

*EITK partners with brands that are providing outstanding customer service experiences. The Brand Spotlight Series showcases innovations and solutions to CX challenges, from many of today's leading brands.*

# BRAND SPOTLIGHT USA TODAY NETWORK

Leading With The Voice of The Customer to Build an Exceptional Consumer Experience

**Q: Tell us a bit about your background, how you came to be at the USA TODAY NETWORK, and a little bit about your current role.**

I've always been interested in complex brands that serve a broad range of consumers and have a strong social mission.

I spent seven years at AARP focused on improving the customer experience and membership value proposition across a range of products and services. The focus was really on how to have a more 360 degree view of the member in terms of their experience with various customer journeys and touch points, the feedback gathered from those experiences, and their overall preferences and behavior.

In my current role, I serve as Vice President of Customer Experience & Insights at the USA TODAY NETWORK, where I lead our enterprise customer experience strategy to maximize value and increase consumer loyalty and retention. Our focus, first and foremost, is to ensure that all parts of the business are leading with the voice of the customer – from our newsrooms, to product, technology, marketing, and customer care. This shapes the basis for our overall consumer business strategy, and the way we drive meaningful and material engagement and brand equity.

**Q: Describe the average USA TODAY NETWORK customer (age, demographic, etc.), the importance of exceeding customer expectations, and how service/experience plays into that.**

We serve many diverse audiences through the USA TODAY NETWORK, starting with our consumers and our business clients.

On the consumer side, we serve both our loyal print readers, as well as digital subscribers and overall news consumers seeking knowledge, understanding, inspiration, and connection – whether to others, their communities, or the broader nation.

We also have a range of business clients – from small to medium sized businesses, to larger franchise operators, who look to us as their strategic partner in connecting them with the right audience and helping to drive their business success.

Regardless of the type of customer, relevance and ease are paramount. We focus our efforts on understanding our audience segments and their unique wants and needs, and make sure we're constantly listening and improving on the moments that matter.

**Q: What keeps the USA TODAY NETWORK special? And can you explain any new ways that the USA TODAY NETWORK is innovating the customer experience?**

We have a diverse portfolio of some of the country's leading news brands, including USA TODAY and 109 local media companies – and a growing number of niche brands, such as For the Win and Grateful.

Innovation has always been a hallmark of our brand story, which is what led us to be the first in our industry for VR storytelling in 2014 with Harvest of Change, followed by the first regular news programming in VR in 2016 with VRtually There. VR is an immersive new type of storytelling that will allow us reach new and existing audiences in an engaging, experiential way.



AMY SHIOJI  
VP, Customer  
Experience & Insights

Building on that success, the USA TODAY NETWORK and The Arizona Republic (one of our local brands) recently won a Pulitzer Prize for “The Wall: Unknown Stories, Unintended Consequences”, which is a report on the proposed border wall. This project really showcased our NETWORK storytelling capabilities from VR, to aerial and 360-degree video, podcasts, LiDAR data, and over 30 journalists to create a truly immersive experience for readers.

**Q: Can you talk a bit about personalization, why you feel it's become such a focus, and what the USA TODAY NETWORK is doing in this regard to tailor their experiences?**

At its core, personalization is really about relevance. To that end, we're laser focused on our consumers in all that we do to meet their needs now and in the future.

From a content perspective, we're looking at the goals of our newsrooms to ensure we're growing audience size, as well as engagement and loyalty of our audience – which comes from understanding what content resonates most, gets people talking, engaging, and coming back for more. We're also focused on content formats to deliver in ways that matter to our consumers as consumption habits and platforms change.

We're also looking into features that allow you to tailor and personalize your news experience, and we're constantly analyzing customer feedback we get from our sites, apps, emails, service channels and other touch points to mine for insights and continuously improve our product and service experience, in the spirit of increased relevance and adoption.

**“** *In all of this, we've seen that doing right by the customer works. In framing the opportunity, we've demonstrated that improving customer experience improves on our business objectives, specifically as it relates to customer retention.*

**”**

*Guests experiencing the newest virtual reality content from Gannett at a cocktail event in Atlanta.*



*Agency partners experience season two of VRtually There at a loft in Chelsea, New York.*

**Q: How would you describe the USA TODAY NETWORK's culture? How does your brand build/maintain a consistent culture and employee engagement?**

As a company (and an industry) undergoing transformation, it's an exciting and dynamic time to work at the USA TODAY NETWORK.

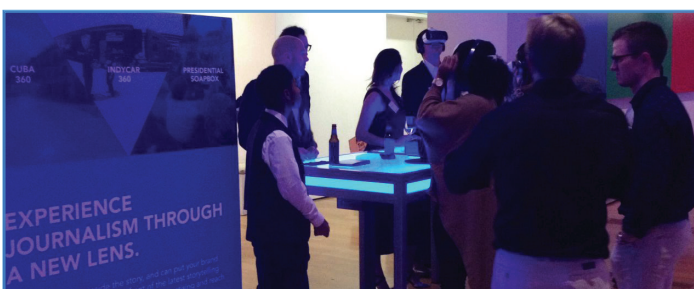
While our passion and commitment to impactful journalism hasn't changed, we continue to explore new approaches to content formats and channels as digital consumption habits evolve. As discussed with “The Wall” project, it's rewarding to see all parts of the business come together to create such powerful stories in ways that haven't been seen or experienced before.

The strength of the USA TODAY NETWORK is really in our national to local focus, and our ability – more than anyone else – to surface the issues that matter most to our communities. We've always been focused on bringing people closer to locations and stories they may not otherwise experience, and our NETWORK allows us to that in a truly differentiated and engaging way.

**Q: What's your take on AI and the role it's playing in transforming the customer experience?**

The proliferation of AI is exciting and certainly brings with it new challenges and opportunities with customer experience, most notably the ability to start exploring new channels and platforms to better reach consumers in their lives.

For us, we are focused on AI and natural language processing (NLP) to help us better understand customer feedback and sentiment, which in turn helps us to look beyond operational metrics and build empathy and understanding in the work that we do. We're also looking at AI to help automate some backend processes around content tagging and optimization to improve efficiencies and operations in our newsrooms.



And while the proliferation of digital platforms and AI will continuously present new opportunities and experiences for consumers and businesses alike, it's also important to not lose sight of "human" element to customer experience.

We just recently celebrated an employee who took the time to troubleshoot and respond to customers who left feedback in the app store around a bug with our product. Customers were so thrilled to hear from a real person who took the time to respond, that they sang his praises, and in many cases, changed their app ratings as a result.

While AI is here to stay, I hope, too, is a focus on looking beyond just the technology or the platform at the people it means to serve.

**Q: Is there one thing you're proud of (in relation to customer experience/USA TODAY NETWORK, etc.) that your team or the company achieved in the last year or so?**

You know, there are so many things, but I think I'm most happy to see how the organization is really uniting together to drive the best possible experience for our consumers.

Whether it's looking at content quality metrics like engagement and loyalty while growing audience size, to working closely with Product to incorporate customer feedback into the development roadmap for user experience and digital platform changes – we're moving much closer to truly being customer-led in our approach to the business.

In all of this, we've seen that doing right by the customer works. In framing the opportunity, we've demonstrated that improving customer experience improves on our business objectives, specifically as it relates to customer retention. "Satisfied" subscribers show an eight percentage point improvement in retention, which presents a considerable revenue opportunity.

I think most notably, the thing I'm most happy to see are the cultural effects – the efforts to align our work more closely, to break down siloes, to commit to do fewer things better. We're seeing improvements to employee engagement, and we're seeing people raise their hands and say, "I got this one", which is huge.

**Q: Predictions for 2018. What do you think will be the main focus for customer experience for the rest of 2018 and into the future, either for the industry in general or specifically for the USA TODAY NETWORK?**

As discussed, I think AI will certainly continue to be a driving force in shaping the experience landscape for all of us going forward.

With the proliferation of new digital platforms that make it easier (and sometimes more challenging) to get access to information 24/7, the focus of the USA TODAY NETWORK – and really all brands – is to continue to embed the customer in all that we do and to ensure a great customer and brand experience throughout – from research, to product design, to service, and innovation.

While it sounds like a basic premise, done well, it's often one of the most challenging endeavors for any organization – and one that we're keenly focused on here at the USA TODAY NETWORK.



**Execs In The Know**

*Thank you to Amy and the USA TODAY NETWORK team for taking part in this EITK Brand Spotlight. Stay tuned for more Spotlights coming your way in 2018!*

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