



EPISODE 1

Marketing meets public policy at Neara

Host: Alan Hart, leader in marketing and customer strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP

Guest: Mary Cleary, VP of marketing, communications, and public policy, Neara

Alan Hart:

Are you ready to go beyond the basics of marketing? I'm Alan Hart and this is Marketing Beyond where we talk about the questions that spark change and share ideas that challenge the status quo. Join us as we explore the future of marketing and its endless potential.

Today on the show, we've got Mary Cleary. She's the VP of Marketing, Communications, and Public Policy at Neara. Neara's an AI-powered infrastructure modeling platform that helps utilities prevent outages and increase transmission capacity. The company was recognized as one of this year's Times 100 companies for their work helping utility companies across the globe prevent power outages. Under Mary's leadership, Neara has expanded beyond its headquarters in Australia and has established major presences in Europe and the U.S. On the show today, we talk about what marketing looks like at Neara as well as this combination of marketing and public policy and how that works in her role as VP. We look at the differences and complexities of marketing in a regulated industry as well as the complexities around international scope of marketing activities. We also have a really interesting conversation about AI and they're both using the AI as well as marketing the AI in their solution, and you don't want to miss this episode with Mary Cleary.

Mary, welcome to the show.

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Mary Cleary:

Thanks, Alan. Pleasure to be here and thanks for having me.

Alan Hart:

Yeah, I'm excited to talk about what you're up to and the company etc. But before we get there, I love dogs. I have two rescues myself, and I hear you love dogs and dog rescues, and I'd love to hear your story.

Mary Cleary:

Yeah, absolutely. You are in great company. I am a massive dog lover and turns out I also have a massive dog. I have a – he's 150 LB, Bernese Mountain dog. So, he's a gentle giant and a total goofball. He's also a bit of a neighborhood celebrity, which is fun. I was actually out for a walk recently by myself. It's a super, super stubborn, lazy breed, so he had refused to join me that day. And someone I've literally never seen before, pulled over and demanded to know where Chief was – exactly, where's Chief? Yeah, speaking of dog rescues and dog well-being, "No Dogs Left Behind" is an organization I also really love and one I will talk about any chance I get. It's this incredible organization that rescues dogs from the meat trade. So, it's actually founded by a guy who's a former David Yurman exec and he literally pulls dogs off of slaughter trucks. He rehabilitates them, nurses them back to health, rebuilds their trust with humans, flies them here to the U.S. and then connects them with their forever homes.

Alan Hart:

It's amazing. It's amazing I got to check them out. I've never even heard of them, so, thank you for putting them on my radar.

Mary Cleary:

Of course.

Alan Hart:

I don't even know how we transition from dogs to marketing, but we'll get there. What has been your – Where did you get your career start and what's been your path to Neara?

Mary Cleary:

So, in a nutshell, it is quite non-linear and nontraditional, so I technically started my career as a banker who was trying to get into venture and as I was building my operating chops, I realized that I really love being an operator and specifically a marketer. So, going back to sophomore year of college I was studying history and spending spare time as a PR intern for Zac Posen before he was creative director, he was the cool new designer on the block at the time – he was dressing all the celebrities for the award shows and things. So, I signed up for this elective class that was only 2 credits, and I thought, "oh, this will be a fun little detour for my major" and little did I know, that I would work harder there than any other class. So, it was taught by Lawrence Lenihan, who is one of the most impressive humans I know, and a really big early career influence for me. He's also the founder of the now massive venture fund called FirstMark. And actually, the following year, he changed the class to juniors and above, but I'd like to think that wasn't because of me.

The assignment was to start a "Web 2.0 startup," which makes me feel 10,000 years old but alas, that's what me and my team did. And we actually had some modest success with customers, and I think that's when I developed a masochistic love of building new things. And the problem was I didn't know anything about growing a business or finance or raising money. So, despite a little bit of success there, when it was time for graduation, my parents were essentially like, "Wow, we're so proud of you, that's so cute, get a real job." So, then I went off to banking and subsequently Corporate Development for basically in-house M&A. That looked like lots of 100-hour weeks, lots of

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pasting logos on slides, but I also met a ton of incredible people. And in all seriousness, I learned all about company valuation, the dynamics with markets and so, here I am regularly digging around data rooms and acquisition and funding processes and I'm getting this direct exposure to the kinds of questions that investors want to answer to before they write a big check. So, I'm starting to see how powerful brands aren't just memorable, but they're actually much more valuable in dollar terms. And at this point I'm starting to fall in love with marketing from afar.

So, then next chapter is I make my transition to operating roles. I had started to interview with some different VC funds, but I was disheartened that they weren't going to be partner track. So, I really didn't have enough experience to be considered at the principal or above level. So, I basically would have been going back to the venture version of an M&A analyst and then have to round trip. So, I said all right, "I'll go try out some operating roles," and in retrospect, which actually isn't that surprising given my early start up double—I absolutely loved it. And that's when I really fell in love with marketing and practice. And when it officially became part of my remit in some way, shape or form, starting with product marketing initially, morphing out to more of a generalist Approach, and then building marketing functions for the first time. And I really love marketing because it's a perfect mix of left and right brain for me.

I think of myself as very analytical. I like to say I think in tables which is helpful for structuring and kind of planning programs and bringing rigor to how you measure things. But I'm also a positioning nerd and I get so much satisfaction of getting that.

Alan Hart:

I love it. I love it and I've never heard of somebody saying, "I think in tables," but I think maybe that's from all the pasting stuff on slides as well everything needs to be lined up just right in my mind. Yes, yes. I think anybody that has spent that much time in PowerPoint, whether you're a consultant, banker, or whatever, it is, everyone knows what I'm talking about. Awesome. That's quite the journey and you've actually been - I don't know - I should probably go back and count at some point, but there's been a number of folks I've talked to that have gone from banking to marketing. And at least the ones I've talked to, that's you included, they make great. I would love to talk a little bit more about your company, Neara. What is the company's scope? What are you guys focusing on? That kind of stuff.

Mary Cleary:

Yes, fast-forwarding all the way. Head to Neara today. Neara is a predictive infrastructure modeling software that helps electric utilities be more proactive about all the things they need to do to keep the lights on. So, even as the demand for electricity exceeds what existing infrastructure was actually built for and as severe weather continues to cause more outages.

So, every day, most of us see distribution poles, transmission towers that actually enable that electricity we take, we all take for granted and utilities who own that equipment are responsible for that across massive areas like I'm talking several thousands of miles. And as evidenced by the many news headlines addressing as such, there is so much that can and does go wrong. So, selling that equipment can cause catastrophic wildfires and power outages that are inconvenient at best. But when they leave people exposed to, for example, extreme temperatures, they can cause really tragic loss of life. So, the equipment's really old and too many utilities rely on manual processes to maintain. And there's also the fact that they're subject to this kind of Byzantine rules and regulations that actually limit how fast they can move to correct major issues. So, it's like trying to clean a skyscraper with a toothbrush. And yeah, so there are the fact that electricity demand is also going through the roof with more data centers coming online, more EV adoption, more severe weather - These are really expensive and thorny problems. So, it's no surprise that people see their electricity bills go up the same. Maybe they're experiencing more outages. People love to hate their electricity provider, but very few people, myself included before I entered the space, really

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appreciate the complexity of the challenges that they're up against. So, you have a perfect storm no pun intended where Neara helps them get ahead of all that by making it really simple to identify risks faster, define the scope of potential problems, and then communicate that to policy makers so they can move faster.

Alan Hart:

I love that. You're filling a pretty vital service and electricity, you're right, the demand and with new computing, I felt like we were already at a max. And then AI comes along, and you hear this big sucking sound of energy need. It is to your point, running all on the same pretty old infrastructure. It feels like you're in a really vital space.

Mary Cleary:

Yeah, 100%. Yeah, for several areas of the country are expecting an entire New York State's fourth of additional demands, which is pretty wild.

Alan Hart:

That's crazy. It's crazy to think about. What is marketing Neara look like?

Mary Cleary:

So, marketing at Neara has three main pillars too. There's policy engagement, comms and PR, and then of course the more traditional kind of paid and owned marketing channels and they're all intertwined and intended to really force multiply each other. We are really lucky to have a number of incredible customer case studies. So, we use comms and PR channels to amplify those in the media, which then help us build credibility with policy makers and regulators who need to understand how our technology actually helps solve the energy issues that their constituents care about.

So, product marketing is a huge focus for us. It's an extremely technical product and product marketing plays a key role in simplifying the value proposition for our typically very large buying committee. So early on, a really big take away for me in joining Neara was that once prospects see the demo, they're beyond impressed. By given we were new to both the US and European markets, it wasn't exactly easy to actually get people to the demo. So, we made it a priority to really capture and bottle what I call "demo magic" and push it all the way up to top of funnel, making it really visible early on in the buyer journey and that's the role that product marketing plays.

We also have an advantage in that it's such a visual product. So, because we're modeling whole networks, I would even go as far to say that even just watching footage from the platform can really instill a sense of calm and control. We also have an amazing designer who really brings that again demo magic to life in short gifs and even static images and paid channels, for example, when you really have one second or less to really capture people's attention.

Then thought leadership is also a really big piece here. What will surprise you about the energy industry – it's extremely dynamic. And because we are a product designed to help solve these existential challenges that impact policy and consumers. In a time when there are so many unanswered questions, we have a really strong point of view on how that should all shake out. Then zooming out to the demand Gen engine, I often describe it as a wrapper that we put around all the product marketing and thought leadership to make sure we package it appropriately. And LinkedIn has been a really successful channel for us in demand gen across web, paid, and organic. So, our current focus there is we've been building some good muscle on how we aggressively test different variables in encouraging prospects to convert.

And then as you can imagine, because our ICP is so targeted and we know exactly who we want to work with, ABM makes a lot of sense for us, and that's a really important part of our go-to-market motion. OPS too is very much

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embedded in the fabric of our overall go-to-market, not just in marketing, but from presales all the way through to customer success and that really helps us tightly align marketing and sales especially. So, for example, in our ABM funnel, we are looking at the stages we've identified from identified target to someone who's actively engaged, and we share accountability across sales and marketing for interrogating who's moving from one stage to the next.

And obviously at Neara we talk quite a bit about infrastructure, and I view OPS as essential infrastructure for the go-to-market team. So, when you have lots of people running hard at opportunities in both sales and marketing, you got lots of deals in flight, initiatives, cross-channel campaigns, it is really easy for things to fall off the rails and end up in a situation where you look behind you and you're like, "I think that went well." So, I often think of OPS as keeping the wheels on the bus, and I'm really grateful that we were able to invest in that function early in our expansion journey.

And then just culturally, I would say giving each other feedback is really important on the marketing team. We all work hard and when you look at something long enough, it's really easy to convince yourself that whatever you're working on is the greatest thing in the world. And that being true, at least in my experience, there's nothing like a fresh set of eyes. So, sometimes bringing in a third party and actually quick shout out, I'd like to give to a community for marketers called "Exit 5." They do these roasts and there these amazing live sessions where you can share a landing page or an ad or whatever the theme of the session is, and they'll give you some pretty hardcore live feedback with an audience. Sometimes it's lots of third parties at once, giving you live feedback with no context and sometimes that's a really powerful way to adjust your own perspective.

Alan Hart:

That's awesome. I haven't heard of that either, so you're like a source of all kinds of little Nuggets today. So, I'm going to have to check out exit 5 as well. One of the things you mentioned in terms of what marketing includes is you've got also; public policy and you might be the first marketer I've talked to that has public policy in your remit. Do you feel like that fits naturally together with marketing?

Mary Cleary:

I do. There's obviously a very different set of tactics and goals in the public policy remit in that we aren't selling to policymakers. The common thread is that success in both arenas, marketing and policy really depends on that same fluency that's required in marketing comms in the persona and what's at stake for them. And in that case regulators and policy makers in regulated industries are really just another stakeholder in an extremely important one at that. So, our what we're selling to utilities, our primary goal is to educate policy makers on how we provide value, not just to utilities, but ultimately to the consumers that they exist to protect and advocate for, which then makes it easier for utilities to adopt our technology.

Alan Hart:

That makes sense. If it is about education and marketing is great communications function, it makes perfect sense in that regard. And I do take it back, you might be the only one on the podcast I've talked to... I have actually talked to somebody else that has policy in their remit as well. But I don't hear it a lot, so I wanted to make sure we talked about a little bit. It's related that you deal with a lot of regulated industries. How is marketing different in that context?

Mary Cleary:

That's a great question. I think the biggest difference is that it becomes extremely important to make sure there's empathy built into your message. So, in many industries if you make a mistake, you might look silly in front of your peers or maybe you can get fired. But in our industry, the consequences of making a mistake look more like ending up in court and becoming the target of public ire, often, despite your very best and most honest efforts. And often

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it's not even a mistake necessarily, it's just that the macro challenge is so big and so complex, and utilities don't have the resources to tackle what's at hand.

Alan Hart:

Makes sense. I was just going to say, the stakes are higher – really high, in that regard.

Mary Cleary:

Yeah, for sure. And then there's the change management piece too. I think change management is difficult, like empathy, it exists and it's important in every industry, but in a regulated space, it's a whole other beast. Because you're not only trying to change how your end customer views key processes but you're also trying to change how your regulators see those processes. So, there's a ton of market education required, and even once your market and policymakers and direct customers are brought into your approach, you need to work really hard to make sure all stakeholders are actually comfortable with the approach and how it gets operationalized, how they validate it, etc.

Alan Hart:

I'm taking that your role within the company is like kind of marketing public policy comms. You've got a very technical product you mentioned, and that's at the core of product marketing and then you add the public policy component and now you've got multiple personas, you got really large buying committees now you're also international in scope and so that feels like it's just like an accelerator of complexity to me. But like, how does that come to life?

Mary Cleary:

So first, you're preaching to the choir. This might sound obvious, but I think it's so important to understand your persona and their challenges inside and out. And while the problems we're solving really are the same globally, the approach to solving them is not. So, we can't just copy paste our messaging across borders. So, a very simple, perhaps oversimplified example: In the UK they call transmission towers "pylons." But it's really so much more than tailoring specific phrases and even things like units. There's actually quite a bit of tailoring you need to do to prove we actually understand the different regulations in different jurisdictions and also the different geopolitical situations that have a large impact on energy.

Alan Hart:

Yeah, I'm envisioning you with a secret decoder ring every time you go to do marketing, make sure you send the right language and like the regulations have to be quite a challenge just because of no one does everything exactly the same, anywhere in the world.

Mary Cleary:

Yeah totally. I was actually just at a conference in Milan. It's our first time going to this particular conference, but it's very much the analogue of a big show that we go to every year in the US. And they're talking about the same things, but it's wrapped up in a completely different package. So, it is just a fun and interesting intellectual exercise to observe how the same problems are unfolding in very different contexts.

Alan Hart:

That's amazing. And I'm a little jealous that you were in Milan, by the way. Great place for global conference.

Mary Cleary:

We ate a lot of pasta.

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Alan Hart:

Yeah, AI is everywhere in marketing, it's everywhere in the world these days. To my understanding you have both products that leverage AI and that you're using some AI in your marketing. How do you think about getting AI, whether it's messaging or how you talk about it, I would love to know your perspective?

Mary Cleary:

Yeah, it's definitely an evolving topic in a lot of ways, I think there was definitely a window of time in which AI was a box to check. People looked expressly for AI solutions and many big companies inside and outside of the industry I'm currently in have mandates to use AI. But there not been much guidance beyond that. What does that actually look like? And now that AI has permeated so many aspects of our lives both personally and professionally – if you're buying a home, there's a good chance AI is going to help determine mortgage rate, your insurance premium, etcetera, to go to the doctor's there's a good chance AI is going to play some role in diagnosis. Many of us look to things like ChatGPT to help plan trips or write emails. And I think that ubiquity is doing two things: It's number one, raising the bar on expectations, but also making people really aware of the potential shortcomings. And as a marketer of a product where AI plays a big role, it makes it extremely important to be very clear about how it actually works, and in our case, that makes it important for us to demonstrate that there's still very much a human in control of how decisions get made. It's not like AI is making the decisions for utilities. It's AI is helping collect and collate the information that they need to make their decisions. So, being really clear about how the logic is auditable and editable with humans in the loop. And also, that it's not about replacing humans, it's about making humans better.

So, I actually saw a really good ad recently from Fiverr. It featured a picture of a bunch of smiling humans and the text overlay was really big: It said, "AI took my job" and then there was an ellipsis and at the bottom it said, "to the next level."

Alan Hart:

Love it. Love it. Yeah. And Fiverr actually, Shiri is one of the VPs of marketing there, was just on the show. So, like it's you've pulled it full circle. And they are doing some really cool stuff. There was an ad recently or a video I saw just a day or two ago and it was a musical themed episode where you're seeing people use AI features to create things and the whole thing was nobody cares. The notion was like "look at this great picture, Oh, but I used AI, and somebody sings out, nobody cares." So, I thought that was pretty interesting, but I do love what you're talking about. The whole idea of AI to help make humans better and enhance what we can do on our own abilities, I think is right. And I do think it has to be the combination like you talked about, which is like humans and AI, not one or the other.

Mary Cleary:

For sure.

Alan Hart:

One of the things we love to do – we know you like dogs, we know you got a big guy named Chief at home. But we love to get to know you a little bit better. My favorite question to ask everybody on the show is, has there been an experience of your past that defines or makes up who you are today?

Mary Cleary:

Really good question. I would have to say: So, growing up, I ran with my dad a lot in the morning. So, my dad traveled a lot when I was growing up, and one of the ways that he was really intentional about spending time together was running. So, he's always been a runner and with his influence, I became one too. So, from pretty much

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middle school, I would often get up early with him before he had to leave for work and before I had to get ready to school and we go for a run together and we would talk about things and mentally prepare for our days ahead. And for me running is less about physical exercise, although that is convenient way to multitask, but it's really more about the discipline to get up early in the morning and simply comes down to staring down the day with confidence and a clear head. So, it's been a really powerful way for me to build grit and resilience personally, and I think it's actually why I'm a morning person and why I tackle challenges the way that I do. I found physical endurance is a really good way to get comfortable being uncomfortable. And it's nice because while running, is still very much a personal routine, we definitely don't run together every day, we do when we can. And here I am in my 30s and just earlier this year, we ran a half marathon together.

Alan Hart:

Awesome. That's awesome. I'm jealous a little bit because I'm not a runner. I shouldn't say that, but I don't like running. Let's put it that way.

Mary Cleary:

I get it.

Alan Hart:

It's so much easier to do when you travel, because you just need sneakers and whatever outfit you need, right? You literally walk out the door and you can go wherever you need to go. So, I need to figure that out personally. There's no way I would ever run with somebody like you that's been running your entire life. Maybe I'll figure that one out. What advice would you give your younger self if you were starting all over again?

Mary Cleary:

Do one thing at a time. So, this is something my mom always says to me when I succumb to that, like chronic type A personality overwhelm and still does. And I definitely haven't always done the greatest job of putting that into practice, but I would definitely say that to my younger self and hopefully, I would listen.

Alan Hart:

I need take that advice myself, so thank you.

Mary Cleary:

It's nice. Good advice, always easy to give advice than to do it yourself.

Alan Hart:

That's very true. Is there a topic either you're trying to learn more about, or you think marketers need to be learning more about?

Mary Cleary:

This is an easy one for me to answer because it's something I think about all the time and that's how you measure the impact of activities like brand investments that are not exactly straightforward to measure. So, I would argue that everyone, including folks like investors and engineers, who typically who might look at brand with some degree of skepticism, they all want the company that they represent to have a strong brand. But then when marketing spends money to that end, too often they end up facing a barrage of questions about what the impact was and I think too many marketers get caught in the middle there, and I've definitely been there myself. So, in general, I think there's so many different attribution frameworks out there and there's no one perfect model. They have all got

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strengths and weaknesses. But I will say that I think short sighted attribution is a massive threat to marketers and measuring things like brand is something I want to get better at.

Alan Hart:

Yeah, no 100% agree with you and it is very hard. I think it's even extremely harder, even in B2B industries like yours. It's something we need to keep doing, cause to your point, like brands don't grow without brand investment.

Mary Cleary:

Exactly. And for people who like nice big valuations too, brand plays a big part in that.

Alan Hart:

Very true. Very true. Are there any trends or subcultures that you follow you think other people should take notice of?

Mary Cleary:

Love that question. I love going down a good rabbit hole, but I'd say my favorite is probably that I'm a bit of a food and nutrition science nerd, and I'll actually credit both my mom and my husband with that. So, quick back story is that much to both of their chagrin, I was an extremely picky eater and had a pretty limited palate until my early to mid-20s. My husband will actually say that I ate no fruits or vegetables until we started dating, which is not entirely true. But he's been a really big influence in getting me to appreciate pretty much every type of food. And so doing I realized that learning about food and what was good for me would actually encourage me to eat better. So as much as I would love to talk your ear off about the different types of turmeric or relative nutritional merit of different grains, I will resist that temptation. But I will recommend a book. Years ago, my mom gave me J. Kenji Lopez-Alt's *Food Lab*, which is absolutely fascinating. There's literally an entire chapter about how to cook eggs and down to the different time intervals that make sense for salting and how that affects the texture and the color of the yolk –things like that. And fast forward to today, that book is covered in cooking splatter, like gross cooking spatter, scribbles, and post it notes and things. And maybe because she's my mom, but she now calls me her favorite “food friend,” and I consider that a great honor. Literally early in our relationship, my mom and my husband would actually text each other about the things, they had gotten me to eat. So, his mission in life is to get me to cross the tomato frontier, and I'm not there yet. But actually, one more thing I'll say about this is coming back to eggs for a second. I recently had a shaved cured egg on a pasta, and it was absolutely life changing and I've been meaning to try that for a while and maybe I will do it this weekend and I highly recommend.

Alan Hart:

I love that. I love that and it sounds like you picked the best partner for yourself you could ever pick. To have your mom and him texting each other celebrating when they get you to eat something new. It's just a hilarious image in my head.

Mary Cleary:

Yeah, they'll literally be like “she's eating blueberries.”

Alan Hart:

haha, she's eating blueberries.

Mary Cleary:

Not anymore.

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Alan Hart:

So, I got to check out this book. My daughter actually is a little bit like you. She's a little bit maybe more adventurous than you were, but still, like vegetables are hard to come by. Fruits easy, but vegetables are a little harder to come by.

Mary Cleary:

Yeah. That's interesting. I had the reverse experience.

Alan Hart:

Oh, interesting. Interesting.

Mary Cleary:

I went vegetables first.

Alan Hart:

OK. She loves research, so I think this notion of maybe putting this *Food Lab* in the kitchen, might actually be the unlock. I need it, so I'll try that. Let's see.

Mary Cleary:

Yeah, keep me posted.

Alan Hart:

Last question for you, what do you think is the largest opportunity or threat facing marketers today?

Mary Cleary:

So, I something else I think about this all the time. So I'll go with an opportunity and I think one of the biggest opportunities is: To build a strategy around proprietary data-driven storytelling. So, to give you an example, I am a massive admirer of what companies like Gong have done with Gong Labs. Are you familiar with Gong?

Alan Hart:

I'm not actually, no.

Mary Cleary:

So, they started out basically by recording sales calls. They call themselves a revenue intelligence platform. But in collecting all that data and it's used for coaching, sales teams and stuff. So, they'll say things like in 60% of sales conversations across deals that close, Rep said, "XYZ" Kind of thing. So, they have all this data and so much of their marketing is about their own data. So they're making these observations across all the calls they record and they're able to pull out these extremely insightful observations that only they can make because of the data they're collecting, so, I think to the extent you can actually harness your own data and tell stories about it that only you can tell, I think that is a massive opportunity to stand out.

Alan Hart:

I love that. And that concept of, I'm going to get this wrong, but you said proprietary data-driven storytelling, right? Did I get it right?

Mary Cleary:

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Yeah, it's a mouthful.

Alan Hart:

Exactly. But it's perfect for an acronym.

Mary Cleary:

Because we all need more acronyms. PDDS.

Alan Hart:

Yeah. And or you can hyphenate the data and it just be PDS. But I don't know if that makes any sense. That's my gift to you.

Mary Cleary:

Yeah, I like that.

Alan Hart:

Mary has been a fantastic getting to know you and learning more about what you're doing at Neara. So, thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing all your ideas.

Mary Cleary:

Thanks so much, Alan. Pleasure speaking with you, this has been super fun.

Alan Hart:

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