

NCWIT Interview with Marketta Silvera

BIO: *Since joining Aaptera in 2005 as chief executive and board member, Marketta Silvera has led the company to be the first provider of v-Business solutions (e-Business over the phone) that help enterprises increase revenues through ad-serving technologies, 1-to-1 marketing, and personalized e-commerce over the phone channel. Previously, as an entrepreneur and chairman/CEO, Ms. Silvera founded the first network-based Internet security company, Pilot Network Services, which developed patented technology to protect corporate networks against criminal hackers. She took the company public and built it to a \$1 billion market cap. Prior to that, Ms. Silvera was President/COO of VoiceCom Systems, a leading voice messaging and IVR systems provider; and of Votan, a voice recognition technology leader. Ms. Silvera is a board member and past president of AVIOS, an international voice-technology society. She has been a frequent speaker at technology and investment banking conferences, and has contributed articles to local and national publications. She holds a B.S. in Economics from Turku School of Economics, Finland, with coursework in St. Gallen, Switzerland, and graduate studies in Mathematical Economics at Syracuse.*

Lee Kennedy: Hi this is Lee Kennedy and I'm one of the board members with NCWIT, the National Center for Women in Information Technology. This is part of a series of interviews that we are doing with just phenomenal entrepreneurs. Women who have started IT companies in just a variety of sectors and they all have wonderful stories to tell us. With me I have Larry Nelson from W3W3.com. Hi, Larry.

Larry Nelson: I'm real happy to be here. We've had tremendous reception, not only from younger people, but also bosses that might be hiring people, or also possibly looking into becoming an entrepreneur. So thank you so much.

Lee: Great, could you tell us a little bit about W3W3?

Larry: We're an online radio show; we started in '98 before anybody even knew what that was. We get a lot of good visitors, and it's all focused strictly on business so this fits with us very well.

Lee: Great. We also have with us Lucy Sanders, who is the co-founder for NCWIT, and also the CEO. Hi, Lucy. So today we're interviewing Marketta Sylvera. Hello, Marketta.

Marketta Sylvera: Hello.

Lee: And Marketta has built just a number of super successful companies, and we'd love for you to tell us a little bit about Aaptera and what's going on there.

Marketta: Well, Aaptera is an exciting company because we bring - in a nutshell - Google and eBay to the phone. What that means is the world is getting more mobile and more than two billion of us worldwide use mobile phones - which have become our computers, and the new media channels. We have them always on, and now we want Google on the phone, and eBay on the phone.

That is where our company comes in, we provide to the marketplace technology for mobile advertising search and commerce, and have filed 36 patents, and won global technology awards, announced phenomenal new business deals with several major companies.

For example, just a couple weeks ago we rolled out in California with AT&T their first major carrier free 411 service, which is called 1800YellowPages. That is powered by Aaptera mobile ad technology. Last week we launched with the largest seller of movie tickets in the country - Movietickets.com - a new ad sponsored ticket service.

Well, actually two days ago I just came back from the Always On conference here, the Stanford Summit,

and presented a CEO showcase there on the same day as we announced and wired the press release about a great new service with Unwired Nation - which ad sponsors eBay calls that they make to individuals that are bidding on eBay service and notifying the callers of the fact that they may be losing the bid and it's time to up the bid or do something.

Lee: Wow, that sounds like Aptera has a phenomenally bright future.

Larry: Boy, I'll say.

Lucy Sanders: Well, here's what we like is that being from AT&T Bell, OK, they're working so that voice is not a commodity. So I love it.

Larry: Yes, she's enlisted with you already.

Marketta: That's good. Well the whole idea behind the free 411 service - which is now a new service called 1800YellowPages - is that people don't want to pay one dollar to two dollars if they can have it free. What makes this a killer application for our company is that the directory assistance is running all over the world, it's a regulatory requirement wireless and wire line carriers provide that service.

So we didn't have to invent the directory assistance. We didn't have to invent the ad sponsored concept because Google has already done that, but, we have invented is the way to bring it to the mobile phone and use the voice technology - voice and visual - in such a way that we really capitalize on that very exact moment when the caller is requesting information through a keyword search, and then provide the information in relevant options so it does not become spam.

So that people do not have to browse on tiny screens for something that's impossible to do when you're on the move in the car, walking or running. You can use the voice, then combine that with a visual at exactly the right time, and provide the information.

Lee: Marketta, we're really happy to have you here today to talk to us, and looking forward to learning about entrepreneurship from you. So why don't we jump on in? I'd love to hear how you first got into technology, and what technologies you think are really cool today.

Marketta: Well, you know I got into technology such a long time ago as a kid that I can't think of the specific moment, but I've always been interested in math and computers early on with the programming, then systems designer, then I got into technical management et cetera, et cetera.

But the main reason for this was that my parents always told me - I grew up in Finland, I'm a dual citizen of Finland and the United States - my parents always told me in Finland that, "You can do anything you want to do". When I was three years old, "You can do anything you want to do, but you've got to be the best at what you do, because when you're the best at what you do you'll get a chance to do what you really want to do." And that kind of stuck in the little kid's mind and I liked sciences, and I liked the math, that's how I got into technology early on.

As far as the second part of your question, what technologies I think are cool... Wow! That's a big question because so many, but for starters, to me, the technologies that serve the mobile environment - the wireless Internet - are the coolest today, because that's where the world is heading. Innovation that addresses the growing needs of this mobile world are really - I think - cool, because that's where it's going to be at.

The industry experts project, for example, by 2010 - which is just in two and half years - that there will be more mobile phones connected to the Internet than PCs. Sp that will tell you why this is going to be cool, and as I mentioned a little while ago, more than two billion of us already today worldwide use mobile phones that have become our computers.

So that whole area I think is very, very cool because it's so meaningful. That's a clear direction where we

all are heading as users and consumers. Then to find something within this area that really solves a big pain is what I think is extra cool, and that's what we do.

That's why I have directed this company that I've been the CEO of for the past two and a half years. I've directed it to literally combine that voice and visual that I brought up a little while ago. Which means that it should be painless. It should be convenient. It should combine the most natural needs at the right moment in an exception mode rather than being bombarded spam that lands on your mobile handset. So you can easily turn this cool technology into a nightmare if you do not provide the right innovations that leverage this particular media. So I believe in Voice and Visual.

Another really cool technology that I've listened to several panels at the Stanford Summit had to do with a social networking and the user provided content. And that's what this particular interview is all about. You know the blogs and the opportunity for people to participate together and grow as a result of that. Rather than depend on finding the books or TV programs or whatever. They can actually dive right in and be part of the group that's making it happen. You know I could talk about this a long time. But you know, there's just kind of a flavor of why I think we are in the coolest period of technology ever.

Lucy: I just love you. I just think this is fabulous. And I mean you are so passionate as a technologist. And I may shift gears just a moment and ask you about entrepreneurship. You obviously are a serial entrepreneur. And why are you an entrepreneur? I suspect that your parents told you that you could finally be an entrepreneur. And what about entrepreneurship makes you tick?

Marketta: Nobody told me what an entrepreneur was. As a matter of fact growing up in Finland, I tell you, it wasn't something that wasn't in my head. It was in my DNA but it was not in my head. Because the entrepreneurship was not as readily available or opportune to folks as it has become nowadays and especially in the United States. The opportunities weren't there because the wealth of the country wasn't there.

But, it has been kind of like an evolution for me and loving technology. And having that something in my DNA had somehow intuitively directed some of my career moves. Such as moving from the technical side, where I had excelled as a designer and manager for quite some time, moving to sales and marketing. Because I felt that it was exciting to learn about how businesses run and what got people to select the various technologies.

So I made one of those moves early on to sales and marketing and thought it was going to be a piece of cake. I thought that was just nothing to it kind of thing. Just kind of round out what I already knew. And little did I know that that was the most difficult thing to learn. Because selling and marketing is a combination of art and science. And you really have to understand people. So science from the techniques point of view. And it's an art that you can't plan for ever.

So it was a much bigger experience than I ever expected. It was very difficult at the beginning. And then it became very rewarding after a while. So that was what directed me then to the point at which I felt really comfortable about understanding what I believe was really central for being an entrepreneur and running a company. Which I wanted to do by that time. And I had this inner drive about wanting to create something big out of something little. To invent something that hadn't been done before. To take something that had already been invented and turn it into a real solution of business problems kind of thing and really getting involved in something that hadn't been done before and making a difference. I mean, I had that ambitious, that kind of a drive. It seemed interesting. It seemed something that would get me up in the morning and just wanting to really delve into it.

So, that's how I got to be an entrepreneur and it wasn't like one of those things that you decide you're going to do it and then you go and apply for an entrepreneurial position, the President's position or something then get going with it. It's a humbling experience because nobody else in the business world is going to hire a person to be a President or a CEO if they haven't done that before..

Larry: Right.

Marketta: So, the challenge there was how do I get to be the real entrepreneur and get through these barriers. It was strategy, then the strategy for me was I want to get into the technology company that I was really excited about and passionate about and get into a position that I was ready for and in this case, it ended up being VP of Sales and Marketing. And then, doing such a good job that I'll get promoted, hopefully.

And that is how I ended up being the President of the first company that ended up being a turnaround for me. Right now, this is my fourth company that I'm running. So, you kind of learn from each one of these experiences and hopefully end up getting better and better at that. And the better you get at being an entrepreneur, the more rewarding it is and the more fun it is.

Larry: Oh, I'll say. One of the things that Lucy was so excited about because of your background and your interest and your focus and everything else, she actually wanted Lee and I and her to turn on our cell phones during this interview, but...

Lucy: No, I didn't.

Larry: No, you didn't?

Lucy: No, I didn't.

Larry: I'm sorry, I misunderstood.

Lucy: OK.

Larry: I certainly would be interested to know, and I know our listeners would too, were you just a self learner or did you have mentors? Did you have people guide your career path? Who influenced you that way?

Marketta: Now, that is really a great question because it would be nice to know how you get to where you want to or you how you find where you want to go. In this case, again, it goes back to the influence of my parents. So, I can't emphasize enough how important it is for parents to guide their kids and expose them to where they have their potential talents and passion, so the parents and friends and then reading a lot. It is definitely guidance from the environment and really wanting to learn all about it.

And as far as the role models go, they just weren't role models. I wanted to have role models and needless to say, my early role models were my parents. Later on, successful peers. The challenge was the successful peers as role models that I had, they were all guys. And so, I did decide to kind of really get on with this role model business and I tried to copy these guys and that was a disaster.

I was a disaster. Then I just finally came to the conclusion that you know what? I'm just going to be myself and I'm going to leverage the areas from my peers that makes sense, but I'm not going to try to copy anybody. I'm just going to create my own style and go at it. That worked like clockwork. So, I would always guide everyone to be yourself.

And what happens in the world too is that we all like unique individuals. We like characters, we like personalities, we like accents. Thank God I have not lost my accent...

[laughter]

Marketta: I used to speak five languages because nobody understood Finnish. And then, I tried to lose my accent and then I decided, "Well, what's wrong with my accent? As long as people understand what I'm saying." So, I hope you understand what I'm saying in spite of my accent..

Larry: Oh yeah.

Marketta: Being yourself is so important and role models are important, but do not try to copy the role models, but really just kind of adapt and find what really fits your style. But then, it ended up being down the line, even a bigger role model conflict for me, which has been just eye opening. And that has to do with team sports. I did not grow up with American football, but my husband used to play football at college. And so, I've learned, I used to say "more than I cared" about football as a result of that.

But the team sport in football and similar where I grew up with soccer, the team sport in soccer is phenomenal as a role model because while you grow as an entrepreneur, you really establish a higher value on team building and how exciting it is to have the right people together who can do anything. If you've got the right people together, they can do anything.

So, watching these team sports and seeing how they could literally outguess what the other player at the other end of the field was going to do before they did it. And seeing how the most successful teams literally know what the rest of the team players are going to do next. And in business, what I notice now is some of us here on my team, we can finish each other's sentences.

Now, that was quite a role model for me to watch the team sports that I never thought about, early on, when you're just kind of like learning the fundamentals and the basics and trying to make it a go. So, those were my best examples of role models that have helped me. And as far as mentors go, as a result of being ambitious and pursuing unique opportunities, I ended up getting to know many famous people who were top executives of big companies and ended up having several of them as my mentors in the business world.

And being an entrepreneur and always being in a fund-raising mode early on, got to know many venture capitalists and funding sources, which also was a good environment where I ended up developing some friendships that led to excellent mentors from that point of view. So, I'm very fortunate in having found a good combination of role models and mentors where I'm really having it easily in front of me.

Lucy: OK, that's some great advice you've shared with us. So, if we switch gears a bit and look at sort of the flip-side, you've built a number of companies, taken one company over a billion dollar market cap. When you think about through all those experiences, what was really the toughest thing you had to do in your career?

Marketta: Actually, the toughest thing was actually quite devastating. As you know, I had done two turnarounds before I founded my own company, which was very innovative, very much foresight and vision and that was the first network-based Internet security company in '93 when people didn't know what the Internet was. And that was the company that I had the highest success with and that was Pilot Network Services.

So, I founded it and built that to \$60 million annual revenues round rates, brought on board a great team and this was one of the first software as a service kinds of businesses, where it built kind of slowly, but it became a recurring revenue generator. So, it was a very exciting business model that was early on difficult to raise capital for because it was a service business, software as a service, as I said, and hosting business and that was very foreign to the venture capital community in '93, '94.

But through my connections, I was able to raise the right amount of capital early on from the venture funds and then through corporate partners and subsequently took the company public, had the creme de la creme investment bankers taking my company public and building dollar market gaps and had a great ownership in the company because I was one of the founders.

So, that was all great. It was the highest of the highs, cover story in Fortune and featured all over the place, etcetera. And then came the crash. The bubble burst, and especially the Telco business because we were one of the first service companies, we had to become a Telco company. We were actually a service provider, so we had very costly backbones and service centers in multiple places in the United States and in London.

And when you go through a crash, you can't downsize something like that, like you can many other kinds of businesses that are just software companies, of course. That was a devastating experience, to be able to deal with that and literally be forced to close down the business because the whole environment evaporated around us. That was the most difficult and devastating thing because of the experiences.

And that was also the greatest business case study you could ever, ever see and experience anywhere. So, the good news is that you come out of something like that stronger than ever and wiser than ever and anything you do after that seems like a piece of cake..

Lucy: Well, I think that that leads us to our next question too, in terms of advice for young people about entrepreneurship. I think you've given us some great advice so far, in the first questions around being yourself and certainly being passionate because you yourself are quite passionate, paying attention to team dynamics. So, what other advice would you give a young person about entrepreneurship?

Marketta: There are a couple of things. Let's say in many cases the new entrepreneurs, they've had their early experiences, hopefully at some good, larger companies, so that they've had the support infrastructure around them. And then, of course, find what you are passionate about and believe in and you want to go and do it and that's great. So, in many cases, what I've seen happen when I've been helping entrepreneurs is that they get discouraged in the process because they go from one kind of an environment to a completely opposite environment where you're kind of like by yourself or with a small group of people.

So, the key thing is don't look back, look only forward. Do not get discouraged even though it seems at times so difficult. And I've certainly experienced this when I founded my company because I had at the prior turnaround that I did, some 300 to 400 people reporting to me and suddenly, you're kind of like you're employee number one and maybe you've just recruited a couple of other people and cannot look back and say, "Why did I do this? I had this lucrative opportunity and infrastructure and I was a big boss and what have you. And now, I'm here, this little entrepreneur."

You just cannot get discouraged. You have to believe in why you made that move in the first place, even if it seems like you're doubting yourself at times and you think that this isn't quite as stellar of an opportunity as I thought. What you want to do is you want to look around, you want to look ahead, you want to modify your approach for that particular new business opportunity to be better than what you probably knew about the landscape when you got into that.

And that is, for example, exactly what I ended up going through because the Internet was at the early stages, I had to raise the early venture based on some network optimization service that people could relate to. And then, modify it to the hot, next big thing which was the Internet. That's, again, where the science and art comes in, in that you may not be able, as an entrepreneur, raise the money based on what your vision is because the rest of the world has not caught on yet.

So, you need to be flexible, you need to be creative, you need to modify your approach and then, not lose track of where you were heading, if you so believe in that at that point in time. The key thing is that what you see most successful entrepreneurs, I think, doing over and over is reinventing themselves. Whether it's Nokia Corporation or whether it's Facebook or whether it's MySpace, everybody constantly has to look ahead and think what they are going to be rather than where they are at that point in time.

So, modification and flexibility, don't look back, don't get discouraged, is what I would give as advice. Charge right ahead and lose track of what it is that was the reason why you got into that in the first place.

Lucy: Well, for anybody wanting to be an entrepreneur, that's great advice because you really never know what's coming in the future.

Lee: Absolutely.

Lucy: And it sounds like you were even ahead of your time in a number of your ideas and resources. It was all the rage in the later 90's, you were just too early.

Marketta: And that made it more challenging. However, the key thing again for the entrepreneur is to look for the problem, the pain. Where is the acute pain that your solution and your vision is going to offer the solution to? The bigger the pain is, the more acute it is, the faster run up of your business you're going to have.

Sometimes, you start with a latent pain and that becomes an acute pain, which was the case with the Internet security. Very quickly, when people started to understand about hacking. Then, there are, of course, larger technologies like the Googles and the Yahoos early on, where they didn't really know for a long, long period of time how to make money at it. But because it was so unique and it has so much potential, it was something worth sticking to.

Lucy: But I think in the early days with Yahoo, people thought Yahoo had done it all. And then Google came out and just...

Lee: Undid them.

Lucy: Yeah! Undid them..

Larry: Googled them.

Lucy: Googled them.

Marketta: Maybe it's a secret why the entrepreneurship will be there forever because there is always yet another thing. And that's what's exciting about this new mobile world, it's full of those opportunities that haven't even been invented yet. And you're actually right, yeah, where people thought, "Well, now that we've got the Internet and Yahoo, what else do we need?" And by golly, there's yet another thing. And that's what's so exciting about the business and about entrepreneurships.

Lucy: Exactly. So, Marketta, I think about your career and how have you brought balance into your personal and professional life?

Marketta: You know what? I've got this one really good secret that I live by and that is physical fitness.

Lee: All right, I love it!

Marketta: So, that is number one in my book. I think that you really need to take care of your body to have a rich mind and a passionate mind. So, I'm big into sports. I grew up on skis. I went to school on skis, I raced cross country. I am a double black diamond skier today.

Lucy: Wow! You're going to have to come out and ski with us!

Lee: Yeah, you need to come to Colorado!

Marketta: Yeah. Well, I've been there lots of times. Lots of times, I love it out there. I just love the Aspen and Vale, etcetera. So, sports is good. And then, reading. I think it's one of the best ways to balance, when you need a break, is reading. I just read Michael Crichton's "Next, " which was absolutely fascinating and it totally draws your mind into a different world. And if you want to read something lighter, I'm in the middle of a book called "The Broker, " which is Grisham's book, which is a suspense thriller.

You balance yourself when you're reading because your mind and your imagination are directed to the different area. And then, travelling. My husband and I will be going with our friends, for example, in 10 days to Bhutan. Have you ever heard of Bhutan? Bhutan is a country, a kingdom in the Himalayas. And that is the last sacred corner in the world, one of those last corners. It was featured in the past year in the

60 Minutes as a country that does not measure GNP, but it measures GNH, which stands for Gross National Happiness.

Lucy: That's good!

Marketta: So, traveling is fun. And if you just want to have a quick balancing act, just go to the movies. I love movies, I go to a movie every week. It's just a couple of hours and you've got complete relaxation and...

Lucy: Well, the last movie I saw was Ratatouille [laughs].

Marketta: Oh really? So, the last one that I saw was Hairspray. I thought it was absolutely delightful because it was innovative. It did not copy Saturday Night Fever and Grease. It literally was different. They invented something new. And it was funny and it was clever and I highly recommend that.

Lucy: This gets us to our last question. You have achieved a lot in your career and you're going to achieve a lot, I'm sure. I mean, we can say after chatting with you here that you're a wonderful technologist and sales person and a movie critic as well. What's next for you?

Marketta: Well, first of all, I want to concentrate on completing the mission here, which is a voice and visual because we have the world ahead of us, and not lose track of completing that particular mission. But beyond that, I'm rarely thinking about how I'm going to return to others in the world what I have been so fortunate in having. That will be probably one of the most fun projects because unfortunately, in my opinion, most people in the world do not know how to use their potential and there's so much we can do to help the rest of the world really get to that.

And I believe when people really learn how to use their potential, a lot of these problems that we're dealing with after the fact, like obese children and crime rates in excess or where we contribute to charities over and over and over, once people, early on, are on a different path, those symptoms will change to something a little bit healthier. So, that is a topic all on its own and this is an unlike topic so I don't want to get on my soapbox on that, but that is next.

Larry: Oh boy, I'll tell you, that really sounds fantastic. I must say from 1993, you're in a security business and nobody knew what the Internet was. But I did in 1996, predict that the Internet was a fad and would go away...

Marketta: [laughs]

Larry: So, it's a good thing we didn't know each other right then. When Pat and I were living in Northern Europe, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, one of our very best friends was from Finland, so we like to... [crosstalk]

Marketta: Oh, cool!

Larry: Yeah. But I must say, Marketta, this is absolutely fantastic. We certainly are going to follow Apptera and your successes along the way. I would just like to say thank you so much and those of you listeners out there who really would like to pass this interview along, they can download it at www.ncwit.org. We'll also have them on our W3W3 Podcast, so they can listen to it any time they want, 24/7.