

MALINA NGAI

WE'RE WORKING RELENTLESSLY TO PROMOTE INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

Interviewed by Pedro Yip and Sirko Siemssen



Malina Ngai is CEO of A.S. Watson (Asia & Europe) and COO of A.S. Watson Group, the world's largest international health and beauty retailer. In last year's Retail and Consumer Journal, she spoke to us about the impact of COVID-19 and her learnings from the crisis. This year, we wanted to learn more about a topic she cares deeply about: the empowerment of women.

Ngai is one of the few female chief executives of a leading international corporation. Under her leadership, A.S. Watson has strengthened its commitment to inclusion and diversity and sought to expand its understanding of women's needs, so as to improve the lives of staff and customers. She talked about the company's efforts to Pedro Yip, Oliver Wyman's Head of Retail & Consumer Goods Asia and Sirko Siemssen, global leader of the Retail & Consumer Goods practice.

Why does A.S. Watson place such emphasis on inclusion and diversity – not just as an internal, organizational topic, but also as a major theme in your customers' lives?

A.S. Watson has a long-standing, ongoing commitment to an inclusive and diverse culture. We are the world's largest international health and beauty retailer, with over 130,000 colleagues around the world. They are our biggest assets, and they play an essential role in the company's growth and success. It's extremely important for us to value each individual – their uniqueness, ideas, strengths, and experiences. Then every one of them can feel welcomed, respected, and appreciated.

We've also been working relentlessly to promote communities that are inclusive and diverse. In the 180 years since we were founded, women have always been our core customer group: Today, over 80% of our over 142 million members are female, and we aim to play a meaningful part in their daily lives and to put a smile on their faces. We want to stay close to their evolving needs and respond to them. Part of our social purpose is the empowerment of women. It's important for us to understand women and empower them to feel good, beautiful, and confident.



How do you find out about how women feel?

Our recent “Women’s Confidence Survey in Asia” asked women aged between 20 and 29 to rate their levels of confidence and say what would boost it. Almost half lacked confidence and about the same proportion were unsatisfied with their career progression. They are looking for mentoring support, networking events, and seminars on stress management and career success. In our global survey, “What is Beautiful?”, 75% of women aged under 45 in Asia and Europe agreed that inner beauty is more important than ever after two years of the pandemic.

Both surveys show a shift in the way people think about the things that really matter, and they help us redefine what “beautiful” means to them. The findings have given us insights into how to empower our female customers – not only to help them enhance their outer beauty, but also to boost their self-confidence and inspire them to glow from the inside, which is more important.

How are you addressing this through A.S. Watson's products?

Watsons has launched its "The New Beautiful" campaign to promote inner beauty and empower women with the social purpose, "Look Good, Do Good, Feel Great." A series of activities across Asia – with the themes "Go Green, Go Smile, and Go Empower" – aims to boost women's confidence and inspire them to be better versions of themselves. There will be career and mental health seminars, and we have expanded our Sustainable Choices product range. We've just launched "Watsons VR Get Active Park" in Asia, a virtual playland made up of a game zone, an exercise arena, a virtual Watsons store, and a rewards station. The park offers a virtual immersive experience that helps customers stay active and healthy while at home. So far, we have attracted over 1.2 million visits, letting us strengthen our bonds with customers who live active lifestyles.

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How does helping your customers like this translate into commercial impact?

The empowerment of women has far-reaching benefits, and we firmly believe it is the right thing to do. It has a positive impact on women's lives and families and on society as a whole. In many economies, women are increasingly represented in the labour force and among university students, and they have greater control over household spending. We hope that A.S. Watson retail brands will be their top choices when they buy health, beauty, and personal-care products for themselves and their families.

What are the main challenges when addressing inclusivity and diversity?

Our starting point was to recognize the importance of inclusivity and diversity a few years ago. It then became clear that it's not about numbers alone. The more fundamental challenge is the culture. It involves staff engagement and education for everyone in the organization – to change the way they think, the way they work, and the way they get along with each other. Everyone has to give up prejudice, stereotypes, and bias. They must be humble and open to change. At the leadership level, we are committed to empowering our colleagues to talk about the challenge and developing new ideas and solutions together. It is critically important to ensure that there are benefits for employees and for our business too.



What are your recommendations for the predominantly male leadership teams at most companies?

It is important for leaders to see talent in everyone regardless of their background and gender. In an uncertain world, where companies need to be agile to stay ahead of the competition, there are a lot of qualities in which women have an edge over men: the ability to lead with empathy and build collaboration and trust; an eagerness to nurture talent; resilience in the face of adversity; and being prepared to ask for help. I could go on and on.

My advice to future female leaders in retail: Get prepared, work extra hard, and focus on where you can make a difference.

Do you have any advice for the many young and ambitious female leaders out there?

My advice to future female leaders in retail: Get Prepared, work extra hard, and focus on where you can make a difference. That's how I shaped my career path, and there's no formula to plan one's success. It's developed through the extra preparation I did on the journey. It is better to be prepared for an opportunity than to have an opportunity and not be prepared for it. Sometimes an opportunity only knocks once. Prepare well for your current and your future roles. In everything you do, don't just get the job done, but get the job well done. Your role is bigger than your job title. This mindset will take you very far in your career. So, believe in yourself and be brave in pursuing your career goal.

There are bound to be obstacles on the way to any kind of success. There will always be tough times and setbacks on a career journey. I always remind myself: Do not pray for an easy life; pray to be a stronger person. With hard work and persistence, there is no limit to what you can achieve. Create the future. Make it your own.