

Ep.3.40 - Lauren Youngdahl Snyder

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SPEAKERS

Ed Clemente, Lauren Snyder, Announcer

- A** Announcer 00:01

Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:30

Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente. And today we're fortunate to have Lauren Snyder with us. She's the vice president of customer experience for Consumers Energy. Welcome to the show, Lauren.
- L** Lauren Snyder 00:39

Hi. Thanks so much for having me today.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:41

Well, it's my pleasure. And I know that consumers is such a big company that I don't even know what part of the state, why don't you kind of tell us what consumers does and what it sort of catch basin is?
- L** Lauren Snyder 00:57

Oh, sure. Okay, so Consumers Energy provides electricity and gas to residents in the Lower Peninsula. So we all are familiar with the mitten right when you put your hand up, they'll lay

your left hand up, and you see the state of Michigan. Imagine if you were looking on the left hand side of that hand, that is where we predominantly serve electricity, we keep the lights on. I myself am in Grand Rapids and Grand Rapids, Kent County is the biggest service territory of electricity that we serve. And then as you move to the middle of the state, we have combination customers, so you would get both electricity and gas from us. And then as you move your way east, but not too far south, because that's DTE service territory, we serve gas customers, so we keep the heat going in the winter for the customers on the north eastern side of the state.

E

Ed Clemente 01:53

So was consumers from the beginning, always sort of in both types of energies?

L

Lauren Snyder 02:02

It's been this way for probably over 130 years, we've been in business for over 130 years. And that's the way that the Foot brothers, those were our founders and the founders of DTE, that's how it all worked out. And so that's the way that we have operated ever since. And it works. For utilities, we work very closely with DTE as well.

E

Ed Clemente 02:25

So where was the Foot brothers footprint? Where do they start?

L

Lauren Snyder 02:29

Jackson, Michigan. [And you grew up there, right?] My hometown, my hometown of Jackson, Michigan, and that's where our headquarters remains.

E

Ed Clemente 02:38

Yeah, I've been there. And I know it's kind of hard to miss if you're in Jackson, it's pretty tall.

L

Lauren Snyder 02:46

It's the old post office, they took the old post office that I remember going to as a kid to drop off mail. And that's the front entry area. And then we built 12 floors. So it's a beautiful glass building in the heart of downtown Jackson.

E

Ed Clemente 03:04

This is going off target already. But your maiden name is Youngdahl, right? [It is. Yes.] So your family worked there too, like the energy company as well?

L Lauren Snyder 03:14

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. My roots run deep at Consumers Energy. So my great grandfather worked for the company. My grandfather worked for the company. He was one of the top executives and retired in 1983. And then I had an aunt on the other side of my family worked for 40 years at the company. And my sister works currently at the company, as does my brother in law. So a lot of the Youngdahl family, third generations, we skipped my parents, neither one of my parents worked for the company.

E Ed Clemente 03:48

Yeah, they didn't try to talk you into it. It was your grandparents.

L Lauren Snyder 03:51

It was my grandfather. Absolutely.

E Ed Clemente 03:55

So you're based in Grand Rapids, but as you said, that is the biggest sort of at least electrical footprint or gas footprint. [Electric.] Electric. And then gas is probably spread throughout the all the other counties somehow.

L Lauren Snyder 04:10

Head towards east That's exactly right. Yeah.

E Ed Clemente 04:14

And just so you know, one of my previous jobs I was an engineer and I used to have to contact MISS DIG all the time. [Oh, yeah.] Yeah, that's like a secret service that if you don't know where pipes are or conduits, it's pretty important to know where all that is actually.

L Lauren Snyder 04:32

Absolutely. From a safety standpoint. You bet.

E Ed Clemente 04:34

And what do you do? Because I think that actually ties into one of the things, one of your many hats I'm sure [Yeah yeah] Well economic development

nals, I'm sure. [Yeah, yeah.] Well, economic development.

L

Lauren Snyder 04:42

Yeah, absolutely. Yes. So I'll tell you a little bit about my journey. I have been with the company for almost 20 years. I came right out of college. I graduated from Michigan State. And in fact, my grandfather was the one who talked me into it. I remember getting a call from Consumers Energy saying, You've got the job. And I thought, Oh, I was a little bit taken aback like I got the job. Wait, does that mean I'm gonna have to move back to my hometown? All my friends are going elsewhere, right? They're going to Chicago, they're going elsewhere. And my grandfather called me and he said, Listen, this is a good company, you want to go on to grad school, which I eventually did, they're going to help prepare you for that, there's so many great opportunities throughout the company, go try your hand at it. And I did. And 20 years later, here I am, I've had a lot of different roles at the company, from being out in the field, from within our call center, from strategy, from Regulatory Affairs, a whole myriad of different roles that prepared me for the role that I'm in now, which is the vice president of customer experience, and the customer truly is at the heart of all of the experiences that I've had here. So I am responsible for all of our customer programs. So think of electric vehicles, we have program offerings for those who have purchased or are considering purchasing electric vehicles, energy efficiency, demand response. I also have responsibility for renewables, our renewables portfolio, as we move as an organization into more renewable resources, such as solar and wind, my team is helping get customers enrolled in programs that support that ambition. I also have responsibility for our marketing and sales function. Yes, we have a sales function and is unique for utility. But if you think about what we're trying to do here, as we pursue our ambition to be net zero by 2040, we need customers to be a part of that journey with us. And so we work side by side with all of our business customers, from small businesses all the way up to big businesses to help them step into sustainable options. And I'm many of them are actually like, raising their hands to say help us so we get the opportunity to do that. Also, within that portfolio is economic development, which I'm excited to talk more with you about here today. And then just recently, I assumed responsibility for all of our external communications, which I am really digging into and loving and have a great appreciation for the work that the team there does there to help ensure that we're communicating with customers, telling our story, and continuing to move forward. So that's what I do at Consumers Energy. I think, if you're listening, and you're not entirely familiar with how utilities work, or at the functions within a utility, if you took my role, and you put it outside into a different company, it's very similar to a chief marketing officer type of role.

E

Ed Clemente 07:33

So that's how we actually connected through Katie Carey. I used to work with her back in the legislative days. [Yeah.] And I would imagine, too, that Marketing Communications has only sort of exasperated I guess, over the growth of like, social media, too.

L

Lauren Snyder 07:59

Oh, 100%, 100%. Like, we didn't even have social media when I started the company. Now, it's a whole new world, right. And that's where, you know, really at Consumers Energy, we want to make sure that when we're communicating to our customers, that we're going to the channels

of their choice, and how they want to receive information, and social media is just continuing to evolve. And we want to make sure that we are a part of those conversations.

E

Ed Clemente 08:24

Yeah, and I would even imagine the other sort of three things you mentioned are important for the talent search for Michigan. You're involved obviously with EVs, you know, electric vehicle platforms, where that some of the things but I think also the sustainability, and the renewable parts of what you do is very attractive, I think, to a lot of people demographically, probably under 40, probably more. But I would imagine other people throughout the stratus, different socio economic groups. But that's probably grown a ton too, since you've been in the position.

L

Lauren Snyder 08:58

Absolutely, I have to share with you another story about my grandfather. So he and I, he passed away two years ago, and we were very, very close. And every time we would talk, we would talk about the company, and he would send me articles and clippings. And on the side, he would write down notes of things to be paying attention to, and we'd always end a conversation with Take care of our company. And I remember being very excited to tell him about the role that I was promoted into the one that I'm in now. And he looked at me and he said, Wait, what? What is this customer experience function? What are you like, what does this all mean, digital and, you know, energy efficiency, you want them to use less of our product, and you want to enroll them in solar and wind like what is happening here. And you know, it's a shift that we've made in recent years to have really big ambitions around, net zero and net zero means we want to be able to move away from coal. We are retiring our coal fleet as we speak, and moving into options that are going to make sure that we're here for the next 130 years, leaving a better footprint for those who are going to come behind us. And so it is a really exciting time to be in the utility. I will also say too, historically, and maybe even still today a little bit, customers don't really think of their utility unless there's a problem, right? Unless your power goes out. Unless you've got perhaps a question about a bill, right? You don't necessarily think of us. But now as we move into this new territory around clean and lean and green, we need customers, we need them to be a part of the study. We can't be successful in the ambition of net zero without them and so we have energy efficiency programs. We have EV programs. Now, I just have to tell you about the EV program really quickly here. [Sure.] For those of you listening, EVs, if you have any questions about EVs, Consumers Energy should be your first phone call. I know that might sound odd. But really, we have a team of experts, we can help navigate the process. It's a concierge level of service that we have here where we will help you figure out what charger you need installed, we'll get you on the right rate, which is really important. It's a very reduced rate for EV drivers, and they charge it in the night time, we're gonna get you a rebate, we're gonna get the charger installed, it really is helping mitigate a pain point that we know customers have when they're trying to figure out how they become their own gas station, essentially. So that the same is true for business customer.

E

Ed Clemente 11:34

I got a question on that. Hang on one second. [Yeah.] So that's a good point. Because I think, obviously, a lot of people are concerned about if they're going to get an EV or how it's going to transition. But so you think before even someone even thinks of weighing an EV, they can know

their situation ahead of time.

L

Lauren Snyder 11:54

100%. I mean, most of the people who call us are those who have already purchased an EV. And now they're trying to figure out, you know, what charging station do I get? How do I get this thing installed, we can do all of that. We do all of that. In fact, my husband just got a new EV and I've been driving a hybrid. And I had our team come out, I experienced, like I like to do most of our programs. So I want to know what it feels like to be a customer. And I'll tell you, we can go deep and we can go wide in making sure customers really understand what's entailed to get their EV on the road. So think of Consumers Energy when you think about your EV.

A

Announcer 12:35

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E

Ed Clemente 12:50

So you mentioned all these different programs you're doing. So who are some of your bigger partners and stakeholders and people you work with? You know that you probably want to highlight? Because I'm sure as you know, like anyone who knows any kind of utilities and government, there's so many other players involved and just yourself.

L

Lauren Snyder 13:08

Oh, we work with all sorts of partners every single day. But let's talk about economic development in particular.

E

Ed Clemente 13:15

What other partners do, yeah.

L

Lauren Snyder 13:17

We're really proud to partner with the MEDC regularly to win jobs and create investment in Michigan and for Michigan. In fact, our teams together we call ourselves Team Michigan. And we're really proud that Brian Rich, who's our senior vice president is a part of the MEDC executive committee, not only so that he can bring awareness to energy issues, but also to learn how stakeholders in all sectors align to achieve a common a common objective, which is to help grow Michigan. So MeDC is a really great partner. Our foundation also supports local academic development organizations across the states. We've got folks from our organization

who sit on various boards, again, to be that voice and face of energy issues, but then to make sure that we're doing all that we can to help ensure that we're landing projects here. And we're constantly focused on deepening our relationship and curating stakeholder engagement. To make sure that Team Michigan is playing offense, we really like to play offense. But let me tell you, I've got a handful of projects that I think warrant shining a light on. [Sure.] They're not the, you know, you may not have seen this in the headlines, although you pay attention to headlines, so maybe you have, but the first one I want to highlight is fairlife. fairlife, so think of milk. fairlife milk, their expansion was directly supported by funding to support wastewater infrastructure expansion, and we worked with them to devise an energy solution alongside their work with the state to ensure that they had no electric concerns. So this drove, because fairlife is here, we saw an incremental 45 jobs, directly to fairlife. And we were told 100 jobs and over \$98 million worth of investment, so it's a great one. The next project I want to highlight is called LuxWall. This is headquartered in Ypsilanti. Litchfield won one aspect of this project and Detroit was announced for the other part. And this is a next-generation, high-performance, energy efficiency, vacuum-insulating glass manufacturer. How about that?

E

Ed Clemente 15:44

I don't know what it all means.

L

Lauren Snyder 15:45

But this created 450 jobs, and was a \$165 million investment in the state. Cytiva Life Services, which is in Muskegon, is another great example. This was a reuse of a former Bayer plant after they closed down. It's a life science project that created over 280 jobs in Muskegon. And the investment here was over 300 million. Another one to highlight is the Amazon fulfillment center in Gaines Township, which is near Grand Rapids. And this created over 1500 jobs, which is just outstanding. And then finally, I'll get the gas only example. Ultium Cells, which is in Delta Township, this is a General Motors JV battery plant. And this created 1700 jobs and over 2.6 billion of investment, the list goes on. But what I'm trying to convey here is we have a lot of projects in our pipeline, more so than we've seen, honestly, in years, where companies are either expanding, or they're landing here in Michigan, and they're creating jobs. And they are investing in a state at levels that we haven't seen before. So really, these are Team Michigan, like MEDC, the other stakeholders that we work with, we work hand in hand to ensure that we are playing offense, and we are landing companies in Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 17:19

And so with all these, obviously those are statewide, and you also have some wind farms too in the state as well, right?

L

Lauren Snyder 17:28

We do have wind farms, and we have solar farms too.

—

E

Ed Clemente 17:32

Yeah, it's growing. But is that a growing niche market for you guys? [Oh, it's growing.] Good.

L

Lauren Snyder 17:38

Yeah, it's growing, you're gonna see more and more and more. Our clean energy plan, which ties to this ambition of 2040 net zero, calls for over 8000 megawatts of solar. So you're going to start to see more and more, we have a lot of demand from our business customers. In fact, the companies that we are working with who are looking at Michigan, they all are requiring that their energy be clean energy, they want to be served by clean energy, which means that they are signing up for our renewables programs that will allow that to be the case where we are building wind, and we are building solar so that we can support these companies who want to be served by clean energy.

E

Ed Clemente 18:25

And those are just regular companies, not necessarily companies that are more like [No, just regular companies.] Just regular companies.

L

Lauren Snyder 18:33

Yeah, yes, yes, it really is. Yeah. You know, and the role that Consumers plays in particular, around economic development beyond just the sustainability. You know, as I mentioned, every project looking here has some kind of sustainability goals, and we're here to help figure that out. But they're also looking at reliability. That's a big deal. And we have really ramped up our efforts around reliability. I hope that you saw a couple of weeks ago, we made a very public announcement that we have committed to restoring power in 24 hours or less, and that no more than 100,000 customers are without power. Now, this isn't gonna happen tomorrow. We call this a reliability roadmap. So we have a plan, we have an investment plan. It's going to take place over the next handful of years here, we're leaning into infrastructure upgrades, undergrounding, tree trimming, and what makes this even more exciting is last week, we received \$100 million from the Department of Energy, a grant that's going to help accelerate this effort. So reliability, we can confidently say to those who are looking like we got you and we're going to continue to improve reliability in the years ahead. And then finally cost, like we never ever ever want cost to be the reason electricity or gas costs to be the reason a company's like, we can't do that. And so we also are working day in and day out to ensure that we have competitive rates, we have an economic development rate, in fact, that is specifically for new customers. And so, again, we're focused on cost, reliability and sustainability. Back to this notion of playing offense with the MEDC and Team Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 20:21

You actually have answered my next question, little bits, but maybe there might be something you missed. But what other future trends do you see for that energy field beyond what you've already highlighted?

L Lauren Snyder 20:34

Yeah, I mean, I think when I think about what's required as we go for Team Michigan to remain successful, it's more inventory. We can't win projects without inventory. And what I mean by that are sites, two years ago, we had one mega site in the state. And we've been marketing for over 20 years, until Blue Oval came. Today, we have three mega sites that are all progressing, and a mega site is 1000 acres or more. So in order to get more mega sites, and sites of just various sizes, the state needs to invest in these sites. And the infrastructure can range from due diligence reports to energy infrastructure, to studies to ensure that we're ready to serve. And we work hand in hand with our engineers to create solutions so that from an energy ready standpoint, these sites are ready.

E Ed Clemente 21:30

Oh, go ahead. I'm sorry. [No, no, no, go ahead.] I was gonna ask, has also technology, like changed for you internally, you know, as an electric or power producing company, that that's actually going to provide some advantages or efficiencies for maybe for you down the line, too?

L Lauren Snyder 21:47

Oh, 100%, in all aspects of our business, automation, artificial intelligence, you name it, everything. We have, the lens with which we look at all of the work that we do, is how technology can be an enabler of that. So absolutely.

E Ed Clemente 22:05

I cut you off, you were gonna say another one.

L Lauren Snyder 22:06

Oh, no, I was just gonna say the other really important aspect of all of this is workforce. Recruiting, retaining graduates and employees, aligning curriculum with business needs, upscaling training. These are all things that businesses are looking for and need as they try and figure out where they want to land. And so it's really important that Michigan, that we're continuing to help solve these workforce issues.

E Ed Clemente 22:36

Yeah, and I would imagine with you having I don't know how many counties you're in, but it's a lot, that you also have a lot of communities that are more attractive, that maybe historically people are starting to move to too, now that also affect some of your footprints, I would guess.

L Lauren Snyder 22:52

L Lauren Snyder 22:53

Oh, yeah, definitely. There's so many great places in Michigan, though, isn't there?

E Ed Clemente 22:58

I know, Muskegon has been doing really well lately, too. And communities are just slowly coming back, or actually, you know, people are moving to different places just all over the state. It's sort of interesting when we see that talent where it wants to go now.

L Lauren Snyder 23:14

Yeah, definitely.

E Ed Clemente 23:16

So the next question, and this is a, I'll give you a plug first, when you were 17 years old, I don't know, did you get a scholarship? Because you were a varsity golfer at MSU. Did you get a scholarship to go?

L Lauren Snyder 23:32

I did, I did. Not a full ride. [That's alright.] Yeah. But I was grateful to be a part of the team.

E Ed Clemente 23:40

So that helped you at least decide maybe a university, but what advice would you give your 17 year old self today as to, what kind of career would you tell them to go to? Because, you know, it's funny, you had your grandpa helping you. What advice would you give to someone who's thinking about making that decision as a career choice?

L Lauren Snyder 24:01

Listen to your elders. No, I mean, my grandfather's advice was spot on for me. And I think what I would say to my younger self is it always works out exactly the way that it should. Might not feel that way in the moment, but work hard, stay humble. And take the just focus on the right next step, and it always works out.

E Ed Clemente 24:22

And your last question could be your easiest. Do you have like a certain like activity or something like an event you go to or just like somewhere you like to go hike or something? What do you like best about living, I know you lived on the west side of the state. Where do you

like best over there?

L Lauren Snyder 24:40

Well, you know, the other thing I would say to this ties into the last question too, is there's no need to leave Michigan. There's so many great things about this state and so many great opportunities and you can advance across any kind of different sector. And so, what do I like most about Michigan? So I have four young children, and my husband and I and our kids, we love to go to the lake, Lake Michigan. You know, when I was a kid, we'd go up to Traverse City. And that felt like a far, far, far away from Jackson, which it is, it's like four hours. But now in Grand Rapids, it takes us 30 minutes and we can be at the big lake and it's just such a treasure. We love to spend time at Lake Michigan. We also love to golf, I want my kids to know how to play golf, lifelong sport and so we love to travel around and do that and spend time up north to we love to downhill ski as a family. So I think those are just a few of the reasons why I love Michigan so much.

E Ed Clemente 25:41

And you as a kid, you guys, you went to Traverse City, or did you go to lakes by you by Jackson, because there's quite a few lakes by you?

L Lauren Snyder 25:49

Quite a few. A lot of my friends growing up lived on Clark Lake. But we would spend most of our summers, it was great. The best memories. We would go for two weeks every summer to Leeland, Michigan. My parents would rent a cottage on Good Harbor Bay right on the beach there. And you know, there was no TV, there was no anything, you were there. You were just enjoying the outdoors and being together as a family and we bounced around to the different towns up there. And I love that area so much so, that's what we do.

E Ed Clemente 26:20

Well, thank you for all your great answers. Once again, our guest was Lauren Snyder. She's the vice president of customer experience for consumers energy. Lauren, a lot of fun. And thanks for doing the show today and keep up the good work.

L Lauren Snyder 26:33

Thank you so much.

E Ed Clemente 26:34

Next week, we're fortunate to have Ingrid Tighe, she's the president of the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center, also known as just The Center.



Announcer 26:45

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