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THE HOST



James Jackson

Please enjoy this transcript
of my interview with
Kate Berg!

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James Jackson

Hey. Hey, everyone. I'm your host, James Jackson. And this is ARCast. Join me each episode as we focus on the challenges and opportunities our category management and shopper insights friends face while in the trenches. If you're ready, let's dive right in. Here today with my friend Kate Berg, and she's a Customer Category Manager in Tyson's Retail Commerce Leadership Group.

00:00:35:19 - 00:00:37:12

James Jackson

Kate, welcome to the show.

00:00:38:02 - 00:00:39:01

Kate Berg

Thank you.

00:00:39:18 - 00:01:00:23

James Jackson

So, Kate, before we begin, we always do this, and I'll tell the audience Kate's journey is proof that your path can be nontraditional, but ultimately you find yourself smack dab in the world of category management. So if you could spend just a couple of minutes sharing a little bit about your experience and then we'll get going.

00:01:01:07 - 00:01:23:23

Kate Berg

Absolutely. First of all, thank you so much for having me. Good to see you. Yeah. So I'm with Tyson Foods and I have been around for almost just shy of 25 years. So in nine different roles, four different functions. Three locations. So I've relocated. I started with IBP, so the fresh meat side of our business, and that was just prior to the Tyson acquisition.

00:01:23:23 - 00:01:45:25

Kate Berg

And I was in Human Resources. I was a corporate recruiter with a focus on our engineering roles at corporate and plant locations. So kind of my first glimpse in how fresh beef and pork products come to market. I then moved into the college relations position, did that for four years, managing our college recruiting and campus events and our internship program.

00:01:46:05 - 00:02:11:14

Kate Berg

And that's what I was doing when Tyson acquired IBP. And so that position was identified as one of the early positions actually moving to corporate headquarters in northwest Arkansas. So my husband and I said, Sure, this is an adventure, let's go. So then in Arkansas, I soon moved into a manager role managing a team of corporate recruiters and working with VPs and directors to fill positions across the organization.

00:02:11:16 - 00:02:41:11

Kate Berg

So really getting a chance to see how the new company was coming together. It was an amazing opportunity to learn cross-functionally understanding what hiring managers were looking for and skills adds and people skills as the teams are being built. And then while in H.R., I had the opportunity to be part of our Emerging Leader development program, which again was just more continued learning, more exposure and most importantly, opportunities for networking.

00:02:41:25 - 00:03:00:25

Kate Berg

So I had the right conversation with the right person at the right time about what might be next in my career path. And it opened a door as our training team was kicking off a people rotation program. So they were picking up about seven people from one part of the organization, kind of throwing them somewhere else to see what would stick.

00:03:00:25 - 00:03:26:04

Kate Berg

And I moved from HR into a brand manager role supporting our club business, developing products there. It was supposed to be a three-month assignment, and it turned into almost two years just because we were having so much fun. But I had the opportunity to take eight items to market. So from start to finish, from insights to R&D, through just vetting the whole process.

00:03:26:04 - 00:03:50:08

Kate Berg

And it was incredibly exciting. Most of that being refrigerated and then a couple in Frozen and it was at that time then that they were like, Hey, this is a people rotation program. Like we have to rotate you. And there was a new opportunity that became available at SUPERVALU as they had just purchased Albertson's and they had this new corporate team looking for in-house support from key strategic partners, which Tyson was identified.

00:03:50:20 - 00:04:24:28

Kate Berg

And so the customer category manager and the category catalyst, or James Jackson and Kate Berg, we were we were in-house. And so as the catalyst, it was a dedicated resource to align our total Tyson resources and provide customer specific solutions. And then with that role, I moved from Arkansas to Minnesota to be customer facing. And then based on the normal ebb and flow of our industry in the business, there was contraction and expansion, and I had the opportunity to provide some long range planning guidance to other accounts like Target and Wegmans.

00:04:24:28 - 00:04:47:17

Kate Berg

And so it was fun to start, you know, branching out and learning about other customers and expanding that knowledge base. And then based on Target's emphasis in increasing their food footprint and own brands, our Target team expanded and I was able to move into a direct sales role on the Target team, and I was managing our refrigerated product portfolio there.

00:04:48:10 - 00:05:20:09

Kate Berg

So after three years in sales, Tyson acquired Hillshire, right? So now all of a sudden there were more brands, there were more people, there were more tools, and it became really evident that like it was time to get back in category, right? Get back on that side of the desk and take advantage of all of those tools. So I had been back in category for the past eight years as a customer category manager, but I have supported about seven different evolutions of sales teams as we've shifted either based on customer needs or internal needs.

00:05:20:09 - 00:05:31:14

Kate Berg

And so right now I primarily focus on supporting our national broker relationship for our Western regional grocery chain. So about 24 key accounts. And then I have one direct account with Save-A-Lot.

00:05:32:03 - 00:05:53:03

James Jackson

Wow. So there you go. What an incredible journey in and a lot of that I did not know. So it's good to learn about that and good for our audience, because you're probably the first person that has really come in that's had that true sales or customer development experience and then gone back into category management.

00:05:53:15 - 00:06:11:08

James Jackson

So I want to touch on a couple things. Just to clarify for some of our audience. So you mentioned a category catalyst, which was a unique position, but could you describe just very quickly what did you have to do as a category catalyst?

00:06:12:05 - 00:06:40:06

Kate Berg

It was so much fun, so totally made up position, right? Dedicated resource again to SUPERVALU. And I was tasked with navigating and fast tracking category projects through both the Tyson system and

SUPERVALU. Right. So we were talked earlier with like you were in house, I was in there 2 to 3 times a week, and our goal was to understand as much as possible about the customer strategy.

00:06:40:22 - 00:07:10:06

Kate Berg

And then it was my job to go back from a Tyson lens and figure out how do I pull these resources together and provide a solution there. So customer meetings like whether we had the Tyson people coming up to Minnesota or we brought people down to Arkansas, coordinating all of those resources and bringing people together, identifying the research from a primary and secondary standpoint that would help us derive some of the insights and solutions and then actually bringing some of those projects to life in store.

00:07:10:19 - 00:07:38:21

James Jackson

Yeah, So that that's very obviously very unique. But it was almost it sounds like a forerunner to what people do with the joint business planning process. So really, how do we connect the dots both internally as a manufacturer with a primary retailer? And you were that person because of your network and your understanding of the whole business, but a critical role, but a challenging role, I would say?

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Kate Berg

Absolutely.

00:07:41:29 - 00:08:08:16

Kate Berg

But it was so exciting, right? So I was pulling together our resources from all of our business units that was fresh, frozen and our refrigerated prepared. So internally, those pieces of the business didn't always talk together. And so it was my job to bring like, here's the lens of what we need to do for SUPERVALU, for their banners, for their ultimate consumers, and kind of focus the Tyson resources on what we could do specifically for them.

00:08:08:21 - 00:08:33:23

James Jackson

Yeah, that's awesome. So that that was the experience you know direct with the customer dealing with both sides of the equation, sales category management, brand and so on. Then you move into the customer development role. And I'm wondering how did that experience as a category catalyst help you and prepare you for a pure sales role?

00:08:34:22 - 00:08:52:15

Kate Berg

So it was it was a fabulous opportunity, right? You got to carry the bag, so they say, right? You got to have the volume and responsibility for what's going on, because I had already spent some time on the target business with some of their long range planning, I had already established some of the relationship with the buying team.

00:08:52:19 - 00:09:12:22

Kate Berg

Right. So first of all, you've got to build that rapport and have those relationships there. So now I just had to narrow my focus on what the target buyers and the guest needed. I was managing lunchmeat and bacon and since I had created club products during my time in brand management, I had been in those plants, I had worked with R&D, I knew the personnel.

00:09:12:22 - 00:09:30:17

Kate Berg

I was able to leverage internal networks there based on target specific initiatives, right? So I was taking that same lens of what are what was the SUPERVALU specific things that we needed. Now, how do you make you just switch your focus and really understand how this new customer is looking to operate and their strategies and how do we align with those?

00:09:31:14 - 00:09:40:19

Kate Berg

And so then just being connected and leveraging those internal networks again, just inherently helps you move faster through the system and meet the needs of the customer in their business.

00:09:41:07 - 00:10:06:11

James Jackson

Okay, So nice. So yeah, definitely sounds like you have the tools, right? And you had some prior experience, so you probably walked in and said, okay, I get this. I got I can handle this, no problem. But there were probably some things that you ran into that you didn't expect or had to learn. Could you talk a little bit about that as far as your role at Target?

00:10:06:17 - 00:10:34:09

Kate Berg

Yeah. So from a sales standpoint, I think first thing that comes to mind is we were an own brand partner with them for lunch meat and bacon, right? And so we're, we're working with very specific product guidelines and needing to meet obviously from a food safety and quality standpoint, but making sure that we were checking the boxes for all of their requirements for a very robust on brand program.

00:10:34:09 - 00:10:53:08

Kate Berg

Right. And that was challenging sometimes trying to connect the dots between producing a product from a Tyson spec standpoint and meeting the needs of the of the retailer spec standpoint and just making sure that we have all the right people that are talking and holding hands to make that happen.

00:10:53:14 - 00:11:29:06

James Jackson

Got it. Got it. So okay, so you're in this role. Now you've moved into a now from pure sales to pure category management. Right? But I think as a category manager, you would agree and on the sales side that sometimes those two roles, sales and category manager, the objectives can conflict or they can contradict. Right? So is there common ground or a formula for common ground that you found that allows those two to play well in the sandbox together?

00:11:29:24 - 00:11:55:24

Kate Berg

Yes, I think so. And I think based on my catalyst experience and kind of pulling all the resources together around the table, I am very fortunate that right now that I don't have any official firewalls that I am navigating in my category manager role. So I pride myself in always presenting the voice of the category and the consumer, because if the category wins, then in most cases the retailer is winning.

00:11:56:00 - 00:12:22:18

Kate Berg

And as a vendor partner, we are most likely seeing growth. I mentioned that when Tyson acquired Hillshire and all these tools that were suddenly available to us, our Shopper Insights team is second to none, right? They conduct very robust research. They are mining secondary data. They are ultimately building these category leadership platforms across our core categories, which is nine or ten.

00:12:23:07 - 00:12:45:05

Kate Berg

And these are tools that allow me to manage the 24 plus accounts that I have on my desk. Right. A customer has a question we want to do a deep dive in this area. Well, I have the toolbox all right there. I pull the deck and I'm able to just harness what I need to be able to approach every customer interaction from a position of strength with category agnostic data.

00:12:46:01 - 00:13:12:23

Kate Berg

Right? I mean, so that's just, I think, huge. And it's allowed me to build solid relationships with my customers so they know that they can trust and rely on the information that I'm sharing to be objective and in their best interest. So they oftentimes will call me first when they have a question. And so I consider that a win in my book, and I have worked long enough with my sales teams that they trust and understand the data.

00:13:13:14 - 00:13:21:24

Kate Berg

And I can work kind of both. I can serve as a consultant for both internal and external stakeholders, if that makes sense.

00:13:22:06 - 00:13:49:09

James Jackson

You're working with a national broker, right? And use 24 different accounts that you're touching. So you got a lot on your plate, right? And as a customer category manager, there are times, from what I would gather, that you are directly interacting with a customer so you can share that information. But there's a lot of times where you're not and specifically maybe going through that broker.

00:13:49:09 - 00:14:08:18

James Jackson

So can you speak about the dynamics of managing that process, working with someone external and giving them what they need, but then also being able to accomplish your goals when they've got a lot of other brands and other priorities on their plate?

00:14:08:18 - 00:14:27:13

Kate Berg

Yeah, I know it has been an adventure for sure. So having touched this part of the business for the last eight years, it's been an exercise in process improvement. So we had been national broker and then we actually split east and west, and now we've come back to national broker. So we're in year two of that relationship there.

00:14:27:13 - 00:14:56:29

Kate Berg

And there has been a lot of growing pains, but then also a lot of growth and opportunity. So I think one of the big things is just open lines of communication and regular touch points. So early on, like practically in my signature line I had "Your lack of planning is not my emergency," because when you have that many accounts on your table, like you just can't do fire drills every day, you can leave room for some fire drills, but you got to have things pretty buttoned up.

00:14:57:10 - 00:15:26:21

Kate Berg

So we've done a lot of heavy lifting to create regular team connections so that we can manage the business proactively, which sounds very basic, but we literally mapped out all of the touchpoints that we needed to be successful, and we booked biweekly calls with all of the appropriate teams because we figured we'd rather cancel a scheduled call because we were all locked and loaded and knew what we were doing rather than trying to pull everyone together for a last minute fire drill.

00:15:27:26 - 00:15:46:19

Kate Berg

So now we've kind of gotten to the point where most of our resources from a broker standpoint are dedicated, but even the ones that still share us a little bit on their desk because we have regular

touchpoints, we keep ourselves top of mind and we keep ourselves kind of up to date on all current customer needs.

00:15:47:09 - 00:16:00:06

James Jackson

Got it. So you are very intentional and process driven when it comes to working. I'm assuming that's the same though, not only with the broker but with any of the sales team.

00:16:00:29 - 00:16:16:01

Kate Berg

I have to be. When you have that many, it's too easy for some pieces to get kind of lost in the shuffle. I don't want anything to fall in between the cracks. And so like I said, I'd rather have everything on my schedule and if we need to cancel, we cancel. But otherwise you're not looking for me and I'm not looking for you.

00:16:16:01 - 00:16:20:05

Kate Berg

And your customer ends up having the information that they need when you need it.

00:16:20:14 - 00:16:37:22

James Jackson

Beautiful. Beautiful. So when it comes to boiling down that information, what are some key things that salespeople look for from a category manager to help them with their job?

00:16:38:13 - 00:17:01:03

Kate Berg

Yeah, I think first of all, the question is how do I look for it? And I think one of the other things that we have done a really good job with in the last 18 months, we have really worked on some consistent corporate reporting, right? We're almost at dashboard stage, but our Commerce Analytics team has done a wonderful job of, you know, you have all these teams who are kind of running their ad hoc reports.

00:17:01:03 - 00:17:30:17

Kate Berg

And so some people say pull it a certain way. So things weren't always apples to apples. We are relying now on more consistent reporting so that, number one, the salespeople know where to find it. It's updated on a monthly basis. They understand the format, so they're not hunting and packing every month. There's a comfort level that comes with, Oh, here's the data, here's my sales are up, my sales are down, oh, I can click this button and I can see based on incremental.

00:17:30:17 - 00:17:52:17

Kate Berg

So it's led to having some really great conversations internally that, yes, helps train the salespeople, but it allows them or us collectively to ask better questions, because if we're asking better questions and then we know where the data is and together we can kind of dig a little deeper. So which brands are up? Which brands are down, right?

00:17:52:17 - 00:18:11:07

Kate Berg

So now we're kind of chasing those breadcrumbs together. Then if they have a question and they can't get a hold of me, they know where to find it on their own, right? Because that was a hold up when I was a salesperson. I didn't have access to any of this information, so I was relying on somebody else to get back to me.

00:18:11:07 - 00:18:33:14

Kate Berg

Well, sometimes you just want to take a look at one or two things to get back to your customer in an email and sound really smart. And so that's our goal, right? And if we're asking better questions, we're removing some of the obstacles before the customer can even bring it up so that then the salesperson is equipped to go in and have a more consultative sales conversation of, well, here's what the category is doing, right?

00:18:33:14 - 00:18:36:25

Kate Berg

And so then they almost sound like they're as smart as a category manager.

00:18:37:04 - 00:18:58:07

James Jackson

Wow. That's a huge evolution there from the way things used to be. Especially on the fresh side. Where you have a customer development person talking category versus having the only way I'm going to talk about it is if somebody else comes in and talks for me.

00:18:58:24 - 00:19:02:02

Kate Berg

Yeah, I mean, it's super exciting. It's just it's elevated the whole game.

00:19:02:02 - 00:19:13:11

James Jackson

Wow. And I'm sure from the retailer perspective, they like that language as well because they see that you're actually not just selling product, but you're trying to find a solution.

00:19:13:24 - 00:19:15:29

Kate Berg

Exactly. You're selling a solution.

00:19:16:05 - 00:19:48:04

James Jackson

Wow. Okay, that's good. That's good. Well, we've been in the trenches for just a little bit here, Kate, and thanks for all your insight. I think it's definitely valuable for everybody listening, but now we need to come up for air. So this is a little chance to have some fun. So I think people probably heard you, but you talked about the fact that you were in college recruiting, right?

00:19:48:05 - 00:19:48:17

Kate Berg

Yes.

00:19:49:02 - 00:20:06:06

James Jackson

So to go from college recruiting to product, that's a pretty big... So could you just you know, obviously maybe fun. But what are things you really enjoyed by making that move?

00:20:06:12 - 00:20:33:24

Kate Berg

Yeah. I mean I just in general it's been a genuine interest to just keep learning. I mean, when you can go a step further back, my major is fashion merchandizing, right? So I started in retail, so finding clothing to help people look good. And then I moved into recruiting to find people, to make people look good. And so I just see it as kind of a transition into now I'm finding solutions to make customers look good, right?

00:20:33:24 - 00:21:13:22

Kate Berg

And in general, I mean, I say that in jest, but genuine interest for learning and it is amazing to me all the work that goes into bringing the products that we produce to market, right? It's an incredible network of people, and truck drivers and product, and... Right. I mean, nothing just magically happens every day. And so to learn how all of those pieces fit together, I think it just helps to have that big picture as you put all of the pieces together, at the end of the day, keep it really simple and find things that work.

00:21:14:02 - 00:21:37:28

James Jackson

So you talk about fashion, which explains or at least leads into my next question. You were well known for your shoes. So Kate would walk in with every known shoe known to mankind, every color, every pattern. What was the highest number of shoes you ever had?

00:21:38:17 - 00:21:58:00

Kate Berg

Oh, my gosh. Okay. So I think I have refined my collection now to maybe 40 pairs. I would probably say at the height I had close to 100 and I would have never counted them, because then it's plausible deniability that I would ever even have to admit how many shoes I had. And they may have been spread across three or four closets so that you never knew exactly you were there.

00:21:59:13 - 00:22:03:24

Kate Berg

And now the funny thing is, I probably only wear about 5 different pairs.

00:22:03:24 - 00:22:08:20

James Jackson

Okay. You know, you're letting us down. What was your favorite pair?

00:22:09:15 - 00:22:33:22

Kate Berg

Oh, my favorite pair. It doesn't even exist anymore. It was a Cole Haan peep toe snakeskin little heel that I bought for myself with some of my first bonus money after I moved into the catalyst position. So little badge of honor and they were super comfortable and very versatile, and literally they broke in half while I was wearing them after about ten years of having them.

00:22:34:17 - 00:23:06:09

James Jackson

But it's funny, that is, and I think I remember that pair. So that was the last question for you. You know, the clothes, you know, you obviously have a lot of experience across a number of different areas of the business, but let's focus on again, that kind of relationship between sales and category management. There's a couple, you know, nuggets that you could drop or one thing that you would recommend when dealing with that interaction.

00:23:06:09 - 00:23:07:02

James Jackson

What would it be?

00:23:08:03 - 00:23:35:28

Kate Berg

I think ultimately just staying open to opportunities, right? Open mind, active listening, eye contact and complete sentences, whether it's with your salesperson or with your customer, because you're making those connections. And sometimes with that active listening, you might hear something that gets glossed over if you move too fast and so that you might really dig in to understand where a customer concern or a sales person's concern really is.

00:23:36:20 - 00:23:57:24

Kate Berg

And then I would also say just looking for ways to improve and simplify process, right? What we do is not necessarily rocket science, but if we can stay connected from a communication standpoint and we can, especially in my world, streamline as much as possible, then it allows us to look for the areas of opportunity as opposed to just kind of chasing our tail throughout the week.

00:23:57:24 - 00:24:04:07

James Jackson

Nice, Nice. And I literally wrote down "Your lack of planning isn't my emergency."

00:24:07:14 - 00:24:10:21

James Jackson

Well, I appreciate you coming on, Kate. It's been awesome.

00:24:11:09 - 00:24:13:06

Kate Berg

Thank you. So good to catch up.

00:24:13:06 - 00:24:36:14

James Jackson

Yeah. And your career, you know, it was one of those I really wanted to talk to you about, because I think it really is instructive for people not only who are maybe going through the experience, but also dealing with the different departments or different areas - and how do I manage through that. So this has been incredibly helpful and well-wishes on your next step in your career, whatever that may be.

00:24:36:20 - 00:24:37:23

Kate Berg

Thank you very much.

00:24:38:04 - 00:25:03:09

James Jackson

All right. Well, you've just listened to another great episode of ARCast. Please look forward to more interesting stories and people in the weeks to come. For more information on our podcast, please go to www.catman.global/ArcaCast. And if you know someone who's just crushing it, please complete the form at the bottom of our web page.

00:25:03:21 - 00:25:20:24

James Jackson

We'd love to have them on our show. So with that, this is James Jackson signing off - and you've been in the trenches. See you next time.