

NCWIT Interview with Sangita Verma

BIO: Sangita Verma leveraged 13 years of executive experience in the videogame industry to found the world's preeminent interactive games-on-demand network in May 2003 -- TAG Television. Providing a full service, turnkey solution, TAG Networks provides the nation's first massively deployable games channel for cable and IPTV television. TAG TV lets players enjoy the timeless appeal of popular and brand-name games including Tetris®, Battleship®, Risk®, Barney™, and Thomas the Tank Engine™, as well as popular online games including Bejeweled™, Diner Dash™, and Bookworm™, and Texas Hold 'Em Poker. In her role as CEO, Ms. Verma has secured \$20 in funding from private equity investors, established exclusive content agreements with leading game suppliers and global brands, and filed eight patents covering key proprietary technologies for delivering interactive content for cable and IPTV. A strategic planner, veteran marketer, and business visionary, she taps skills gleaned from a varied yet focused career to lead TAG Networks' management team of seasoned game, licensing, video-on-demand, interactive television, technology and consumer entertainment product specialists. Prior to founding TAG Networks, Ms. Verma worked with Midway Games, starting with the company in 2000 as director of worldwide syndication. Previously, she had her own online marketing company, Craig New Media, working with Panasonic and Psygnosis (a Sony Company) among others. Before that she was group marketing director for Panasonic Interactive Media Co. Her videogame career started at Data East Corp., where she managed the U.S. marketing activities and then moved on to establish and manage Data East's European office. Sangita Verma is a member of the Entrepreneurs Foundation's CEO Council and was voted one of the Top 50 Most Powerful Women In Cable Technology by CableWorld magazine in 2006. She is also a member of the Women in Cable and Telecommunications (WICT) "Tech It Out" mentoring programming which encourages girls to consider technical career paths. She is a graduate of UC Davis, having earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics. Ms. Verma lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and two sons.

Lucy Sanders: Hi. This is Lucy Sanders. I'm the CEO of the National Center for Women and Information Technology, and this is another interview in a series of interviews with IT entrepreneurial women. And today, we're talking to the CEO and founder of TAG Networks, Sangita Verma. Hi, Sangita. How are you?

Sangita Verma: Hi, Lucy. I'm great. Thanks for having me on your show.

Lucy: Wonderful. With me today is Larry Nelson, from w3w3.com. Hi, Larry.

Larry Nelson: Hi. I'm happy to be here, as you know. This is exciting.

Lucy: Well, why don't you tell us a bit about w3w3.com, since these podcasts will be hosted on your site as well as the NCWIT site.

Larry: Well, the short story is that we're an online business radio show. We started in '98, and we archive everything with pictures and audio, blogs, and podcasts. So that's us.

Lucy: That's pretty exciting. Well, and we are excited to have you here today, Sangita. You have an awesome company. And I have to tell you, it must be every computer scientist's dream to work with a company that is so involved with gaming. And in fact, just to throw a little factoid in here, they did a survey recently of young men and women who decided they want to go into information technology, and in fact, many of them want to go in because of gaming.

So, why don't you tell us a little bit about TAG Networks? It's a very exciting, on-demand network for games.

Sangita: Thanks, Lucy. You're right. Games are a lot of fun. They really are. I think that when it comes to technology, there's so many aspects that are very interesting, but I've never found anything as pure fun as the games part is. But, what we're doing at TAG Networks is we're creating the first games-on-demand television network.

And so, as a consumer, you turn on your TV and you tune to a channel, just like you would HBO or MTV or BBC. The difference is that you can start playing games right there with your remote control that's already in your hand. The types of games that we offer are considered casual games, so we're not competing against consoles like Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3. I think, our games experience is more similar to what you would find on the Internet, at sites like Pogo or MSN Zone or AOL Games. So, it's puzzle games, card games, kids' games - things like that.

Lucy: It's a great concept, and I'm sure it's going to be extremely popular. And these are exciting times for you. I hear your company just raised a Series B on funding, and you're doing a scale-up of your technology.

Sangita: Yes. This is actually a very exciting time for us. When I describe it to people, I like to think that this is 1981 and we're MTV. We feel like we're just sort of right on the verge of taking off, and in a huge way.

The trials that we've had at market with our cable operator partners so far have been phenomenal. It truly shows that consumers love games. They want to play games. They want to play them on a big screen. And if you make it easy right there for them, it's staggering the number of hours that they play and how frequently they play. So, we're very excited about that. And we're very excited that we've created some proprietary, amazing technology that is enabling us to be able to go to what I consider the next generation of TV networks.

Lucy: Well, and maybe one more sort of incidental before we get into the interview. I have to say that NCWIT is having a reception pretty soon at the football stadium at the University of Colorado, and we have access to the JumboTron.

Sangita: Oh, yeah.

Lucy: And so, maybe, we could put a few games up there. It's on an IP network. It might all work.

Sangita: That would be great. It's so funny you mentioned that, because when you think about one of the really popular things at a baseball game, as silly as it is, it's the little dot race game.

Lucy: It surely is. Everybody loves it at the CU football games.

Sangita: Right. Exactly. And so, there's a very, very simple application of a game, yet everyone loves it. I think, it just goes back to showing how people love games.

Lucy: Well, and that gets us, maybe, into the interview, in terms of asking some questions about technology. I know TAG Networks has a lot of interesting technology that you have to use to deploy this type of game-on-demand network. But, other technologies that you see out there, Sangita, what are you seeing on the horizon that you think is especially cool?

Sangita: I think that just the whole social networking phenomenon is very cool, and the technologies that are enabled by that. I think that it'll become even more interesting when it is tied across platforms and across devices.

Right now, social networking is very big on the Internet, but it's growing on other platforms. For example, I had just read - in fact, yesterday - that Microsoft has the largest social network connected to the TV, via their Xbox Live service. And I think that as you start seeing these devices connecting people, and it's not limited anymore to a platform or device, that's where it becomes even more exciting.

Larry: By the way, could we back up? I've just got one interesting question. How did you first get into technology? And then, tie that in with why are you an entrepreneur?

Sangita: Oh, OK. Well, it's funny, because I don't think of myself as getting into technology. So, I kind of fell into the games industry. I was doing investor relations when I first got out of college. And I did that for a couple of years and decided that I wanted to do something that was a little more creative and a little more fun, and at a variety of different places, found a games company that sounded like a lot of fun.

I didn't know anything about games at the time. This was back, gosh, 16, 17 years ago now. Nintendo was considered a kids' toy, was just taking off at that point. I started working for this games company called Data East and just fell in love with the industry.

And I've watched how I think technology has progressed just amazingly across just about everything. I mean, the rate of acceleration of invention is incredible. But, in the games world, you really saw it, because you would see these eight-bit games back in 1990, to what they're doing now on the Xbox 360. And that's all technology. That's all enabling entertainment.

And so, as I got more into the games industry, I really started getting more into the technology that enables you to have a better games experience, to have a better consumer experience. So, it's funny, because I think when people think about technology, or certainly when most young women think about technology, which is where I was at that age, it didn't sound that fun. It didn't sound that glamorous. It sounded kind of nerdy. You had to know math.

I think, all the aspects of technology that people really were harping on weren't necessarily the really fun things that technology can be, which is creating amazing user experiences and entertainment and platforms to be able to enable people to do the things that they want to do. And that's the part that hooked me and really got me into the technology aspect, as opposed to "I want to be a technologist."

Larry: What about that leap to becoming an entrepreneur?

Sangita: Oh. Gosh. You know? I don't know. I think, I just have always been one. It wasn't a conscious effort. It was just, I had an idea, I didn't see anyone doing it the way that I thought it should be done, and I just said, "You know what? I'm just going to do it." And I did it. There really was not a lot of thought. There wasn't a lot of pros and cons listed. It was just the thing to do. And I did it.

Lucy: That's wonderful. I mean, I'm sitting here listening to your description of why you like technology, thinking that we need to have you come to our NCWIT meetings and carry that message, because that's exactly what we're up to is really trying to convey that sense of energy and passion and what makes technology so much fun.

Sangita: Yeah. And I was thinking about this, in preparation of us talking. When people think about becoming a doctor, for example, they just think about becoming a doctor and saving lives and what other aspects of it is it that really turns them on. They don't think about, "Oh, I've got to know physics. I've got to go to medical school for this." They don't think about all the little details that get involved in it. They just have the vision of what they want to be.

And I think that, with technology in particular, we kind of miss that because, at least when I was in school, the dwelling was always on, "Well, you've got to do this. You've got to do this kind of math. This is what you've got to like to do." And the vision of what you can truly create wasn't ever shown as an end goal.

Lucy: That's right. And I think that that's a really important message to get out there.

So, Larry was asking a little bit about being an entrepreneur and what makes you tick in terms of being an entrepreneur. Who was it that influenced you along the way? Who, perhaps, is your greatest role model? Who's helped you along in this career path?

Sangita: I think, it's a combination of things. I think, one, I've been very fortunate to work with just some fantastic people throughout my career.

But, probably, the bigger driver was, when I started working with the games company back in 1990, they had a fantastic management team on board. I was 25 at the time, and I was excited that I would be able to learn from these people that were really good at what they did. Well, the company went through a series of changes, and, within a year, the whole management team was gone. And the next thing I knew, I was running all of North American marketing.

Larry: [laughs]

Lucy: [laughs] I'm not laughing because they were gone. It's just one of those moments in life, you know?

Sangita: Yeah. I know. I joined the company in order to learn from these people, and then they disappeared, and I learned. It was trial by fire. It truly was. "You're in charge of North America. Now, go."

And so, in hindsight, I think, maybe, that helped really instill my entrepreneurial spirit even more, because I didn't have a choice. I just had to learn. I had to do it. And it was very exciting. And of course, you make mistakes as you go, but you learn from them. And I think everything that I did up until I started TAG Networks kind of led to a culmination of where I am with TAG Networks and why we think we're going to be really successful.

Larry: Let me ask this. It sounds like you've had an exciting and very fun career all this time. You've accomplished a great deal; you're on the road to accomplishing even more. What is something that maybe you've had to put up with a little that maybe you didn't get to overcome, you had to learn to live with, along the way?

Sangita: Oh, that's a great question. I think, the only thing that I can say - I'm kind of living it right now, frankly - is you can only control what you can control, and everything else you just have to kind of roll with. That's a tough lesson. And it's tough for, I think, probably any entrepreneur, but it certainly is for me, because an old boss once called me I'm a steamroller. I just go and I get things done. And so, when you get stopped by things out of your control, it's difficult.

Certainly, TAG Networks, our distributors are cable operators like Comcast and Time Warner, and IPTV companies like Verizon and AT&T. And anyone who has worked with those operators knows that they have their own timelines, and they're not necessarily your timelines. And so, I think that has been a challenge. It's just learning to become more patient. And that's hard to do.

And it's really hard to do given the environment that TAG Networks is located in. We are literally across the street from Google. And so, we're right here in the midst of the Silicon Valley, where things happen so quickly, and it's hard to be working with industries where their speed is not the same as what is around you.

Lucy: I hate it when I can't control things. Don't you?

[laughter]

Larry: Put your hand down now. Put your hand down.

[laughter]

Sangita: I'm getting better about it. But, it is hard. I mean, that's probably one of my hardest...

Lucy: I think, it's hard, too. Hate it. I think that that's great advice, to sort of sit back sometimes and be patient and see which way things are going to kind of land, right? And I think, you probably have some other really great advice, that if you were giving advice to a young person today about entrepreneurship, what other things would you say to them?

Sangita: Probably, the biggest thing - and maybe it's a cliché - is really, you need to be passionate about what you're doing. If you believe in your idea, then follow it.

And then, the second part of that is, keep following it. Don't let people talk you out of it. Because it is amazing to me how many people either don't understand your vision, don't believe in your vision, or just don't think it'll work. They will get in the way. And if you let them talk you out of it, it's a mistake, because I find that when things are right, they all fall together in just the most interesting ways that you could not have planned for.

Larry: Sangita, let me ask this. This is no time to be humble. I want you just to be straightforward about this. What characteristics do you have that make you a successful entrepreneur?

Sangita: Oh, this is actually really easy for me to answer. I am tenacious. I do not give up.

Larry: [laughs]

Sangita: I don't take no for an answer. Frankly, I'm just a pain in the ass.

[laughter]

Lucy: We're kind of laughing because, in this series of interviews, this characteristic shows up over and over, maybe, slightly differently said - relentless, persistent. I think, you said "steamroller."

Larry: I think we ought to have an award called the "pain in the..." You know what I mean.

[laughter]

Sangita: It makes sense to me that that would be a strong characteristic of an entrepreneur, just given the obstacles that you run into. If you just gave up, you wouldn't get anywhere. And so, I think, it's the people that are willing to stick it out. And when I say stick it out, of course, you may need to make course correction, and you may decide an idea that you had wasn't quite right and it needs to be refined here or there. But, if you believe in a vision and keep going, and don't let things get in the way and deter you, at the end of the day I think you'll be successful.

Lucy: I think, that's well said. And being an entrepreneur is just so much work, and you do have to be relentless and take risks and get out there. And yet, we recognize, too, that people have personal lives. They have causes they believe in. They do things with families and friends. So, we were just wondering, in your particular case, how do you personally bring balance into your professional and personal life?

Sangita: That is probably the ultimate question. I went to a Women in Cable conference in New York, a couple of months ago now, and it was really refreshing for me because up on the stage were some very high-powered women in cable speaking: Gerry Laybourne, who is, I believe, the chairman of Oxygen, and a few others. And the one comment that they made, which I think resonated with everyone, including myself, is, "There's no such thing as balance. You just can't do it, so don't even try."

And I think, that's right. I think, you need to pick what is important, and you just can't do everything. So, for me personally, at this stage of my life, it's a business. It's TAG Network, and it's my family. I've got two little boys. I'm married. I've got a husband and two little boys, who are four and nine. And so, my life really is my family and my work.

And what I've had to sacrifice are things like having a clean house and getting together with friends as much as I used to - I don't do that anymore. And that's OK. I mean, I know that that'll change. It's just sort of a stage that I'm in at right now. And I think that when women try and do everything, where they try and have the cleanest house and the best-behaved children and run a company and throw parties like Martha Stewart, that's where you get into trouble, because you just can't do it. It's crazy to try.

Lucy: I don't want you coming over and seeing my house. [laughs] It doesn't look very good either.

Sangita: Trust me. Then, I'll feel right at home.

Lucy: [laughs] It doesn't look very good either.

Larry: That wasn't a slip of the tongue when you said "trouble" and "Martha Stewart" in the same sentence, was it?

Lucy: I don't think Martha gets to come over to our house either.

Sangita: But, it's a matter of figuring out what the priorities are and realizing that something's got to give, and being comfortable with just saying, "OK. Let's let that part go for now. I'll come back to it when I can."

Larry: Now, I'm going to put you on the spot.

Sangita: OK.

Larry: All right. You've already achieved a great deal. Thank you for sharing your personal, and professional, aspects of your life this past number of years. And I'd like to ask, what's next for you, above and beyond TAG Networks?

Sangita: Gosh. That's a great question. Again, I am so focused, again, just on TAG and my family that I rarely poke my head up to see what else is going on.

I do know one of the things that is important to me - and as well to my husband, to us, I think, as a family - is figuring out: how do we give back to the community? We've been so lucky that the next stage, that hopefully TAG is very successful and we'll sell it for millions of dollars and we'll have some time on our hands. What can we do then, to give back to the community?

And so, we've got some ideas of different things that we'd like to do. So, I think, perhaps taking some time off to do, for lack of a better word, social venture work, or enabling other people to get to where they want to be, would be fantastic.

Larry: Oh. A person after your own heart.

Lucy: A person after my own heart. Well, thank you very much, Sangita. This has really been interesting. I think, you're very inspirational, and I know our listeners will get a lot out of hearing your advice and some of your experiences.

And I just want to remind everybody to share this podcast with a friend. And I'd like to remind listeners where you can find these podcasts. You can find them at www.ncwit.org, as well as w3w3.com. And don't forget to share this podcast with a friend.

Thanks very much, Sangita.

Sangita: Thank you.

Larry: Thank you.