

# the dots

a podcast about connecting.

## Sue Bohle Transcript

**Announcer:** [00:00:04] Welcome to The Dots, a podcast about connecting. The Dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring things together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life. And now your host: Digital Strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur, Kathleen Buczko.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:00:30] Communicator influencer an entrepreneur, Sue Bohle has blazed new trails for women and pioneered markets from consumer products to video games, all while raising a family and building a multi-million dollar business. Sue, welcome to The Dots. Thanks for joining us.

**Sue Bohle:** [00:00:47] Oh you're welcome, Kathleen. Thank you.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:00:50] Sue, I'd like to just kind of dive right in and if you could tell me a little bit about your journeys...you started in journalism school, right?

**Sue Bohle:** [00:00:59] Yes. I was not following the path of my family because, they were all in science but, I agreed that if I was able to go to journalism school, I would become a teacher. So I did that for three years but it didn't last. My brain was atrophying.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:01:17] I can appreciate not teaching. That's a very hard job but, how did you end up in the agency business?

**Sue Bohle:** [00:01:24] Well teaching is a wonderful vocation and I loved working with the kids but, I needed something that would constantly stimulate me to be learning and the field of journalism did not change as radically as other fields. So, I went back to graduate school looking for a way to be more stimulated, just in what I was getting out of it. I started out then, looking for a job in Los Angeles. I could not find anything in a magazine which was my major actually but, I found the job at Burson-Marsteller in public relations because, they had just acquired a client with a personal hygiene product and none of the men--and there was only me in the office who wanted to tackle that one so, I got into public relations. I immediately saw a couple of things that were of interest to me. I would get to travel. I would get to manage people, which was sort of the same idea as teaching and coaching which is a theme that continued throughout.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:02:29] So, here you are in the agency business and I'm going to just put it out there: it looked at least a lot like Mad Men "light" certainly at that point in time.

**Sue Bohle:** [00:02:42] Oh, my, yes.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:02:44] Tell us a little bit about how is it to be the only woman in the room?

**Sue Bohle:** [00:02:50] Well, it was very much like Mad Men. We all went to lunch every day and we usually had a drink. And on Fridays we went and had tequila and margaritas. But, I was very careful to manage my position because, I was the only woman. So what I did was, there were six of us senior executives I mean, six executives of the post to any kind of staff position. So I made it a

point that every single day of the week I would try to go to lunch with a different person so I could learn from this guy and I would go to lunch and I would pick their brains all during lunch. And I also worked late every day because if I had a drink at lunch I had to make sure that I could go back and think well and I would go back and make up for the time working and I was scared stiff the whole time but I was just determined I was going to make it.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:03:41] Yeah. You really broke through. You became the first senior executive on the West Coast for JWT [J. Walter Thompson], correct?

**Sue Bohle:** [00:03:50] That, also. Yes. I was fortunate. It just wasn't done. Women just were not given that opportunity. But I was a strong enough person to persist in terms of accomplishment, just depending on myself to work harder than anyone else. And I think women always had to do that. They still to a degree, have to do that, but I was not willing to do anything else. I was just willing to see what I could do, in fact, as I got pregnant with my first child at J. Walter Thompson, the thing that occurred to me was that I was going to lose my job because I would be out. And I worked all the way through the pregnancy to nine months to the Friday before I had him on Friday night. And I just wanted to keep that job. So everybody, including my husband, just sort of had to put up with that.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:04:43] Wow. It takes an extraordinary amount of strength, having done that three times in my career at this point. The exhaustion at the end of a pregnancy is overwhelming. I tease in my office now that pregnancy is the only host-parasite relationship that's not treated with antibiotics.

**Sue Bohle:** [00:05:06] (Laughing) Very good, Kathleen. Well, I found actually that focusing on work was very healthy for me regarding the pregnancy. I used to joke that the only time I got morning sick was on Saturday because I was so focused on my job from Monday to Friday that I just didn't think about it. And you know you are taking care of another human being so it is exhausting. But you--it's a joyous time, and if you also think that your job is joyous, you know, you just somehow manage both. It is a strain, but you can do it.

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**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:05:53] So you're managing a family, you're one of the only senior executives at a multinational, leading national agency in the United States, and [then] you start your own PR agency. Talk about that.

**Sue Bohle:** [00:06:09] It's kind of a crazy thing. No one in my entire family on either side had ever been an entrepreneur, in fact I'm not even sure. Among all the cousins and everything that there still is an entrepreneur in my family. A few people began to go on and work in business, especially men, but no one has ever started a company. It was just kind of an aberration that happened. It happened to me when I had that second child and she was only 10 days old. Shocking. But I was running a press conference and the CEO of the company, which was a major bank in Los Angeles, came to me and said, "Hey, I've got to talk to you about something." we were standing there ready to give a press conference and I was trying to talk him about his messaging and he said, "Sue, I've got my messages. I have to talk to you about something. I'm leaving J. Walter Thompson. I need to either join us, which you've said before or you don't want to go in-house, or I need you to start your own agency, and you have two weeks to make your decision." So there I was, someone walking my baby because I was nursing. We were doing a press conference. I had a toddler and he was giving me an opportunity that I had never even considered.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:07:26] So recognizing the opportunity when it's presented, is that both terrifying as well as...

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:07:32] I wasn't sure I recognized that. But you know, I was certainly--I mean, I really didn't have a choice. He wasn't going to stay at J. Walter Thompson and I thought somewhat... I had to go home and tell my husband, "Oh my gosh, what do you think?" And he was like, "Sure, do it." And he said, "I tell you what, we'll build a little apartment at the bottom of the driveway and you can just work from home," and he went to sleep and I stayed up all night. I think several hours, anyway and said to him in the morning, "You know John, I'm going to start my own agency but I'm not willing to have an apartment at the bottom of our driveway. The kids will be crawling down there. If I'm going to do this, I want to have space in a place where I would be recognized as an agency and I took that little baby in a backpack and went looking for space in Century City and got a five hundred a month space-- 500 square foot space, I should say and just brazenly did it even with the new house, you know and a debt that I'd promised I would work forever to help overcome. And I just did it. I just was-- I just wasn't willing to do anything else but try to make it full-throttle from the beginning and not get a negative reputation from just being you know somebody doing it out of their house.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:08:48] Right right. So what kept you motivated in those early days of entrepreneurship?

**Sue Bohle:** [00:08:56] Oh. Fear of failure. No question. I did not want to fail and I would work. I would come home, you know grab the babies, one on each leg, walk them upstairs to the bedroom, you know, fall asleep in their beds reading them stories and then get up after a couple of hours then sleep for a few hours with my husband and then get up and go to work the next day. It was incredibly exhausting time. And I see my daughter and my daughter-in-law struggling with that today. And I've said you just got to get through the first four years. You're going to be sleep-deprived, you're going to have a strain. But if you can get through the first four years, your kids start to take care of themselves. And that's what happens.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:09:45] It's funny. You know we are a kind of consortium of women who produce the show and we have all sorts of children at all different stages of life. And I don't think we say enough. It's about getting through, I always say, the first five years, because once they start to develop their own social networks in school, there is independence that comes-- that they want to be able to see and an independence or at least a breathing space of a few hours in school that you can live your own life.

**Sue Bohle:** [00:10:26] But there are pressures on you. My daughter, as she got past this stage where I could find the time to help her with her homework every night, when she needed it, we hired college students to you know to come in to help her with her homework. I was traveling. I was traveling internationally and trying to stay in front of it. If the kids know that you really love them, they'll deal with that kind of thing. But one time she told the college student, "I think I might be adopted, because my mother has gone so much." I'll tell you, the guilt from that statement! I have talked about it 'till today and teased her about it. But in the end, both of my children are so respectful and so proud of what I was able to accomplish and that's what keeps you going. You know, as long as the kids know you love them to death, they will deal with your situation and how much are gone. And today with Facebook, and some other kinds of things, I mean Facetime where you can call them and talk to them. You know they can you can say and even better touch, you just have to have the willingness to, you know do both things at once. And it's not easy but, it's doable.

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**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:12:35] So, if you were to give advice to someone today who is starting their own business, what would you say?

**Sue Bohle:** [00:12:44] Well, I think that it is more possible for women today and that they should just believe in themselves. There's no substitute for hard work and there's no substitute for keeping a high standard and not being willing to compromise the way that you teach your business or what you do yourself. But I think that it's doable today. And I would recommend it. There are many advantages to having your own business. You then can write off so many of your expenses: almost all of your entertaining is a write-off to the company. You can go places and be in charge and feel like you are leaving something that is important. You can make sure that your work is better than the average work that someone else would do and that wins you business. But you do have to also remember that it's not all about hard work and accomplishment it also is in developing relationships. For a long time, I thought I was, if we get the placement the Wall Street Journal that will get us business. And that's true. It got us business. But as the world became more difficult to succeed in accomplishing what our clients wanted, which is press, press, everywhere else. Then the relationship you built with your client so that they understood when you were doing your best and it just wasn't entirely possible or out of your hands, that they would hang in there with you because you were doing a better job than anyone else. So I would say there are two major things to think about in having your own business: one is accomplishment, and the second is relationships.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:14:35] As you've gone through your career, you've continually reshaped yourself from being a leader of a multinational agency to an entrepreneur, to today running the Serious Play Conference. So, tell us a little bit about that.

**Sue Bohle:** [00:14:55] Well I think, Kathleen that I've benefited a lot from the way the world was. I feel very lucky in many respects but, also it required me to have the gall and the willingness to stick my neck out and do something that someone else had done. When I started my own agency, I started it with a large bank, a piece of business from Kodak, and of all things, we launched Chippendale's--the dance/the strip club. But, I looked out there at the marketplace and I saw that a lot of things are happening in the Silicon Valley. And that there would be an opportunity for a PR firm to do technical work. Now, I of course didn't have a particularly technical background because women were told you know, math/science that's for guys.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:15:45] Right.

**Sue Bohle:** [00:15:46] But I knew that as a journalist, I could learn what an engineer did and re-explain it in a way that the rest of the world would understand. So I set my cap for trying to get my first client in the Silicon Valley. There were only two PR firms in the Silicon Valley at the time, if you can believe it. But I knew the CEO of one of them and I said, "David, when you have a conflict, tell them that I'm interested in having their business and I got my first Silicon Valley client as a referral. I made the story in The Wall Street Journal and several more and BusinessWeek. And that launched my career in a field that was huge and had very few people competing in it. Now you mentioned that I went on from there, yes. Because one of my technology clients sold his firm for 60

million dollars after six months of our work with him so, we had really helped him become successful with the press, that allowed him to sell that company. So he introduced us as a favor to the company where he had been before which was Atari. All of a sudden we were in an entirely new industry where there were NO PR firms and it was the beginning of the video game business. But we focused, and we were the first PR agency to do that. We focused on video games, because now we had tremendous competition in the Silicon Valley and we had those two, then directions. But the video game business eclipsed that and became a whole new field. You mentioned Serious Games because that's now an outshoot of video games. The addiction that the boys had for video games produced the opportunity to study why playing games made people want to actually replay, and replay something. And now that has been applied to education. We are at the fulcrum of the very beginning of the serious games industry and I got into it because I really saw, all the way back to my first, that it was a way to improve education in schools and teaching. And now I see that the Serious Games are used in business and health care and every other thing and I wish I were 50 again because I'm at the beginning of a really fast expanding industry. It's interesting too, I should say that you know, I've reached 65 and I wasn't bored. I was just enjoying myself so, I worked another four or five years until my kids said, "Hey, Mom, stop working 80 hours a week and spend more time with the grandchildren." So I gave up my public relations agency and I, as you mentioned, I do now produce the Serious Play Conference, which is one of the most credible conferences for the Serious Games industry. So it's moving with the times--seeing--not getting stuck, not being complacent and looking ahead and seeing what the opportunity might be out there and then just going for just going for it.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:18:51] "Just going for it." I think that that's just the message that we need to leave everybody with. Sue, thank you so much for joining us here on The Dots and sharing your story, sharing your voice, and sharing what's next. So we appreciate it. Thanks so much.

**Sue Bohle:** [00:19:10] Thank you Kathleen.

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