

# Mandy Ferguson

Managing Director, Harlequin Mills & Boon

From market researcher to managing director, for **Mandy Ferguson** the challenge is always creating affinity for a brand, through understanding the needs and desires of your consumers and customers. >>



After almost 30 years in the food and drink industry, which included spells at Heinz, United Biscuits, Premier Foods and ABF; Mandy Ferguson joined Harlequin Mills & Boon, the iconic romance publisher, in 2009 as Managing Director. Her remit is to drive the business forward, adapting it to meet the growing digital opportunity and provoke consumer reappraisal of the Mills & Boon brand. She took time out of her busy schedule to tell Nigel Wright Recruitment about how she got to where she is today, her passion for consumer brands and what the future holds for Mills & Boon.

### What lead you into a career in marketing?

I fell into market research really. I studied history so I had a good grounding in how to analyse and interpret information, but I knew I wasn't going to take the subject any further. I got a graduate position at MEW, a travel and tourism market research agency, but got frustrated with completing research projects for clients and then not seeing how the research was implemented into the client's business. I wanted to be client side. In research the final decision doesn't rest with you and I was interested in gaining broader experience by moving into marketing. But really, I wanted to be far more involved in the key decisions. After running the research department at Heinz, I was headhunted by United Biscuits to head their research function, who then saw my capabilities as being beyond the research role. They provided the opportunity to move into marketing where I could become involved in all aspects of developing a brand to meet consumer's needs and desires.

### What is it about the consumer products sector that has seen you devote your career to it?

It's an essential consumer sector with huge >>

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## Mandy Ferguson – CV >>

### 2009 > Present

#### **Harlequin Mills & Boon**

Managing Director

### 2005 > 2008

#### **Associated British Foods**

Managing Director – Ryvita

### 2004 > 2005

#### **Premier Foods**

Interim Managing Director – Ambrosia

### 1988 > 2004

#### **United Biscuits**

Marketing Director – McVitie's UK

Marketing Director – KP Snacks

Business Group Controller – McVitie's UK

Projects Director, Strategy – McVitie's UK

General Marketing Manager – McVitie's UK

Marketing Controller – Terry's Group

Head of Market Research & Information

### 1982 > 1988

#### **H. J Heinz**

Market Research Manager

### 1979 > 1982

#### **MEW Research**

Market Research Executive

variety and great brands and it offers breadth of working environments from small company to big business. I like to work in businesses where I have an affinity with the product, you have to be passionate about what you're marketing and selling.

### Tell me about your passion for consumer brands then?

One of the advantages of working in research is that you get involved across the whole portfolio of brands, like I did at Heinz. Brands are so multi-faceted with so many different elements you have to deal with – brand values, consumer relationships, the look and feel of the product – it's about having the right commercial skills blended

with creativity and emotion. It's not just a black and white or functional situation. You have to build a relationship with consumers to influence and educate their choice... and no brand ever gets it 100% right!

### How did you make the transition from Marketing to Managing Director?

After my role as GM Marketing at McVitie's where I re-established McVitie's' house brands as well as re-launching McVitie's Digestive, I spent the next three years outside of marketing fulfilling a strategic projects and then sales controller roles. This included achieving double digit sales growth for McVitie's products in major Supermarkets including Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Iceland. I gained broad exposure to wider business planning and strategy. I knew, however, that my heart lay in brands and taking on big competitors in difficult segments...

### So the MD role at Ryvita was an opportunity to use all of your experience and skills...?

My CV is all well known British brands which have a lot of affinity with consumers but also some negative perceptions which need dealing with. Ryvita, at the time, was all about dieting and older consumers. People thought it tasted like cardboard! I helped change those perceptions by aligning the brand with the wider healthy eating and snacking market and injecting taste credentials into the brand, which it was lacking before, through product innovation...the result was a 22% increase in overall sales.

### After almost thirty years in the food and drink sector, what lead you into publishing?

When the call from Mills & Boon came, the obvious attraction was working with an entirely different category and broadening my experience combined with the challenge of developing an iconic brand. It helps that I love reading and books.

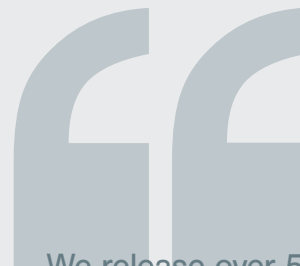
### In terms of building and maintaining a successful brand, what new challenges does the publishing industry bring?

The key differences moving from food and drink to publishing is learning the terminology and also

how the industry operates. One of the great things about Mills & Boon is the incredible publishing challenge – it's a different model, more like a magazine. We release over 50 books, all original titles, every month and they're only on the shelves in retail for a month before they're replaced with a new batch. We also operate an important direct marketing business and have a growing opportunity with the emergence of eBooks. It's a constantly changing environment – I love the challenge of dealing with change.

### Mills & Boon is an iconic brand that has been around for over 100 years: how has it stayed relevant?

Mills and Boon has a lot of very loyal customers who have been reading the novels since they were teenagers. Our editorial has moved with the times and we offer a wide variety of genres and our challenge is to get new and younger consumers, whom have outdated and incorrect perceptions of the brand to give us a try. Mills & Boon is like a Hollywood 'romcom'. Its great escapism, gives readers an emotional lift, a pick-me-up as, of course, there is always a happy ending. A big opportunity for us is the growth of e-books. Romance readers are avid readers and they've also been early adopters of e-books. Romance >>



We release over 50 books, all original titles, every month and they're only on the shelves in retail for a month before they're replaced with a new batch.

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fiction is easy to pick-up and dip into, so the e-book concept is ideal for them. It's portable and it gives you easy access to a range of books without the burden of having to carry the book everywhere!

## What are the challenges for the brand?

There is still a perception that Mills & Boon is quite bland and the heroines are weak and just wilt in your arms; there's no sex and the writing is poor. People don't think they're representative of modern women but that's not actually the case – the female characters are very feisty, sassy and streetwise and there's great variety of genres and heroes. Many of our books are quite sensual now and not really suitable for young teens anymore. The chastely kiss at the end of the book was ditched a long time ago! These are the negative perceptions we have had to overcome. Mills & Boon's market is very competitive. Obviously we are distinctive in the romance category but you're essentially trying to persuade people to pick up a Mills & Boon over any other book. You're also encouraging people to read, generally, whether that's in digital or physical format.

## How have you overcome these challenges?

We've just re-designed the whole range to appeal to a broader set of consumers as well as introduced a new sub series called Riva, aimed at women in their 20s upwards. We have a variety of different titles across nine romance strands - for example, we were doing paranormal and vampires before the Twilight saga took-off! Our regular readers understand the changes we've had to make to the look and the content and the feedback we've had is good. They don't feel the need to bend back the cover to hide the cheesy clinches anymore!

## Do you have a lot of influence over the content?

Harlequin, who owns Mills & Boon, has three acquisition teams that commission the stories and manage over a 1000 authors. I can influence the trends that we choose to get into by feeding through themes which seem to be gaining traction in our market more so than the actual content.



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I do have influence over the titles we choose to publish in the UK under our other imprint MIRA, which covers a range of commercial fiction genres, targeted predominantly at women.

## You mentioned new technology earlier, for Mills & Boon and other publishers, what do you see as being the opportunities and the threats associated with the innovations on the market?

We've embraced e-books because we don't have a hardback business. E-books represent a threat to the hardback publishing model because its one book at one price. Whereas, traditionally you would sell the hard back for £12-18 and then six months later publish the paper back. We only do paperbacks so it's not as much of a commercial challenge to us. We still, however, have to consider how to engage differently with consumers. How do you manage the balance between physical and digital? How do you convert everything? What role does the website and online communication play?

## What brands do you look to for inspiration?

Rather than particular brands, I like to try to keep up with new and interesting developments across markets which could have an application to our business. If I had to pick a brand then I'd choose Innocent which is distinctive and true to its original values, but continues to innovate and move the brand forward.

## Throughout your career, you've always sought ways in which to challenge yourself further. How do you challenge yourself outside of work?

Outside of work I'm a single mother with two teenage daughters, a house to run, numerous pets...so it's challenging balancing this with a full time job. I go to the gym regularly and challenge myself to keep fit. I'm sociable and enjoy meeting up with friends. I love going to live events, theatre; I'm always busy doing something. I enjoy the challenge of fitting everything in!

## What's your favourite holiday destination?

Africa on safari. I've been twice and I took the girls last year and we're all going again this summer. I enjoy relaxing and chilling on a beach too. With my background in history I also like to go on city breaks and explore museums, art palaces etc.

## What are you currently reading?

I've usually got three on the go! I could spend my whole day reading, reading is work...I've got piles of books at home. I'm currently reading The Iron King, one of the books in our new Miralnk teen range. It's just fantastic for teenagers – it's the first in a clever and engaging series. I'll read a few competitors' titles, just to understand how they are marketed, and the Sunday papers. I don't have time to read anything else!

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