



Why Valarie De La Garza Calls Her Own Shots

The CEO of Fenton Communications, the largest public interest communications firm in the country, shares the key to successful social impact campaigns, the lessons that nonprofits can learn from consumer brands, and the questions she asks to decide if big opportunities are the right opportunities.

Alicia Menendez: When Valarie De La Garza was approached about becoming the CEO of Fenton Communications, the job wasn't even on her radar. It should have been. Valarie's experience on campaigns run everything from the census to voting, combined with her years working with major consumer brands, and her lived experience as a working class kid growing up in Southeast LA made her the ideal candidate to run the largest public interest communications firm in the country. Valarie, thank you so much for doing this.

Valarie De La Garza: Oh, you're so welcome. Thank you.

Menendez: I've heard you talk about how growing up in South Gate, a working class Latino community in LA, just that early experience really shaped your commitment to social impact. What was it about that experience growing up in South Gate that had you thinking as a young person about social injustice?

De La Garza: I don't think I really understood truly what my situation was, my standing, my socioeconomic impact in my life until I went to college, being the first one to go to college, which many of us are. And then you realize, "Oh, wow," how behind I was from an educational standpoint and how unfair that was, that the zip code was a huge determinant, a social determinant on my life. And honestly, it made me sad. It made me angry. It made me appreciate that, "Wow, I'm here now." For me, that was really the crystallization of wanting to really figure out a way to be involved in social good and social impact.

Menendez: In the nineties, when you're doing Latino PR, it is still a pretty niche industry, it's at least treated as a niche industry. Do you have a story or a memory from that time that if it happened today would be absolutely ridiculous?

De La Garza: I do. I have a couple. I would be called Maria by clients, by other peers that were in what we would consider mainstream community relations and public relations. Now, I will tell you, Maria, of course, is my grandmother's name, and there are many Marias in our Latina and Latino community...

Menendez: Yeah, just the problem is you weren't one of them ...

De La Garza: Right. And this didn't happen just once. This happened to me multiple times.

Menendez: I believe this line is from your bios, it's something along the lines of, "Today, Latino communications is the expectation, not the exception." And I wonder if you really believe that so and if it is so, why so many people are still so terrible at it?

De La Garza: Yeah, I think that there used to be in the nineties when you saw the explosion of ethnic and public relations and communications in advertising, it was seen as, "Well, we need to

do it in this box. We need to do it in a division." And now I think that there is a recognition when we say "Quote the mainstream communications." Well, all you have to do is look at the numbers and numbers translate to sales. Let's just be honest. And so I think that what we've seen in the industry is a reflection of what we've seen in the world. Now, there might be an expectation, but back to your point on it not being done well, because it has to still be done by people who have lived an experience by people who come from those stories, South Gate, East LA, whether that's Chicago, wherever, across the country, and frankly, there can be complacency in the industry and throwing their hands up.

And I see this in corporations that also say, "We need more people of color on boards. Oh, we can't find "them." "We're here. We have to be more intentional and look harder to widen the pool to get people with these lived-in experiences. And in fact, we will do a great job of engaging our ethnic communities.

Menendez: The bulk of your experience is in nonprofit and social impact work, but you've also done brand side work and consumer side work. And I wonder what the lessons were you took from brand and consumer work that you've then been able to take and apply to your work doing social impact.

De La Garza: When you work on the brand side, you actually have more resources and you see how things are done when there are dollars that are set aside for focus group, qualitative and quantitative group testing. There is so much on the line when you're working with a company that has to move the needle on sales. I worked on clients like Nestlé, I worked on Kellogg's, and they were so sophisticated in using those tools and bringing that discipline into the nonprofit area where certainly those dollars are not available, which is a shame, which is wrong. They still have to move the needle, but that needle is about many times saving lives. That needle is about housing, that's about feeding people, but they do not have those resources.

But certainly we can have an intentionality and we can learn how do we apply that same discipline and rigor even if we don't have those resources. Or we'll help slow down a nonprofit and say, "Listen, I know you want to jump in and do X strategy right away, but let's do some research. We're going to spend a little bit more money at the outset, but it's going to be worth our while to be more on target and help us with research that's going to actually yield us results in the end."

Menendez: When you talk about part of your value being the fact that you did grow up in South Gate and you did grow up with a single mom and that lived experience, does the time come to mind when someone was pitching an idea to you, or like, "This is how we're going to reach the Latinos," or, "This is how we're going to reach working class people," where it sort of required you to summon little Valarie of South Gate to be like, "That's not going to work."

De La Garza: Oh, many times, but not just now, throughout my 30 years. Many, many times. And I'll tell you, they typically comes from good intention, good intention of saying, "Oh, we want to reach this market or community," but the wrong way of going about it from a perspective of dollars and cents and not about true engagement. And there's also, I think more than anything, and this is something we're still battling, we are not all the same. I happen to be an 11th generation Latina. My family goes back 11 generations in Texas. So people will say, "Oh, what part of Mexico are you from?" And I say, "Texas." It's amazing to me, but we're not all the same. And I think there tends to be back to the little Valarie when I would get mad. It's when it's like, "Oh, we're all the same. We're 'Hispanic!'" And when that diversity is

not recognized, that's when you get, I put my eyebrow up and say, this is not legitimate. It's not authentic, and it will not work, and I will not be a part of it.

Menendez: Does any specific pitch come to mind?

De La Garza: I think I would get in trouble.

Menendez: You don't have to tell me who it was. Just like...

De La Garza: Well, I'll tell you, I worked on a campaign where it was a Latin food brand, they produced chili and other things, and they had a long heritage. And the number one consumers were Latinas. And I found the ideas of the company so stereotypical and off the mark, and back to when we talked about doing research and so forth, I was like, "Who did you lean in? Because this is a different market for you. This is going to come off badly." A man with a big mustache comes out in a white suit, the big hat, and it was awful. And so you have some clients who are willing to listen and some clients who are not. At that time, there was a middle ground that was reached, but it's hard when you're the only one. See, this is again why it's important to have people at the table because then you're the one, "Oh, it's just you." Then you're not so valid. But when you're like, "Well, actually no, let me explain to you why that can be potentially offensive. You are walking into a situation where you either offense or it falls flat, and then you don't want to invest in the market anymore. But if you actually engage authentically, then guess what? You will connect with the consumer, then you'll make more money. That's what you want to do. You will sell more." But in that case, I was shocked at the imagery. I felt like we were in the 1950s.

Menendez: And really you were in the early aughts. Valarie, here's my big question. What were you doing? How were you positioning yourself so that you were someone that was being thought of as a person with CEO potential? Because you can say it's the work, but we're Latinas. We do the work, right? That part, we've got. Beyond that, what were the strategic relationships? What was the personal branding? What was the positioning that allowed you to step in when that opportunity presented itself?

De La Garza: I think for me in this moment, it was not a job that I actually had on the table for myself. And that's very telling by the way, because we don't see ourselves in that position. We don't see, it's less than 7% in my industry. It's 7% for people of color. I think it's 4% for women people of color, and who knows what it is for Latinas. When I look back to what brought me to that moment, I think it was the diversity of the experiences that I just mentioned. I think that it was an authenticity to the work that I've been talking about. For us at Fenton, we really need to mirror the experiences of the communities that our clients surf. And so I can talk about that in a way that not everyone can talk about that. That little girl that you talked about growing up in South Gate, and that family, is the same person that many of our clients are trying to impact today. And so I think that that was extremely attractive. And I think that it's not just doing the work, it's doing good work and it's being empathetic and kind. To me, those are things, especially as women, we've been told all our lives are soft, are told all our lives, we need to be strong and hard, and you can still be a badass. Being a badass is about saying, "What is your experience? How can I make that better? How can I relate to you?" And I think that for me, I see no other way, and I think that that's a departure in what we're seeing in companies from male to female. It just so happens that I also bring the experience of growing up low income, of growing up with a single mom and seeing that not as a deficit, but seeing it as an asset and something that is a new insight that perhaps others may not be able to really understand.

Menendez: You layer on to that lived experience, the work experience, and you have what I would describe as a real web of skills, right? So strategy, writing, team building, marketing, media relations, community outreach, public affairs. I would argue the highest value players or people like you who have an intricate set of skills. I think one of the challenges then is how you communicate and sell those skills in an interview. How you make it clear how those skills work together to create a cohesive vision of what a leader is.

De La Garza: Oh, I couldn't agree with you more. I think that the value that you can bring to the table is a Swiss Army knife versus just saying, "Okay, I can do this one thing," shows agility, and I think in the end that if the combination of producing excellent work, being agile and showing that you can shift because let's be honest, any role in talking about communications in your field too, you've got to be a Swiss Army knife. And I think that coming from backgrounds where you've had to be agile anyway, in dealing with difficult circumstances, that can roll up into who you are professionally. You should be able to move back and forth because that's going to make you more marketable. And for me, I've always been interested in, "What haven't I done yet?" It's a confluence of those skills and what you learn in all those just different ways that you bring and make you attractive for someone to call you up one day, which is what happened to me and said, "Listen, I know you're running half of our agency. Would you be interested in this? I'd love you to do this." And it was really more about me saying, "Okay, let me bring out the Swiss Army knife. I've not done that, but I have all these skills." Now I can bring them together.

Menendez: I don't want to gloss over this point, which is, this was not on your radar. Someone else saw it in you. When you get the call saying, "Would you think about this?" Did you do the thing I hope you did not do where you said, "Yes, me hands up?" Or did you play a little coy and say, "I'm going to need a minute to think about it."

De La Garza: Yeah, I actually did not say yes. I said, "I will do this in the interim." And I had a plan, and my plan was, and we should all talk about mentors. I had so many women and men, but women in particular about, this is not something I've done and just because it's given to me, and so many times I tell people, and I think as women and particularly as people of color, we think, "This is my shot. And if I don't say yes, I'm going to lose my shot." And I tell people this, and I recently said this to someone the other day, "You have to decide what your shot is. Just because someone calls you, you may not be set up for success. You have to decide if that is your shot. And by the way, A, you deserve getting the phone call, but maybe it's not for you. Maybe it won't make you happy. Maybe it won't give you the opportunity to thrive in the way that you want to thrive."

So for me, I did some consulting with a friend, one friend who'd been a CEO twice, a woman of color. And she said, "Listen, I think it's a great opportunity, but it's a lot of responsibility. But more importantly, can you have the ability to do the things that you will want to do? What's your discretion? What does that really look like in terms of responsibility and how does that fit into your life of what you want to do with the vision for the firm?" And so she said, "Do a hundred days. If you can try it before you buy it on both ends, if you have that opportunity, do take that because then you can see what it really is like, your owner and you." And you'll be in a situation where you'll say, "This is good." Or, "I need to make these adjustments." Or, "Peace out." And our owner, James Marcus agreed to it, and it was the best decision I ever made, and I couldn't be more honored and humbled to be in the role now, two years later.

Menendez: Valarie, what did I miss?

De La Garza: The only thing I want to say is that I tend to see in many of my staff members, especially women of color, we suffer from imposter syndrome. And I just want to say to ignore if you can or talk back to that voice when it tells you you cannot. There's a difference between saying, "You know what? This is what I want to do." It's not that I cannot do it. I make those choices. And to not let that creep into your psyche and take over because we need to be honest with ourselves and know that you have people around you who want you to succeed.

Menendez: Valarie, thank you so much for doing this.

De La Garza: Oh, thank you. I really appreciate it.

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 Hola@LatinatoLatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at [@latinatolatina](https://twitter.com/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.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Valarie De La Garza Calls Her Own Shots." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. September 4, 2023. LatinatoLatina.com.

Produced by:

