

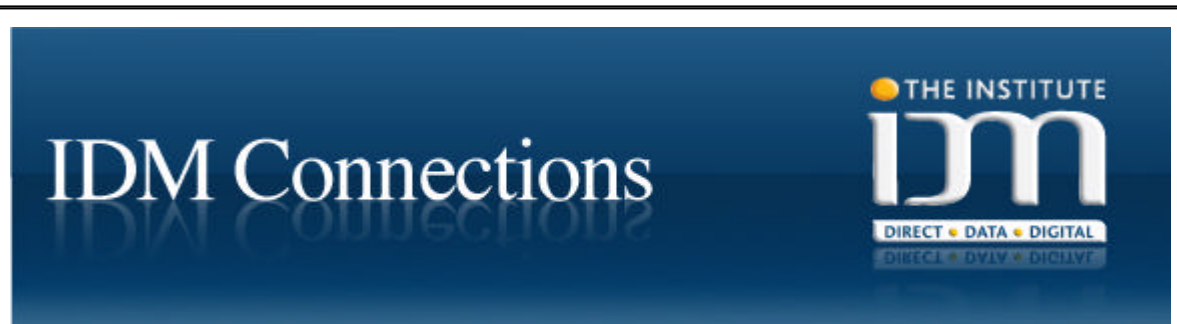
IDM Connections: June 2009

Page 1 - [Main page](#)

Page 3 - [Ten things I've learned about social media](#)

Page 2 - [Simply the best](#)

Page 5 - [Over to you](#)



Ten things I wish I'd known



We were delighted this month to learn that one of the IDM's long-standing fellows was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours. Lopa Patel MBE, FCIM, F IDM, FRSA is founder of award-winning South Asian lifestyle portal Redhotcurry.com, and was honoured for her services to digital media, the championing of entrepreneurship, particularly among Asian women, and for supporting the South Asian community in the UK. We couldn't resist asking her for the 10 things she wishes she'd known at the beginning of her illustrious career...

1. Give something for nothing

Yes, the word 'free' may be the most over-used word in direct marketing, but giving your customers something for nothing can still help you reach your target market, open a closed door and perhaps make someone's day. On a personal level, far too often people will weigh up what they will get in return before agreeing to give up their time, money or energy for a worthwhile activity. My motto is always "give something for nothing".

2. Speak up

All too often, especially when you are starting out, you are too scared to speak your mind. In direct marketing, I once did a campaign for a client where we mailed out a diskette to 50,000 recipients. Earlier that day I had tried to use the diskette myself but found I couldn't open the files. Instead of speaking up, I said nothing, thinking it was me or something wrong with my pc. Needless to say, I could have saved my client thousands of pounds if only I'd spoken up.

3. Own up to your mistakes

Sorry does seem to be the hardest word, but if you have made a mistake, own up to it. I once ran a campaign for a client where I messed up the data (wrong name with wrong address) for the entire campaign. Saying sorry to the client allowed me to put it right for them and we worked together for many years after that.

4. Planning is the answer to everything

Although I have longed to accept that the answer to everything is '42', the reality is that good planning is the answer to everything. Whether it is a business plan, campaign management, time management or your social calendar, planning will help you achieve your aims faster.

5. Do the same thing for long enough

You need to do the same thing for long enough to learn from your mistakes. It is easy to give up at the first hurdle, but if you keep doing the same thing you will eventually learn how to get it right. This is especially true in SEO (search engine optimisation) and digital marketing – you'll instinctively know the building blocks you'll need for your plan.

In career terms, it is tempting to change jobs every year, but I personally feel that an employee only starts to make a significant contribution after the first two years in a job!

6. Research, research, research

As someone who has started several ventures, I often jump in far too quickly. 'Research, research, research' should be the mantra for any would-be entrepreneur. It can help avoid costly mistakes and even crystallise your idea into a lucid and attractive business plan.

7. Be knowledgeable

Career mistakes are easy to make. I did a degree in biochemistry when I really wanted to be a journalist. This early mistake has only been overcome by knowledge acquisition and a desire to find my way back. It started with writing marketing articles to now writing articles on social issues for the mainstream and online media. Being knowledgeable about your market, your industry or your interest will help open up career opportunities.

8. You are in charge of your career

I have to say men are better at this than women, but realise that you are in charge of your career. If you see a job that you want within your company, ask your immediate boss if they could put you forward for it. If they say no, don't take it personally – assess whether you have the necessary skills for the desired vacancy. And don't sulk! Remember you've just put your boss on notice that you have ambitions beyond your current role.

9. Invest in yourself

You need to constantly invest in yourself: your skills set, your qualifications, your interests, your knowledge, your presentation and your own personal brand. Leaving aside your ego, take a look at yourself from an external perspective. This will help alleviate the 9am-5pm syndrome and will be of considerable value to you and your employer.

10. Killer heels are murder on your feet

I never seem to learn that kitten heels are far better than killer heels. Even as I totter off into the sunset, I'll be regretting that I didn't put a spare pair of pumps in my bag!

About the author

Lopa Patel is an entrepreneurial businesswoman and an inspirational leader with extensive experience in the creation of successful businesses within the new media sector. Her outstanding record of achievement has been recognised throughout the industry via numerous awards and accolades including an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List 2009.

Lopa is founder of Redhotcurry.com, Britain's leading South Asian lifestyle portal and currently a Non-Executive Director of Becta, the government agency leading e-Learning strategy in the UK. She previously founded a direct marketing services company and has helped set up several non for profit organisations in a voluntary capacity.

Lopa is well qualified in marketing, with fellowship of a number of prestigious professional bodies.

Have you gleaned ten things from your extensive experience that you'd like to share with the rest of us - or can you recommend a colleague whose wise word we ought to hear? Let us know at connections@theidm.com



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