

Lisa Fretwell

Director, Retail/Consumer Packaged Goods Practice

Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group



Lisa Fretwell grew up in Ruishton, a pastoral village in the southwest of England. While she thoroughly enjoyed her childhood amid the hedgerows, fields, and orchards of rural Somerset, she had her sights set on becoming a scientist. Initially, her thought was to become a physician; a week's internship at the local accident and emergency center, fainting at the sight of blood, convinced her otherwise.

"I wanted something hands-on and applied rather than theoretical," she says. "So then I looked at engineering. Out of all the engineering disciplines, I quite liked the idea of chemical engineering, because you could make some weird and wonderful things. You could create some life-changing experiences in chemical engineering."

With three "A" levels (biology, chemistry, and math), and 12 "O" levels, Lisa attended the University of Birmingham, where she took a bachelors degree with honors in chemical engineering (as well as a number of scholarships and awards). She joined Procter & Gamble Ltd. because, "...it has to do with real people, consumers, and making products. People used the products we made every day, for practical things." As an operational department manager, Fretwell built two world-class quality and logistical startups, creating fast-moving, innovative teams, cutting materials and process costs, and increasing process reliability and productivity.

At the end of five years with P&G, Fretwell realized she knew a great deal about production and operations, but little about marketing, commercial management, and strategy. She wanted to be in a position where she could use her skills to make a more significant impact on the business, and she wanted to become a more rounded business person. She took a job as business improvement manager with a small textile firm called



Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG)

Textured Jersey. This position exposed her to the fashion industry, leading her to involvement in retail innovation and marketing.

Although Fretwell didn't realize it when she took the position with Textured Jersey, the locally-produced garment industry in the United Kingdom—as elsewhere in the developed nations—was at an inflection point; China and southeast Asia were rapidly making it impossible to compete on cost of production. Within a few months of positioning the firm for growth, the company needed to radically redesign its operating model, moving production to Sri Lanka.

At this point, Fretwell had already gained admission to Cranfield University to earn an MBA on a part-time basis. Cranfield suggested to her that she come as a full-time student, and offered her a management scholarship to make it possible. While she found the transition process with Textured Jersey to be fascinating, she left to pursue her MBA degree.

With her MBA under her belt, Fretwell felt she had achieved her goal of gaining a more rounded perspective on business and management. Her next move was to Gemini Consulting, where she quickly focused on retail and consumer products as the company merged to become Cap Gemini. As a vice president in Global Consulting and Technology Services, she took a lead role in transforming a poorly-performing Retail and Consumer Packaged Goods sector, repositioned it within the European marketplace, and delivered significant year-on-year increases in sales and profits over three years.

Fretwell, now married with two small children, loved her job at Cap Gemini. So when she received a phone call on a summer morning from a headhunter recruiting for Cisco Internet Business Solutions (IBSG), her first response was “No.” But then the recruiter began talking about work/life balance at Cisco, and about the hands-on, practical, business transformation work that IBSG performs for its customers. She began having conversations with people at IBSG, and found them “...really bright, really challenging. They were doing some great things.” Eventually, the lure of IBSG won out, and Fretwell joined IBSG's Retail/Consumer Packaged Goods Practice.

Looking back on that decision, she says, “IBSG is more hands-on with customers. I missed that, being the general manager of a practice. If I look at what I'm doing now, we're solving problems that nobody else has ever solved. We're creating new markets. We're creating new channels. We're trying to shape solutions that make a fundamental difference to our customers and ultimately to the industry. That, to me, is fantastic stuff!”

Fretwell is meticulous about doing her homework before visiting a client, and always tries to immediately offer something of value. She asks many questions and listens carefully to understand the client's challenges. “My role is to bring insight, but it's also to make sure that the insight or potential solutions that we bring are absolutely fitting. I don't want to solve the business problem that I think they have—I want to solve the problem that they actually have.”

To achieve this, Fretwell immerses herself in the client's business. "If that means that I sit in the store for a day, or stack shelves for a few hours, or operate the cash register, that's what I do. It's easy to come up with highly theoretical stuff, but my approach is to understand what the people on the ground are experiencing by seeing it for myself."

She says she also tries to make recommendations pragmatic and simple. "You don't want to bog people down with a lot of gobbledegook. I distill down what the technology means in terms of how it will affect their customers, and what it does for the business," she comments. "Truthfully, it's a lot harder to crystallize a solution in three bullet points than it is to load it up with jargon."

Fretwell's work in retail has resulted in a number of thought leadership pieces on the rise of the mobile consumer, and the use of collaboration tools in retail industries. She sees profound changes coming to retail because of IP-based tools such as social networking and mobile enabled shopping.

"Consumers don't have the same expectations they did just a few short years ago," she observes. "They want to be able to shop when and where they desire, which may not be in an actual brick-and-mortar store. And they want to be able to bring their friends in on the experience. Information technology is no longer a necessary adjunct to business; it is the business. Helping customers to understand this and transform their businesses quickly is what makes my job so satisfying."