

Taking chances

What it takes to move up in the retail and consumer goods industry

By Debby Garbato

In 2000, Robin Chase co-founded Zipcar. She had three young children and \$78 in the bank.

Today, the car-sharing company has nearly 1 million members. While Chase had no transportation experience, she knew how to run a business. And she believed in the power of women.

Chase is unusual. According to Arch Profile, which conducts psychological assessment testing for corporations, women are far less likely to take risks than men. Theories suggest that as caretakers, women fear endangering loved ones.

Taking risks, however, is a key leadership

competency, and Chase is one of many executives inspiring other women to become less risk-averse. Facing dramatic market changes, more women in the retail and consumer goods industry are making career decisions involving uncertain outcomes. They are seeking advice and taking well-researched and calculated risks to advance their careers.

Not a natural

Stacey Brown, vice president of human resources, labor relations, government and public affairs at Safeway, is not a natural risk taker. When offered a big promotion and relocation to Maryland, she had to weigh the personal and



Are you a risk taker?

Experts define a calculated risk taker as someone who evaluates if an opportunity involving risk is worth pursuing.

A calculated risk taker

- Is able to act on incomplete information and judge when incomplete information is sufficient for action.
- Is self-aware and able to accurately assess her own capabilities.
- Evaluates likely benefits against likely costs of actions.
- Sets challenging, but attainable, goals.

Sources: Dr. S. Caird, Get2Test.net

professional implications.

"I was director of labor relations at [sister division] Jewel Osco in Chicago," she recalls.

"My ex-husband and I share custody of our two boys. Everything was going well. Then the opportunity arose. Do I work for a division that wasn't as successful at the time and take my kids, one of whom has special needs, away from their father and a good support system? It scared me."

The Maryland office was going into a merger and there were many unknowns. Employees felt they were on shaky ground. And Brown was unsure if she was qualified. "Everyone was terrified," she says. "I didn't know if I was ready. I had to put on big boots. I felt I didn't know

what I was doing and people would figure it out. It was a lot of change at once," she says, admitting that privately, she cried a lot.

Brown prayed and talked with her colleagues, ex-husband and members of her church. "One co-worker said to 'suck it up and stop crying,'" she says. "The male executive leaders really went to bat for me, making sure I had every opportunity to succeed in ways I didn't expect. It was really humbling."

Eighteen months later, Brown's children are "thriving." Working at Safeway, she was able to save 800 jobs through a series of complex union and government negotiations. And she was promoted again.

risk takers

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Stacey Brown

Vice President, Human Resources,
Labor Relations, Government, Public Affairs
Safeway



Crossing borders

Canadian-born Lisa Bagshaw, vice president of sales, drug channel at Henkel, also faced a life-changing opportunity. She could accept a promotion and move to Chicago or stay in Canada in a role she was successful and comfortable in. Looking back on her accomplishments, she realized a series of calculated risks are what led to the promotion.

Bagshaw, an 18-year Henkel veteran, began researching international work issues and finding a new home in the right neighborhood. She also gathered insights regarding her new customers and new team, which would enable her to quickly adjust to her new role. “I had to leave family, friends — everything I’d known and worked for. Would I enjoy the challenge? Would I be able to make an impact?”

Conversations with her mentor before and after the move were valuable. Four years later, Bagshaw has made new friends and has had a positive effect on the team. In 2013, her team was recognized as Team of the Year. In 2015, her unit was awarded Unit of the Year for laundry. “Risk can be a positive motivator,” she says. “It’s frightening at the same time. But risk and reward balanced out.”

Stepping back to move ahead

Some career risks involve leaving a well-paying job to gain valuable experience. Kristen Abreu, now Walgreens team leader at CROSSMARK, left a position at a successful company after 16 years during a reorganization. That day, she received a great job offer — and turned it down. “I was 20 years into my career,” she says. “I’d been a category manager and divisional merchandise manager. I needed to step back and understand where I wanted to go.”

Abreu launched her own consulting company,

“Risk can be a positive motivator.”

Lisa Bagshaw

Vice President of Sales, Drug Channel
Henkel



working with a CPG sales team on strategic projects. The one-year contract Abreu negotiated allowed her to take time to decide how she wanted to spend the rest of her career.

After the year was over, Abreu moved to a shopper marketing agency. She enjoyed the creative aspects. “I liked working with the shopper marketing agency. I took a job with one, stayed eight months and really enjoyed it. But I missed the numbers side and working with suppliers.”

She ended up at CROSSMARK, where she leverages her talents and says she couldn’t be happier. “I’ve been able to round out my skill set,” she says. “I help develop programs specific to retailers’ needs. I deal with everyone from \$65 million vendors to those with one or two products.”

Education her way out

Sheila Iwano, vice president of brand development at Catalina and an 11-year company veteran, is a prime example of overcoming challenges — and taking risks. Iwano was raised in a low-income, inner-city housing project but looked to education as her means of escape. She credits attending Brooklyn Tech, a specialized high school for the academically gifted, with changing her life trajectory and instilling within her a risk-taking mentality.

At age 14, her day began with a two-hour commute (each way) just for the opportunity to receive a quality education. At the time it felt as though she had to work twice as hard to get half as far, but this is how grit and sacrifice would become life-long guiding principles that would serve her well throughout her journey.

At the same time, Iwano, who is of Vietnamese and Puerto Rican descent, often felt alienated — not only in her African-American neighborhood, but by not being “Asian enough” or “Hispanic enough” to be accepted by either community.

This is where her inherent passion for CPG comes from. “When you think about it, how would a marketer back then have targeted me demographically?” she says. “It’s a very exciting time to be a consumer today. Whereas we were once relegated to a one-size-fits-all value proposition, consumers are now in control, demanding and receiving relevant content and offers.”

This passion was first discovered when she took a job as an administrative assistant in a retailer’s consumer insights group — and took another risk. When

her boss noticed she was analyzing data, he promoted her to business analyst. “I was terrified,” she says. “I had a clear vision of what my administrative career path looked like. But I trusted him, accepted the change and my CPG career took off. Since then, with every promotion I’ve achieved, we meet for a celebratory lunch.”



“Act from a place of authenticity, not from fear or obligation.”

Sheila Iwano
Vice President of Brand Development
Catalina

Love and mentorship

Many successful women receive support from family, friends, colleagues and religious congregations. Others were encouraged by teachers, professors, even neighbors.

Abreu has consulted with the same mentor and professional friend since she was named assistant category manager in her early 20s. “A former boss has been there through good times and bad. He doesn’t tell me what to do. He helps me think through pros and cons, see the big picture and draw conclusions,” she says.

Safeway’s Brown met her mentor at a conference. When she discussed her promotion and compensation package, the woman told her, “If this is what would be offered a male counterpart, take it.” Brown heeded that advice. “I explained what I wanted and why, and they said I was absolutely right.”

Family support can be emotional or physical. For Brown, who had grown up in Maryland and moved back there to accept the Safeway position, it has been both. “My parents unpacked and set up my house and helped me find daycare. I had ready-made support.”

Some families, like Iwano’s, can not provide the necessary support. Iwano was raised by her Vietnamese mother who did not fully understand American culture. “My mother believed that the only respectable career was that of a doctor or lawyer.” Beyond her family, friends thought she was crazy for becoming a mother at 21. “If I’m

being honest and objective, I don’t think my naysayers were trying to be intentionally discouraging. They simply couldn’t see beyond my circumstances or the depth of my ambition.”

Authentic success

Whatever the situation, many women leaders say the most important factor in taking a calculated risk involves being true to yourself. Jennifer Elmashni, senior director of sales strategy at Johnson & Johnson, is the first to admit she’s a bit eccentric and felt she had to tone down her personality and style to fit a corporate mold and expectation. But in “holding back,” she felt unfulfilled. Finally, she let her hair down.

“One Friday, my boss noticed a pair of bright green sneakers I didn’t really realize I was wearing to work. He loved them. His recognition of the shoes was figurative. But it sent me a message of encouragement that it was really OK to be my authentic self,” she says.

“The more I was myself, the more I realized others wanted to follow my lead. Taking the risk of leading in my own, diverse way — I’ve learned has greater impact.”

However calculated, most women who’ve “been there, done that” admit not all risks are worth taking. Even if the risk makes professional sense, it may not be right for everyone. “Act

from a place of authenticity, not from fear or obligation,” advises Iwano. “Most importantly, be willing to walk away from risks. I still have never jumped out of a plane, gone zip-lining or baked a cake from scratch. There’s nothing wrong with that.” ●●●



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