

Making Customers Comfortable Online While Taking Bold Chances Offline

This transcript was lightly edited for clarity.

**Chris**: My very special guest today is Olga Torres. She is the director of marketing at Averica Discovery. Averica is an analytical development CRO with expertise in small molecule analysis and purification. Olga, welcome to Life Science Marketing Radio.

**Olga**: Thank you for having me, Chris.

**Chris**: This is gonna be a good one, I know. So, let's jump right into this.

**Olga**: No pressure.

**Chris**: Yeah, let's jump right into this. Olga, can you describe for me the transition you're seeing in the CRO world? So, as customers look for services, what factors are they considering when making the decision about what CRO they think they want to work with?

**Olga**: CROs are different from other biotech companies that have a product, like an antibody, that they're selling, even if they're selling it custom. You know, a lot of these niche CROs, they're very focused on a specialized area, and knowing a little bit about them will help understand a little bit how the buying process is slightly different. A lot of them were started by people that were pharma leaders, that they decided to leave Pfizer and start a CRO. And they're focused, because they’re scientists, on delivering excellence.

They're respected. They have a strong network and good reputation for delivering quality. That has sustained a good part of their business, but it doesn't help new customers find them. If I was looking for someone, I might just go online, or I may go down the hall and ask somebody like "Who do you think?" But even if I ask somebody down the hall, I'm still gonna go and check them online.

Everybody researches and they are looking for confirmation that "This company can help me," and that has certainly to do with our capabilities. But when they go online, you get a lot of information, so you can kind of get an assessment of the company's reputation, who it's associated with. You may see ads for other companies, and then you start to consider all these things from another company. Or if you end up on a directory, then all the companies that perform that service.

So, it's gone from being about loyalty and reputation. Now it's not enough to do just that scientific excellence component. You have to leverage that and you have to get it out there, and you have to show, in a lot of different ways, what science you're doing and what level you're doing it at and how to differentiate yourself on that.

**Chris**: Nice. Yeah, I like that. So, excellence is table stakes, to some degree. I mean, I'm assuming most companies are delivering excellence, but it's hard to sell excellence. You couldn't say, "We do a great job" of whatever it is you're looking for. Especially for someone who's looking across a large number of companies, there has to be something, as you say, to differentiate them, to make them dig a little deeper on your content, right?

**Olga**: Right. I definitely had that argument before, within the company. They're just energetic debates, because someone will tell me "Our approach is different," and then say "But the result is the same." And I started thinking about cakes and if I made a cake from a box. If I made a cake and did all the ingredients myself, or if I went to a bakery and there's this baker there who has a lot of experience and has everything close by. They've kind of optimized that process.

And I pay more for the baker than the box cake, but I also don't have to spend the time figuring it out and wondering about the quality of the results. So when you think about it like that, then you can start to separate out "Okay, an approach is a different thing" or "There can be shades of excellence," and it doesn't necessarily have to be a percent pure number.

**Chris**: Okay. As a former sales person, tell me how online marketing is changing your industry. In other words, how does the nature of how you engage with your customers change because of all the things they can find online?

**Olga**: Yeah, and they can find a lot of things. I think about a car. The last car that I bought, I did all kinds of research online. And probably all of us did more recently. And that's what it comes down to, is research on the different aspects and that information you see online.

It's about the company, it can be about the product, it can be about the service. And fundamentally, that has changed the process and it went from almost like a one-on-one conversation of information gathering through a cold call to, again, this bombardment of factors and data.

One of the ways that that has really changed, is making sure it's not just your website that people find you through. So, you're making sure that that persona you have out there exists in the directory, is in the blogs, in any videos you've made, in your social media accounts, and in your ads. It might sound really silly but the thing that goes through my head is this line from the "Sound of Music" where they're like "Activity suggests the life of purpose." It's all about activity, and I think about it when I'm frustrated that there's too many things to do. I think about it in also knowing the weight of what all of it is.

It's like all of it comes together to create something that's three dimensional. With the technical service like ours, it's not like buying shoes. It's everything flows outward to online, flows from me to online. My goal is to engage back. A conversation starts a lot different than it used to at a trade show where I'd be like, "Hi! Where are you coming from?" I can't do all of those things.

**Chris**: Right. The conversation starts differently, as you say.

**Olga**: Yeah. I think the focus then, certainly in person, but with the website and with all the components, is to establish credibility and to create some level of comfort so that it's less intimidating for someone to reach back out and have them start the conversation.

**Chris**: I think that's a brilliant point there, and a very simple one, to have companies think about their marketing and figure out how do we create an environment that is the most inviting for people to interact with and put up as few barriers as possible, which may mean putting up a little less information, because that's the paradox of choice.

I think it applies to just the amount of content, in some cases. If it looks like there's gonna be too much to plow through, maybe someone says "You know what? This website just looks simpler. I'll go with those guys. I'm going to click their button." Because they're afraid of what's gonna come back at them otherwise.

**Olga**: Yeah, I agree, and it's something you have to continually learn and relearn. I guess, when you get down to the analytics, you have to remind yourself, on average, how many pages are people going to? They're not going to every page on your site. Basically, you have like two pages to get them to figure it out. Each page has to have a component of that goal

**Chris**: Yeah, I think that's great. There's an element of testing there, and the analytics, as you say, to learning what people's behavior is, and looking back at the ones that were successful and figuring out "This is what worked. People go to that page, then they go to that page, and then they click."

Olga, tell me a little bit about how you've been able to translate what worked for you as a sales person, because you mentioned being in a trade show booth and initiating a conversation with someone. But how have you been able to translate what worked for you as a sales person in an in-person conversation to an online conversation?

**Olga**: That's one of those things where you're going to have to step away from the project. You can get really close when you're trying to think about all these things, but when I thought about the trade show, our booth or table, or even a conversation on the phone with someone, I don't think cold calling is as effective as it used to be. And it certainly was relied on, but I grew up in the time, in sales, where it was.

So, thinking about a lot of different situations, what were the questions they asked me? Not what is the salesy positioning statement I want to tell them, but I really had to think about their questions and how I would answer their questions. And then restraining myself from saying, "We help chemists do..." you know?

I think, as scientists, we have an aversion to hearing something that's really salesy. It reduces the credibility for us. So, the goal became how do I create that part of the conversation that's natural, of just getting to know someone in a digital sense? Because the conversation with...our service is really technical, and that conversation needs to happen about their project. But the point where we get to a project, the conversation starts to pivot in a lot of different directions, and I had to stay before the pivot in the digital marketing.

I'd say maybe the pivot point would be when they say they have a need. If marketing's focus is then to create credibility and comfort so that they will tell us that need, then it comes to those things that you were saying, "What should be on that page?" And that's this balance of not too vague so that it's not obvious what we mean. It needs to be clear, "This is what we can do," and not too specific because you'll alienate one group while you focus on another.

And then you have to speak to all the potential pivot points. I refer to us as layering. For us in chemistry, I think about the analytical chemists, the medicinal chemists, the process chemists, CMC. I think about people who have a lot of experience in the industry. I think about people who have no experience. I think about the robots that crawl the site. Once the people - not the robots - engage, then the conversation moves on with sales and they're able to then go into the project specific components.

**Chris**: I really like that. I really like how you said you have to stay in front of the pivot point. And then I assumed, and it sounds like I was right, that the pivot point is the moment when they say, "I have a need," and now a real, live salesperson is going to engage with them about what that is and how they move forward to determine whether they're going to do a project.

**Olga**: Yeah. And it might be one of the ways that sales experience works against me, is because I do know where that pivot is and I know where I naturally want to then turn the conversation to be really specific. And I think that that's something we've learned over the past couple of years to differentiate and try to say, "Okay, well here's a line."

And this is where we're going to divide...not that we don't all work together, but if we go too far across that line, you're alienating a whole section of customers. And they're gonna see that presence online and they're gonna say, "Oh, they can't help me."

**Chris**: Yeah. The other thing that I like that you said very early on in the last answer was about thinking about the questions. I think this is the essence of online marketing, is to really understand the questions that the people who could be using your services have. And it is rich in the possibilities for creating things that will engage them. And simply writing down all the questions that they might ask and figuring out the answers and in what different formats you might deliver each of those answers and how they can be bundled together, is really how you tell your story up to that pivot point.

**Olga**: I completely agree. And finding the right outlet for that and talking about when something might be a good blog article or a publication or a poster or a video. Recently, we started doing a video series where we just took those basic questions we got asked all the time, either online or in person. Those really, really basic ones. We're just turning out 45-second videos to answer them so that those answers are there. I think it's hard, though sometimes, I know I keep talking and talking, but I guess that's the point.

**Chris**: Yes, it is. Keep going.

**Olga**: I feel like I'm running on a lot of sentences. The questions and having...scientists, the way we want to answer them...everybody in our company is a scientist. I have a biology degree and I work with a bunch of organic chemists. The way I want to answer “Why is it important?” is different than the way they want to answer.

And making sure that my answer works for them because they're the target and making sure that their answer works for more of an emotional reason, like why is it important, not just because the FDA says you have to do it. Which it is important for that too, but because this is what it gives you. It gives you more time or it gives you higher quality or more answers.

**Chris**: So, one of the things that I like that you said you're doing, and that I don't see...I think it's pretty rare what you have started to do, and that is create a 45-second video. So, each one answers a specific question. People don't have to watch a five-minute long video to find out everything you do, they can watch the ones they want. I think that's a really smart way to think about answering those questions, first of all. And then those can also be re-purposed in other ways. What kinds of questions are you asking and answering in those videos?

**Olga**: A lot of the questions came from the questions we get asked in the contact us form. I think definitely the one we get the most is, “How much is a chiral separation? How much is it gonna cost?” This gives us an opportunity to explain what goes into it. It's not a flat rate price because it depends on how we develop a method for everything. Everything is custom.

These are the things that go into that, and that may determine the difference in the cost, or maybe what's the difference between purity and potency. Some of them are gonna be on the more basic level for people who don't have a lot of experience. And then because someone who has a lot of experience, they'll be like "Of course." They know this answer, but they may like the fact that somebody else has answered it there for them.

**Chris**: Yeah, I think what you're doing there, especially with the 45-second videos, is exactly what we talked about earlier, and that is creating a site that's very comfortable for people to find what they want and to look at the things they want and ignore the things they don't really need.

**Olga**: I think a lot of what I got from sales was in making sure that comfort level was there. Because I know that might be the thing that pushes it over the edge. If I'm giving them a sense of not just "we can do this" but "we're here with you, and this is what we do," and makes it easier than "I'm gonna go with this company over the other company who may not have responded in the same way."

**Chris**: Yeah, I think that's the art of online marketing, is you're creating an environment. It's not just presenting information. You are portraying your company's personality and values and way of doing business with people through how you present information online.

**Olga**: Yes. I think the only thing we wanna be careful to say is it doesn't replace anything that we were already doing. It's certainly just in bringing some of what we were doing into the digital world.

**Chris**: Absolutely. Yeah, it doesn't replace anything. But if someone is looking for you online, you want to replicate the experience that they might have with you in person as closely as possible.

**Olga**: Right.

**Chris**: Olga, what types of tools have you found are particularly useful to automate this - because it sounds like there's a lot to be done - and other things to amplify your efforts?

**Olga**: In terms of automation, the first thing that I move to do is to automate the social media, because it can be a lot to nurture and constantly add information to. There are a lot of each of these tools that I'm gonna mention, but the analytics tools, I love. Because I love the data. There's been some tools I didn't like because they didn't give me enough data, and I want to be able to sometimes plot my own graphs and cross-correlate. And I look at it the same way I looked at an HPLC chromatogram when I was in research.

Keyword analysis does a lot for understanding you're saying what you're saying. If there's a keyword you know is important, like method development, you want to make sure that that's coming across in the right way, and not just to a person but to a computer. Graphic tools like Canva, I love that tool because it's very drag-and-drop and I can create really nice graphic images that I can use as a Twitter card or I can use them as the picture that goes with the blog. And it takes me a couple of minutes. My boss thinks it takes me a lot longer.

**Chris**: We won't tell him.

**Olga**: I keep trying to tell him. It's like, "You know, you don't have to do graphic design, too." I'm like, "This is pretty easy, but okay." Most of what I love about the tools is, if you look at them a certain way, you can see how a robot sees the site. And that's important because it determines a lot about the SEO, what you come up with in search.

In our original site when I came to the company, SFC, super critical fluid chromatography, was mentioned a lot, because that's a core technology. But it was mentioned so much that Google read the site as an instrument company. Like, that we sold that, not that we sold the service of that part. So, that was one of the things that I learned. One of my favorites to tell people is the word "assay." I'm a biologist. When I hear assay, I think about ELISA. That's not what they mean when they keep using it. And they kept using it around me.

So I would say, "We do assays." And then when I showed them the data and I'm like, "We just keep coming up on sites." If somebody did a search for an assay, and they were looking for ELISA, we would pop up, because they had optimized it that way. When I brought it to the scientist, they're like, "Well, the biologists are wrong." Which is such a mentality of a chemist. But I was like, "All right, we're not using this word. I don't want to use words that are confusing. We need to focus on the message."

There were a couple of other things I actually had coded into the site that were almost synonyms. So I told Google they were synonyms. An example of that is "chiral separation" "chiral resolution" and "chiral purification." All of them mean to get two molecules separated and away from each other, and to make sure that, on our site, a bot-crawling it could recognize that, "okay, when you see this, it's all the same thing," without me having to write onto the page " chiral separation, chiral resolution, chiral purification." It ended up being extremely valuable.

**Chris**: I think that's a huge valuable lesson for everyone right there. First of all, using the language your customer uses, and because a lot of people are hearing that, but making sure that the meaning of that language is understood. So, the difference between the way a biologist or a chemist would use the word "assay," and then also understanding that it is possible to educate Google through your own code, it sounds like, on the equivalence of certain terms.

**Olga**: Yeah. That I found a way to draw that made me really happy. But the developers had to put it in. Well, I could put it in one line, but they put it in a way that would make it easy for anyone to do it, who is putting stuff onto the back end of our site. But the important thing with all of the tools to remember is that you get meaningful data out of it, or you get meaningful time from using it.

And different things are going to work for different companies and for different people. While there are a lot of tools - I think I counted that I use about 20 tools regularly - it can get to be overwhelming, but they can work together.

**Chris**: Nice. And I'm not gonna have you mention all 20, I'm gonna let you write a guest post on my blog for that. I'm going to invite you to write a guest post on that. So, keyword analysis, Canva, what's the other one in the top three?

**Olga**: Analytics tools. There's a lot of information in Google Analytics. I think that a lot of people focus on the traffic numbers, and those are important, but finding out how people are getting to your site, and not only once they get to your site but how they move through it, is extremely valuable information. The behavior that they have on your site, you can use that to make sure they're doing what you need them to do and you're sending them on a path. Or you can use that also to say, "They shouldn't be there. I don't want these people. I don't want the biologists on my site."

How to play with these data points over time. Although it does take significantly longer than any test that anybody would want to know of. It takes three months sometimes to get the data. It's something you nurture. It's something you do on a regular rotation so that you can strengthen what you have. You can specify your message.

**Chris**: Exactly. When you say it takes three months to run a test, for example, the reality is, three months from now - I'm assuming you're still in business - would you rather know a little bit more and do something better? Or would you rather start three months from now and then realize that you should have been looking the whole time? I just bring that up because some people say, "Well, it takes too long to do." And I think, "Are you not going to be around when that thing's done?" We're not just marketing for this month or this quarter. We want to get better forever.

**Olga**: I have a huge smile on my face right now because there's so many times where I don't want to get in the way of the science and the lab and all the other things that have to happen to run the company. But at the same time, I'm standing there like, "I need this, because six months from now, it has to be done. It has to start now." And that can be an article, it can be a video, lots of things.

It takes time, and I need to know that I have my data done by a time point. So, I'm always thinking six months in the future, and trying to say "If we don't start collecting data now, I won't have it then and would have lost six months."

**Chris**: Exactly. You're training for a marathon, so you've got to be ready. You got to start working now to be ready six months from now for whatever your goal is. This seems like a good transition now. What is your approach to selling the idea of this type of marketing plan within your organization? How do you demonstrate the value?

**Olga**: I think that the first thing to know is that my CEO wanted to have a marketing plan. I think he had tried a couple of different things. When I came onto the company, something that I said was "I've done stuff with social media and a little bit with communications. I can take some of that off of your plate." It was like 20% of my job, with the majority being sales.

We developed a small series of objectives, like "Let's enhance our social media profiles. Let's enhance our SEO. I don't like being on page nine. What can we do to get to page one?" And then actually analyzing the results. It's great that you're collecting the data, but if you never look at it, you can't do anything with it.

**Chris**: Now I have a big smile on my face. One of my first rules of analytics is, don't collect data you're not gonna use. If you're not gonna do anything with it, don't waste your time collecting it. I guess the opposite of that is, if you collect it, look at it.

Does it help, in an organization like yours, to frame marketing as an experiment and testing hypotheses rather that what, maybe from a more scientific analytical point of view, seems like fluffy hope? For lack of a better word.

**Olga**: Well, going back to the marketing plan, I had attempted to sell the plan we came up with to the rest of the company, and I honestly fell flat on my face. I was shocked. I know scientists like data, and I like data. And I didn't have any data two years ago. I didn't have any data at that point. So, a lot of the company thought I was wasting my time, and they didn't believe in what I was doing.

It really didn't bother me, because I had the data and I knew that I had doubled my domain authority, and that Google was recognizing us as credible, in addition to our customers recognizing us as credible. Yeah, I think that was framed in our minds as a series of increasing experiments. I think that also helps break it up and make it manageable. It's not such a big thing of trying to enhance your SEO. It's a part of something. I don't know, there's a warm and fuzzy part coming out of it. I can't avoid that.

But in January of this year, I worked with the CEO to put together a data-driven presentation to the company. It undeniably showed that there was an effect the marketing had on the growth of the company. We grew the largest we had ever grown. It was 40% year over year. Half of that was attributable to marketing, in one way or another. So then they believed.

**Chris**: Well, first of all, congratulations. I think that's a fantastic result. But also, the other thing about data-driven marketing is now you're looking at...you're not just doing marketing and hoping that your company is growing, for example. You're not saying that everything we do is going to work, but now like a good scientist, you're going to write down what did work and what didn't work.

And then you're going to do more of the things that do, and test out some different things and forget about doing the things that didn't work, or figure out why they didn't and try some modifications. There's a continual guide there for how to move forward, rather than...because if you're not doing that, some things will work and some things won't, but you'll never make better choices about which you should be doing if you're not keeping track.

**Olga**: Right. We did, I would say, a mix of experiments. Some, we were pretty sure how it was going to turn out in somewhere around that strategy. But a couple, we were completely speculative. The example that we have of that is the cycling team. We decided to take the money that we would spend at one trade show and instead invest it in a cycling team.

They were about to create an elite cyclocross women's team, and they named the team Averica from the sponsorship money. It got to be this really big thing and they had Twitter followers. We thought "Okay, we're going to get some great pictures. It'll be fun. Maybe it's kind of like an ad because people in science like cycling. So, if they run with the right uniform on through the right streets in Boston, it'll be good." And we have so much more. The Twitter activity was insane. Cycler cross is a specific type of cycling and it's like if you were to...

**Chris**: It's crazy.

**Olga**: It's crazy! And it's so much fun! But they have such a big community. And it's so nationally ranked and globally ranked athletes started following our Twitter and sharing information that we were putting out there. The people from pharma companies were saying, "It is amazing what you're doing." There were customers that had kids cycling teams that they were trying to help grow and nurture, so they used us as examples.

And there were other ones who came to us and found us because of this. We didn't expect that. We hoped for customer engagement, but we honestly...the best thing we got from it was personality. I love how we are inside the company. Everybody regularly eats lunch together. We're always kidding around with each other. We work together to make sure that everything is done. That's really hard to capture online, and I think that was the first thing that I wanted to do.

The CEO was like "What's with these cutesy tweets?" And I was like, "You know, we're actually kind of funny. Why don't we be funny online?" The best example of who we are as a team, internally, has been what the women of team Averica have been able to portray digitally.

**Chris**: I'm stunned. Honestly, that is one of the boldest marketing moves for a life science company I have ever seen. Because let's face it, they're all pretty conservative, and that is, I would say it's fair to say pretty unrelated to what you do. And yet, you took a chance and you went after an audience or built an audience that wasn't primarily people looking for analytical services. And yet, it got big enough so that your intended customers found you. And on top of all that, some of them found you, decided to do business with you, but also established a brand, and as you say, a personality for you through an entirely unique channel.

**Olga**: Yeah. Honestly, I thought we'd imagery, like pictures of speed, strength, and strategy. It was wild. It's a wild sport. If you don't know about cyclocross, definitely check it out. But to have gained a personality, I think I was so emotional when the season was done because of that goal having been achieved. That was probably the hardest goal I had, and that was a personal goal. It wasn't something that was in my list of things to do as we grow the marketing there. I don't think it's the only bold thing we've done.

**Chris**: I'm sure it's not, but I just think that many companies would not be as courageous as you have been on that.

**Olga**: It was something that was definitely unique and innovative, not just for a life science company but for a CRO that's as specialized as we are to have taken that risk. And even to have taken the risk with a marketing plan and diving as deep into it as we did. Let me rephrase that. Not with the marketing plan but with a dedicated marketing person. We don't know of any other niche CROs that have someone that is 100% of the time dedicated to the marketing.

**Chris**: Wow. Well, obviously, after they listen to this podcast, they might.

**Olga**: It's an inherently highly technical and highly customizable space. So, it's a challenge. And getting to where we got was a challenge and it was...because there are so many components to consider. All of these little things that we've talked about, they're simple things but they're a lot of things. And some of it is in changing your perception, your paradigms, around whether marketing has value, like it did with the team, part of our company.

Or even with some of our colleagues, because they've been giving us a couple calls going like, "You guys, what are you doing there?" Every time I appear in person or my COO appears in person at an event, they come and they're like, "Hey, we saw what the cycling team did." So, diversity of things, meaning variety of things that we've been able to do and connect with people.

And again, that's what we said right at the beginning. It's about connecting with people. It's about making them feel comfortable. The cycling team, to me, makes somebody feel comfortable. After we've established the credibility, they know what our personality is, and then we're right back at the beginning of the marketing cycle.

**Chris**: Exactly. That's beautiful. I think that's a great place to put a bow on this. Olga Torres, I want to thank you so much. I think this has been a fantastic handbook for small companies thinking about why and how they should be improving their marketing game. I can't thank you enough for a fantastic conversation. We're gonna come back and do another one because I still have lots of questions.

**Olga**: Okay. This was really great. Thank you for the opportunity to share some of what's been a whirlwind two years of activity.

**Chris**: My pleasure.

**Olga**: Thanks, Chris.

**Chris**: You bet.

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