



What Drives Marta Tellado to Advocate for a Fair and Just Marketplace

The President and CEO of Consumer Reports, and author of *Buyer Aware: Harnessing Our Consumer Power for a Safe, Fair, and Transparent Marketplace*, explains why digital rights is the next frontier of consumer protections, and shares her best advice for flexing your consumer power.

Alicia Menendez: Every day, multiple times a day, we are making choices as consumers, how we spend our money and how much of our data we're willing to share with the companies we do business with. Now, you may not be constantly thinking about those choices. I know I am not. I am moving very quickly, but Marta Tellado is. She's the president and CEO of Consumer Reports, an independent nonprofit that works with consumers to create a fair and just marketplace. She's also the author of *Buyer Aware: Harnessing Our Consumer Power for a Safe, Fair, and Transparent Marketplace*. I found this conversation with Marta eye-opening. And everything from the varying layers of protection on things we use every day, like the apps we use to transfer money and on what Marta calls the moral clarity required to go to the map for consumers. Marta, thank you so much for being here.

Marta Tellado: It's a pleasure.

Menendez: Take me back to when you are presented with the opportunity to come run Consumer Reports.

Tellado: What drew me to Consumer Reports was this almost mystical intervention where I recall that my first internship out of college was working in Public Citizen, which is a consumer organization with another historic iconic leader, Ralph Nader. So it was interesting when they called me and said, "Would you be interested in talking to us about it?" My life came full circle from being a college grad doing my first job and then being called and say there's this amazing organization, another icon, which is now looking to modernize and be on the forefront of what's happening in the digital marketplace as opposed to what it was. And I really was drawn to the idea of the millions of people that rely on trusted information every day to guide them in a marketplace and create the opportunities and the safety they require.

So that, to me, was so intriguing and the closer I got to it, the more I recognized that it really was another avenue for me. And it was also a social enterprise. It's not government, it's not philanthropy. We have a double bottom line at Consumer Reports. We are a nonprofit. We are independent. We are fact-driven science based. And we've had to earn that trust over the 87 years that we've been there. And I really believe that Consumer Reports is more relevant today than it was back then because the market is so opaque and so difficult to navigate.

Menendez: I think a lot of us have interface with Consumer Reports when we need to buy a new dishwasher, when we need to buy a new washer machine, and there's that value. But I think it's really fascinating what you were saying about the fact that the market now revolves so much around information and the gathering of a person's digital footprint, Internet patterns, our personal information. And I think that's still... I mean, it's amazing to me they took over in 2014 and they were having that conversation then because most of us are still in a game of catch-up around things as basic as are you accepting all these cookies or not? And what does that even mean? And I just want to get to where I want to go faster perhaps without the awareness of what that information is being used for and how it is shaping our experience as consumers. Baseline, what is it you want our listeners to know about how to be a mindful and aware consumer in the 21st century?

Tellado: I'd say the first thing to be aware of is it's so many of the consumer rights and protections that we fought for for the last several decades really don't apply to this new marketplace called the digital marketplace. So don't assume that there are protections out there for your data, for what you're doing online, for the apps that you're using, the financial tools that are at your disposal like the peer-to-peer payment apps, whether you have to pay a bill.

Menendez: Like Venmo and Zelle and...

Tellado: Yes. Venmo, PayPal, Zelle that we just assume that there are sort of protection embedded. So let's say Alicia, that you send someone but you happen to get the name wrong or the number wrong and you realize that money is gone and it's gone. Well, there's no guarantee you get it back. And also, what you also don't know is which one of these apps is collecting how much information about you and about your spending habits. I'll give you another example. So we did an investigation on car insurance in 2017 and we partnered with a lot of investigative organizations. This one happened to be ProPublica, and we investigated because we wanted to understand. So most of us, most consumers assume that your driving record is what fuels the number, how much you pay for your premiums. We did some reverse engineering of the algorithms. We looked at what is the data that's actually being sucked up to price.

And what we learned is it wasn't your driving record that was most important. It was your zip code because they want to know where you lived. You live in a Black neighborhood, Hispanic neighborhood. We saw that you pay up towards of 30% more for your car insurance and with the same risk factors as the adjacent neighborhood, which is white. So there's no transparency there. How do you know that? You don't. And so much of our online purchasing is driven by things that you're just not aware of. In a marketplace where we have now shifted from bricks and mortars to digital and online, what are the rules and guidelines of that marketplace? What is our role as consumers to demand better from these companies? And it's hard to do that when you're not aware of them and when they're not transparent to you.

Menendez: So where do you start? What is the first thing you have people do?

Tellado: A number of things. We were just talking about safety and security in your data. And one of the things I'm always surprised by, and I always talk to people and say, "Well, have you given yourself a security tuneup?" And they're like, "Well, what's that?" It's like it's going through your devices and just changing the controls on your devices so that your data is more secured. It's not just your iPhone, all your digital devices. What we designed was something called a security planner. It's free, it's on our site, you can download it. It's also

available in Spanish and it just walks you through, here's like a basic fitness exercise to get you the security and privacy. And why is that necessary? Because the devices that you buy are not set to that maximum security.

If you have a television, you want to check that because there's some televisions that are tracking what you're viewing and they're doing it because they're taking that data and they're selling that data. Whether it's an exercise fitness bike, whether it's a baby monitor. So go through all those devices and do that. Now, the problem with that is the burden is on us, and that's not fair either. But as we fight for a world that is safe and secure and private by design, we don't have to stand still. We can take some agency and do something.

Menendez: I love that duality of that. And of course, that comes from a systems thinker, right? That both the system has to be reformed and you have to advocate for those reforms at the macro level. But that also, while you wait for it, there are things you can do to make sure that you are safe and secure. And here's the thing, in as much as the way the conversation has changed to incorporate the reality of living in a digital world, you're still fighting these fights over products like ion batteries. That fight has not ended, the fight to have safe consumable goods.

Tellado: Well, we've been here before. That's another way of saying we've been at these fights. But the thing about a marketplace is that it's constantly evolving and that's not a bad thing. You have innovation, you have technology. It's not one and done. Yes, we've done work on harmful products and harmful ingredients. Well, guess what? Now, we have something called PFAS, which is also harmful, which didn't exist a decade or so ago that consumers were aware of. And so as the market evolves, so does the work of Consumer Reports and what we do. I mean, we have to be that searchlight. We have to be running at pace or ahead of that pace, which is getting harder and harder to do. But a market is never standing still and waiting for us, and we have to be on the cutting edge of that. So we've got to look at the new products and services that are out.

Menendez: I mean, Marta, there's just such incredible responsibility with what it is you do. Has there ever been a time where you worried about getting it wrong or you came close to getting it wrong?

Tellado: In an organization that is driven by the facts and by science and by the research that we do with consumers, you always want to be fact-driven. But what you also know about science is that science is evolving. We know that. We've just been through a pandemic where the science was evolving in real time. The irony is that there is more information out there than ever before. The challenge is that you don't know what to trust. And you don't know it's getting harder and harder to distinguish what is advertising and what is real fact-driven content. I'll give you an example. My father, lifelong diabetic goes on the Internet, loves the Internet, loves his iPad. But he's being marketed things constantly because they know he's diabetic, they're tracking him. And he gets this video that looks like a legitimate doctor telling him, "Stop taking your medications and sign up for this." Well, he fell into that trap. Absolutely fell into that trap. I come home, he is not feeling well. And I finally dragged it out of him like, "Well, what's going on here?" There's no way to know. He thought it was a legitimate doctor. That is absolutely a common mistake. How do you distinguish between an ad and real facts?

Menendez: Marta, there are two competing realities. Tell me if you disagree that I think, we as Latinas grapple with, which is we understand our power as consumers. We understand that we are

among the most brand loyal groups in the country. We understand that Latinas in particular are making a lot of the purchasing decisions within their homes. And at the same time, we often feel as we have been overlooked as consumers, that there has not been the interest, the effort in understanding what we most want and what needs and serves our families and our communities. And I can't quite put those two things together.

Tellado: It's a great point. And the way I think about it is that all consumers, our collective voice is a sleeping giant. When you think about what is a marketplace? A marketplace is about supply and demand. Companies need us. They cater to us, they want to know what we think about their products and services. And your example, the buying power of Latinos. I mean, it's gone up 87% just from 2010 to 2020, but we don't want to be marketed to just because we're a tremendous buying power. We want to be marketed to because we have a voice, our community is distinctive. And that I think what really matters and what is so important. So I think our collective voice as consumers, we tend to be overwhelmed and think we don't have agency. When I see every day that that's not the case when we take on companies like Fisher-Price because they have products that are not safe. Particular example is a sleep product that we succeeded in getting off the market. But it took years.

Menendez: I used that sleep product on my baby.

Tellado: Oh.

Menendez: I know. So I had my first baby in 2016. She slept in that for the first few weeks she was home. And then by the time we had our second baby in 2019, it was off the market.

Tellado: That's right. And it was off the market because it's a terrible tragedy that nearly 100 infants lost their lives. And I think we assume that things have been tested. But everything about this product was in violation of what the American Academy of Pediatrics says is safe for infant children to be sleeping on. But I have seen how our voices can make that change happen. And that particular product that you just mentioned, Alicia, is no longer available on the market. And we succeeded in crafting a law with parents and with companies to make sure that products like that are not going to find by renaming themselves. Now, the market is complex and so we have to also go to the secondary market. That product is also found in nurseries and in daycare centers. So the work is never done, but I have seen the tremendous power we can have and the change that we can affect.

Menendez: I'm so struck by the fact that you are so thoughtful and soft-spoken. And at the same time, have this job that requires an incredible amount of bravery and temerity to go toe to toe with corporations and say, "We are going to, on the part of our consumers, say that this is not a safe product and that it needs to be taken off the market." And you don't make a lot of friends that way. That's not an easy thing to do. Can you tell me about a time where in order to do this job and do it correctly, you had to convince yourself to be brave?

Tellado: What we do is be present for consumers when government fails them and when the market fails them. Where do you turn? Where do you go? That sense of purpose and mission is what we cleave to. The marketplace changes, the core of who we are and what we're fighting for does not change. And I think I would go back to that example about the Fisher-Price Rock 'n Play sleeper for kids. When we discovered that the Consumer Product Safety Commission sent us data inadvertently that actually made the direct connection, we were threatened by them. "Do not release this data. You weren't supposed to get that data." So we had a conversation internally, but we did the right thing. We put people first. We said, "No. We have the data, we've got to make it public." And within three days, there was a total recall of that product.

Menendez: But here's the thing, Marta, you make it sound easy. You make it sound like you got the data. Because it's this thing, if the right thing to do were easy then everyone would always be doing the right thing. But the right thing to do is sometimes not easy. So in that moment for you, was it the comfort of knowing that it was a group decision? Was it the comfort of having the lawyer sign off? Was it knowing that nothing you do will ever be as brave as your mom taking four kids to another country and learning a different language? Where are you summoning that from?

Tellado: I think that moral courage has to be encompassed. And for me personally, my parents' courage set that compass from a very early age. It is about doing what's right. It's also about understanding that trust is earned and that leading an organization that has to earn the trust of consumers means taking the independence and the data-driven approach very seriously. That having purpose is also about being able to stand up and show and demonstrate that there is a way to do something where the bias is with consumers. People always say, "Well, independence, does that mean that you..." And I say, "No." Our bias is always we look at the marketplace, how is it harming or defending consumers? And that's our North Star. That's where that moral courage comes from. To look at it with an independent eye and make a judgment that is fueled by that history of commitment to putting consumers first.

Menendez: I love it. Marta, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Tellado: Thank you, Alicia.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at ola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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