



Louise Phelan

WMB Businesswoman 2013 – Louise Phelan

PayPal

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‘PayPal is fast paced, trend setting and boundary pushing. Because PayPal people are fast paced, trend setting and boundary pushing.’ So it says on their website. It’s true, the company is noted for being up there in the innovation stakes, on a par with the likes of Google and Facebook. With an onsite gym and restaurant, healthcare for employees, monthly reward scheme and a subsidised bus to and from the city centre, PayPal wants the best.

Last year, the company announced it would create 1,000 jobs at a new international operations centre in Dundalk, in addition to the 1,500 people already employed at its Blanchardstown, Dublin base. This year’s WMB Businesswoman 2013 Awardee Louise Phelan – Vice president of global operations for Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) says, “Business is going great. We’re hiring and continuing to hire. We’ve filled the 1,000 and we have about 450 more jobs as we speak today in Dundalk following on from our announcement in July. We’re at full capacity in Dublin at 1,800 and we have 300 in Berlin.”

PayPal also recently launched its program in Russian rubles, tapping into the growing consumer base in Russia’s e-commerce sector. Among BRICS countries, Russia has the highest proportion of households with an annual disposable income of more than \$10,000 – and more of those households are turning to online retailers. PayPal isn’t new to Russia – it’s been serving Russian customers since

2006 and opened up its Moscow office over a year ago – but prior to adding the ruble as its 26th currency, users in Russia could only use PayPal on foreign sites and only with other currencies.

“Russia is obviously a huge market for us. We have 65 Russians sitting in our Dundalk office for the business that we have today. So we’re very happy with where we are,” Louise states.

The formidable businesswoman says the pressure to perform never really eases off: “I think regarding the economic climate, Dublin is coming back. I’m not sure if it’s coming back around the rest of the country in the same way as Dublin though. But you have to make sure even in recession times, as before the recession, that you’re looking after your customers. You have to be the customer, in other words eat your own dog food!”

Louise is a dab hand at courting the media – not only because she’s regularly the bearer of good news but she doesn’t mince her words. You would be hard-pressed to find a businessperson who doesn’t admire the Laois native. Some would say she’s one of few who are driving the Irish economy back to glory. To list the number of accolades she has received to date would take up this entire article but one of particular noteworthiness is becoming the first female to receive the Sir Michael Smurfit Business Achievement Award.

Determined and confident Louise joined PayPal

in 2006 as CS and risk director for the EU before being promoted to her current position in 2011.

Prior to joining PayPal, the 47-year-old was a member of the senior management team for GE Money, a division of General Electric (GE), which specialises in small ticket lending for a client base comprising both consumers and commercial customers. During her 16 years with GE (formerly Woodchester Investments), Louise held a wide variety of management and leadership roles; from 2000 - 2006 she held the position of compliance leader with responsibility for leading change and integrating a compliance culture across the organisation. While in this role, she was a member of the Business Quality Council and was also Ombudsperson for the business.

Gender roadblocks have never been an issue for Louise, she gives as good as she gets: “At GE I worked for the car finance section and spent six months in the dealership selling finance. It was a very male dominated market. So I was very aware of all of those issues but I was very lucky that the people that I interacted and worked with respected women in the motor industry. They also knew that where you were was based on merit and your performance, not on whether you were a woman or a man. I think you can make your own luck sometimes.”

One of 17 children, Louise was the second youngest. “The 17 were a great influence in my life. We all went to boarding school together so we really had a great relationship. Some of us were young enough that we didn’t know the older ones but that all changed as we got older. We’re a tight knit family but all those people were individuals in themselves so you got something from all of them – personalities and life experiences. You didn’t realise how fortunate you were when you were younger but now I look back and see all I learned. It was like we had our own company ourselves. Everyone brought different attributes to the table.”

As a young girl Louise wanted to be a paediatric nurse but at 22 years old she decided to change her path and study law, economics and credit management. She laughs when I ask what reason she had for changing her career choice: “None really! I knew I needed to go and do something so I went and did a commercial course and joined Mars Ireland. Then took it from there. I enjoyed debt collecting! But listen it’s all learning, it didn’t matter what I did. I went through that whole process of college but for me it’s not about the end game, it’s about having all those interactions. The theory is one thing and the practicality is the other. If you marry the both of them together and bring that learning to any walk of life it’ll drive success.”



L-R: Rosemary Delaney, WMB and Louise Phelan, PayPal.

Louise encourages the youth of today to also find someone who will encourage them to be their best. "I've always had good strong advocates of me in my life. Those who say 'you can do this'. I have a very strong family network, friends and bosses along the way that have said 'you need to do more, you can do more'. I always say to people to make sure that you have an advocate of yourself - whether it's a brother or a sister, an aunt or an uncle. So find an advocate of you who supports you to grow in yourself but also grow the opportunities.

"It's great to go to university and business school but what's more important is sharing skills - the skills that you can make use of. Show that you're joining the debate club, you're socialising, you're setting up that club - all of those things are really important skills, that our people at PayPal need to have certainly."

Most recently Louise participated in Shine A Light 2013 - 70 Irish business leaders slept out in Iveagh Gardens, Dublin, in an effort to raise up to €400k for homeless charity Focus Ireland. "I did! It was the worst nights rain or else I've never experienced rain because you're always inside looking out. So it was really good, very humbling and very sombre. I am so proud of myself that I did it. It's not about the money - I raised €7.5k - the piece for me was around the giving of my

time. Time is precious for everybody and certainly for everybody at our level and I have family - an elderly mum who I spend every Saturday with. So giving of my time was a huge sacrifice. I only had to do that one night, I'm not sure if they asked me to do a second night would I have done it. It certainly has made me look at things very differently and made me take responsibility of my own. I actually did a big clean out afterwards and gave clothes to St. Vincent DePaul. There are only so many times you can wear a jacket. So it was about resetting your own values and realising that you have to think differently."

Everyone wants a piece of Louise; in December 2012 she was appointed as a non-executive director of Ryanair. She also sits on the Board of the American Chamber of Commerce and in 2014 she will take on the role of its President. In the future we might even see Louise turning her hand to entrepreneurship, she says: "It's funny, I'm probably not a great risk taker and what I mean by risk is my own money! But I'm certainly not going to be in the job I'm in in ten years time. One of my ambitions would be to maybe set up my own business but my own business would be a shoe shop," she jokes. "So nothing too taxing but also something that I'm passionate about." As always with Louise, passion prevails in all she does.