

## Alumni Profile: Karin Koonings (MBA '90) by Matthew Fox

Matthew Fox recently spoke to Karin Koonings three weeks into her new, Seattle-based role as Starbucks Coffee Company's vice president of international marketing, about her career and 'the Starbucks experience'.

**Matthew Fox: Can you describe your various roles at Starbucks?**

**Karin Koonings:** I was the very first field marketing manager that Starbucks ever hired [in 1996]. That was based in Toronto. Prior to that, Starbucks was a much smaller company – besides Canada, we weren't in any other international markets and now we are in 33 different markets [with more than 8,500 locations]. At that time, a lot of the marketing was developed out of Seattle, with people visiting the field and working with local agencies, but as we continued to grow, they realized that there was a need to have people on the ground. I set up the marketing organization in Toronto. It truly was a trailblazing role where a lot of the systems and processes that I learned as an MBA, and from working with packaged goods companies [Unilever and Labatt, prior to Starbucks], helped me develop the field marketing department.

**MF: What does being the vice president of international marketing entail?**

**KK:** One of my primary functions will be to create a marketing community so that the common threads that really bind us together as a brand are tightly woven. I think when you start dealing with geographically dispersed areas and different cultures, you need to ensure that the brand is consistent no matter what country you go to.

**MF: How do you define the 'Starbucks experience'?**

**KK:** The Starbucks experience is providing more than just a premium cup of coffee to our customers. Our 'partners' in the different stores are at the core of our company's success. It is their ability to create that

warm, welcoming experience for people in their store that defines the Starbucks' experience. It's about the relationships we create with our customers, as well as with the communities in which we do business.

**MF: There are non-coffee elements to Starbucks that are integral to the experience, such as music and wireless internet access. What innovations are on the horizon?**

**KK:** You named some of the big ones, which are quite transformational when you think of the traditional café. We also have the Hear Music media bar (an in-store CD-burning console) that we've been testing in Santa Monica and in Seattle. We recently launched our packaged coffee in grocery

## One of my primary functions is to ensure that the common threads that bind us together as a brand are tightly woven.

stores in Canada and have recently launched a coffee liqueur in the United States. Through our partnership with **XM Satellite Radio** (Nasdaq: XMSR), the leading satellite radio provider in the U.S., we launched the Starbucks "Hear Music" channel featuring music programming from Hear Music, the voice of music at Starbucks. These are initiatives that are close to the core of the Starbucks experience, but we'll be looking at new ways to deliver that experience, too.

**MF: What was the most important thing you learned at Uoft?**

**KK:** Collaboration – the value of the combined efforts of a group putting together a recommendation or analyzing a case – is the most important thing I took away as an MBA student. It has been integral to my career at Starbucks, which has an incredibly collaborative environment. You will not succeed here if you don't take that kind of approach, because we are so geographically



dispersed. One of the things I wasn't necessarily taught at school and discovered on my own, through Starbucks, was the responsibility that we have as business leaders to really make a difference in the world. What practices are we engaged in, and how can we change them to create a more sustainable model? For MBA students thinking

about their career, I think these are some of the hard questions they should be asking themselves, and they should be selecting employers based on their values and where they can really make a difference.

**MF: What are you most proud of, personally or professionally?**

**KK:** I don't draw a hard line between what is professional and what is personal. Realistically speaking, the two have to co-exist, so that is how I approach life. What I think is so unique at Starbucks is that you can really pursue your passion. If you are working in marketing, for example, and you have a passion for corporate social responsibility, which I have, you can incorporate that into your job. If you are passionate about music and you want to discover new up-and-coming talent, you can do that, too. The opportunity to develop the passions of the people on my team through their work environment has been one of my personal accomplishments. 