



# Executive INSIGHTS

## 10+1 Questions with Jean McLaren, MARC USA

*Jean McLaren is President of the Chicago office of MARC USA, a full-service, integrated Marketing Agency. She answered our 10+1 questions via phone conversation.*

**1. MARC USA just created a new media offering. Tell us about it.**

Media has become such an important and specialized discipline, we decided to give it its own brand, Cogniscent Media, and dramatically expand our services. Cogniscent Media combines advanced data science with our practice of Decision Science. Today the focus of most agencies is to drive efficiency through programmatic media. At Cogniscent Media, we enhance our data projections with our understanding of the seemingly irrational way people actually make decisions, to deliver higher results. Another important benefit Cogniscent offers is hands-on supervision and ownership of every account by seasoned professionals. This is a real point of difference versus the large, publicly-held media shops that rely on junior staff to do most of the work. Finally, we provide full transparency to our clients. We customize the tools used for each account, rather than insisting all clients use an agency-owned service.



**2. What else should people know about MARC USA?**

In partnership with colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University, we created an innovation tool called MARcket Incight. This uses Artificial Intelligence to analyze all publicly available online commentary on any given topic. The AI enables us to quickly analyze all the ways people are talking about the topic. It gets to the heart of what they're saying, even if they're using different words and "talking around" their actual point. This uncovers people's unarticulated needs, as well as the workarounds they create to meet these needs when they can't find a brand to do it for them. It identifies white spaces and helps clarify the real barriers to people's use of a brand. It's an incredibly powerful tool for innovation. We've used it for a number of clients ranging from Payless ShoeSource to Ruby Tuesday to S.C. Johnson and it provided dramatic insights that led to improved marketing programs, and results in the market.

**3. What characteristics do you look for when hiring?**

I use two simple criteria: leadership qualities, and a passion to build things. I want people who aren't content with the status quo. In terms of leadership, I look at past accomplishments. Talk is cheap. If they have what I'm looking for, they will have demonstrated it, either at work, or in the case of entry-level candidates, in private life. They might be a leader on their college campus or at their place of worship. They have to show me how they walked into a situation and took initiative to make it better — to push beyond their specific assignment.

**4. Same question, but with strategic partnerships.**

First and foremost, I'm looking for innovation — ideas and expertise that are very forward-minded and will enhance what my agency is bringing to the party. Second, I look for a true spirit of collaboration, someone who is open enough to the idea that as we work together we create something bigger than the sum of the parts. They also must be willing to give as much as they get.

**5. Tell us about an experience, or a person, who influenced you?**

My father was probably the most influential. He was a hardscrabble Scot — born in Scotland.

He had a very strong work ethic and he believed kids should work for what they wanted. He instilled in me the idea that I could achieve anything I want if I am willing to work hard enough for it.

As a kid, I got into horseback riding and I begged my parents for a horse. We lived on a property in Michigan that had an old barn on it. When I was 14, I renovated the barn by myself. My father saw that



*Jean's parents, Albert and Lorrie McLaren*

and he said "Okay, if you're willing to build a fence with me, you'll have a big enough pasture for a horse." So every night for six months, he and I would put in five sections of cedar posts and rails. We put in about 3,000 yards of fencing. Then my parents bought me a horse. When I decided I wanted to work with a trainer and compete as a rider, I boarded horses at our house to pay for training costs. I had the best of both worlds in many respects. I lived in a beautiful place and had many privileges. But my father tried not to hand me anything. He made me work for it. I think when you teach people to master hard tasks, they have a great feeling of confidence and competence.

**6. What's your favorite work setup — your desk or someplace more informal?**

I can work anywhere. But my favorite place to work is at our farm in northern Michigan. It's so wonderfully



*Jean McLaren at 17 years old competing at the national finals*

quiet. I can be so productive there, looking out over the hayfields.

**7. Outside of work, what does your perfect day look like?**

Easy question. My perfect day is being at the Kentucky Horse Park, in Lexington, competing in a horse show. The venue is an old racehorse-breeding operation that has been transformed into a top-flight competition site. It's pretty much heaven on earth for me; absolutely beautiful, and the horse shows are the highest quality. It's an enormous treat to go there and compete.

**You are a very accomplished horseback rider. What are the competitions like?**

I compete in the adult jumper division, which is anyone over 18 years old. The jumps are about

3' 6" high and 4' wide. I am often the oldest rider in my division, and I must say, I enjoy beating the youngsters — which I do pretty regularly. I have a very talented horse named Snow Day. We've been together about two years and we're very competitive. We compete throughout Illinois and Kentucky about 10 times per year.

**8. What books, movies, music or other art/entertainment/media are you into?**

*“I realized that I learned a lot because I got a clear idea of what not to do.”*

I'm pretty broad-based. I finally discovered audio books. I'm working my way through the Louise Penny series of mysteries. They're well-written and a lot of fun,

an escape. I'm also almost done with the Hamilton biography. I only get through about three paragraphs a night before falling asleep, so it's taken me about three years to read this book! But it's fascinating. I didn't realize that politics were so vitriolic back then, too.

**9. Everyone in business has setbacks. Tell us about one of yours, and how you got past it.**

Earlier in my career at another agency, I worked with someone who was the complete opposite of me in terms of management style. It was really a painful experience and very demoralizing. I hated how he treated me and everyone else. It was a bad scene. Years later, though, I realized that I learned a lot because I got a clear idea of what not to do. I'm now more mindful of how my behavior as a leader impacts the people I work with, and my company.



Jean competing in the 2016 national finals

Another time that comes to mind is when MARC USA, like all agencies, was really suffering during the last recession. Marketing dollars are always first to get cut. We scraped by and held on with our fingernails. We had to cut staff to the bare minimum and we took on some projects we wouldn't have before.

I'm proud we had the grit to work through it, and we came out much stronger. The next three years, we grew four-fold. Many agencies, including big ones, closed their doors. We survived and then grew.

**10. Separate from your own, what industry are you watching and learning from?**

I watch retail closely. Partly because my firm has a very strong heritage in retail marketing. Retail is also going through such radical change right now. I am interested to see how the pendulum swings back toward "human" experiences from digital. I think right now everyone is just focused on buying digitally. But when people literally can't walk into a store because retailers can't pay for stores anymore, I think there's going to be a pendulum swing back. It won't be the same as before, but I'm confident that

*“Retail is... going through such radical change right now. I am interested to see how the pendulum swings back toward “human” experiences from digital.”*

people will get to the point where they want some sort of tactile experience in addition to digital. Digital

serves a great need, but it's not the same as being there in person. There's a lot of Decision Science behind this, too. When you can create a tactile experience, it produces a much more powerful emotional connection to

the brand.

**+1: To what one trait would you attribute your career success?**

I'm extremely goal-oriented. Once I set a goal, I will turn myself inside-out to achieve it. I'm very single-minded and resilient -- all those traits my father taught me when I was ten years old. Some would call it Scottish stubbornness. I like to think of it as single-mindedness. ▶