

Jennifer Poniatowski:

How can we do business better for our members? How can we grow organically? So we literally went from having probably the oldest technology and started peeling back the layers in introducing a whole new digital experience for our members. And that's going to give our consumers the best experience. It's going to give our employees the best experience. But you can't do that by being so centrally focused on one or two things.

James Robert Lay:

Greetings and hello, I am James Robert Lay, and welcome to episode 260 of the Banking on Digital Growth podcast. Today's episode is part of the Game Changer series, and I'm excited to welcome Jennifer Poniatowski to the show. Jennifer is the Vice President of Mortgage Sales at Credit Union 1, and today I look forward to diving into her game-changing journey of growth as we explore the lessons that she's learned along the way to empower you, to guide you, the dear listener, to level up your future growth potential at your financial brand or FinTech. Welcome to the show, Jennifer. It is good to share time with you today.

Jennifer Poniatowski:

It is good to share time with you as well.

James Robert Lay:

Before we get into talking about your own game-changing journey of growth as VP of Mortgage Sales at Credit Union 1, what has been going well for you personally or professionally? It's your pick to get started.

Jennifer Poniatowski:

I'm going to start with a cheesy one. I got a puppy four months ago.

James Robert Lay:

Really?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

His name is Sebastian. He is a golden doodle. I never thought that I would see myself as this crazy puppy mom, and here we are.

James Robert Lay:

I love it. Sebastian the golden doodle. So my sister-in-law, she just got a miniature poodle named Archer. So, I love it. I love it. Growing puppy families for sure.

Jennifer Poniatowski:

I think all puppy names need to have these strong man names. So Archer seems like he's a real character as well.

James Robert Lay:

He is because he actually has three paws that are brown and then one is a white paw, and my sister-in-law does archery. So that was the whole idea of the name right there. And then professionally, what's been going well for you on that front?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

Yeah, so I mean, it's been a wild three years. However, I've really spent the last 12 to 18 months traveling, being back with my team. I have teams across the nation, so I've been spending a lot of time traveling to see them. If someone invited me to a conference last year, I was there. I missed meeting with my colleagues, seeing everyone face-to-face. Reconnecting. It's been great to be able to travel as much as I have been, reconnecting, again not just with my team, but with my fellow colleagues. Vacationing as well. So it feels like we're back.

James Robert Lay:

It does, and it really goes to show that it's not just digital, it's the human experience as well, working in conjunction with each other. I want to hop into the time DeLorean of your mind now. You mentioned three years. Let's go back three years as a starting point to where you have been on this game-changing journey of growth. Set the stage. If you think back three years in your mind, what was life like back then for you? What do you feel like has changed the most since then?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

Everything has changed for us. So Drake the rapper sings a song, "Started from the bottom, now we're here." I kind of feel like that's where we are. We did not have a digital experience at all at our organization as it speaks to mortgage lending. Our technology was very dated. It was clunky, it was cumbersome and not just for our clients and our members, for our staff as well. In 2019, we ended up drawing this roadmap and created this digital journey, not just for our borrowers, but putting technology into place for our teams as well. How can we do business better for our members? How can we grow organically? So we literally went from having probably the oldest technology and started peeling back the layers and introducing a whole new digital experience for our members. We actually launched our first piece of that in December of 2019.

James Robert Lay:

Just in time.

Jennifer Poniatowski:

Just in time.

James Robert Lay:

Just in time. I want to pause you right here real fast because I think you brought up a really good point for the dear listener to think about. A lot of times when we think about growth, we think about member experience, we think about customer experience, but you were also very mindful looking back about employee experience, and I missed the mark on this. When I wrote Banking on Digital Growth, I put together a formula, and I touched on this earlier, but DX plus HX equals growth positive digital experience combined with the positive human experience will lead to growth. But then it was through the pandemic, I realized I missed the mark, and we need to roll this back. And as I'm writing my second book, Banking on Change, EX plus HX multiplied by DX leads to growth. So a positive employee experience will lead to a positive human experience that can be exponentially multiplied through a positive digital experience.

How did you involve others within the organization as part of this conversation to, for lack of a better word, make them feel included? Because a lot of times, I think as team members, they're the last to

know, and the technology's just thrown in their lap, like, "This is where we're going. Have fun." What was this like for you?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

Very, very much hands-on. Starting from the LO taking an app, having the processors involved, closers really understanding their process, their pain points, looking at things such as fallout and finding ways that we could improve not just the process, save time, efficiencies. We're a credit union, so these are our members. We have information. What information do we have on them already, so we're not going back and asking for them. What can we provide to our sales team, so they're going out and they're not asking these questions. They're giving them opportunities right away. So months and months and days and weeks of research and looking at processes, "Stop right there, let's talk about this." And I think in doing so, it brought a lot of buy-in from the team. So there wasn't a lot of arm twisting when it came to, "Hey, we're going to roll this out." There was a lot of excitement involved.

James Robert Lay:

Because they were part of the process from the very beginning. It's this idea of inclusivity and is a key part of something else that I talk a lot about, open strategy. Where strategy historically has "come from the top", open strategy invites the conversation at all different levels of the organization. And as a result, you, along with the other team members, were able to see gaps, to see obstacles, and then be able to bridge those obstacles, to bridge those roadblocks, to eliminate those roadblocks going forward. When you think about your own game-changing journey of growth that you've been on, what have been some of the roadblocks, some of the challenges that you have overcome to move forward and make progress here?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

Yeah. So I think one of the main points is understanding technology, understanding data, understanding integrations. Again, I'm a sales girl through and through. I was an LO back in the day, so I can't tell you how many times I've said it or have heard then from my teammates saying that they want the newest, brightest, shiniest object that will make their lives so much easier, but without understanding how it A, connects to the rest of your technology, how does it align with your organization's strategic plans and growth? It's very easy to say, "Hey, this is the best POS, this is the best CRM." And then you're stuck with all of these different tools that don't speak to each other, and you end up backpedaling and spending more time trying to get them to work instead of enhancing your business model, which is really what all of that should do.

So I felt like it was just a lot of self-education. I'm pretty tech savvy, but it was a learning curve for a lot of us.

James Robert Lay:

Of course.

Jennifer Poniatowski:

And not just me, but organizationally and getting everyone on the same page outside of the mortgage world, IT, marketing.

James Robert Lay:

And that's what something I found very interesting in preparation for this. A lot of this comes down to ongoing learning, ongoing training, ongoing education, but then taking time to think about how you can apply those insights. And that's where the innovation, that's where collaboration enters into the narrative. I know in June of 2019, the organization hosted an emerging leaders program that was very Shark Tank like. Each department gave a one hour pitch to the executive leadership team. What happened here? Because I think that's another very practical takeaway that the dear listener can take back to their organization when it comes to innovation, when it comes to future growth. What happened here?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

So, it was a really incredible experience for us. Something that I'm really proud of is that my organization's culture is very much so based on being innovative. We had a newer executive team and they established this emerging leaders program. They basically took every individual business unit within our organization, called us business owners, and had us put together an offer to our executives to find or to create an initiative that would accelerate growth, increase productivity, deliver more innovation. So I knew that I wanted all of these new things, but I had to really put a lot more thought into it than just saying, "I want a new POS," or, "I want a new LOS," or, "I need a CRM that does this, that, or the other," really research data. I would call multiple different platforms and just pretend that I'm shopping for them, not knowing if my company was going to open a checkbook or not.

So long story short, our team obviously represented residential lending, and we had presented our roadmap, put our journey into a full on presentation, and we requested a lot of money, again, from everything from our POS to a new LOS to CRM. We even asked for better laptops and a better cell phone package for the sales team. I mean, when you're asking for it, you might as well go for it.

James Robert Lay:

That's right.

Jennifer Poniatowski:

And I'm grateful that our team was selected. So that happened on a Wednesday, and on a Thursday I was reaching out to the companies that I was interested in doing business with. Friday we were talking contract negotiations for our point of sale platform. And like I mentioned, December 6th actually of 2020, or I'm sorry, 2019, we rolled that first piece out, which was our point of sale system.

James Robert Lay:

Yes. You also now have been focused on a passion project, getting a new marketing and CRM platform up and running. It took time to get to this point, didn't it?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

It took a lot of time. Working with the specific platform Total Expert, I started speaking with them in 2019 along with the rest of the vendors that we were working with. I like to say that they are my second longest relationship I've ever been with because we started dating in 2019, and now we are finally, we're rolling this project out this year. So I'm super excited. Our organization decided to roll out a different CRM for the company, not just for mortgage, whereas Total Expert was going to be just for our team. So I had to be patient and I had to work with that specific CRM. As time had gone on, it became more and more apparent that that wasn't the best fit for my team.

Obviously a lot in the market has changed. A ton has changed. We went from 2020 to not being able to leave our desks to 2022, where we have to go back to the basics, knocking on doors to realtors, reestablishing those relationships. I know that that's not possible without more content, without a better marketing and CRM tool as a backbone. What's amazing is throughout ... And we've spoken regularly. I could probably pitch a nice presentation to a, "Hey, new client for Total Expert," because I've been through so many of them. But the timing finally aligned and we really had a real, real crystal clear focus as to what we wanted our initiatives to be with leveraging that. So, here we are.

James Robert Lay:

Once again, another key takeaway for the dear listener is you had adopted an organizational wide CRM, but you saw an opportunity to integrate Total Expert as a capability upgrade for your team in mortgage. And that's something that I make a lot of recommendations around through the education and through the coaching that I do, is just because you have an organizational wide CRM, does not always mean it is a good fit for a particular business line within the organization. I want to dive a little bit deeper into this because another pattern is patience. It required you to be patient. You talked a lot about timing. What has that process looked like along the way as this final piece starts to come together on just your game changing journey of growth?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

So it's aligning with our initiatives. So had we rolled that piece out when we rolled out some of the other pieces in early 2020, I wouldn't have had much to do with it because we were so buried in our refi business. I wasn't out trying to market. It was almost like, please stand back. We need to take a nap at some point. But that company itself has also evolved a lot, and I think that's why it's so important to keep a constant contact with someone. "We're building out this journey. My organization decided to go with another platform. However, that doesn't mean that it has to stop there. We want to continuously make sure that we're optimizing what we're offering," and that just wasn't cutting it. So what does?

And speak to the vendors of the world. Don't stop following up with your potential clients because they knew ... I was very open with them with what our business model looked like and the other platforms that we had, and they essentially established an integration with them. So it's like, oh, I can have the best of both worlds, keep our tool that we're keeping all of our data on, and then still extract the great pieces of Total Expert to really meet the needs of my department and our company.

James Robert Lay:

That's a fantastic point as well, because this is where I think collaboration between different technology platforms creates an exponential growth opportunity. Too often we think of technologies as competing agendas, but in this particular case, Total Expert saw an opportunity to provide you, provide your team, provide your organization with a capability upgrade, and then collaborated with another platform to bring everything together. I think the more that we can look from this from a place of abundance and not of scarcity, not of competition, but a place of abundance, we're all going to grow. We're all going to get better together.

And that's where when you start looking ahead towards the future, what role will collaboration continue to play, not just from a technology standpoint, but I think with your team? Because like you said, the mortgage game is now once again transforming. We're entering into a new phase. Where are collaborations? Because once again, you go back to the idea of realtors and relationships that we didn't

have to worry about two or three years ago. Now it's transforming again. Where are platforms like Total Expert going to help to facilitate this collaborations with lenders on your team in the mortgage space?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

So it's content and it's data and it's delivery really. So as I mentioned, we're back to being boots on the ground. We're making relationships, but not just with realtors because there's just not that much business right now. So how can we expand our scope and get business elsewhere? I think that as a credit union, that's really how we have an upper hand. We have a nice combination of we have these members, we have their information, we have this data, and we can set up this bidirectional partnership to where we're connecting our external partners with our internal members and piecing it together in a way that's really, really, really not cumbersome for my team to manage. I have hungry sales folks out there. They're out there making connections, or they have a borrower that wants to be connected with this person. They don't want to spend an hour filling out spreadsheets and doing this constant manual contact. We have the ability to really streamline that whole process, but doing it in a very innovative way by giving them good content as well.

James Robert Lay:

I like what you were saying, content, data, but then also the delivery mechanism of this and automating that, systematizing that. There's a lot of lessons to be taken here. From the Four Seasons brand experience with Izzy Sharp, he was often noted saying, "We need to automate the predictable so that we can humanize the exceptional." And I know that when working in an always on digital world, it can start to feel a little bit overwhelming. It can start to feel a bit exhausting. And from my experience, I found that game changing leaders like yourself really balance out the best of both worlds, the digital world, the physical world, the digital relationship, the physical relationship. What does this look like for you now? As you mentioned that you've been on the road pretty frequently over the last 18 months, you've got a team nationwide, you're getting back. How is that in-person face-to-face time creating a positive impact as you're rolling out some of these changes? Because change can feel a little hard and scary for some.

Jennifer Poniatowski:

Yeah. So I think the physical presence has been huge. I even look at our business partners. I've been doing sales calls with my team. I think just setting the tone that we have to work a little bit harder going forward, but also leveraging all of the tools and resources that we have to stay successful is just as important. I don't know that it's necessary for me to be traveling as much as I did in this coming year. There was a lot. But I think that that physical presence is a lot. And I think that by partnering with platforms that allow you to have this omnichannel or provide your borrowers and your members and your partners with this omnichannel experience, you're putting yourselves in a position where you get to do business the way the consumer wants to do business. And in this specific era that we're in, I think that's an expectation from them.

James Robert Lay:

Yes, indeed. And that comes back to a positive employee experience, leads to a positive human experience that could be exponentially multiplied through a positive digital experience. I appreciate the perspective and the time that you have invested into people going all the way back to the beginning of this journey in 2019 as an important part of the game changer equation. Culture, people, education, thinking about the dear listener and where they might be. I would say you're probably a little bit further ahead than some. What role does culture play into this exponential journey, game-changing journey of growth here?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

I believe that culture is the backbone to really any organization. You have to have a culture that's open, that wants to be great to grow. At my organization that I'm at, that's the way we live essentially. So I think you need to have that before you even have the ability to dive in deeper. By doing so and by setting the tone for what your culture is, you're going to get that buy-in.

James Robert Lay:

Yeah. It's having that innate need to grow from good to great. And when you get to great, that great becomes the new level of good. And then you're going to what to continue to grow from good to great? You're leveling up quarter after quarter, year after year. It's so easy, I think, to get stuck in what I'm writing about in *Banking on Change*, the cave of complacency. The cave of complacency, it provides a pseudo sense of security, but we know it's a very dangerous place to get stuck and to be. For those who are listening that either A, they might feel stuck in the cave of complacency right now, or B, they have others within their team, within their organization who they perceive as stuck in the cave of complacency, what's your recommendation to help them come out of the cave, to continue to move forward, to continue to grow with courage and confidence, particularly in uncertain economic times where we're questioning a lot? What's your take on that?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

So I think something that I've learned over the last three years is no matter what you plan for, you are never going to be prepared. However, having certain things in place will allow you to adapt much easier. I feel like it's so important for any business unit to get themselves into a proactive space and set themselves up to be proactive rather than reactive. And the majority of individuals over the last three years in mortgage lending, we've just been reactive. I believe that having the right tools in place, you're able to be proactive and continue to grow. Had we not put in that POS that we did in December of 2019, I had no way to collect documentation electronically. Every follow-up was manual. I didn't have a way to dive into my core system and collect data. I had to get papers and information.

I honestly feel if I were to put a number on it, we would not have been able to service about 60% of our membership, and that's huge. So I think, you say these things and they can be scary, but if you take what we've been through over the last three years, and alone, those experiences should make you want to make sure that you're building this platform to live through everything. Now again, what's going to happen in three more years? Assure you, I have no answer to that. No one should at this point. We've been through so much. But trying to set yourself up to be able to adapt to what our consumers really, really need during these times.

James Robert Lay:

I think that's the key. It's really creating and establishing a proactive stance for exponential change. I think when I look out over the last 20 years of working and coaching and teaching financial brands, so many have operated from a reactive stance. And now as we're moving towards, say 2030 as a horizon line, like you said, it's very hard to predict, to even begin to fathom what the future holds. But I want to do a little bit of future focus as we start to wrap up here because it's fun. It's fun to at least live in that future state to get some clarity into where we're going. It provides some sense of direction and guidance. Let's leap ahead two years into the future. You're moving forward, you're continuing to make progress along your own game-changing journey of growth. You're in a really good place. Leap ahead in your mind. Look back to this conversation today. What has to happen, one thing, for you to feel good about the continued progress you're making on your game-changing journey of growth?



Jennifer Poniatowski:

So we've been in a build phase for the last several years and chasing a lot of that technology. I want to be in a space where I'm optimizing every day. I don't need to run out and get the newest shiny coin. I have it and I'm making great greater.

James Robert Lay:

Yes. I think that's the key. When you think about experience, and we define experience here at the Digital Growth Institute, whether that be employee experience, human experience, digital experience, member experience, experience or experiences are well-defined systems and processes that have been A, strategically mapped out, B, applied, and then C, continuously optimized over time, resulting in either positive or negative emotions, but it's through the optimization that we can learn, get even better, grow even better together. We've covered a lot in our conversation, Jennifer. I want to get real practical here as we wrap up. Thinking about your own game-changing journey of growth and everything that you've experienced, everything that you have learned over the past few years, what is one small, simple action that you would recommend the dear listener to take to guide them forward on their own journey of growth? Because all growth begins with a small, simple step forward today.

Jennifer Poniatowski:

Prioritize. I always say prioritize. Going through this journey has taught us a lot, but we are only as good as our organization, and I think prioritizing to align with our organization's initiatives are going to give us the best result. We're talking about experience. When you look at a mortgage lender, we need to stop just chasing the loan. We want the entire relationship. And that's going to give our consumers the best experience. It's going to give our employees the best experience. But you can't do that by being so centrally focused on one or two things. You need to, as I mentioned, broaden the scope and really prioritize what is going to expand and meet the initiatives of the entire organization.

James Robert Lay:

Yeah, priorities I think are so key because back to your point, shiny object syndrome. It can be so easy to try to get the latest and greatest, but back to your point, with your relationship with Total Expert, you have everything that you need to continuously grow and optimize, get even better from that. Jennifer, this has been such a wonderful conversation. What is the best way that someone who is listening, they want to connect with you, they want to continue the conversation that we've started here, how can they best reach out and say hello to you?

Jennifer Poniatowski:

I am on LinkedIn, Jen Poniatowski.

James Robert Lay:

Connect with Jen, learn with Jen, grow with Jen. Jen, this has been so fun. Thank you so much for joining me for another episode of Banking on Digital Growth. As always, and until next time, be well. Do good. Make your bed.