

**Susan Packard**  
**Scripps Networks Interactive**

*Note: Since the time of her interview, Susan Packard's responsibilities have changed. See her bio, which lists her as co-founder of HGTV and Executive Vice President, Martin Frankel Associates, for the full update.*

Lorin: Let's begin by setting the stage of your story up until now. Tell me how you got to where you are.

Susan: I started in consumer research out of graduate school and in pretty short order realized that, for me, writing questionnaires and doing mall intercepts was a pretty boring job. So, a friend of mine was working over at HBO. This was 1980 and it was just getting started. She gave me a call and said, "Look, we need people. We need marketing people, sales people...we need everything! Come join!" And so I started in cable programming then and have just stayed with it for almost thirty years now.

Lorin: Amazing! Are there synchronicities – twists and turns and being in the right place at the right time – that would be important to talk about?

Susan: Well, the industry itself is very entrepreneurial and even though the big guy says, "Bought out a lot of the smaller guys," it's still got a lot of excitement and entrepreneurial flavor to it, which makes it a great place to be for people who like to build businesses. The twists and turns are, I think, just the nature of the industry and so it's not predictable at all. A friend of mine was telling the story that she was having dinner with someone from NBC a week-and-a-half ago and this friend from NBC looked on her BlackBerry and saw that Comcast was or is negotiating to buy all of NBC Universal! This is the kind of stuff that happens quite a bit, so it's very unpredictable. The technology continues to drive a lot of what we do and that's all new and exciting. As far as twists and turns for me personally, I would say I've always been somebody who enjoys building businesses. So, HBO was a build, CNBC was a build, and clearly the biggest build was HGTV because we started with nothing.

Lorin: Absolutely.

Susan: But, there was a coincidence of my having worked for NBC (CNBC at the time) and calling on Scripps, which owned cable systems at the time, and they were my clients. I had a relationship with that division of Scripps, and that was very helpful as a different group of folks started out. The programming division of Scripps had heard of me through this other division. So, the right place at the right time? I guess you could say that's true!

Lorin: Yes, and like any entrepreneur, you never know where you are headed down the journey; you just know that you have an intention to get to a certain place.

Susan: And that place changes!

Lorin: It so changes! Help me know how vision has played a part in the process of your success.

Susan: I would love to say that I am this great visionary but I am not! The truth is that I am a great number two and I can contribute to the vision. I can bring energy and a fair amount of creativity to help contribute to the vision, but the sad thing is that the vision is typically from someone I work for. In the case of HGTV, that was Ken Lowe, who founded it. It was his idea! And so, there were five or six of us that were part of the founding team and we brought his vision to life. We translated that and it became real, but having someone set the table with their vision is absolutely critical. If you don't have that person around the table, then I don't see how you could ever be successful.

Lorin: Yeah. I love that you say you're a great number two, because I think a lot of entrepreneurs are a great number one and they forget about the importance of this number two staff. Once that vision is set, whether it's by you or someone else, somebody has to be responsible for setting and achieving the milestones.

Susan: Absolutely.

Lorin: That's probably your greatest strength, I imagine.

Susan: I would say that's true.

Lorin: Tell me how you do that and what rule of thumb or what guidance would you give someone that's not so good there.

Susan: Well, if you are not a very strong person operationally or from an organizational standpoint, you need to have a strong number two and that's usually an associate or a coordinating person who can keep you on task. In my case, I would say that I am better than average at it. I am not great at it but I am a good operational person. If I was a greatly organized person, I probably wouldn't have as much creativity as I have. So, it's a balance of everything, right?

Lorin: That's true, yep!

Susan: But I would say that if you don't have it, you would need somebody to kind of keep you on task. It's just the simple things that people do to be successful, which is ask, "What do I need to accomplish? What timeline do I need to accomplish it in and how am I going to get there?" This is a goal. Through most of my career I was focused on getting as much distribution for the cable networks I worked for as possible. So, the first year, for example, at HGTV...you know you don't want to set yourself up to fail, so you want to set an achievable goal, but a stretch goal. It needs to be both and, of course, there is collaboration in setting these goals – certainly with your board or your boss, or sometimes your colleagues; it's all of you together. An example of that at HGTV was when we were about in year three of the business. We could see break even in sight in the next year or two, which was quite exciting. The founding team sat in a retreat meeting and said, "Okay, if we had to prioritize (which you always do) and you have limited financial resources, what will they go against?" Every operational area was represented in this meeting and we decided collectively that they would go against two areas: 1) programming and 2) distribution, and we all collectively agreed. So we set that goal together as far as how to allocate our financial resources, which is probably the healthiest way to do it, because everybody then has a buy-in.

Lorin: And, what would you say has been your greatest personal accomplishment?

Susan: I would say that my contribution from the sales and business development side of Scripps Networks has allowed us to break even very quickly, more quickly than tradition. We were in break even mode by year four and it's typically year seven for a cable network. Then, I was put in charge of a new ventures group, which was to create new businesses, and out of that group came several new business applications, new technology, and new cable networks. So, just continuing to broaden what Scripps Networks could be would be my greatest personal accomplishment.

Lorin: Tell me a little bit about your personal life. Do you have a family? Kids?

Susan: Yes! I have one son and he is a freshman in college as of six weeks ago.

Lorin: Oh, wow! So, through your whole career going from one big project to another, you had a son to raise?

Susan: Yes!

Lorin: So, has there been balance or not?

Susan: I was very fortunate because when we moved from Michigan our son was two or three years old. My husband was a college teacher and I was at CNBC at the time. Then we made a choice to come to Knoxville to start HGTV. When we were in Michigan, our family members were caregivers for our son. And when we came to Knoxville, we didn't have any family, so my husband decided that it made more sense for him to stay home. Yeah, he was a stay-at-home dad.

Lorin: Oh, wow!

Susan: So, I am very lucky and that's not a typical path.

Lorin: Totally not typical, especially over the past twenty years.

Susan: Right.

Lorin: So your husband paved the way for many other men to do this.

Susan: Well, I hope so. I don't think he thinks of it or I think of it that way, but he certainly was the foundation for the family balance.

Lorin: I love to hear that! There's got to be flexibility and openness to a new way so that women can do these great things that we are capable of doing!

Susan: Right.

Lorin: How does intuition play a role in your success?

Susan: I don't know what that really is!

Lorin: I love that answer!

Susan: But I would say that women have great capacity for listening and they have a great capacity to read between the lines. If that's what intuition is, I think that we do an excellent job at those things. I just think I was comfortable in my own skin, in being a senior woman in corporate America. I didn't become a man to be successful and I tried to maximize those attributes that women come by somewhat naturally. It was a great complement of skills to have men and women sitting in the senior board rooms trying to tackle the business riddles or the personnel issues of the day, whatever they were.

Lorin: That's a great, important point. So, do you feel like you use intuition regularly in business?

Susan: I feel that I am a very engaged listener and I can connect dots pretty easily, especially around what the concerns, needs, goals, and dreams of people are. That helps me to be an effective manager. I do use those skills every day.

Lorin: You are making a really important point, and that is whether you know what intuition is, if you are listening authentically and actively and purposefully, intuition will kick in. It's not just the facts that you are hearing; you are hearing so much more.

Susan: Right! Right!

Lorin: That allows your intuition to work better. I love that point that we might not even be able to put our finger on what intuition is, but you are using that basic skill of listening, which women do beautifully. It really helps us be much more effective. Okay! Anything else that you want to say on that?

Susan: Well, I think there is some degree of empathy that comes with intuition, which to me is a little bit of a mysterious word. But if you break it down, it's kind of how you can read situations and people and go from A to B when you don't have all of the information. I do think that women come by empathy very naturally, and to the degree to which you can have some degree of empathy, especially when you're working with people, I think you can be more successful.

Lorin: I think that's a really good point. Thank you for that clarification; that's perfect! Next I am curious about whether you ever think about your intentions? You know, it's one thing to set a goal; it's something very different to have an intention for a meeting or an intention for a project.

Susan: Oh! Absolutely!! I mean, I always do! I think to be a strong operations person, you cannot go into a meeting without having a goal in mind. Let's say you are going into a board meeting. You need to know what you want to come out of that meeting with! If the board is an effective board, they'll even say that if you walk in and you haven't made things very clear, they'll say, "What do you want of us? What's the purpose; what's the outcome that you want?" Nobody has time anymore, so you really have to be crystal clear.

Lorin: Gotcha, I love that point! In other words, setting an intention actually is a time management skill.

Susan: Oh, yeah! Absolutely! And you rehearse it, too. I know when I am going into larger meetings, I do a lot of self-rehearsal and role-playing of what could possibly be obstacles to my goal. How can I achieve my goal; how do I work around what could come up as an obstacle? Not only do you have to set what your goal is, but you need to be prepared to argue and fight for it.

Lorin: And, you are using the word goal interchangeably with intention.

Susan: Uh-huh.

Lorin: Do you see them as similar or different?

Susan: I see them as very similar.

Lorin: I appreciate the way in which you are using it, because I think that point has never been made before by anybody else that we've spoken to – that having an intention saves time. The next area I'd like to delve into is confidence. I am curious what you might say around confidence, as it has to do with responsibility and choice. What comes to mind there?

Susan: I agree that we are accountable for our own confidence. I could just call it being comfortable in my own skin, knowing what I am good at, knowing what I am not so good at, and being clear on what that is. Having said that, having mentored so many women in my life, I've seen that lack of confidence is a very recurring theme. We are not close to having women at the point where they need to be. I think there still needs to be quite a bit of counseling and mentoring of women in this area. We'll eventually get there, but it's one area that's been slow to come by. I will give you an example because I talk to women who are senior as well as junior to me, and I talk to daughters of friends. I was having lunch with a daughter of a friend who is twenty-three and is a nurse. She thinks she's going to get a promotion to be a supervising nurse and she was struggling with knowing how to say to her supervisor, "I think it's really important that I stay 'hands on' with my patients, that you don't have me lose that because I think I can be more effective as a

supervisor.” And she said, “But I don’t know how to say it. I’m afraid and I don’t want to challenge her.” I just helped her through that process of why she absolutely had to say it because it was the most important thing that she could *do* for her patients.

Lorin: What’s in your mind when someone comes to you and you get a sense that what she really needs is more self-confidence? How do you tell them to create that and build more and grow on that particular essence of themselves?

Susan: I tell them that they need to get comfortable and identify what they are really good at and what they love to do. Usually they are the same thing, but not always. They also need to identify what they are *not* very good at and they may still have to do some of those things. But, once they are able to do that, I will take them through the process of saying, “Okay, you are like every other human being on this planet, right? You are not perfect! Neither is your male colleague sitting across the table from you. Let’s list the issue that one has and let’s list his strengths and you’ll see that everyone is the same. Just because you have this group of things over here that you are not so good at, don’t feel dragged down by it or made to feel that you don’t do a superior job. You are just part of the rest of the human race!”

Lorin: Exactly! So, I love what you are seeing and what you are wanting more of, as a society, as a gender. You see this as another level and I do, too. Rather than looking at what’s not working, I am curious what more we can do to help. I don’t know what it is, but part of it is writing books like this and giving talks like you are talking about. It’s almost like giving women full permission to be confident.

Susan: Yeah.

Lorin: You have created and hugely contributed to some huge projects over the past thirty years in the world of TV. So, how do women need to be in order to create?

Susan: You know, I don’t think that there is any one pat answer. Some people, women or men, create much better if they are in a small incubator with maybe a couple of people around and some technology. Others create better if they are in a larger group and can

brainstorm. Again, it's back to knowing yourself and what gives you the most excitement. Because creating is *so* exciting and if you don't feel that excitement, that passion and that adrenalin, then you are not effectively creating something. So, you have to put yourself into the appropriate environment that will allow you to be a successful creator. For me personally, I prefer to have people around me to brainstorm and to tell me I'm a raving lunatic, or to support my ideas, whatever the case may be. We have something here we call "Going to Abilene" where it's sort of, "How do we get there?" We all look at each other going, "I have no idea! Then let's go back to Knoxville!"

Lorin: That's funny.

Susan: Mechanisms like that help you create a language and systems and environments most effective for you and those that will help you to create.

Lorin: I imagine being around hundreds and hundreds of people in the organizations and companies you've worked with over the years helped you to create similar cultures for yourself.

Susan: I wasn't fortunate enough to influence many of the places as far as their cultures went. So, at HBO I didn't influence the culture. At CNBC I didn't really influence the culture – possibly in a small way – but HGTV was my baby and that was the founding group to create, set the core values, and put all of that in motion. We tried to write a mission statement, but none of us could wordsmith it, so we ended up with core values, which were a shortcut to a mission statement.

Susan: I would love to say that I've put my imprint on all of the places that I have worked, but from a cultural standpoint, it would be this place where I am working now.

Lorin: It's where you feel like you've had most impact on the culture.

Susan: Oh, absolutely!

Lorin: So, do you think that you are more effective from a creating standpoint or from a manifesting standpoint because of that? Or do you think that you've been pretty effective from a creating standpoint no matter what the culture was?

Susan: Yeah! I think I've been effective, even though creativity is another one of those funny words, because when I was with HBO and CNBC we had our programming folks who put television on the air, and I think they're traditionally what you'd think of as creatives. But, you can be very creative in business operations, too. You have to ask questions like "How do I reach this goal?" "How do I negotiate this point in a way that may be a little bit out-of-the-box?" "How do I define something to my counterpart in a way that we can both agree on, that we can live with it and it's the right template for us to live with? All of those things take creativity and I don't think you have to create the culture in a company to be able to be creative.

Lorin: Right, right. I do think that in order to create and create big, to get your vision out there or to get your big goals out there, whether the culture contributes or not, there's a way of being. In other words, there's something about giving. There's something about being conscious about who we are *being* in order to create those goals, whether it's being in a corporate scenario, where another person may be leading the way, or an entrepreneurial environment.

Susan: Oh, I am sure it is very different as an entrepreneur.

Lorin: I'll bet you there's some overlap, too, and I am trying to find what that might be, because that could be really valuable for people. In other words, I imagine you are a strong leader and you said you are a really good listener. So, there's something about the way you really give to people and value their perspective.

Susan: Yes, you value not only their perspective, and this may sound clichéd and trite, but you value *them* and that gets back to the empathy – the degree to which you are genuine in your value of them, because they wouldn't be working at your place if they weren't valuable.

Lorin: That's such an important point that you are making, because I think there's still this old image of women leaders needing to be hard core and they need to not be empathetic because that's too female. I think that's a mistake.

Susan: Yeah.

Lorin: I think that the more genuine we are being as women, the more effective we are as leaders.

Susan: And it's a more comfortable room you play in when you are surrounded by men.

Lorin: Yeah, absolutely. We're used to hearing women say, "I think I need to act more like a man," but I think that there is room to give full permission again to use your female traits.

Susan: You are going to have two problems with that. One is you are not going to be comfortable with how you act because it's not going to be genuine. And, the second is you are really not going to make your "room" comfortable, whether it's filled with men or women, because you are not going to be genuine! You have to be true to yourself.

Lorin: Is there an area that you could attribute your success to that we haven't yet talked about?

Susan: I don't think it's anything original. I am a very high-energy person who loves to learn new things. Those traits, combined with what we've talked about regarding listening and empathy, are the things that come to mind.

Lorin: And, how do you feel about failing, not that you would do it on purpose?

Susan: I am my worst critic and I think that you might find that in a lot of successful people. I will relive things, because I do a lot of rehearsing mentally – modeling, envisioning what a situation's going to be like when I have to accomplish something. And, when something comes out of left field, which it always does, I think back on it and ask myself, "Why wouldn't I have considered that?" I can be hard on myself and probably a little bit too hard on myself, but I don't know that I do much airing of that.

Lorin: You talked a little bit about your husband's role. How about men that you've worked with? I do think our roles are evolving in a beautiful way and I don't think that we talk about it very much. How have their roles evolved as your role has evolved?

Susan: I'm not sure. I think that whether it's gender, religion, or sexual preference, we've all gotten more inclusive and more open to being inclusive because there is a strong business case for being inclusive. It's gone beyond being a social issue. It's a real bottom line issue.

Lorin: Absolutely, which is really an important point! You can be just as bottom line as they can and vice versa. And your style is not judged, it's accepted in the world.

Susan: You do need to build trust amongst your team and that takes time, but once you build trust amongst your colleagues, amongst people who work for you and the people you work for, then your environment is a very comfortable one in which you can achieve, be successful, and create.