

Paul: Hi, I'm Paul, CEO of the Australian Retailers Association. And welcome to Retail Therapy. A podcast proudly brought to you by American Express. The ARA is Australia's largest and oldest retail association representing around seven and a half thousand independent national and international members. Each episode, I'll be chatting with a leader in Australia's retail industry right here in the Amex lounge, including the CEOs of some of the biggest retailers in Australia and across the globe. We'll be finding out what makes them tick, what defines their leadership style and how they got to the top of their game. So join me for some retail therapy as we ask these questions and more, and navigate our way through the retail industry, Australia's largest private sector employer. For more information about the work we do at the Australian Retailers Association, head to our website, retail.org.au, joining me for some retail therapy today, Nicole Sheffield, that executive general manager community and consumer at Australia Post. Nicole is responsible for the customer experience across the key channels at Australia Post, including their network of more than 4,300 post offices, the customer center and digital channels. At some point in our lives, we've all interacted in some way with Australia Post they'd been part of Australia's social fabric for generations, so delighted to have Nicole in the studio. Nicole, welcome.

Nicole: Thank you, delighted to be here.

Paul: Australia Post is more than just delivering letters and parcels. How do you see your organization's position in the overall retail landscape?

Nicole: It's certainly a lot more than delivering letters and parcels. I mean, it's an organization that started 212 years ago with the second fleet. When actually our convicts were stealing letters and in the letters were a lot of gifts to each other and, so first postmaster general Isaac Nichols said we need a postal system. And he started from his bedroom in George Street. And, you know, that's where it all became the actual trying to connect with everyone. And I think that whole spirit of connection and putting people together doesn't matter what part of the world you're on, no matter where you are in, you know, the landscape, whether you're rich or poor or whatever, you know, Australia Post is that area that has connected us for so long, it is now become a significant retail business. I mean, the reality is we do have 4,330 post offices, many of those post offices, particularly in regional Australia where we've got over two and a half thousand they are the general store for regional Australia, they don't have a JB Hi-Fi or a Telstra shop or an Apple shop. We are that for them. And so that role has really evolved from where we were just sending and receiving destination. And that's still probably 50% of our business to actually in many instances, you know, we said the teller of the nation, many bank branches are closing. We provide those banking services. And then in terms of actual merchandise, you know, merchandise is a significant part of our business. And you're seeing a lot of people. I know they love to talk to me about air fryers and flippers and fish and all that other fun stuff that you buy, the nonsensical stuff that you buy at the post office. I say, I don't judge, if we think it's a bit quirky and you know, it's the last minute where you run it and go, Oh my God, it's my aunt's birthday today. Or I need to send something well, you know, you can get something.

Paul: Yeah. So it's a really become like, I think most Australia would be surprised by the history of the way you just described it, but really has become the central community point for most communities across the country. So a really integral part that Australia Post plays in beyond just letters and parcels. So quite interesting, quite loving to see all the different types of merchandise that you're selling out. So you have selected that mentioned us yourself.

Nicole: We have a merchandise team that reports into me. Yes. But I mean, you know, we've really grabbed, when you think about it during COVID, there was an e-commerce boom and, you know, happy to talk about that and where we actually supported so many small businesses in how they were going to go online. But at the same time, there was a shopping boom and Australia decided overnight that it needed multiple televisions. It needed multiple phones. It needed, you know, home and office

equipment because our homes are now not just our homes, they're our places to educate and our home office and you know, our gym. And so all of a sudden our merchandise team had to sit back and go, how do we deliver? Particularly, isn't just about online shopping. If they can run down to the post office, because they're going to send mum this book that they have to, they can't leave in Melbourne. You couldn't leave five kilometers. So while they were there, what else can they pick up? And so there was a real sense of openness to driving different categories. And we may have pushed things a bit too far, but we had some fun.

Paul: Well, we've had an absolute extraordinary year. When you think about the last year with Australia, we've seen such a massive shift to e-commerce over the past year or so. And the stats around online shopping have gone through the roof. You have your own online shopping report, which shows that more people are shopping online than ever before. So tell me, what are some of the interesting trends you've been seeing?

Nicole: So it looked, there were a number of trends. And I think what we're seeing, firstly, is that a million more households were shopping online regularly, last year than the year before. So we now have 9 million households. If you think about it. There are only 13 million households in Australia. So the volume changed significantly. The second big thing that happened is what you purchased online changed significantly. So previously apparel and clothing and footwear, et cetera, dominated, there are a lot smaller. They're easy to send the kind of boxes that can be managed. All of a sudden we were buying canoes and gym equipment, and I tell you boxes and boxes and boxes of wine, and that hasn't let up either. I can tell you. So from our perspective, that's wonderful in terms of e-commerce and what people feel comfortable buying online. But it's really tough in terms of delivering and making sure that we can deliver, especially at the same that you've got no planes in the air. And this country is huge and expectations are pretty impatient. And the other thing we saw during COVID is there was a big shift in online behavior. So not just in shopping, we didn't click and forget. We clicked and we tracked. So the effectiveness of My Post app and our Australia Post App was absolutely critical because people were literally tracking their past because they were waiting for that very important active wear or whatever it was they were waiting for. And so we had to really work on those algorithms and on the accuracy and because it happened so quickly, we had learned a lot along the way, but, you know, I'm happy to say that we ended the year with the number one app in the app store. We were bigger than zoom and that that's just crazy, but that's how much we love our online shopping,

Paul: This vision of a post-it on a pushbike, trying to deliver a canoe. So tell me how does that,

Nicole: Well, he doesn't deliver the canoe, and hopefully the canoe, it gets picked up from a Star Trek outlet. If worst case scenario, we've had a few canoes in the back of a post office where you've been carded.

Paul: So what does it mean then if there's a reduction letters and increase in parcels, what does it mean for the local post offices? Their place in the community diminished orders have become more important as you've earlier described.

Nicole: The role is I think it's absolutely more important and it does depend on where you are located. So regional Australia it's definitely had a significant role, and the services that offers is broadened. So if I look at my mix, you know, in regional Australia, about 30% of the products that sell a merchandise, right, about 40% parcels about 20% are letters. And then the remainder is banking services, or we've seen a major drop in passports, what we call identity services. But you know, that mix is, is quite different in city outlets or Metro outlets. Let us play a much bigger role because for small businesses, letters are really important, particularly if you're, you know, a local trading and you're sending a bill or you're a lawyer that's sending important documentation that needs to be sent. So we have to really make sure that it's not a one size fits all. And when you've got a network, the size of ours, it can't be, so we really

need to make sure we get the tiering of our network. Right. And we've got the right services for that particular community and segment.

Paul: Good point. I mean, I was just reflecting because we've known each other for such a long time now, and I guess you've been in so many different types of role and just reflecting on your background, particularly in the digital space, I guess when you think about digital, how has that evolved over the years and where do you see that heading and how it changing consumer behaviors, driving all of this?

Nicole: Well, look any digital for a really long time. Like I started at Telstra. Well, it was what, 25 years ago. So I have seen many different iterations of the digital journey. Ultimately, I don't love the word digital because for me it's all about improving customer experience. And what digital does is take friction out of the shopping experience. So if it's done well, it actually is. It doesn't matter if it's in the palm of my hand, it's actually when I'm in and outlet or I'm, you know, you know, where I'm on a bus, wherever it is, it's how I take friction out. Or I'm just tracking. I've already made the purchase, but I don't feel it until it gets into my hands. I don't feel that that is a dam. So what's changed. It's, everything's changed. What's changed. Ultimately I think is a major shift in not just how many people are consuming, but how often they're consuming. And my role prior to this was chief digital officer at news Corp. And we would say that the average person will go to the average person. There's many people that have might be on this, but the average person will look to, you know, at that time, 5 to 10 sites or apps in an hour. Now, many times they're going back to the same thing. Like, you know, checking my social profile. Who's actually commented on my post or checking my, you know, you'd be surprised at how much we check out banking apps, you know, or we go to news.com.au because we need the latest maps, spoof or whatever, you know, whatever it is that does it for you. But the reality is what happened with digital is it used to be something that was seen as entertainment at the end of the day. And what happened is it became such a big part of our daily lives. And part of the, you know, it's a bit of a rest at work and no one really thought you were on a website. They just thought you were working cause you're on your computer and you've got your headphones on. So all of these things changed and e-commerce took a little longer to happen because all of a sudden we had to feel comfortable with making the payment and Australia really fell behind the rest of the world. You know, the rest of the world, you know, whether it was the Amazon effect or confidence in payments or what it was, there was a number of things that meant Australians were a little bit more tentative in how they went on their online journey. What we saw was the early adoption happened in that, you know, what we now know is the millennials, but back then they were kind of young 20 somethings. And you know, it really was, you know, you'd see these big social phenomenons, you know, Tinder would take off and everyone needed something immediately for their new date tomorrow night. And then bang, you know, then that iconic dress had to happen like within a period of time. And so we started to see this happen. I think the other big thing that what happened was customer experiences shifted in all of these different parts of our lives. So think about Uber, Uber experience is an amazing experience. It's not just about the app. It's actually about the fact that I don't just choose where I'm going. When I get into that, Uber, the guy says, hi, Nicole. And I go, hi Suresh or whatever. And he knows exactly where I'm going. And I get out of that. Uber. I don't even have to pay him. It's all done for me.

Paul: Right. Except further now they're offering you whether you want conversation yes or no, with the air conditioning yes or no. So it's an amazing experience to learn from.

Nicole: Take that experience that we've been used to now for four or five years or you, the Netflix experience, which is so personalized. It really does know me and recommendations or really get to know me. That's what I expect in my shopping experience. And so when we start to see retailers really drive that you start to see massive adoption by different cohorts. And the other big trend we saw is, you know, the growth of home and gardening and home office. Also the gray army came online and they shopped in mass. And that was sort of massive shift because we saw this group that we really had

struggled to use face time. I mean, I've seen more of my mother's nostrils in the last two years than I ever need to. The point is, is she's now feeling comfortable in using this thing that sits in her hand. And I couldn't even give her a phone five years ago. She said, I don't need that app is, you know,

Paul: We should never talk about positive things that came out of the pandemic. That's probably one of the things that did accelerate trends that were already occurring, but they just brought it forward by like a decades worth of trends in 10 months. So a lot of those are positive and I think the most of those behaviors will be embedded and stay. So let's hope them and mentioning online shopping continues the way it's been going. When we spoke about just before, around it being a big year, big year from an online shopping point of view for Australia post for you personally, and then from a leadership point of view, it's been even a bigger, bigger year. So, so I'd be interested to hear from you around what you can say about whether it's been a distraction. How has the leadership team at Australia Post responded, which is the change in leadership at Australia Post?

Nicole: Oh, that's a big question, isn't it? So a couple of things I think you know, it was a big year already. Thank you, pandemic, and volumes and how we coped with that. And then of course we got regulatory relief from the government, which allowed us in Metro areas to deliver letters every second day, which would took a lot of changing shifts, et cetera. But it allowed us to really put a lot of those posters into vans, which were a lot safer than keeping them motorcycles and deliver parcels. And then of course there was a lot of attention on us because whenever that there's a change in service people question things. And then of course then we already had a Senate inquiry and pending, and then we have Senate estimates. And of course, then we had the Senate estimates that is well-documented in media, which ultimately was Christine you know, telling the Senate that we, we gifted for executives, cardio watches for doing the banker post deal. And I don't think anyone would have expected what resulted. And I was sitting next to her when that happened. And I remember thinking, Oh my gosh, having had a lot of media experience and seeing that long red lens camera across the Senate, just come out of you. I was like, Oh dear, this is going to be tough. No one expected it to transpire the way it did. I would say that I probably can't say much because there's still a lot of things happening between the CEO and the board. But what I can say is that it was incredibly difficult. Christine was an excellent and is an excellent CEO and obviously very passionate about Australia post. She certainly brought me into the organization. And you know, I have a lot to be very thankful for with a lot of these things when you're doing the volume of servicing the country that we are, and we're talking about, you know, 50 to 60 million parcels. And you are going through a peak. You almost have to separate what happens with board and CEO and government in this instance, because we've got this one shareholder called the government, and they're a bit tricky at times, you may have noticed, you almost have to say that's what's happening. We have to actually deliver for the country because Australia's sort of, wasn't accepting excuses. And we were seeing volumes. So as a leader, it is quite confronting, but it's also an opportunity to really get you focused on that. And then there are other people. So our acting CEO, Rodney Boys had to focus on on the board, things, et cetera. And then, you know, look, I don't think we'd ever want to really relive it.

Paul: Was it hard to remain focused during that period, given the whole organization was under such pressure?

Nicole: It wasn't hard to remain focused. It was just exhausting because you were just dealing with things that you didn't expect. And it's one of the great things about working for government organization is your shareholder is the Australian people, right? That's beautiful. That's also, there's a lot of opinions, we are just saying, you know, and, and so that can be challenging. And after having going through COVID, et cetera, is been difficult, but I will say this, I look past, you know, in the last few years, what we've managed to achieve, and I'm really proud of the team, and I'm really proud of those results. And I think we have to focus on those and focus on outcomes because you can't change what's happened. You're not having conversations about it sometime it can be quite distracting. And we have

teams of people that are just dealing with so much, especially our frontline, because when we were deemed an essential service, you know, effectively 99.2% of our post offices remained open. And all of our people, we had a reduction in absentees and that's during a pandemic. And you think about it, you didn't know what was on the other side of that screen. And we got screens out very quickly. We were one of the first because we wanted to keep our people safe, 81% of my network's actually licensees. So then they're not even controlled right there. So we could send them out screens and they could say, we still don't want to open. And we couldn't compel them to, because this was a pandemic. And yet they chose to open because their role of serving the communities is far more important to them than anything else. And I think that's really as a leader, what you have to focus on.

Paul: You raised some really good points. Say when you think about your career and your background, I mean, it has been quite diverse covering broadcast publishing and telecommunications. And the question on my mind is did leadership come naturally to you? Have you always had ambitions to get the top of your field?

Nicole: Look, if you ask my mother, she would say yes, but my mother is five foot, little Polish woman. Okay. And she would say she never shut up. She never shut up. Right. I would say that being the oldest of two migrants speaking, you know, sorry, my two migrants whose English was their second language and they could speak English, but really didn't read or write. I was pushed to get on the phone. And, you know, like basically they'd be yelling at me, tell telecom, that's. I'm not paying that pollard five times this month, knowing for what you did. So at the age of nine and say, hi, I'm Nicole, I'm ringing you about this bill. I look back now. And so it really taught me to kind of lean in and have confidence and communicate from the age of nine, I had to write letters and I had to do all these things that work quite well. My brothers were kind of playing footy in the back and like, it, wasn't kind of a natural thing for a nine year old to be doing or 10 year old. Now the one thing I'll say is people often comment on my ambition and I think it's something that as a woman, you're often seen it ambitions kind of seen as a, I dunno, a negative. Yeah. And I kind of, I own it. Right. I've owned my ambition. I'm not shy about saying that. You know, I want to continue to grow in my career. I want to be a great leader. I want to be a CEO. I'm not in a hurry. I want to be a good CEO. So I think those things take time and you've got to make all the right moves. But you know, for me that that's a constant learning. Like, gosh, every day I'm learning, I'm doing things right. I'm doing things wrong. I put my foot in my mouth frequently and I've got to say, ah, I shouldn't have said that, done that. But I think that if you're open to learning and that's kind of what you need to be in 2021 as a leader especially after the year we've had, then I think you'll, you'll end up being a better leader. And there are certain things that have, you know, certainly in media, it's highly cutthroat, lots of great communicators, highly intelligent, but you know, you put your armor on every day because you go in a battle. You, whether it's to, you know, whether it's, you know, I was the chief digital officer. I mean, those newspapers did not want to go digital. Right. building subscription platforms, building out free websites like news.com dot a U and getting that to number one and everyone going. But you're a parasite. I mean, there's been plenty of times where in your career, you've kind of had to forge new territory and people have gone, but why? But I think in that instance, you don't look at what you can't do. You look at what you can do, you do it the best you can. And then you learn from the things that you don't know. Yeah.

Paul: Well, you've clearly developed an art and getting everything done. So you're clearly a very busy person, juggling many responsibilities, including family. Tell me what a normal day looks like for you and how do you actually cram everything in, you know, do you think women have an additional disadvantage, I guess in getting things done, because they're going to work because they're trying to juggle all this other responsibility that often is invisible to the work colleagues.

Nicole: Yeah. Well look, yes. And yes. Okay. So, but I will say this I'm very fortunate that my husband, who also has a great career is really supportive and was raised by a single mom actually. So he never

thought he just assumed all women worked all the time. So it was probably lucky for me really. Yeah. So, but so I do, I have four children that have always had a working mother, so for them, they were kind of independent and self-sufficient, but there's always mother's guilt and a normal day for me like this morning, my son who's studying was back for the weekend. He was leaving at seven 20. I knew I had a big day and I needed to be in the office by eight. So, you know, I set the alarm at 5:00 AM to go for my walk. So I was home by seven quarter to seven shouted at then you know, spent 10 minutes then jumped in the car, then did my makeup in the car while on a conference call. I mean, it was all safe, very safe, of course, you know, and then raced in and the day just started going, right. And like, as I said to you before joining you here, Paul, I was at a post office. Cause we just launched a new post office in Bondai beach, which is just stunning. And it really quite iconic. And, you know, the parcels are open and it's going to be the first of our real self service type and eco-friendly type post offices. But, you know, it's a lot about going, but the great news was there was a some sort of meeting that happened earlier in the office that day. And as I was leaving, there was they had a catered for so unusual these days we get nothing catered from [inaudible] and there was a lift over vegetarian lasagna, like a big one. So I said, that is mine. That is dinner tonight. So I actually got it easy tonight because I'm going home and this is what we're eating.

Paul: You mentioned your exercise because I think that's quite fascinating because often busy executives don't get a chance to actually fit exercise in their routine. But clearly you do that as part of your program to tell us a little bit more about that.

Nicole: Yeah. Look, I did it for about three or four years and I didn't feel, I didn't feel well. Like, you know, like you can get up at five 30 and start reading the media and start thinking about your day. There's always emails that come overnight. There's always something to be doing. And I find that for me, when I re-introduced, whether it was a walk or a run or a swim every day, that it was actually time to just kind of almost let the day begin and just take all the negative thoughts out, although many a time, because half the time I've got my AirPods and I'm listening to some podcasts and talking to myself and I'm sure people are walking by going, that woman does not look like she's de-stressing right now. But look, you know, I think it is about what works for you for me. If I can start my day with some form of out, in particularly nature. Like I know some people go to the gym, I'm not, I don't love a gym, but I do love to be there.

Paul: Yes. So you sort of get that physical exercise, but also great for your mental health. I'd like to also then touch a little bit on sustainability. It's an increasingly important issue for retailers who are becoming more conscious about their carbon footprint and impacts on the environment. How do you see the role of retailers in driving better outcomes for state, for sustainability?

Nicole: I think it's absolutely critical and we've, you know, we ourselves set ourselves some ambitious 20, 20 targets and we've managed to achieve those. So now we've got 20, 25 targets that are even more ambitious, but I feel confident that we will get there, but it's a commitment. And that's really about, you know, it's your carbon footprint, how you're reducing it where you're, whether you're going to get to zero net emissions or what we're going to reduce to. And then of course, for us, particularly, we deal with a lot of packaging and packaging is landfill. And I think we have to get really responsible. And I'm really pleased about the growth of, I mean, we literally sell out of compostable packaging all the time. You know, we've seen some really innovative retailers push us over a year ago now, like country road to say, we want to, you know look at biodegradable and compostable packaging. I think the other thing is that we made a pledge or I, I made a pledge January last year. We were at the fun times. So it was just before COVID hit, who knew that it fun time was going to Canberra and joining the prime minister's plastic summit, but we went and and it was funny. All of these FMCG were getting up and making these really ambitious pledges like Unilever got up or was it Procter and Gamble and said, Tresemme packaging will be made from this type of content. We'll be able to put it into bins. And my team had

given me this pledge that was quite benign. It was, we commit to being a responsible you know, corporate and I just chucked it away. I thought this is rubbish. You know, it's like that episode where she goes, he says, I love you. She was going to break up. She said, okay, let's give it a go. And I made a pledge. And I said, by the end of 2021 Australia posts, all of its Australia, post packaging will be made from a hundred percent recycled content. And everyone shared, cause that was massive. Then I sat down, I looked at my phone and my phone was exciting. Cause everyone at Australia post goes, how are we going to process that on machine? I'm like, it's January, 2020. I said, at the end of 21, we've got two years. So I'm happy to say we're at 80% now. It is fantastic. And the team are working hell and I think we will achieve that. And I guess that's what you've got to be thinking about. Where can I make a big difference? Because there are so many things that need to be fixed. And as retailers, we, I think we have the number of things to play. We have the role to play, which is responsible delivery of the products that are being consumed and how we can deliver that and where these products are made and how they're made and telling the journey, showing the story of that journey. But the other part that we play is actually making sure that we're transparent and almost educating our buyers and hopefully attracting buyers that are really interested in the role that you play in helping the planet. It isn't easy to do because our businesses on consumption, right. And the whole concept of consumption is more, more, more. And yet actually the whole purpose of sustainability is less, less, less. But if we can drive that balance, I mean, we have a partnership with red cycle which allows you to recycle yourself, plastics, and you take them to these big bins and we've got them in quite a number of outlets across the country. We're focusing more on regional Australia. Now the great thing about that is you take your plastics and you get them recycled, but they've got to be made into something. And so during the bush fires, we purchased quite a number. I think it was over 12 parks. We've furnished them with new park benches and they were made out of the recycled satchels. So now we're working on an RFP with red cycle to see how do we actually make our new benchtops our counter tops in our post offices or our wall slats out of recycled satchels. So that it's actually the sessions themselves. Cause if you don't the other thing we can recycle, but what are they getting made into and are they actually practical? And so I think as retailers, we've got to be smart at every level.

Paul: So it comes in a leadership then controlling and managing what you can manage, but also having those initiatives in place to actually make a difference. So well done you, I mean, that's an amazing outcome and you've still got six months to go, so we'll see what happens. So diversity, quality, inclusion are also important issues for retailers. You're a director of chief executive women amongst the many things that you do. Tell us about that role and the importance of diversity in the retail sector.

Nicole: Yeah. Look, so I've been a member of chief executive for a while now and, and, and on the board for four years. And before that the council for two years, I've been quite active in actually, you know, the matcher or the saying, well, the mission I should say is women leaders enabling women leaders. So the whole purpose is not about your generation, it's the generations coming through. And this is where I think retail plays a really important part because you actually have, we all have so many females, my workforce, 76% female. Yet when I look at our leadership team, it's actually far more male. And so it's how you keep those women in the workforce, how you give them meaningful careers, help them with the training and the tools, but also give them mentors or sponsors, which are different things. And mentors is going to help you in your life. A sponsor's going to sponsor you to get promotions and sponsor you for new opportunities. And the role of chief executive women is pulling all of those leavers and, and advocacy and, you know, looking at change within policy particularly, and we've seen massive, you know, we've seen the me too movement, and now we've seen, you know, I think that whole you know, Canberra bubble and what's happening within, you know, some of the terrible things that have really just surprised us all with Brittany Higgins and et cetera. I think what we have to realize is that there are extreme you what would you call like things that have happened that are just wrong and, you

know, in many instances, criminal, but there's also the everyday woman that actually is just trying to get through her day and whatever that day looks like for her, she wants to get home at night and feel like it's been worth it. And some of that may be raising children and there's nothing wrong with that, but that's actually a really valuable role to play. And that doesn't mean you have to step away from a career and how do you balance the two? And so we still have got a long way to go with childcare and, you know, the latest budget certainly helped that. But I think how we manage all those elements and really ensure that our female generations that are coming through most importantly, feel they have those opportunities, but want to stay in their career because we have more women that graduate from university. We have over 60% of females that graduate from universities, but by the thirties, we only have 40% that are in management.

Paul: Terrible stat, terrible stat. When you were reflecting and you're talking, I guess if you think about the advice you'd give to a younger person, particularly young women starting out in the industry, what would that be?

Nicole: There'll be many highs and lows. So don't beat yourself up about either of them. I always say it's a pendulum. You know, I sometimes get the balance, right? Sometimes I'm really good at my job and I'm a bit rubbish at home. And sometimes now I'm a mom, you know, I've been a mum for a while. Now, my son's 19, but you know, like I'm really great mom, and work's not under control. I don't beat myself up, give yourself the opportunity to breathe and be your best self in whatever environment you are, every day's a new day. But most importantly, do not be shy about leaning in and saying, look at me, give me this opportunity. Don't feel like, because I've got this other thing happening. I better not. And so many times women second guess themselves, better not do not do that. Throw yourself in. I mean, I remember, I mean, I was kind of nuts because I was in denial. I was pregnant. So that was probably not a great example, but being seven months pregnant and storming into our CEO's you know, office at the time. And I was the general manager of online at seven West Medias Pacific magazine at that time. And I stormed in seven months pregnant and said, the publisher for the youth titles is just resigned. I run all the websites. We make more money out of the youth websites than we do out of the magazine. So just give me the magazines. And I made a big pitch. And of course he didn't really notice that I was pregnant because I did notice those things 20 years ago. And he said, Oh, okay, well, it's true that you can make, I can do a really good job. And I stood up and he went, Oh, Hey, should you be telling me something? I said, I told you three months ago, I'm pregnant. Like I'm actually announced seven months pregnant goes, how are you going to do it? I said, I don't know, but I'm going to do it. And you know, I mean, look back, there was a different time. We didn't have paid maternity leave, et cetera. And economically I knew I was going to probably come back after a few months, but I was able to negotiate doing that Part-Time working from home and I had an environment that was about if I hadn't asked.

Paul: You saw the opportunity to ensure you sort of went for it. And often that's not a gender issue. I think it goes across male men and women, women, I think also probably expect to be always super a superwoman don't ask for help. And have you, have you thought of, you'd let Linden asked for support at times when you've had those lows to get through those particular times or if he's just soldiered on your own?

Nicole: No, no. I'm a big talker. So, so I believe that you're not alone. I think it does take a village. It also takes a village of, and whether you call it a network in your corporate life, but it takes a lot of people. And one of the things that, you know, to help you. So one of the things I always say to women that speak to me is there's a couple of things you need, you need your village. So whether it's your mum, friends that can help with school pick up because you're just stuck in a meeting and, you know, and you can text and say, and they'll, you know, you'll load them back. So make sure you do that. Or it's the corporate friends where you're going through a really rubbish time and you ring them. I mean, I've rung you Paul and gone, Oh my God, this is doing my head in. What do you think? You've got to reach out and

take that advice. And people are really, I mean, Australians are just generous by their very nature and they want to help you don't exploit it and don't do it just when you need something. Either sometimes reach out to others. If they're going through a hard time and just go, if you need anything I'm here or at sometimes if I'm reading, you know, reading a paper online and I see something and I see that someone's done well, I'll send the link to them and say, you rock good on you. And that just knows that there are you remember them and it's part of it. But I do think that generally we feel like we've got to have the answers or perfect, or everything's about a coffee or a meeting. And it's kind of not, we don't have that time. You know, people are kind of really busy. So sometimes a five minute call in the car or a quick text message is just as powerful as keeping that connection alive. And I'm a big believer in keeping connected

Paul: Really good points. Do you have any regrets? Do you think that because you couldn't say there's anything you would've done differently?

Nicole: Oh gosh. Yeah. Plenty, plenty of regrets. Look, I part of the reason I left news corp is I didn't like the leader I was becoming. So I was becoming quite aggressive. I was unhappy. I wasn't my best self and that was a hard year for me. And it was also hard for me to admit that I wasn't gonna, I wasn't doing well. So actually stepping away and saying, I wanted to make a complete career change and you couldn't have got you can't get more different than news corp in Australia posts like, absolutely just so different. And so for me saying, I want to try something completely different and learn new skills was kind of scary, but I had to, because you kind of have to like what you do every day, but you also have to like yourself when you're doing it. And sometimes when you're in a cutthroat industry where it is really difficult, you don't realize you're becoming the cutthroat person, but to compete, that's sort of what had what happened. And you think it's normal to yell and scream and it's just not, and it's not the type of leadership style that I certainly wanted. And I thought it was right. So, you know, that that's probably, you know, I know that time is probably one of my biggest regrets, but there were plenty of successes as well, but it's how I got there that I wanted to learn. You know, you can still have success. You just don't have to do it in a way that is banging the table. And, you know, you know, when it all costs, I don't think in a values driven world, the way we are now, you actually have to take people on the journey and yes, you need a purpose and a goal, but you have to, sometimes the way you get there is just different. I mean, my current workforce average tenure is 27 years. You don't, it's not like news corp, you know, you're fired. If things don't work, you don't do that no way. In fact, you have to learn how to bring out the best in them. And that's been really rewarding. It's not been easy, it's been a different challenge, but it's made me certainly think differently about how you lead and lead through change.

Paul: Some really good points. If you're thinking now, just talking about the future of retail, I guess, and when you think about the future of retail, what are the greatest opportunities that lie ahead, do you think for the retail industry?

Nicole: So look, I think the retail industry is obviously the place to be like, I just think it is so exciting. And so I think there's a couple of big things that are ahead. I think that in some respects, we got much better last year and understanding that digital was not the enemy and that Amazon had all the answers. In fact, we can all learn different parts of our business, but when you truly are powerful, when you can make digital and physical come together, and whether you call it omni-channel or whatever the reality is that the consumer or the, you know, the customer, hasn't really made a shift, she's going to buy from you when she was on the bus this morning. And then she's going to walk past at lunch and go, Oh, I'm going to try that on now and also buy for your click and collect or whatever it is. So I think that's a really, really important thing that is going to keep growing. And Australia is really at the cusp of that. And I think what you've seen with the growth of, you know, I mean, I think home and gardens surprise me and how much of that has moved in this omni-channel world. We've always loved our homes, but we've got 2 million more Australians that are stuckey. So gosh, we're doing a lot of DIY, right. But also, you know, we seem,

we gadget obsessed. And so you've seen some amazing results from JB Hi-Fi, et cetera, and that I think will continue and how we continue to evolve and drive that I think is really important. But I think the big trend is going to be personalization and how we use the knowledge we have with data and data really is not this nasty word. Actually, it's helping you drive algorithms that perform better so that you can personalize and get people to get products that are more relevant to what they need. And it, isn't just about upselling. It's about right selling. And that's where the future of retail I think is, makes it really exciting because it truly is that, you know, that real time experience. And if you have a good experience, it's also something you want to share. So it becomes part of someone's Facebook feed or their Instagram feed, because they want to all Snapchat. Cause it'll only last five minutes, but I know with my own daughters who are teenagers, you know, they buy something, you know, for years now they'll take a selfie and they'll post it. And, you know, like I just watched them that you're part of that life. You're part of that generation as they grow and evolve. And I wish that they would wear more actually cause crop tops, do my hair regardless as they evolve, you need to kind of realize that that's part of retail's role and it always has been. But I think now it's, it's really at the touch of a fingertip. And I think, look, the last thing I would say, cause I have to say to you, it's so wonderful that you are CEO of the IRA now because it's wonderful to have an association that drives so much credibility and strong voice, but advocacy, but also actually makes us seem like an industry that has grown up and has a really important role to play when we employ so many Australians. And we have such an important role in how those people evolve in their careers in their lives. I mean, I think that the work that you're doing with your team and the ARA is fantastic, so that they'll make those trends even better.

Paul: What a lovely way to end this conversation. It's so great to see you, Nicole, thanks for joining us on the Amex Lounge with some retail therapy and Gretsch License, all the work you're doing at Australia post and all the best for the future.

Nicole: Thank you so much, Paul I've loved it.

Paul: Stay tuned in just a moment. You're about to hear some exclusive bonus content. We have a fireside chat with Robert Tedesco, VP and general manager of global merchant services in Australia, New Zealand at American Express about reigniting retail and some key insights from small to medium retailers. Robert, thanks for joining me here in the Amex lounge. What's American Express's research telling you about the retail sector coming out of COVID-19.

Robert: Thanks, Paul. And thanks for having me. Lot of positivity amongst our larger retailers, as we've seen discretionary spend that ordinarily would have gone to travel and entertainment shift to retail. And those retailers who have really strong omni-channel strategies are probably benefiting the most. We've seen that in our own numbers as well. Our TNA even now remains at about half of its pre pandemic levels. Whilst pre pandemic spend with shops is around 25% higher. Having said that our research with small business shows that they're remaining cautious and concerned. Our research amongst more businesses found that less than half of retail SMEs feel optimistic about the year ahead, but 58% said their top business resolution for 2021 is to try new ways to grow their business. So we all need to play a part to help support this ambition, especially during the recovery.

Paul: And what does American express doing to support retailers?

Robert: Look, our primary goal is to make it easier to create great mutual customer experiences through a number of ways. We have great data and analysis which can inform better ways to drive spend. We have access to our base of high spending customers. We've got participation events that drive span like our Vogue American Express fashion night out. And we have great frictionless experiences that can help create a seamless checkout experiences through our technology and tokenization and not forgetting our flagship small business campaign shops more, which we've transformed into a year round movement, celebrating the valuable contributions, small businesses make to their communities.

Paul: Now tell us more about shop small this year, Robert, it's been an institution on the retail calendar for a number of years now.

Robert: Yeah, it has. And it's a really popular initiative. It's now in its ninth year and we've traditionally held shops small in the lead up to Christmas over this year, we're extending this support year round. This is a very effective campaign in driving spend in businesses. As we incentivize American Express card members with three extra points per dollar spent with those participating small businesses between 2013 and 2020 American express card members have contributed more than \$6 billion to the local small business sector through shops more. We want the whole sector in retail to thrive, but we know that those small businesses in particular make up the majority need that little bit of extra support.

Paul: Thanks for joining me in the Amex Lounge. Robert, it's been great chatting with you.

Robert: Thanks Paul.

Thanks for joining us on the Amex Lounge some retail therapy. Make sure you subscribe to our show on Apple podcasts or follow us on Spotify. We can be found wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts. For more information about the work we do at the Australian retailers association, head to our website, retail.org.au. Follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, wherever you love to connect. All the links can be found in the show notes. I can't wait to talk retail therapy with Australia's retail leaders and share these conversations with you. The future leaders, business owners and innovators of the industry.

The ARA acknowledges the traditional owners of the land, where we have recorded this podcast, the Gadigal people of the ordination, and we pay our respects to the elders past present and recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as Australia's first traders who utilize a sophisticated network of trading paths that have facilitated the exchange of goods, knowledge, and culture for millennial.