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Tech

## Marcia Tal – CEO, Tal Solutions

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The women I interview for MadamAmbition are epic. But if I may be so bold, Marcia Tal moves a little beyond epic into legendary territory. Marcia is the CEO of **Tal Solutions®**, a consulting business with a cutting-edge technology platform, **PositivityTech®**, the Science of Transforming Negatives to Positives®. But when Marcia opened up about her childhood, education, and life in the corporate world, I understood I was speaking to someone who shaped the world of modern business, and what's more, she did it on her terms.

Raised in Queens, Marcia is a lifelong New Yorker. Her mother was an executive assistant, and her father worked in the automotive industry. Marcia attended Hebrew school as a child, where the boys' class learned different things than the girls'. "My mother had a vision. She thought there was no reason I shouldn't go to the boys' class because I could learn anything. So I went. I was the only girl in the boys' class. I didn't think that much about it as a child. Now, I can't tell you how many experiences I've had over my career where I was the only woman sitting at the table."

Marcia expected to attend college because education was crucial to her family. "My mother's family came from what is now Ukraine. It was ingrained in her and taught to me that education is something that can never be taken away. However, my parents never pushed me down any particular path. My career was my decision."

Marcia attended State University of New York at Albany and became a math major because math was a naturally successful subject for her. "I had a professor who reinforced that math teaches us how to think and solve problems. Math can apply to anything we do. I found my space there." She was the only woman in her major's small graduating class.

## Adult Life and Career – CitiBank

After graduating in 1981, Marcia began looking for work. “They didn’t have internships at that time like the ones available today.” She looked for what she might do with a math degree, wanting to challenge the status quo. “But, when I looked for a job, I couldn’t find one at first. I started doing temp work because I knew shorthand.”

Marcia did that to make ends meet while she job-hunted. “I walked the streets of Manhattan submitting resumes.” Finally, a recruiter found her, and she went to Citibank to work in risk management for the credit card business. Her degree in mathematics helped her get the job as credit cards is an actuarial-based business.

Marcia quickly made an impact in risk management. Over ten years of serving in numerous roles, Marcia enhanced Citibank’s capabilities. She utilized new data sources and derived variables new to the industry.

One example is the expanded use of credit bureau information. Marcia was (and is) an expert in credit bureau information, but in the 1980s, that information was constrained to a specific purpose. Of course, today, credit bureaus are multibillion-dollar ecosystems. They have products and buy massive amounts of data. But in the 1980s-90s, Marcia brought these ideas to the foreground.

Then Marcia moved on to transaction data. Once again, the problem with transaction data was with the required computing power. Today, MasterCard and Visa can process and utilize trillions of transaction data elements and incorporate them into risk models. Marcia understood the potential, but the computer power wasn’t available to integrate transaction data into actionable risk models decades ago.

Over time, Marcia worked on expanding the application of derived variables from different sources and then created models and tested them alongside industry models, such as FICO or Vantage scores, “Technically, we wanted to have the best predictive powers. And maybe you can do it faster today, in a more integrated way. But the concepts aren’t all that different.”

Marcia’s influence in the credit industry was due in no small part to her constant striving to make connections to real-life situations, people, and outcomes. When she spoke to employees about bankruptcy scores, she said, “Go sit in a bankruptcy court. Understand. Just listen to what’s happening. Observe how decisions are made. Then return to the data, and you’ll apply it differently.”

Toward the later part of her risk management career, Marcia created enterprise-wide segmentation, integrating customer behaviors into business decisions. Applying segmentation,

Marcia built many operational capabilities, such as a retention center to deal with customers wishing to cancel their credit cards. She also built a test center to test different types of products, including source code methodology that let others design, test, and measure their results.

Marcia created the term “decision management,” now a well-known industry term, which became a new function for Citibank. Through this, people in the organization could build careers in an analytic discipline. “When you’re a leader, your whole job is making sure that you have the talent and that you’re grooming the talent. What I saw was that people loved the work, but they didn’t see career progression. So I worked hard to build this global function, integrating it into global HR systems so that even when young people entered the company, they could have rotations as Management Associates inside of this function.” The model was so successful that it spread across all markets and products through Citibank.

Marcia summarizes her industry-changing career: “I built a community around the data and analytics. At the end of the day, it was about applying analytic discipline to drive business results, which we did to the tune of billions of dollars.” Marcia emphasizes, “I didn’t do this by myself. I had fantastic teams of people.”

Marcia was not only a game-changer in the financial industry but a forerunner of the women’s equity movement – though that was never really her intention. While the mother of five children, she worked an influential job in what she honestly describes as a “man’s world” many years before women’s equity issues were mainstream.

“I had to find a way that I could balance priorities in my life. I spoke to my boss about my commitment to take my kids to school each morning. While I wouldn’t be at work at 7:30am, I did let him know that I’d work late and from home in the evening and that I’d get the job done..” Her forthrightness was almost unheard of, and the reception to it was varied. At the time, she admits, “If I wanted to leave work to watch a school play, it certainly wasn’t something I’d talk about.”

Marcia’s steadfast example caught the attention of other women, who often came to her for advice on raising a family while working. “Everybody needs to find their boundaries about the things that you will do and the things that you won’t do, and how you will do it. I did my best work, and that’s what stood out at the end of the day.”

Marcia was at Citibank for 25 years. “It was the kind of organization where you could have so many different jobs that you felt like you were always changing. Every two or three years, even within risk management, I did something new: different jobs, products, and parts of the customer cycle. There was no end to everything you could become expert at.”

# Tal Solutions – Post-Citi Bank

After 25 years, Marcia left Citibank. With her children mostly grown, she wondered if she could give herself the gift of exploring what she wanted to do. She had always considered herself an “intrapreneur” at Citibank. Why, then, could she not become an entrepreneur outside of Citibank? That seemed like a simple and logical statement, but Marcia found the reality quite different. Only when she began the work did she understand how different it was outside the corporate world.

She had to decide: what does Marcia Tal stand for? But this was a challenging question. “I had so much knowledge; I knew I could impact the industry. And I also love discovering and being at the forefront of something new.”

Throughout her career, Marcia was aware of customer feedback’s crucial importance. She spent time at Citibank listening in customer-facing environments. “Even back in the 1980s, Citibank had huge loose-leaf binders of customer correspondence. I realized how important it was to read each of these letters. We will do a better job only when we understand the importance of what our customers tell us.”

Tal Solutions’ consulting service was formed around using data and analytics to produce solutions and improvements for their clients’ businesses. Additionally, Marcia began her journey to build the PositivityTech intelligent platform using The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB)’s public customer complaints — a rich data source. She understood complaints to the CFPB were high-risk friction points that could be unpacked for value at scale. She built proprietary tools with an understanding that the language customers use to describe problems with banking products is industry-specific, which became one of her differentiators.

“Once a risk manager, always a risk manager,” says Marcia. “You are trained to think a particular way. Always looking for leading indicators and triggers, or anything that hints a change on the way.”

Marcia’s hypothesis, and eventually Positivity Tech’s founding principle, is that any conversation is an integral piece of information. When used in a way where the information is gathered and connected, these conversations bring both predictive and preventative insights.

To put her theory very simply, Marcia believes that customer interactions tell us:

1. The things we need to know,
2. What will happen before it happens
3. How to serve our clients better, and
4. Opportunities for growth and innovation.

Positivity Tech came about when the technology was available to really do the job. Modern computing power can archive the billions of texts and words gathered, and these can be used to create variables and models.

Even the consulting work of Tal Solutions is now blending itself more within this space. “In the United States, there are 100 billion interactions between institutions and consumers every year; that’s an enormous data source. And with the right analysis, we can use this to indicate where things will change behaviorally, economically, and financially.”

Marcia gives an excellent example of exactly how this predictive technology can work. “During the pandemic, it was very clear when a person had to decide whether to pay their rent or buy their medicine, trying to collect on a credit card payment was not productive. So, if you knew that beforehand, what might you do differently?”

“It turns out I’m asking people to think differently – and the biggest challenge is finding the people in the organization who see the enormous opportunity and say, yes, I’m going to use this information.”

Marcia’s goal is to see a transformation in the culture and mindset around the power of using customer interactions, turning it into a driving force of prediction and prevention to increase business impact. She believes that transformation will take place but may take many years. “Most customers never reach out. The only way a company can get more diverse people to share their experiences is to make them believe that the company cares and will respond. That is a brand opportunity: to stand for something and demonstrate what it will do.”

When I asked Marcia what advice she would give her young self, she said, “Whatever I might have told myself, I’d tell my grandchildren now. I’d talk to them every day about their capabilities. Because I’ve noticed that almost through osmosis, girls especially tend to take a backseat. And I don’t want that for them. I think it’s essential for them to know they’re smart, capable, kind, and strong. I tell them, ‘Put in the work, and you can do whatever you want to do.’”