

DR: I'm Danielle Royston, and this is Telco in 20.

MWC 2023 is just a few weeks away. This is the biggest event of our industry, held annually in fabulous Barcelona. Remember 2021, when my team swooped in and took over Ericsson's exhibition space? I'm sure Ericsson would like to forget that year, but I'll never forget it, or cease to bring it up at every opportunity. CLOUD CITY was epic. MWC is known in the industry for being a deal-making show. Some people say you can do a whole year's worth of meetings in a week. It's a place where you can rub elbows with policymakers from more than 180 countries and see all the biggest and best innovations coming down the pike.

There's a ton of excitement brewing for this year's event, which runs February 27th through March 2nd. The folks at the GSMA who organize it are working overtime to make it extra special. Today, I'm super excited to be talking with the GSMA's Chief Marketing Officer, Lara Dewar. She's going to give us the inside scoop on what's in store, how big this year's event is going to be, and introduce MWC'S inaugural conference within a conference, the MVNO Summit. Spoiler alert: Totogi, where I'm acting CEO, is the gold sponsor. It's time to sit back, relax, and get ready for an exciting MWC '23 preview. So, let's take 20.

Lara Dewar is chief marketing officer of the GSMA. Hi, Lara. Welcome to Telco in 20.

Lara: Thank you for having me, DR, and I'm delighted to be here.

DR: I am so excited to talk to you about MWC '23, which is coming up. You recently became the CMO of the GSMA, and I'm sure you and your team have been crazy busy getting ready, and so how is MWC '23 shaping up?

Lara: There is so much momentum and positivity around the event. I could not be happier, nor could I be more excited. I think we are expecting well over 2,000 companies to exhibit, and the exhibition hall is going to be a great reflection of the fact that this is more than a mobile show and expands out into adjacent industries, like transport and finance and logistics. I think there's going to be so many cool things on the show floor that I hope everybody gets an opportunity to walk around and see it.

DR: Yeah, I can't wait. I always look forward to MWC, especially on the vendor side. You plan your year around it. It really builds your pipeline, generates the leads, you get to do those face-to-face meetings. I always explain to people outside of our industry, it's a deal show. It's really about people coming together, having meetings and making deals. And the last three years have been affected by the

pandemic. Do you think we'll ever get back to that level that we saw in 2019 of just over 100,000 people?

Lara: I think we're definitely heading in that direction, although I think the pandemic has changed so many things. It's changed the way we work and the way we think about work, and probably also how we get work done. You're absolutely right. MWC is known as a deal-making show, so this is a place where more importantly than the number of attendees has been, for us, and what we're known for, the fact that it's bringing the right people together, so that you can get a year's worth of deals done in four days. That's really what MWC Barcelona is all about. And many of our exhibitors really pivot their annual business calendar to both reflect that and to participate. So I think this year that we'll expect somewhere north of 60,000. I would hope that we'd be at 80,000 attendees and eventually beyond that, back to those pre-pandemic levels. But I'm okay if that doesn't happen, if we continue to be known for and can demonstrate that this is where deals get done.

DR: Yeah, exactly. I think you're dealing with maybe a little bit of a second problem besides just COVID, which is the global economy is contracting a bit. In the U.S., they're talking about a recession coming, and how big is it going to be? And so that of course will impact corporate travel budgets. Less people will be allowed to go, or maybe some companies might even not attend. So do you think in-person events need to create a little bit of FOMO, so that people really do feel like they have to go and they need to be there?

Lara: Yeah, absolutely. In some areas of the world, by the way, we're still dealing with COVID. We're really lucky and I'm super grateful that where you and I live, we're kind of through the worst of all of that. I remain very grateful anytime I'm in a big crowd. The energy is super meaningful for me and I love it. I think from an in-person event, that side of our business, we rely on building FOMO, and I think we do that by creating a very cool conference agenda and events within the events where great conversation takes place, where great debate takes place, and where really, the thought leaders of the industry are gathered to share their perspective with an audience, and that's a huge element for us.

DR: Yeah. In the big tech world, Amazon and Google and those guys, pre-pandemic, they would do a pretty big concert for the attendees, and those tactics would bring people, not as just the networking and exhibitors and then the tech talks, but using those kinds of things where we have Elton John or someone iconic, that people are like, okay, that's totally worth it. It's included in my ticket price, and I'm going to travel to go see that.

Lara: Yeah. Look, it behooves us to create value every year. And as the chief marketing officer, I promise you that loads of creativity gets poured into this event every year, to determine we are bringing the latest and the greatest and the names that will be a draw, so that people feel they're getting value for money. I also think in this kind of moment, whether we're talking post-COVID or whether we're looking out to a probable recession, we also know that there will be a real flight quality and people know, again, that they can come here to meet with the decision makers. They can come here and hear from the thought leaders. And then beyond that, see demonstrations of the coolest technology that's out there that's powered by mobile.

DR: Yeah. And I think telco still is a little bit of that old school industry, where it's all about handshakes and the whites of your eyes, and that is absolutely an in-person thing that's been very difficult to replace over Zoom. I mean, when you travel out to visit the executives in their country or see them in Barcelona, it's meaningful. So I think we still have that element in our industry.

Lara: I think so. And I don't know if you're finding this, DR, but I don't think collaboration happens over the phone or over video call in the same way that it happens in person. There's something about the chemistry of people being together that creates kind of serendipitous moments. So you'll get introduced to someone that wasn't on your agenda or that you didn't expect, and you'll get engaged in a conversation with them and head down a path that you might not have otherwise thought of. So, very much looking forward to more and more of that.

DR: Yeah, I mean, I've been working remotely for 12, 13 years, so I've learned some of the cues. I can tell when someone's not paying attention or not reacting to what I'm saying in the right way, but if you haven't been doing that for many years, you miss the small little, I'm leaning into the table, I'm looking at my phone, and I think the world still hasn't really been attuned to reading 2D body language. We're still very much keyed off of 3D body language. So I absolutely agree with that.

Lara: Yeah, I think that's right.

DR: So you can't say Mobile World Congress without the word congress. You guys bring delegations together from close to 150 countries to discuss and shape telecom policy and regulations. It's kind of like the secret part of MWC that most people don't participate in. What is that like? Is that one big dinner? Is it several sessions? Does everyone have their flag? Is it like the UN?

Lara: So glad you asked me this question. So the ministerial program is a little bit mysterious, because it's an invite-only program and there's a whole bunch of us who don't qualify to go, by the way, myself included. It runs in parallel, actually, with MWC, so it starts on the Monday and ends on the Wednesday. And last year, overarchingly to MWC, we had people from 183 countries represented, which is just mind-blowingly cool. I think in the ministerial program alone, we had 161 country and organization delegations. We will see more this year, and it is literally the largest global gathering of policy-makers who enable the digital economy. So it will be ministers, heads of regulatory authorities, data protection authorities, security agencies, they will all be there.

And similar to other tracks at the show, they will be engaged in debate around current and meaningful issues in the telecommunication space. So they will be talking about things like, how do we close the usage gap? They will be talking fair share. Those are a couple of big meaty issues that will be getting discussed on this year's agenda. They will also have conversations this year around spectrum. 2023 is a year where the World Radio Conference will be held, and those spectrum allocations are becoming a really competitive space, so that will also be a topic of conversation.

DR: Well, I know if I was invited, I would run around and tell everyone, let your telcos in your country use a public cloud. They probably would not appreciate me too much, but that would be my agenda. Right? Might even dress up like a public cloud maybe just to make sure everyone understands. But that would be hilarious.

Lara: Might have to find a way to sneak you into one of those receptions then, just to see the costume.

DR: So let's talk about MVNOs. Just in my little corner of the world, we've been seeing this part of the industry gaining steam, and MWC is adding a new program focused on MVNOs this year called MVNO Summit. I am proud to say, Totogi is the gold sponsor. So tell me about this. How did it come about? Why did you guys start focusing on this group of people in our industry, and who you think will attend and how many people will be there?

Lara: So let me start by saying thank you to Totogi for being a huge sponsor of this particular summit, but moreover to you, DR, for being a huge friend of the show since 2021, maybe before that. But you've been a really meaningful partner and you're super well thought of by everyone in our organization. I couldn't be more grateful for that.

DR: Thank you. Yeah.

Lara: And I think the MVNO Summit really came out of feedback from our attendees and industry customers and peers who talked about this as being a missing element. We know that there is a ton of growth expected in this space in the coming years, and we felt it was absolutely necessary to respond to that feedback and to that growth. I think the person who should attend the MVNO Summit is engaged in that space or the adjacent space. They're a partner to an MVNO or they're interested in hearing about what makes a successful MVNO, so suppliers and commercial partners. The summit itself occurs on the Wednesday of the show in Hall 7. We will have a map within the app to show you where that is located.

DR: Yep. Easy to find.

Lara: And we anticipate north of 200 people attending that particular summit.

DR: Yeah. I think another group that maybe we could target, or at least we're thinking about it at Totogi, is we're seeing a lot of MNOs start to build out digital brands, so they're building a whole second or third stack to service maybe a subset of their subscribers or go at it with different strategy, change up the pricing. I think even MNO executives that are thinking about, "how do I efficiently stand up a purely digital brand and maybe even compete against MVNOs?" And so we've been going to shows and talking to MNOs and MVNOs alike, and we are seeing those MNOs building those digital brands or a down brand or a second brand, and so I think those people are also looking for technology and discussion.

Lara: Yeah, I think you're right. Those innovative business models. I was at a conference in Bangkok last November, and heard a lot of what you just described, where there are digital brands popping up and out of MNOs to test new business models that sometimes compete with their existing or their traditional business models, but therefore a specific customer group.

DR: Exactly.

Lara: And there are so many people in this industry thinking about how they can serve a customer differently and better, based on demographics and expectations, which I think is a huge way forward.

DR: Yeah, it's a fabulous idea for MNOs to do this, because it's a lower risk way, just like you said, experiment with new ideas on a small component of your subscribers. So you're not betting the farm on a new BSS or, in my case with

Totogi, a brand-new charger. You have this subset demographic that you want to focus on and you can try these cloud native tools, these tools that aren't as hard to get standing up. You can experiment with new technology and new concepts. And so I think for MNOs that are looking for ways to spark new ARPU ideas and grow their subscriber base, and even though yes, as you said, maybe competing with your own legacy subscribership, it's a good way to experiment. And sometimes it's lower risk.

Lara: And better you than someone else.

DR: Yeah, exactly. And I have talked to MNOs that have that exact attitude. They're like, MVNOs are coming up. They don't have the burden of the network. They can use these little tools like Totogi and whatever else, Salesforce and Zendesk, and they're up and running in a couple of months. And I mean, while it's great, they might be bringing extra subscribers, but they might be siphoning off subscribers from us. And so I think MNOs are trying to think maybe we should copy some of those tactics. So yeah, I think it's going to be a really great three hours over at Hall 7 at the MVNO Summit. We're super excited about it. I'll be speaking, I'm so excited. I'm already working on my talk. I always try to make my talks interesting and fun. Last year, I brought the drums. I remember I was working with GSMA. They're like, "Did you say drums?" I'm like, "Yeah, I would like to bring some drums."

Lara: Yes, you've heard me correctly.

DR: So crazy. And then after the MVNO Summit, we're actually throwing an after-party.

Lara: Oh, I love that. I'd love to attend.

DR: Come. I think people want to be together and they want to enjoy themselves. Like you said, MVNOs, a little bit of an underserved group. They don't always get invited to cool parties, and so we're going to throw a cool party for the MVNOs and anyone interested, so we're super excited about that. So, speaking of parties, I hear that you love to throw dinner parties.

Lara: I do.

DR: I'm sure you're not hosting the 161 delegates from all those different countries, but I wanted to pick your brain, on what are the key ingredients to a successful dinner party? Is it the size of the group? Is it the seating chart? Is it the menu? What really makes those dinner parties work?

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Lara: So, I feel like I've learned a couple things over the years. And first of all, I developed this love because my mom and my dad are experts at hospitality and making people feel welcome, and it's such a lovely gift to give people.

DR: For sure.

Lara: And I've learned there's three or four elements that contribute to a winning formula. One is you need a signature cocktail, because that's just fun and something for people to talk about when they first arrive.

DR: It's a good starter. Yeah, for sure.

Lara: It's a really great starter. The second thing is, I know it sounds really corny, but there is something about a round dining table that engenders conversation in a way that a rectangle or square does not. It levels the playing field for people. So if you can fit people around a round table, that's hands down the way to go. And probably the third element is the most important. It's you've got to have interesting people at the table, and not worry about whether they will like each other. I used to have, in my mind, this thing where I would only allow certain of my friends with certain other of my friends, because I thought they would fit better. Now I've realized human beings are amazing. If you just invite really interesting people, we work all that other stuff out over dinner, over cocktails and great wine and food pairings.

DR: Well, my secret to successful dinner party, I do not cook, so it definitely would be the signature cocktail. And lots of them. People will talk and have a great time.

Lara: And then no one cares.

DR: Oh, my God. So maybe we should have a signature cocktail for the after-party at the MVNO Summit.

Lara: Oh, my gosh. I would highly recommend it.

DR: Yeah, we totally will do that. I think that's a great idea. So Lara, this is an amazing conversation, learning about what's coming for MWC '23. I can't wait. Looking forward to seeing you in person, and come see us at the MVNO Summit.

Lara: I absolutely will. Thanks, DR.

DR: Awesome. Stick around, because we're ending each podcast with a Telco in 20 takeaway. I have 20 seconds to tell you something you need to know.

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You just heard Lara talk about the MVNO Summit, which is new this year at MWC. For the first time, the GSMA has recognized that there is a unique pocket in the industry that needs some love and attention. MVNOs and digital brands don't want to hear about open RAN and the latest network equipment. They want to hear ideas on how to set up their systems quickly and efficiently, so they can start to grow their subscriber base and revenue. Cha-ching. I'll be speaking at the MVNO Summit, so come join me. It will be held in Hall 7 on Wednesday, March 1st from 4:00 to 7:00 PM. And you know I don't go small on MWC. I'm always up to something fun. Be sure to stay until the end, because we're throwing an awesome after-party.

To make it super easy to have a great time, we're even providing transportation to the venue, Luz de Gas, one of the hottest spots in the city. Who doesn't love a great party? So now you know exactly where you need to be. Come to my talk, clap loudly, stay late, and let's get cloudy. And if you're looking for things to cheer about, then listen to my other podcast episodes and check out our awesome YouTube channel. Follow us on Apple Podcasts and Spotify, and leave us a review. DM me on Twitter @telcodr, and connect with me on LinkedIn. You can also sign up for our killer email newsletter on telcodr.com. Next up, Barcelona. Later, nerds.