Meet the Incoming Weber Shandwick Collective CEO, Susan Howe

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This month, The Weber Shandwick Collective (TWSC) got a new CEO—but it seems like there won't be much of an adjustment period.

Susan Howe stepped into the chief executive role at the communications agency on Dec. 2, and since joining nearly 29 years ago, she has held successive leadership roles running the gamut from regional general manager to global head of consumer marketing. She succeeds Gail Heimann, a marketing legend in her own right, who announced her retirement earlier this year.

With a tenure approximately equal to Heimann's, Howe entered the C-suite in 2017, holding two less commonly seen C-suite titles—those of chief collaboration officer and chief growth officer—before ascending to agency president in 2021. Throughout her growth at the agency, she has adhered to a tenet of optimism, using joy and laughter as tools in her problem-solving arsenal.

Howe sat down with ADWEEK to discuss the through lines and particularities of her career journey, the staying power of TWSC, and her thoughts on what's energizing about the state of communications today.

Her words have been edited for length and clarity.

Picking up pieces

I have chosen to build my career at Weber because it has always afforded me the chance to zig and zag, learn and grow. I think to some people, it might look quite linear because I'm so long tenured in one agency, but in truth, [I] was picking up skills and opportunities every step of the way. You don't know what piece you're picking up until you get it all together and you need it for the next thing.

When I was earlier in my career and partnering with clients, I learned how to give and take, push back, and develop ideas. When I ran a couple offices, it was about how to put people in the right role at the right time. When I was able to take on some global experiences, it was all about the context around me, and how local context and culture influences the work we do so fundamentally.

A vital part of our story—and I think this is true for my story as well—is this collaboration "muscle" that is so intrinsic to how we operate. When they named me chief collaboration officer, I think it was a first-of-its-kind C-suite role. It was the recognition that we needed to change the kinds of teams we brought together.

I knew that I wanted to be somewhere that was always changing and challenging. I don't think I ever mapped what those steps would look like, but I knew if I could keep finding experiences that kept my curiosity alive and enabled me to deploy my optimism, I would stay and try to do what's next.

Success in the era of earned

When I think about Weber and who we are in the industry, we

have these incredible roots in PR, but we've evolved so much to be about earned ideas. I believe that we are firmly in the era of earned, and that means there needs to be new solutions for what marketing delivers.

> *Susan will characterize herself as optimistic—but I think you don't get to be optimistic unless you have the intellect, strength, resilience, and strategic acumen to lead through change and complexity, which she has done and will continue to do. I am thrilled for her—and I will be excited to watch TWSC continue to soar under her leadership.*
>
> *—Gail Heimann, former CEO, The Weber Shandwick Collective*

This is a moment [when] what we do in communications is all the more important. When you think about all of the seismic changes that are happening in society—in terms of media fragmentation, politicized conversations, complexity of delivering a message—being the team, the agency, the partner that is able to tap into culture and help a story move into the zeitgeist is incredibly powerful. Earned is needed on both sides of the coin more than ever: We have to protect the reputation because of all that complexity, but we also have to promote the reputation, and that is equally complex. You need optimism and resilience to get through both of those.

The edible mascot at the Pop-Tarts Bowl, that's communications—knowing what's happening in culture, knowing what people are going to find joyful and take on [to] tell the story themselves. That is just such a brave client. I remember when we talked about the idea, before we presented it, how we had to gear ourselves up for that conversation. We're like, "Do we really want to take this to the client? We're going to eat the mascot." And they said, "You scared us. Let's go." That's the kind of partnership that really is just precious.

Building the agency of the future

I am so lucky to be born with this sense of optimism. In many ways, it's a gift, not a skill. I wake up most days this way, seeing the potential. That's me as a person. But also, I think [about] our role in the industry—how do we continue to make communications better? And for our clients, how do we help them solve some of the most challenging, business-critical issues in the world? All of that is energizing, which becomes the cycle of goodness to fuel more optimism. My side hustle is that I'm a yoga teacher, so [I have] that desire to embrace a beginner's mindset and just take it back down to the human form.

What's on the horizon that I need to continue to learn and develop? In many ways, it's the unknown. I have been here my career, but what will the next chapter bring as CEO, and what do I need to pick up?

When you know that others believe in you, it makes you stronger and more willing to make that leap forward. And that's something I also try to apply myself: How can I be supportive for the teams I partner with and give them the energy and the understanding that we can do it?

Part of my passion has been the development of people here—in particular, supporting women leaders. In an industry that has so many women participating, there are not enough women in the rock star jobs: the C-suite roles in general, or the jobs that make them feel like rock stars in whatever way they would define that. A lot of those jobs are held disproportionately by men. How do we support getting more women into the rock star jobs? That's part of my mission … [and that means] sponsorship, mentorship, access, experiences, travel—the

things that spark their curiosity to continue to grow.

The agency we are today is not the agency we need to be in six months or 12 months or even two months. The future is always imminent. So this focus on continuous reinvention and being the agency of the future, whatever that future looks like, has been very, very critical.

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