

# Continuing to Reimagine AOL

An Interview with Susan Lyne,  
Chief Executive Officer, AOL Brand Group

**EDITORS' NOTE** Susan Lyne joined AOL in her current role in February 2013. Prior to joining AOL, she served as the Chair of Gilt Groupe, Inc. since September 2010. Before this, she was Gilt Groupe's Chief Executive Officer from September 2008 to September 2010. Lyne served as President, Chief Executive Officer, and director of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc. from 2004 to 2008. Earlier, she served in various positions at The Walt Disney Company, including



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as President, ABC Entertainment; Executive Vice President, Movies & Miniseries, ABC Entertainment, and Executive Vice President, Acquisition, Development & New Business, Walt Disney Motion Picture Group. She had also worked for News Corporation Ltd. and K-111 Communications for approximately nine years as Founder, Editor-in-Chief, and Publication Director, Premiere magazine. Lyne currently serves on the board of directors of Gilt Groupe, Inc. and Starz Entertainment, LLC. She attended the University of California-Berkeley.

**COMPANY BRIEF** AOL Brand Group ([www.aol.com](http://www.aol.com)) is a company committed to continuously innovating, growing, and investing in brands and experiences that inform, entertain, and connect the world. The home of a world-class collection of premium brands, AOL creates original content that engages audiences on a local and global scale. The firm helps marketers connect with audiences through effective and engaging digital advertising solutions.

## What made you decide this role was the right fit for you?

I was on the AOL board for three years, so I knew the company well and I knew Tim (Armstrong, CEO) well. But it wasn't until the company went to a three-segment work structure that I felt I could add value and that it would be fun to do so.

## Why did the transition work so smoothly?

The initial merger (AOL and Time Warner) was a marriage of two companies that had hugely different cultures. It wasn't until AOL spun back out that one could begin thinking about what AOL was apart from Time Warner.

It was brilliant to identify Tim as the right person to lead AOL because he had spent enough time in Internet and growth businesses that he was not going to take no for an answer.

## How much coordination is there among the three-segment structure of AOL?

There is coordination because Tim has a leadership committee that draws from all three, and that includes the functional areas as well. I have never seen a leader who can write a

deep, thorough, and motivational e-mail to the troops on Sunday night that is so right on target.

## Where are the growth opportunities for the Brand Group and is it growing as you had hoped?

One of the initial challenges was that we had probably 50 brands when I joined the company and a number of them were not consumer brands. They were more like content areas that had been blown out into a site.

So the first area in which I realized we could create value was by honing in on 8 to 10 that were genuine consumer brands that had an organic audience, and by working to develop homepage traffic that would be additive instead of just sustaining that brand. This meant pushing more resources into the ones that have genuine growth potential.

Second, the way we had set up AOL.com was essentially as a feeder to the rest of our brands, but there is so much more we could do with that homepage to make it a fun, powerful, and impactful experience in and of itself, as well as something that keeps you up to speed on everything going on at a glance. You add one more page view there and you would be shocked at what that adds to revenues.

## What do you look for in terms of adding brands?

I look for an area with great consumer and marketer interest, and a brand that is growing because of the way they have set up their site, and how they speak to consumers.

## Is the message getting out to the next generation of talent about the opportunities here?

We bring in a few people who have great networks and the drum beat starts. It's all about recruiting well at high levels and

then making sure that those people are doing exactly the same thing – bringing in the best mid-level editors, writers, engineers, and designers. One can succeed in all parts of the company.

## What is your primary focus?

I'm focusing on what we can launch that will have a bigger impact over the longer term. So while we're reinventing AOL.com, we're also launching AOL Live. We have high hopes for it, but it hasn't been done before. We will see what resonates with people. It's a great opportunity for us to begin to push out content to an audience that might not organically think about coming to AOL.

## As the company grows, is it difficult to retain its culture?

Tim is a communicator by nature so he can get in front of a room and make people believe. This was important for AOL, which was a company that for too long had gotten used to the idea that they were going to shrink.

So you can have a huge impact on the culture by starting to turn around the business because people are then proud to work here.

## What is your vision for AOL Entertainment?

This is part of AOL Live. Our first programming will be a combination of utility and entertainment. We're going to be doing live news updates on a regular basis – short and tight, that can live on the homepage. Around that, we will use the topical area to do programming that I would call entertainment as opposed to information or news.

## Is New York City becoming a tech hub and are you surprised at the focus on the tech sector?

Largely because of the industries that are dominant in New York – media, fashion, even a certain part of entertainment – you see consumer-facing Internet start-ups growing in the city. Whereas the West Coast is primarily about platform and device development, the start-ups in New York are about what can be done to make the best of a particular experience.

There are young people in New York thinking about entrepreneurial endeavors rather than joining a big media company. We have seen tremendous activity and we still can attract top-level tech stars to AOL because of what we are doing here and what the future holds for us. ●