

Known internally as the company's fixer, General Mills' VP of global communications addresses complex challenges and diverse stakeholders across the globe. By Rose Gordon Sala

SARA RUBINSTEIN



When General Mills' global communications leader lies awake at night, it is to plot a strategy to support a company that garnered \$18 billion in sales in 2013 and posted double-digit international sales growth nearly every single quarter.

He thinks in protocols, training, and tools, fretting over the best and most efficient ways to sync those three elements across the more than 100 countries in which the company does business.

Tom Forsythe, VP of global communications, is deep in a reorganization of his department to match General Mills' growth and the ever-evolving 24/7 nature of the job. It is the most time-consuming – and complicated – task on his agenda this year.

"General Mills operates in 138 countries, so the sun never sets on us. Things happen at every hour," says Forsythe. "Our structure

outside of the US is not as well developed as it is domestically, so international takes up more of my time than it used to."

A press inquiry that came in the night before this interview tested the company's global communications apparatus, and proved it is fallible. Forsythe is candid in its retelling. A reporter's question landed with one of its European agencies. The firm passed it on to a PR director with General Mills in the region, who then forwarded it to the US team – at 3:42am CDT.

The situation was further complicated when the name of the reporter to call was left off the memo. The story ran with a note saying "General Mills didn't return calls."

"That's unfortunate because the question was ready to be answered, but we just didn't get it into the hands of the right people to have that story run differently," he says.

To prevent that scenario from repeating, Forsythe relies on his protocol, training, and tool mantra, which includes an issues management website, clear rules about "who gets to say what and when," and

1991-present

General Mills, VP, global communications. Previously held the role of VP, corporate comms (2000-2011); director, corporate comms (1996-2000); and director, state government relations (1991-1996)

1985-1991

Flint, Forsythe & Associates, president

1981-1984

Governor Allen Olson of North Dakota, press secretary

social media monitoring, analysis, and response tools including Spredfast, Clara-bridge, and Collective Intellect.

He admits the systems were in place, but in this instance, they still failed.

“Staffing by itself isn’t the only answer,” he says. “It really is about skills, capabilities, and do you have the tools in place to help people do it the way you’ve trained them? Can you get comfortable doing it as fast as you all need to do it? Empowerment is important, too, and so is judgment.”

Inspired global vision

Forsythe’s boss, Kim Nelson, SVP of external relations, praises his global vision.

“We were largely a domestic company just 15 years ago and now almost a third of our revenue is coming from outside the US,” she explains. “As you get people on the ground outside of a home country who are working across languages and cultures, you better have clarity on how you want the company to engage external stakeholders.”

“Tom has really helped us sort through how we partner effectively with many different stakeholders,” she further adds.

The 56-year-old Forsythe heads up the company’s brand PR, internal and external communications, issues management, and consumer services, a division that responds to and handles more than half of General Mills’ social media front lines.

With acquisitions such as Yoplait in France (2011) and Yoki Alimentos in Brazil (2012), M&A-related and internal communications are a vital component of his job, but issues management and stakeholder engagement continue to swallow the bulk of his time in the international arena.

As the world’s seventh-largest food company, according to trade publisher *Food*

Processing, General Mills’ issues often fall around ingredient sourcing and sustainability, such as water or animal welfare.

When the Rainforest Action Network came after the company on palm oil several years ago, Forsythe led the engagement.

The harvesting of palm oil has been implicated in deforestation in vulnerable regions around the globe. At one point, the group spread a huge banner in the gold-and-black colors of Cheerios on the snow-covered lawn across from its Minneapolis headquarters that read: “Warning: General Mills Destroys Rainforests.”

Forsythe flew to Southeast Asia to witness palm oil production firsthand and attended a global roundtable on sustainable palm oil.

He then offered the several dozen protestors coffee when they released their banner in mid-January 2010.

“Tom’s response was not to hide in the building, but to bring coffee out for them because we are Midwesterners and that is what we do when people come to visit,” recalls Nelson. “Tom is that face of the company who will do things like that.”

Responsible business

By that fall, General Mills issued a pledge to strive to source 100% of its palm oil from responsible and sustainable sources by 2015. At the same time, the company’s statement, shaped by Forsythe, noted that it uses only “about one-tenth of 1% of the world’s production,” of palm oil.

Rainforest Action Network organizers unfurled a different kind of banner outside the annual shareholders’ meeting that year: “General Mills Joins Race to Protect Rainforests.” Forsythe says it was a “pretty positive engagement” overall.

A HEALTHY CAUSE

Unable to leave his DC-policy roots behind, Forsythe continues to dabble in healthcare policy in his free time.

He sits on the board of MNsure, the state’s health insurance exchange implemented to comply with President Barack Obama’s Affordable Care Act.

Though Forsythe says he’s “not a huge fan” of the ACA, he believes in transparent insurance pricing and broadening access to affordable healthcare. In an earlier era, he was the senior health policy analyst at the Progressive Policy Institute and worked on several bipartisan healthcare reform plans in the Clinton era.

“When you begin to see how this impacts people’s lives, you can get excited about trying to help people,” he explains.

“There’s certainly an external component to this, but sometimes it’s fundamentally understanding the issue and deciding what is the appropriate response for the company,” he adds. “You’re protecting how that issue will evolve, you’re understanding the implications for our supply chain, and addressing it through communications, such as a CSR report, our intranet, or in statements to the media or on social media.”

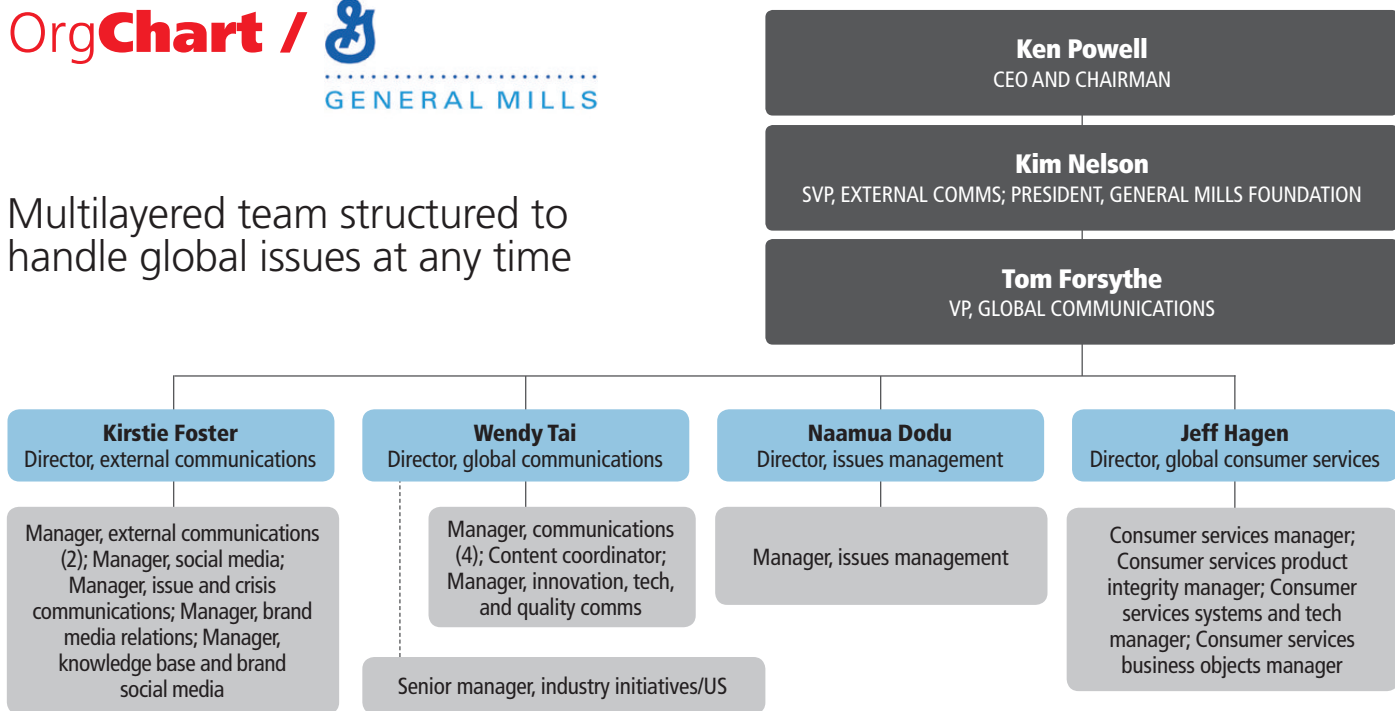
Forsythe is, by all accounts, a company man. He’s spent about a quarter of a century with the CPG company in Minnesota where he was born and raised. He represents the all-American brands of Cheerios, Betty Crocker, and Hamburger Helper, and a *Fortune* 500 company that includes “Do the right thing all the time,” among its top



Forsythe calls the company’s commitment to an interracial Cheerios ad (left) as a proud moment when the company “lived up to its values.” In another case where General Mills received criticism, a change in company practices was welcomed by a group of rainforest protestors (right).



Multilayered team structured to handle global issues at any time



corporate values. It's a credo Forsythe repeats often and colleagues point to his ability to not only speak in the company's voice, but also to forecast where it wants to be in the future as one of his key attributes.

When Minnesota became one of four states to address gay marriage on the high-profile 2012 presidential ballot, Forsythe was among those who believed the Midwestern stalwart should stand against the initiative to implement a state constitutional

westerner, don't mistake his sweet, coffee-wielding exterior for an inner pushover.

"He does not suffer fools lightly," adds Nelson. "He cuts through all the BS and is very forthright in his thinking."

His experience on political campaigns as the "message and media guy," in Washington, DC, prepared him to examine all angles before digging in. If a dicey situation arises, you will find Forsythe behind the company's statement, if not quoted directly.

comms functions, such as events, report up to the CMO Mark Addicks, as well as to individual brand leaders, along with advertising, media, and a social media group.

General Mills' former director of brand PR Greg Zimprich left the company after 19 years in August 2012 during a restructuring of its marketing and communications functions that was part of a wider restructuring that included cutting 850 jobs, half in the company's Minneapolis headquarters.

"We're a house of brands," says Forsythe. Agencies work at the brand level, including Cone Communications, GolinHarris, and Weber Shandwick in the US, Image 7 in France, while Porter Novelli works in other European markets and Australia.



"GENERAL MILLS OPERATES IN 138 COUNTRIES. THINGS HAPPEN AT EVERY HOUR"

amendment to ban same-sex nuptials.

After the company's CEO made the announcement that the company would support defeat of the amendment, Forsythe once again chatted with the opposition when protesters descended on its headquarters.

"I was proud of the company for taking a stand on a controversial issue that really went to the core of our values, which is to value diversity," he says. "We knew it would be controversial. Yet, in the end, these decisions are easy. It's the ramifications that are hard." The amendment failed 51% to 48%.

While Forsythe possesses the friendly, easy cadence of a born and bred Mid-

"He, more than any other individual in the company, is the guy you turn to when something bad happens, a crisis, or an external engagement that is really tricky," says Nelson. "He is the company's fixer and has trust within the highest levels, such as CEO Ken Powell."

Forsythe's team is focused on coordinating response, identifying issues, employee communications, and the company's brand. There is no corporate agency of record. Instead, it is handled by his unit, while Nelson leads government relations, CSR and sustainability, corporate communications, and philanthropy. Some typical mar-

Moment of pride

Forsythe also counts the company's commitment to an interracial Cheerios ad as another moment of pride in his career.

Despite the racist comments lobbed by some at the commercial that shows a young multi-racial family interacting, General Mills brought the spot back for the brand's first Super Bowl ad. It earned a place among the top 10 Super Bowl 2014 ads, according to a *USA Today* ranking.

"We didn't realize what a statement we were making with that ad, but later I was proud to say we were standing behind it," he says. "It's important at these moments to reflect the values of the brand as a whole." ●