



# A Day in the Life of Bill Novelli and Diane Ty

## Social marketers leading change

One of the co-founders of the global PR agency Porter Novelli, **Bill Novelli** is a recognized leader in social marketing and social change. He is a professor of practice in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at the McDonough School of Business, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, and teaches courses in Corporate Social Responsibility, Principled Leadership for Business and Society, and Leadership and Management of Non-profit Organizations.

**Diane Ty** is Senior Partner leading the Portion Balance Coalition and AgingWell Hub at Business for Impact – an initiative founded by Bill Novelli at McDonough; its mission is to help solve the world’s most pressing issues by delivering world-class education and impactful student experience, and through direct action with global companies, nonprofits and government leaders.

Bill and Diane share with us their experience of applying deep consumer insights to purpose-led communication initiatives.

**Sight and Life (SAL):** Bill, this issue of *Sight and Life* magazine is dedicated to consumer insights in the nutrition space.

In what ways have perceptions of the power of the consumer evolved in recent times?

**Bill Novelli (BN):** Consumer power has certainly evolved in recent times, and consumers today have a lot more options – both for good and for bad. Consumers today have many more options to find things out about the products put before them, and in many societies, although not all, they have much greater purchasing power than they ever had before. Just think of cars or breakfast cereals, for instance. Henry Ford famously said of the Model ‘T’ Ford, “You can have any color so long as it’s black.”

Nowadays we have a proliferation of different types of cars, including electric cars, and there will soon be driverless cars. The same proliferation of offerings exists in the field of breakfast cereals. That said, there are still many companies out there putting bad or flawed products onto the market, and so the dictum “buyer beware” is still as important as ever.

**“You, the marketer, are not the target audience”**

**SAL:** From your earliest days at the global FMCG player Unilever, your career has required you to get inside the minds of consumers. How do you approach this, and what have you learned along the way?

**BN:** In all my marketing experience, I like to fall back on two things. Number one: you, the marketer, are not the target audience. This is important, because people often tend to apply their own experiences when this is not a wise thing to do. The other thing is that you really need to do the research to understand the consumer. And the nature of the research you have to do has changed – it’s much faster and less expensive nowadays because of the new technologies available, but you still need to understand the mind of the consumer.

**SAL:** Diane, since 2014, you have been a Senior Adviser to the Service Year Alliance and its predecessor organization. Could you tell us something about that organization’s work, and also about the value of service to the community as you see it?

**Diane Ty (DT):** The Service Year Alliance is all about making a year of service a common opportunity, and also a common ex-



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Bill Novelli and Diane Ty walk the halls outside the Business for Impact offices at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business

pectation, for all young Americans. Mahatma Gandhi once observed that the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others, and that thought is at the heart of what the Service Year Alliance does. The magic really happens when people from different backgrounds come together and work for a common purpose. Our aim is not to mandate a year of service but rather to make it a cultural norm and expectation, so that when people meet one another for the first time, they might ask “Where did you serve?” – just as we nowadays ask “Where are you from?”

**SAL:** *You're Senior Project Director of the Portion Balance Coalition and also Director for the AgingWell Hub – two initiatives organized and convened by Business for Impact at the McDonough School of Business. What is the aim of these initiatives, what challenges do they have to overcome and what have they achieved to date?*

**DT:** In the Portion Balance Coalition, we've brought together representatives from government, industry, nonprofit organizations and academia to address America's obesity epidemic – with the aim to take this to the rest of the world in the course of time. On the demand side, we are orchestrating a campaign to raise consumer awareness of portion balance – meaning volume, proportionality and quality, and not simply portion control. On

the supply side, we're working with key industry players to address portions, starting with the away-from-home eating space.

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**“Major societal problems can't be solved by one player or one sector alone”**  
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The AgingWell Hub grew out of a collaboration that started with Philips in 2012, and was officially formed in 2015 as part of the White House Conference on Aging. As with the Portion Balance Coalition, we bring together ‘strange bedfellows’ – key players from different sectors, including direct competitors – because we recognize that these major societal problems can't be solved by one player or one sector alone. For example, I led the development of a Caregiver Journey Map for people taking care of loved ones with Alzheimer's disease. We created a persona of a woman who was caring for her aging mother and seeing the various stages of the journey from that caregiver's perspective. As an offshoot of the project, we also created an online calculator that calculates the cost of caring for someone with Alzheimer's at every stage of the journey. The current cost of Alzheimer's to society in the US is staggering. And more recently, we're looking to the Journey Map to model the impact of Alzheimer's on a financial caregiver.



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From left to right: Dena Graham and Nathan Phillips of THAT, Claudia Cukrov and Elisa Silva of SS+K, and Diane Ty discussing creative concepts for the Portion Balance Coalition, a program housed at Georgetown University’s Business for Impact, part of the McDonough School of Business

**SAL:** *The industry use of communication to stimulate societal change is a key theme in your work, Diane, whether at American Express, AARP, Save the Children or, more recently, the McDonough School of Business. In the era of social media, do the new technologies available to us offer genuinely new ways of engaging and mobilizing mass audiences, or do they mean that we are simply doing old things in new ways, in your opinion?*

**DT:** I think we’re genuinely doing new things. New technologies are making it easier to gauge and mobilize mass audiences. You can come up with more messages more quickly, you can reach a larger audience more cost-effectively, you can share actual content on a massive scale, and almost everyone has a voice now and can express an opinion. All that is positive, but there is a downside too, of course, because digitalization also creates opportunities for misinformation and the fueling of strife within society. And none of the new technologies replace the need for face-to-face communication.

**“Marketing has always been backed by science. It all just happens much faster today.”**

**SAL:** *Your background is in marketing: you joined American Express in 1987 and rose to become the company’s Vice President of Marketing. How much of marketing today is science, do you think, how much instinct and how much plain common sense?*

**DT:** I don’t have a magic formula, but I would say that marketing has always been backed by science. It all just happens much faster today, and there are many more tools in the marketing toolbox.

Nevertheless, marketing still requires a heavy dose of instinct and common sense. Everything that I’ve done in my marketing career has always been based on consumer insights. What’s different now is that those insights can be gathered and analyzed much more quickly, cost-effectively and in much greater depth.

**SAL:** *Bill, you were co-founder and President of the leading PR firm Porter Novelli, for which you worked from 1972 to 1990. What insights and skills from this experience do you apply to your wide range of not-for-profit work?*

**BN:** When Jack Porter and I started Porter Novelli, we moved from New York City to Washington, DC, to work for the Peace Corps, and then came up with the aim of creating a marketing communications agency there. We thought Washington was all about health and social issues. That shows you how naïve we were! Of course the place is really all about politics, and power, and money, and sex. Anyway, we applied marketing communications to health and social issues, and we created a niche for ourselves, because no one else was doing that at the time. We joined forces with certain academics who were trying to apply the discipline of marketing to social issues and causes, and in the process we pioneered the concept of social marketing. What you’re trying to do in the commercial marketing world is to change the behavior of individuals and to use the marketing mix of Product, Promotion, Place and Price to get a specific individual to buy a specific product.

I went a long way applying that approach to social marketing, but I eventually found that it’s not enough. You need to change social norms on a huge, environmental level, which means that you have to go beyond the marketing mix and get involved in



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Diane Ty (center) of the AgingWell Hub at Georgetown University’s Business for Impact moderating a panel at the Aging 2.0 event Tale of Two Cities: How Community Impacts Aging, together with (left to right) Dr Lindsay Mullins of Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University, Robin Wagner of Louisiana Department of Health, Gwendolyn Sutton of Virginia Hospital Center, and Gail Kohn of Age-Friendly DC



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Bill Novelli talking to MBA students about how Business for Impact is working to change the world, by helping companies to do well by doing good

policy advocacy – on the level of legislative, regulatory and even legal advocacy – because policy is the main driver for changing social norms. A good example is the way policy changes have massively driven down the consumption of tobacco. The new communication and information technologies are also important, of course. Likewise important is the role of media, because media can drive social norms. So those are the significant learnings from my days post-Porter Novelli, and I apply them to my current work, which is in the field of social impact.

“Policy is the main driver for changing social norms”

**SAL:** You founded Business for Impact at the McDonough School of Business in the belief that “business can be a powerful force for good,” as stated on the organization’s website. How, in practical terms, do “successful companies do well by doing good”?

**BN:** Firstly, I would say that “doing well by doing good” is not just about ethical behavior – because everything, actually, has to be about ethical behavior. When you get up in the morning and get dressed and go to work, you have to be legal and ethical. Lots of people say that Corporate Social Responsibility and the Triple Bottom Line of People, Planet and Profit are about ethics, but everything is in fact about ethics. Secondly, I’d like to mention the role of the Anglo-Dutch fast-moving consumer goods company Unilever within the Portion Balance Coalition as epitomizing doing well by doing good. So to my mind, it’s all about companies finding the ‘sweet spot’ by building environmental, social and governance (ESG) strategies into their core business. If you can do that, you can create greater financial value for your stockholders and investors and at the same time create social value for the rest of society.

**SAL:** Diane, your Ad Council campaign, ‘Do Good, Mentor a Child’ won an Effie Award when you were working at Save the Children. What is the essence of a good advertising campaign?

**DT:** I think it starts with a very strong emotional connection to the audience. Then you need a clear call to action: what do you want people to do? And the third component is the ability to measure results. A great advertising campaign is all well and good, but did it actually achieve what it set out to do? We ap-



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Bill Novelli introducing a roundtable on ‘Next Generation Tech’ sponsored by Philips North America, a sponsor of Business for Impact

plied those criteria to the ‘Do Good: Mentor a Child’ campaign, which was all about encouraging adults to volunteer to spend quality time with a child in their community, letting that child know there was a caring adult other than a parent or guardian in their lives.

**SAL:** *The world remains fascinated with the perceived glamour of public relations, marketing and advertising – as witness, for instance, AMC’s award-winning 2007–2015 TV series Mad Men, which is set primarily in a fictional advertising agency on Madison Avenue in Manhattan, New York City, during the 1960s. Are these disciplines as glamorous as they are sometimes perceived to be, and does advertising still have the power it used to have in the ‘golden days’ of Madison Avenue?*

**DT:** I think that the work done by advertising is still really important and powerful, but there have been two big changes since the days of *Mad Men*. One is the huge amount of industry consolidation that has taken place, and the other is the shift to online advertising, with data scientists now in the mix. We can now target audiences more precisely than ever before and use real-time analytics to assess the effectiveness of advertising initiatives. Creatives have much more powerful tools at their fingertips; and at agencies, there’s still a need for strong strategy and relationship management skills, and for good leadership. And of course, there are many more opportunities for women and for people of color.

**SAL:** *Bill, you have had leading roles in international relief and development (with CARE), ethical campaigning (Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids) and improving people’s quality of life as they age (AARP). What drives you to devote so much energy and professional expertise to these and other social initiatives?*

**“I think ethics are important for everybody”**

**BN:** I think ethics and social responsibility are important for everybody. I run a program on ethical leadership here at Georgetown in which we ask the questions: “What is leadership?” and “What is ethics?” All the world’s great religions, of course, have the same premise, which is the Golden Rule: Treat other people as you would have them treat you. Our society is currently wrestling with the question, “What is ethical behavior?” – and it’s a question we have to ask ourselves every day.

**SAL:** *‘Hands-on service’ is key to the work of the Service Year Alliance, Diane. Is there a figure, real or fictional, who has particularly inspired you in your commitment to give something back to society?*

**DT:** I don’t think I could point to a particular person, but events experienced as a child have certainly shaped my worldview. My parents are of Chinese origin and come from the Philippines. I was very struck by the poverty I witnessed when visiting the Philippines together with my parents at the age of 12. It made me feel that I should work not just for financial gain but for a real purpose, and this experience has inspired my whole career in the nonprofit sector. That’s how I met Bill, of course, and I continue to meet inspiring people along the way. Service works!

*Bill Novelli and Diane Ty were interviewed by Jonathan Steffen*

**Further information**

**Business for Impact**

> [businessforimpact.georgetown.edu](http://businessforimpact.georgetown.edu)

**Portion Balance Coalition**

> [portionbalance.org](http://portionbalance.org)

**AgingWell Hub**

> [www.agingwellhub.org](http://www.agingwellhub.org)

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