

Agency for Change Podcast: Sue Wilkinson, Ameritas

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Sue Wilkinson: 0:00

You are just the current set of management leading a corporation. Part of your responsibility is to leave it in a really good spot for that next set of leaders and that next set of generation to lead the company even further into the future.

Announcer: 0:19

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman: 0:43

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman. Welcome back to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Now I know every one of you who has listened before knows that I love marketing and branding. In fact, I'm always on the lookout for a company that has great messaging and a catchy tagline. And one company who has done this well is called Ameritas, and their tagline for the last several years has been Fulfilling Life. And today I'm excited to talk to my friend and the president and chief operating officer of Ameritas, Sue Wilkinson. Sue absolutely exemplifies the idea of fulfilling life, both professionally and personally, as she has dedicated 28 years to helping millions of customers plan well to live fulfilling lives through insurance, financial services and employee benefits. She's also a strong advocate for numerous charitable organizations and causes. Sue, I can't wait to talk with you today. Welcome to the podcast.

Sue Wilkinson: 1:58

Well, thank you, Lyn. I really appreciate being asked and I'm looking forward to our chat.

Lyn Wineman: 2:03

Oh, me too. So, Sue, I drive by your building every day, but I recognize because we have people across the country, maybe some of them haven't heard of Ameritas before. Could you start by just telling us more about the organization?

Sue Wilkinson: 2:21

Sure. So Ameritas is an insurance company based here in Lincoln, Nebraska, and we offer all sorts of insurance products, so life insurance, annuities, retirement plans, wealth management so if people want to invest in stocks and bonds, whatever, we can set up some accounts from that standpoint. We also offer dental vision and hearing care, offer dental vision and hearing care.

Lyn Wineman: 2:45

I bet a lot of people are familiar with you for the dental, vision and hearing care that you provide to employers and individuals from across the country.

Sue Wilkinson: 2:50

Yes, that is generally where our name recognition comes the most.

Lyn Wineman: 2:55

Fantastic. So one of the things I've read about Ameritas is how your services go beyond the traditional offerings to enhance customers' overall well-being and satisfaction, thus the fulfilling life tagline that I love so much. Can you tell us more about that?

Sue Wilkinson: 3:20

Yes, so when we think about it and I love the fulfilling life tagline too I actually was blessed to be part of that time period when we were changing our brand, so it was exciting at that point in time. But when we think about fulfilling life, there's all aspects to someone's lifetime and we can be there in many ways throughout that, both in good times and in bad.

So when we say about the services and things that we offer. You know we can help people truly enjoy the fun things like retirement and having an appropriate retirement to live your life post retirement. You know we're also there during some icky times though, too. You know there's deaths that happen in the family. You know we help them financially, the remaining family members you know with the proceeds. But then we have disability income as well so if somebody becomes disabled for a period of time, you know we're there to provide insurance. I mean there's some down times that we're there to support people, but it's the fun times too. And then when you flip over to the, you know dental vision and hearing. You know nobody likes to have root canals but people do love to get their braces off, right and like smile after they're done so you have the highs and lows you know, even from that side of the business too. So that's what we kind of mean by like we're providing services along the way. We did start, you know, 137 years ago just life insurance primarily, but listening to customers with just needs of consumer basis. We've expanded our product lines a lot over that time period.

Lyn Wineman: 4:50

That's amazing 137 years ago. That's quite a legacy for a company to go that long and that far.

Sue Wilkinson: 5:00

It is, I would agree.

Lyn Wineman: 5:02

So, Sue, you've touched on this a little bit, but you know, one of the things people are talking about right now is hey, we're not quite sure and particularly in an election year we're not quite sure what's going on

with the economy. There's a little bit of uncertainty. I'd love, because you've been in this business for so long, your perspective on how financial planning can really play a role in helping both individuals and businesses thrive, when we're kind of in that question mark area.

Sue Wilkinson: 5:34

Yeah, I'm a big believer in financial planning and long-term financial planning, so you know there are ups and downs. You always hear like you have to stay in it for the long-term, like, do not react to volatility that's going on into the market from day to day.

So, like if you're of a certain age, you know, don't look at your retirement plan account every day because you need to be in it for the long-term but both individuals and businesses. The part that businesses come in to play for us is you can have small business owners like yourself, Lyn right, who needs to think about succession for their business. You know we can help with that in terms of your financial planning for you to be viable for your own retirement, but also set up your business in a way that it can then thrive you know post you being. You know the person who's leading it, we can do that for small businesses you know, with key man insurance and just a variety of other, you know things that we can do. So it does span individuals as well as businesses, and then, as a whole, you know businesses need to be able to offer offerings to their associates. That's where our 401k plans can come into play, our dental and vision and hearing can come into play because you want to employ people you know that feel like they're getting a benefit from you as an employer too.

Lyn Wineman: 6:53

Yeah, and I personally am a little bit of a caretaker, right, like I want to make sure everybody has what they need. I know I'm very soft hearted, so you know I want to make sure we've got disability, short term and long term and all the things in place so that if something happens, my team members are protected. But I'm also protected because I'm just going to want to pay for it all and you know, as a small business you can't always do all of that. Thank you for that. So I mentioned in the intro you've been with Ameritas for 28 years. I bet you've seen a lot. You mentioned being part of the rebranding and the tagline, but what are some other key milestones, or maybe even transformations that you've witnessed during that time?

Sue Wilkinson: 7:42

Yes, I would say. There's probably three big things over a 28-year career that I can think of. So we've done two very large mergers, one in 1999 that doubled the size of our business. That was a company in Bethesda, Maryland, in the Washington DC area, and then in 2005, we did another merger which doubled our size again and that was out of Cincinnati, Ohio. We still have a presence, a fairly decent sized presence with associates in that area, about four or 500 associates still in that area. We employ 2,500 nationwide. But those two mergers were monumental to us as an organization doubling your size. And then the third thing is right during the pandemic we were, we just had a conversation with our board in February of 2020 and then, a month later, you know we all go into this pandemic about investing in ourselves to transform how it is that we do our business, and investing in ourselves by means of technology.

And so we call it technology enabled process improvement TEPI for short is what we call it. It's still ongoing because, in reality, transformation is always you know, always ongoing. But we did ask to be allowed to invest in ourselves for a period of time to make sure that we were setting ourselves up for generations, and generations. Like you don't last 137 years by not thinking far enough ahead, we're just a current set of management. There will be another set of management in the future. We want to leave them in a spot that you know we've done enough to transform ourselves such that people aren't feeling like they're having to do too much manual work or manipulate information too much in order to get, you know, an output. So I think the transformation part is the third, the third thing in my mind that sticks out you know for the 28 years.

Lyn Wineman: 9:37

You know, the pandemic obviously was tough and that is an understatement but I think one of the good things that did come out of it is it really did accelerate a lot of technology transformation that you know, maybe we would have been hesitant for or resistant to, but there was no choice. You had to make it happen. And, wow, the foresight to have had your board approve that literally days before we shut down. I mean, I know not a lot could have happened in those 30 days, but it set the wheels in place for it to happen. So I think that's really a great thing. So, Sue, I love seeing strong and generous women rise to leadership roles, and I definitely would say you are a strong and generous woman. I'm curious, though in the 28 years as you have been on this journey, did you have any struggles along the way?

Sue Wilkinson: 10:39

I think everybody has struggles along the way. I would say this my struggles were simplified, I would say, because of the amazing support I had of my spouse. Yeah, you know you're, it's a team, it's a team effort. When you have a young family, you're trying to progress in your career. For me in particular, being in an industry that's very, very male dominated industry, traditionally at the executive levels, so spousal support was, you know, meaningful obviously to me in the journey.

Sue Wilkinson: 11:10

So, but I would say from a you know like, from a true struggles standpoint. You know I was really blessed Ameritas, even though the industry as a whole was pretty much male dominated, we had a lot of strong female leaders within Ameritas here in Lincoln, but also nationwide. Some of those acquisitions that we did. We had a lot of strong female leaders within Ameritas here in Lincoln, but also nationwide some of those acquisitions that we did. We had female leaders of, like, a mutual fund company or of a broker dealer. The support that they provided along the way or like, even if it wasn't even conversations, but my observations over the time periods of how they went through and did things I think helped make my struggles, maybe less than perhaps some others might've encountered along the way, but in general the balance of work and family. You know it's hard but you put in the effort on both sides of the house and you're rewarded.

Lyn Wineman: 12:02

Sue, I'm going to shout out to having an amazing spouse. It does really make this journey easier, and you know, being able to work together as if you choose, to have a family and kids and balance all the things that is the thing I've heard. The new term is life-work, harmony, because I do think sometimes that

balance is a myth. But getting them to maybe work together is a good thing. But having observed you and known you for years, you seem to make those things look easy, so kudos to you for that.

Lyn Wineman: 12:40

Also, you mentioned the strong woman role models at Ameritas. I mean, one of my role models is somebody I have been able to observe and work with in community and charitable events, but is a woman named Joanne Martin who has passed but she led Ameritas for many years. I'm curious what was it like having someone like her as a mentor in your career?

Sue Wilkinson: 13:09

Immeasurable is the word that comes to my mind as to what her impact was. She was my mentor for 26 years. I worked for a public accounting firm, a large public accounting firm that audited Ameritas, and so she was actually my client. And then she had approached me to apply for a job, you know, here at Ameritas and from that point on even though at that point I was not directly reporting to her, she was not my hiring manager, she was somebody that helped navigate, I guess, my career here at Ameritas, because I'm someone that gets bored fairly easily.

So like I'd be like okay, now I've done this, is there anything else? And she would always kind of point me in the right direction. It was up to me to make it happen and to do the work to be successful in it. But she would say, have you thought about this? And it was really, when I reflect on it, she, her hand, was in almost every career move, because I've had like eight different, pretty significantly different roles in this organization over 28 years.

And until this last one you know, because she had passed by the time I've been named president. She pretty much had a hand in almost every single one of them. So immeasurable that's what I would say.

Lyn Wineman: 14:21

I love that word, and I can imagine her smiling down on you, knowing that this is the next chapter in your career as well. Sue, as marketing person, I love great stories and I'm wondering if you can share a success story or an example that really illustrates the positive impact Ameritas has had on a customer's life or business.

Sue Wilkinson: 14:54

Sure, so we do have customer stories on our website, so I would point people to Ameritas.com and we launched. I think we maybe have six stories there. I can't remember exactly how many we have out there right now but then they run the gamut. So there are stories about disability income. There's stories about life insurance, about employer so I encourage people to go and look on our website.

For me, the one that's most compelling is because I turn it back on my own experience like why did I commit myself to the insurance industry as an industry that you know I wanted to work in. So the stories about how life insurance helped people you know post traumatic event are the ones that are always the tear jerkers to me. And the reason it resonates with me is because I lost my own father when I was 25, he was 53.

Lyn Wineman: 15:44

I didn't know that, yeah, so this really has to be meaningful to you.

Sue Wilkinson: 15:49

It is, and so like even though I had a working mother, which was, you know, a little unusual in the day in rural Nebraska to have a working mom. But so, even though she had income, dad's life insurance really helped, right, like, set a peaceful, like I don't have to worry about this necessarily. And then, ironically, the same thing happened to my mother-in-law, you know, 10 years later, with an unexpected passing of my father-in-law.

So, those are the ones that I just think that's the purity of this business insurance. People don't wake up and say I want to work in insurance you know, but when you, when you think about it from this perspective, it's just so purposeful and it's what has continued to, you know, draw me to this as an industry.

Lyn Wineman: 16:35

I love that. I love that it has touched your life personally and that that makes so much sense to me about why you chose this career, but also about why you're helping people through Ameritas. So Sue, looking ahead, I know you're always looking ahead, I know you mentioned you get bored easily. What are some of the future goals and initiatives for Ameritas, and how do you see the company's impact growing into the future?

Sue Wilkinson: 17:08

So, again going back to the tagline of fulfilling life, we want to fulfill more lives, so one of our overarching goals is always to grow the number of customers that we're interacting with and helping along the way, and so we do that in two ways: organically, which we consider to be just the general sales that we're doing day in and day out, as well as persisting the business, keeping the business that we already have, you know. So that's one way of making sure that we're continuing to fill the lives of our customers. And then there is the acquisitions aspect too. We do continue to look for opportunities where we can grow as an organization, and the thing is, anytime we do an acquisition, so I talked about two big mergers, but we've had numerous smaller acquisitions along the way, and when we do acquire a company, we count the number of customers. That's part of what we look at how many customers.

It's not just about revenue, but how many customers come with this, how many more lives are we going to be able to touch as part of this acquisition? And it's something that we put in our business case when we're, you know, selling it to internal management and it's a big enough acquisition that goes all the way to the board.

But anyway, so, speaking about the future, it's just always growing, organically or through acquisitions, to make sure that we're just enabling more customers to have the joys that you can have by being part of our organization

Lyn Wineman: 18:36

You know what I love about that, Sue, is when you are part of an organization or leading an organization that does what they do so well in such a beneficial way, it's great to have a mission that says we are going to touch more lives in this very impactful way. So I appreciate that you said that I'm going to flip this a little bit, because I've also mentioned in the intro that I've known you to be so involved in the community and with different charitable organizations and you actually taught me something that has really impacted my involvement in charitable organizations and that is the three board rule. Would you be willing to expand on that and then also just share why community involvement is so important to you?

Sue Wilkinson: 19:27

Sure, and I can't take total credit for it because it is something that Joanne had passed along to me, you know, 20 some years ago. But my the three board rule is generally this like, if you want to be involved, there's three aspects to consider being involved in when you're thinking about things. So one is, if you have a family, if there's something that's important to your family so in my case it would have been my kids, be involved in something that's important to them. So you know, in that capacity I would volunteer to be on advisory boards for the school you know, or things like that. One is to be involved in your industry so that you can continue to grow and learn in your industry. So whether or not that's being involved in your industry's lobbying group or an operational group within your industry or whatever. And then the third one is just something different that's outside of both your family and your professional life, what's something that you maybe just want to learn more about and you feel like you can share talents with that organization. Share talents, you know, with that organization. So in that case, you know, I've been on volunteer boards for, like Bryan College of Health Sciences was, you know, one of them.

Is it related to my industry? No, is it related to my kids? No, but boy, it sure was very interesting to be part of that you know organization and learn more about that college. So that's kind of the three board rule, as I've become empty nestered. Um, there's not as much you know with the kids. So then now, now that aspect of it for me has turned more to faith-based.

Just the involvement as a whole is important to me, Lyn. I guess I learned it at an early. At an early age my parents did stuff in our community growing up. It's just such it fills your bucket right to like give back.

Lyn Wineman: 21:21

It really does, it really does, it really does. And I just want to say, on behalf of the community and the different boards I know that you've touched Thank you, thank you for the work that you do there, because I think once again we talked a little bit about that work, life balance or life work harmony. You know, when you throw community service in there as well, it's very enriching and very heart fulfilling. But it's also another thing to kind of balance in all of the things we're trying to do. So, Sue, for our listeners who would like to learn more about Ameritas, what's the best way for them to connect?

Sue Wilkinson: 22:04

I would say the website that I referred to earlier, so just you know, www.Ameritas.com.

You know all sorts of things about our products or our financial strength or our history.

Lyn Wineman: 22:17

Yeah, fantastic. We'll have that linked up in the show notes as well and shout out, Sue, to your marketing team. I have several friends on your great marketing team. They do a lovely job. All right. I'm going to ask you my favorite question next. Yes, they do All right. I'm going to ask you my favorite question next and I think I mentioned this is podcast episode 201. We've asked this on every single episode, but, Sue, I am inspired by motivational quotes. I get to talk to such interesting people like you on the podcast. Could you give us a few words of your own to inspire our listeners?

Sue Wilkinson: 22:57

Yes, and I kind of already referred to it a little bit when I talked about the 137 years of Ameritas. But my words are this particularly when you're in a larger corporation, you are just the current set of management leading a corporation, and there were many before you who helped set the foundation of you being able to lead the way you're leading currently. Part of your responsibility is to leave it in a really good spot for that next set of leaders and that next set of generation to lead the company even further into the future.

Lyn Wineman: 23:31

I love it. You know what. It's good advice for both your work management, but also, as you think about all of the community boards you've been on, that's good advice for that type of role as well, to leave things in a really good spot. I love that, thinking about, you're just the current ones. You are building on the great work of those that came before and you're going to leave it in a good place for those that come after. Very nice, very nice. Sue, I always like talking with you. As we wrap up this great conversation today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing

Sue Wilkinson: 24:15

So I'll go back to the kind of the insurance concept as a whole, Lyn, and in my mind, you know insurance companies have the unique ability to span across many needs of an individual or a business. You know we can sell something today that needs to be in place 100 years from now. So basically, we can help you pull from birth to death, and that we're there in both the good times and the bad.

Lyn Wineman: 24:40

Very nice. I love that. Sue, I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more organizations like Ameritas. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today.

Sue Wilkinson: 24:54

Absolutely Lyn.

Announcer: 25:16

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