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**THE HOST**



*James Jackson*

Please enjoy this transcript  
of my interview with  
**Sylvia Wulf!**

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00:00:37:10 - 00:00:38:13

James Jackson  
Welcome, Sylvia.

00:00:38:28 - 00:00:40:29

Sylvia Wulf  
Thanks, James. It's an honor to be here.

00:00:41:29 - 00:01:14:12

James Jackson  
Thank you. So, Sylvia has an incredible career journey. She has done a myriad of different positions in the industry, actually, both on the food side as well as the food service side. And she is now really steering a really interesting organization that we'll talk about that a little later as well. But before I really get started, Sylvia, I was hoping that you could go a little further in detail on your career journey, and then we'll get started.

00:01:14:27 - 00:01:17:07

James Jackson  
Let's get in the trenches.

00:01:18:18 - 00:01:47:01

Sylvia Wulf  
Thanks again for having me. So, you know, when I think about my career and how it's evolved over time, I think the one constant is very early on, I really recognized that I loved business. I just love business. It's what makes the economy move. It's what provides livelihoods for people. And so that really drove me into a business career starting in college.

00:01:47:10 - 00:02:13:00

Sylvia Wulf

And I started in finance because I believe that business is all about keeping score. And that's what finance and accounting does. And so I actually started in a cost accounting and then financial planning role, and that evolved into market research when I went back and got my MBA; because I started to recognize that the broader world of business, you have to think about the customer.

00:02:13:00 - 00:02:49:09

Sylvia Wulf

And that has been a consistent theme throughout my career, is how do you build a business that's customer centric? How do you make sure that you are in fact putting points on the board, which are dollars to the bottom line? And so that is how I developed my career. I didn't stay with any particular organization. It was more about I chose career moves based on the opportunity to continue to build that business career, because I knew ultimately that my goal was to be in general management and or, you know, run a company or a business line.

00:02:49:17 - 00:03:08:18

Sylvia Wulf

So I've had roles in, as I said, finance, in accounting, marketing. I actually asked one of my mentors if I could move into a sales role, and I still remember him looking at me and saying, You don't want to do that. Then you have to deal with customers. And I'm like, Yeah, I do want to do that.

00:03:08:18 - 00:03:35:01

Sylvia Wulf

I think you want to be on the front lines because if you're going to run a business, you need to think about what that looks like from a sales perspective and then operational roles. I've done M&A, and most importantly, I think to this conversation is how I got involved with category management, because at the end of the day, category management is putting together an assortment that's relevant to a customer, right, or a consumer.

00:03:35:09 - 00:03:45:11

Sylvia Wulf

And then how do you make sure that you're positioning that assortment appropriately so that you're driving them to that category and you know that they're picking your products?

00:03:45:22 - 00:04:04:04

James Jackson

Yeah, that's great. And I'm glad you jumped into category management. You know, we had a conversation prior to the show and one of the questions that I asked was, well, well, how did you get exposed to category management? And you actually gave a pretty interesting answer. So if you could share that, that would be great.

00:04:04:13 - 00:04:26:21

Sylvia Wulf

I think my first exposure to category management was I went to work for Pillsbury, and Pillsbury is a big retail organization, although I was in food service. And so we were trying to think about category management and that particular channel based on that excellence that they had on the retail side. But I think most relevant is the experience that I had at Sara Lee.

00:04:27:06 - 00:04:57:10

Sylvia Wulf

So I joined Sara Lee Coffee and Tea, and so it was also predominant in the Foodservice channel. But just as I joined the company, they bought six coffee companies to consolidate their position in the coffee space, and that included retail brands like Chock Full of Nuts, Hills Brothers. And so what we did was we really had to think about the category and the product line specifically as we merged all of these businesses and brands.

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Sylvia Wulf

And the way that we started to think about it was to apply category management principles to those categories so that as we integrated those businesses, we were coming up with a portfolio that was compelling to our customer and to their consumer or their patron in the case of food service. And I think category management principles are relevant both in the retail segment as well as the food service segment.

00:05:24:05 - 00:05:38:09

Sylvia Wulf

And so it was really because we had these businesses and we had to figure out how to integrate them and extract the value for them that led me to really think through how do we apply those principles to this particular opportunity.

00:05:38:09 - 00:05:59:20

James Jackson

Yeah, you know, it was funny. So when you said that, you know, I think we tend to think about category management and directed at a retail store or directed at a food service organization or distributor. I never really stepped back and thought about how you could do that internally too at a manufacturer, you know, and still have at it that optimal assortment, as you mentioned.

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James Jackson

So I thought that was really fascinating. So once you did that, you made another step in your career and so if you could walk through that because again, now you're kind of engaging with a retailer and talking in an interesting space within the store as well.

00:06:17:20 - 00:06:54:22

Sylvia Wulf

Yes. So after I left Sarah Lee, I joined Tyson Foods and I joined actually on their food service in their foodservice business and was in charge of both brand communications and product management. And so, again, the ability to think through one of those, what's the meaning of those categories and what role do they play? And then I was moved on to the retail business specifically in the deli, and it was at the time when retailers really wanted to compete for the traffic that quick service restaurants had.

00:06:55:01 - 00:07:21:08

Sylvia Wulf

And so they were rethinking what is what's the purpose of the category and then how do we think about it transformatively and how do we surround it with what will make it successful. We think about shopper insights. We did a lot of work on foot traffic and really attracting people to the deli and being able to think about the category and new products for example.

00:07:21:08 - 00:07:55:22

Sylvia Wulf

It's old hat today. But back, you know, I hate to say this, 15 years ago it wasn't as common in the deli to see prepackaged foods, you know, take home meals. We actually went over to the U.K. because they had a lot of fresh kinds of prepared foods in the U.K. And we wanted to learn what could translate to the U.S. Now we're much larger in terms of the geography, but it was really about what products and how do we think about the categories like rotisserie chicken and, you know, deli meats?

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Sylvia Wulf

How do we drive consumers to the deli and how do we make sure that we have the right assortment, the right insights to be able to make sure that we're capturing that consumer dollar?

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James Jackson

Yeah, Yeah. It's interesting because I think back then was when you really started to see kind of the channel blurring and you saw it not only where we were thinking, Hey, you've got grocery products in a drugstore or what have you, but the reverse was holding true as well. And so you've talked a lot about food service. This is one of our first episodes where food service has really been a conversation.

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James Jackson

But, you know, I also had an experience on the food service side. And food service is somewhat a little, if you would agree, a little behind retail when it comes to category management. But you led an organization that was definitely focused on bringing category management into the food service arena. So it would be great if you could kind of walk through a little bit about that experience and maybe some of the things you learned on that side.

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Sylvia Wulf

Sure. You know, I joined U.S. Foods at the time that we were owned by private equity, and they had brought in a new CEO who previously had been the CEO of Loblaw's. And so you think about private label, right? They really did create the private label category in a way that was brilliant, you know, almost branded. Right. It was the Loblaw's brand.

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Sylvia Wulf

And one of the ways that he wanted to rethink food service was to bring in category management talent that he had worked with when he was running Loblaw's. And so the person that brought me into U.S. Foods had actually run category. He was the chief merchant for Loblaw's. And so when he came to U.S. Foods, he started to think about category management the way that a retailer would even though it's it's different because it's showing up on a menu.

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Sylvia Wulf

And so how do you translate some of the principles of category management, right assortment, right messaging. All of those things and building an analytical capability that no other food service does. Because you think about it, a food service distributor is a retailer. I mean, they're the same. And so how

do you take those principles, the analytics, the data, to be able to drive the right assortment based on the customer type?

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Sylvia Wulf

And it was a very successful strategy. I ran meat, seafood, produce. Those are what we considered the fresh categories, and they drive a lot of the other, the purchase of other categories. And so we started to look at the relationships and really thinking about the basket the way that, you know, you think about just the way that you do at a retailer.

00:10:50:04 - 00:11:02:06

Sylvia Wulf

And it was it was a highly successful strategy. It's one of the reasons I believe that Sysco came after US Foods to try to acquire it is because that whole methodology changed the game.

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James Jackson

Yeah, yeah I remember those days very, very well. So within that process though, because it was fairly groundbreaking, without disclosing too much proprietary information, what types of challenges did you face? Because even though, like you said, a distributor acts like a retailer, it is different. So what are some of the things that you face, whether that's internally or potentially even some of your partners, like your manufacturers, when now you don't have that relationship that's about more holding hands together versus data driven customer insights type relationship.

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Sylvia Wulf

Internally, it was food service had been a gut based decision business. And so, you know, I know what my customers need. I talk to them all the time. But if all you know is what you know, you may not be asking your customer the right question. And so when data was introduced into the process, it opened people's eyes.

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Sylvia Wulf

But we still had to overcome a lot of that inherent customer relationship component to the business because they always said, you know, it's a belly to belly business. And it is. So using data and analytics can help inform what's best for that customer because you understand them from a different perspective. And you can compare them to like customers similarly to way that you think about demographics, in the way you think about shoppers and consumers.

00:12:40:14 - 00:13:06:23

Sylvia Wulf

Because consumer becomes a shopper when they enter the store. Right? And so you have to make sure that shopper behavior is aligned with, you know, the consumer demographic. And it's very similar. If you think about restaurants, we'll use them as an example. You know, like restaurants have like menus. And so looking at what successful looking at their pricing strategies, all of those can be informed by data.

00:13:07:03 - 00:13:43:08

Sylvia Wulf



And so that was probably the biggest challenge is how do you think about it more analytically? How do you help people overcome the importance of the customer relationship, the personal customer relationship? And then when you think about your supplier partners it is really making sure that you understand who's going to be the category leader, right? Who's going to be the is going to own that category, but also that you don't get all the business because you're the category, right, is we need to make sure that we've got the right assortment and there are other vendors that play roles in that category.

00:13:43:15 - 00:13:52:22

Sylvia Wulf

How are we going to make sure that we have the most efficient, effective assortment, not necessarily based on one vendor? And so that was a big change as well.

00:13:52:29 - 00:14:19:13

James Jackson

Yeah, I saw it firsthand as well. So, you know, one of the reasons why I wanted to have you on today is because you have seen category management from its infancy and to today, and you've seen it both from working within an organization and pulling some of the levers to now running an organization and having category management embedded in that organization.

00:14:19:25 - 00:14:26:20

James Jackson

But holistically, what do you feel is the value of category management for an organization?

00:14:26:29 - 00:14:53:27

Sylvia Wulf

Let me start with what I believe is fundamental to the success of category management, and that really is customer centricity and, you know, customer and consumer centricity, right? You need to make sure that you understand your customer and you need to understand the consumer and the shopper that is interacting with that customer. And if you lose that, you will never be successful in category management.

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Sylvia Wulf

It's not an exercise. You've got to make sure that you constantly have an eye on, you know, who's walking in the store and why, you know, what are those? How did they make those decisions in terms of what to buy and how to build that basket? Because that's what the customers that the retailer is going to care about or distributor is going to care about.

00:15:13:24 - 00:15:38:18

Sylvia Wulf

So I'd start with that. And I think if you build from there, the principles apply and the benefit for the organization, as I become a much more effective and efficient partner and that puts me ahead of my competition. And at the end of the day, that's what you're really looking for, for your own organization, is how am I positioned as the partner of choice?

00:15:38:26 - 00:16:15:02

James Jackson

Great, great. So I mentioned this evolution from, you know, early nineties until now, things have really changed or accelerated, especially over the past couple of years. One thing that really has come into play is omni channel. And I think we did talk about that a little. What are your perspectives on category management as we have changed and omni channel becomes a much larger portion of the business and of kind of our time spent within category management.

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Sylvia Wulf

I think the biggest impact has been the consumer can now choose different ways to experience the category. And so that forces you to think differently because that experience may look different, right? When they walk in a store and they see a shelf set or they, you know, you're looking at shopper attitudes. You need to think about the same way in terms of your e-commerce sites and how you're interacting with them digitally.

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Sylvia Wulf

Right. And so I think that the omni channel is forcing category managers to think about, you know, what is that look? What are the similarities? What are the differences and how do I position things appropriately depending on whether it's in-store or online. To me, those are the opportunities and the challenges that we have to solve for right now because the consumer's going to drive, but you want to be able to have that relationship with that consumer or that shopper.

00:17:21:29 - 00:17:30:00

Sylvia Wulf

And so how are you going to do that effectively, depending on where they're experiencing your product lines?

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James Jackson

So when you look at hiring somebody within a category management organization or a category manager specifically, what do you look for? What are the type of people that you hired or would hire for roles in your organization?

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Sylvia Wulf

First and foremost, I think category managers need to be analytical in their approach because I think that you're making stronger decisions based on data. But that being said, I think that they need to be sensitive to, again, that consumer, that shopper, which means that they need to they need to be intellectually curious, because I think that's what it's going to take to blend with that analytical skill set is I'm a constant learner.

00:18:18:06 - 00:18:28:21

Sylvia Wulf

I'm curious how can I think about things differently? And then, you know, will the data support my hypothesis? So those are the two qualities that I would look for in a category manager.

00:18:29:13 - 00:18:55:18

James Jackson

Got it. Got it. Good, good. So, so I hit you with a couple different questions in the trenches now I what? I'll let you come up for air. Take a breath. Finally coming up for air, a couple of fun questions. Learn more about you. So you talked about general management was a focus of yours, but you also have another passion.

00:18:56:11 - 00:19:26:16

Sylvia Wulf

You know, I'm passionate about agriculture, and the categories that I that I managed previously or the companies that I've worked for, like Tyson, they all stem from agriculture. And I think one of the hardest jobs in the country is to be a rancher or a farmer, because, you know, you're dealing with all kinds of challenges. And it's just a fascinating business.

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Sylvia Wulf

A lot of them are families still family owned and operated. And so agriculture is a passion of mine. I actually am on a board that shares AG an environment in the biotech industry, because I think that agricultural technology is going to evolve more rapidly than other areas of business. And the reason, as we always have to feed people and we have to do it in a sustainable fashion.

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Sylvia Wulf

So you think about, okay, how am I going to make sure that we don't have global starvation and how am I going to do it in a way that doesn't continue to damage the planet or is forced to deal with what we're, you know, with climate change and how do I do that effectively? And so to me, it's a fascinating space right now and one that I'm pretty passionate about.

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James Jackson

Excellent - which probably leads to what you're doing today. So if you could share for our audience a little bit about AquaBounty and what's happening with your organization.

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Sylvia Wulf

AquaBounty is a land based aquaculture company. What that means is we raise our fish in a land based tank farm in a bio secure environment that we can build them any place that we have access to the right kind of water. But the other component to our business is the biotechnology side. So we market the first genetically engineered animal approved for food use.

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Sylvia Wulf

We went through 25 years of testing and approval before our salmon. It's a salmon was approved for food use and I believe that that's the future. I know there's a lot of talk about GMOs, but I can guarantee you using biotechnology responsibly is going to allow us to meet the challenges that we have in terms of food security and, you know, the challenges that we have to protect the planet and why wouldn't we use those tools, you know, in a well-regulated and safe way to solve those challenges?

00:21:32:21 - 00:22:03:17

Sylvia Wulf



Because we have that, we have the knowledge, we understand in our DNA and look at what happened with the vaccine. And I know there's all kinds of controversy, but we never would have had a vaccine come to market that quickly. And so I think we need to use those tools in the toolbox. And I'm proud of my organization because it combines the ability to bring a healthy protein, our salmon, affordably and accessibly to large populations that may not have that accessibility.

00:22:03:17 - 00:22:07:25

Sylvia Wulf

And we're applying science and data to be able to do that responsibly.

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James Jackson

That's wonderful. And yeah, there there's definitely an opportunity as population grows and so on that that need for sustainable food options is a is paramount. It is so last kind of fun one for you a little more personal but you shared with me that you enjoy nature and you take walks. What's the name of your dog and what kind of dog do you have?

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Sylvia Wulf

So my dog's name is Snickers and she is a mutt. We have always had rescue animals, so she's our third rescue dog and we have our sixth rescue cat. His name is Smokey Robinson. But cats are always named after rock and roll stars. But the dog's name is Snickers and she we have no idea what she's made up of, but she was she was a rescue.

00:23:07:19 - 00:23:18:28

Sylvia Wulf

And we brought we she's a what they call a senior because she was four when we got her. So typically they're not adoptable at that age. But we love her. She goes on lots of walks with me.

00:23:19:19 - 00:23:49:21

James Jackson

Snickers and Smokey Robinson. Love it. Well, that's a great way to end the show, Sylvia. It's been awesome. I really appreciate it. I think people who are listening are very appreciative that you'd spent the time, because you do have kind of a different perspective. Being a leader of an organization and understanding the components of that organization and how category management really drives things or really contributes is something I think we all needed to hear.

00:23:49:21 - 00:24:15:13

James Jackson

So we appreciate the time. And for those who are listening, we thank you for joining us on this episode with Sylvia. And we are again looking for other compelling stories about compelling people. And so with that, thanks for joining us. And this is ARCAst. We just want to thank everyone for coming out and listening to our ARC podcast.

00:24:16:00 - 00:24:34:02

James Jackson

Please look forward to our next upcoming episodes as we bring more intriguing and insightful guests to our podcast. And don't forget, you're not alone. Have a great week.