pitched the plan to some very senior technical people in Holden, some of whom had global responsibilities, to get access to their technical personnel for free. The outcome was growth in the sale of genuine parts, further building the Holden brand and, most importantly, doing the right thing by the customer. It actually became a bit of a case study within the GM organisation.”

We turned our attention back to Hella and what differentiates the brand from its competitors. Paula points to the organisation’s pedigree as a Tier 1 supplier to OEMs across the globe, which represents 80% of the global business. “Although there is a huge range of Hella products on the car as it leaves the dealership, the brands are not so evident.”

Ironically, Hella is better known for its presence in the automotive aftermarket, notwithstanding that it is the minor part of the business. As the manufacturer of so many original parts on so many global OEM makes and models, Hella is the source of so much of the innovation in the cars of today and the cars of tomorrow. “We see this as a real sustainable competitive advantage, which is backed up by our research and development and investment in product innovation, which clearly flows through to our aftermarket portfolio.”

Paula also highlights that the diagnostics business has been well established in Europe for quite a long time, with extensive coverage in those markets. “The Hella-Gutmann launch journey in Australia is still less than two years old, but clearly the global capability

is there. The opportunity is therefore to enhance the message and improve the communication to build the scale here in this market. We need to show that not only do we have an exceptional understanding of how the electronic components work in a vehicle, but we also have the diagnostic and calibration capability.” Hella’s lighting capabilities are so well known around the world that it almost overshadows that the electronic business has a similar level of commitment.

I then asked Paula who has been her greatest inspiration throughout her career, and she was quick to acknowledge that she has been inspired and mentored by several managers and leaders over the years. However, when I pressed her to be more specific, she singled out Jo Markham from her years at Holden.

“Jo headed up the Aftersales business and was well regarded as someone who paid great attention to strategically managing her career. She was positive, assertive, and a person of the highest integrity who invested so much time into developing her team and even others in the broader Holden business. She really was an inspirational female leader who could empower people to be confident, think differently and really fight for people’s rights. I had the privilege to work with her on two separate occasions.”

Paula added that she has learned so much from so many people in her journey and taps into

the “patchwork quilt” of influencers on a regular basis as she manages the challenges she faces in both business and in life in general.

It is evident that Paula is very passionate about the automotive industry, so I asked her what advice she would give young women considering a career in our industry. “This is an extraordinarily challenging and fascinating industry, full of so many opportunities. It is at the cutting edge of design, technology and innovation, with a great diversity of roles available across the entire supply chain. It’s important to point out that not everyone in the automotive industry is necessarily into cars. They are creative, innovative individuals with a passion to work with similar people, work in a collaborative culture and feel part of a community that adds so much value to society as a whole. If young women are looking for an industry in which they can learn and grow, the automotive industry has so many opportunities. It really is a great career option.”

In closing, Paula wants to encourage all of us in the industry to share our experiences and – who knows? – it may well inspire the next generation of designers, engineers or technicians. “Take every opportunity to speak to people about what you do and how great an industry we work in. You just never know who’s listening and how you can influence the direction of someone’s career.”



Really enjoying her time at Holden.