

Alumni Profile: Sandra Hanington (MBA '92)

by Catherine Riddell

Catherine Riddell: Describe your role at BMO.

Sandra Hanington: As executive vice-president, customer strategies and marketing, I head up the marketing, product and direct bank areas for our personal and commercial business. For me it's about understanding our customers, putting together the right offers that meet their needs, communicating those offers to our customers and to our employees, and delivering great service through our direct channels.

CR: How did you get where you are today?

SH: I worked for a bit as an engineer and ended up doing industrial marketing when I was with **Sunoco**. From there, I made the shift into financial services marketing. Most recently, I spent three years in Chicago in a very similar role with our U.S. personal and commercial banking group, **Harris Bank**. It was a huge endeavour to move my whole family down there, including my three children, but it was a wonderful adventure for all of us and I'm definitely the better for it.

CR: How do you marry your skills as a licensed professional engineer and an MBA grad in your current position?

SH: Surprisingly well! My engineering background was really demanding, so I'm not easily frightened by complex things. In fact, complexity was one of the things that attracted me to financial services because I knew it would be intellectually challenging, and I liked that. I think the whole strategy and problem solving orientation has also stood me in very good stead. The practical engineering bent means that I'm very results-focused and that works well for our business too.

CR: What is the most important thing you learned at Rotman?

SH: The first thing was learning how to put together a persuasive business argument. Secondly, in the business case simulations I

learned rule number one was that you never go far wrong if you invest in market research. That became a rule of thumb for me later on – make sure you understand what your customers want. If you wait for them to tell you, it's often too late.

CR: Fast forward now to the date you are set to retire. Looking back on your career, how would you like to have made your mark?

SH: I would like to see the extent to which I've helped make financial services much more customer-centric – a business where we meet customers' needs and deliver exceptional service and are wildly successful for our shareholders, as a result. As a leader, I would like to have a legacy of having helped the people that work for me develop really engaging, challenging, rewarding careers that make a significant contribution to the organization.

CR: Do you have a mentor?

SH: I do! She's a Rotman grad, a woman I once worked for. She is very smart, is a very strong marketer and has a great work-life balance. I continue to admire and respect her for all of those reasons.

CR: Do you have any advice for current MBA students who aspire to a career in financial services?

SH: This is garden variety advice, not just for the financial services: make sure you love the place where you're considering working. Make sure the culture feels right to you, that it brings out the best in you. Don't make short-term decisions that go against your nature. Secondly, make sure there's a way for you to contribute to the organization's success – that whatever your role is, that it's helping to move the organization forward. From that you can build a very progressive career and feel good at the end of the day. You'll go home feeling that you really made a difference.



CR: How do you know, early on, that the culture will be right for you?

SH: Find out what their measures of success are. Their measures of success should be a very clear pointer to the values of the organization, and a way for you to test if those align well with you. So if you're all about sales and that's where your scorecard starts and stops, an organization that measures success on some other scorecard, or doesn't measure that at all, isn't going to be a very good fit. You also have to know where you want to feel your impact. In their heart of hearts, most people know if they want to drive things from the centre or be out in the field making it happen. I think having that kind of self-knowledge is really important too.

CR: What's next for you?

SH: I just returned to Canada in this role, so trying to be successful in this job is really important. Right now it's about really trying to figure out how to take our retail banking offerings to the next level and how to win and keep our customers' trust and business. In this market, there are all kinds of opportunities for a smart, customer-focused organization. After this interview? More meetings and a dinner. It's a really busy schedule, but I love what I do. 