

INTERVIEW WITH

DEEDEE SMITH

eMobility Marketing Manager and eMotors
Global Lead, Solvay Materials

WPS: Thank you, DeeDee, for joining us for this interview today. It's really a pleasure to have you and to hear your thoughts and to share your experience with our readers.

We got in contact with you through our contacts from the CWIEME event that we both visited this May. So can you tell us a little bit about how your collaboration with CWIEME started?

DeeDee Smith: The first time that we attended the CWIEME show was two years ago, and we found it by looking for trade shows for coil winding. Solvay had never attended the show before, so it was our first experience. I started interacting with the organizers asking about the ability to talk about some of our products. We had such an awesome first year and they were extremely helpful, everything from getting the booth ready to helping us prepare for the talk that we were giving and then coming by and checking on us making sure that the show was going well and that we were getting what we wanted out of it. I would have to say that that first show really opened our eyes to how large CWIEME is and that it really encompasses the entire supply chain around coil winding.

This year I've been a bit more involved with the group. I participated in the education panel, which was, I think, the first one that they have ever had. That was a different experience, not just interacting with customers, but now also interacting with students and really understanding what is driving them, so we can tap into that next generation talent pool.

You are currently working as an e-mobility Marketing Manager at Solvay Materials, but you also have a background in chemistry. Can you please tell us how did your unique expertise contribute to your success in the field of e-mobility? Because this is not really the typical way.

I have a PhD in organic chemistry from Northwestern University in Chicago, IL. And there I was doing something completely different. I was studying copolymers for drug delivery. It was very-interdisciplinary work. I worked with the Children's Hospital downtown. I would synthesize drug-containing monomers, polymerize them and make the copolymers, and then the nanoparticles. Then I would give them to my collaborators for testing. I found I was really good at crossing these science boundaries, being able to communicate what I was doing from a chemistry standpoint to doctors and clinicians, and then also taking their work to conferences and being able to explain to other chemists the impact of the chemistry that I was doing in these lab settings. I found that having that ability to talk, cross science talk, was really beneficial. It was also beneficial when I did my post-doctorate and I was writing grants and trying to get funding, being able to lay out that story in a way that anybody could understand it, regardless of what their background was.

After my postdoc, I decided that I really wanted to get into industry and see the impacts of what I was doing on a day to day basis in the market. Therefore, I joined Solvay in 2011. I joined one of their advanced engineering, advanced chemistry groups. We were looking at technologies that weren't to be developed for another 15 to 20 years. After a couple of years of doing that, I felt like I wasn't really close enough to the customer or the business. I wanted to understand how we were making money and what was really driving our business and our customers. I moved into a more business facing group doing product development. I was still in R&D, but in a position that allowed me to interface more with our customers. I started traveling with our front line folks, going directly to customers and talking with them and using that background of explaining things in a way that everybody can understand to explain to our customer how our products really worked and what we were doing chemically to make them work in their applications.

After a couple of years, I decided to make a very large leap and leave R&D and go to the commercial side of our business. I started in sales development where I was actually owning customer accounts and driving business development at those customers before moving into this market managing position. But I would say that the skills that I developed early on, being able to talk to people regardless of what their background was and explain complex concepts, has made me successful in this job. Those early lessons in communication skills and talking across disciplines to explain things in a way that they understand has been beneficial.



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You said that you were developing solutions that were really advanced, really far in the future. And what's a really big topic currently with the development of technology is sustainability. As the transition to e-mobility is actually a pivotal moment in the automotive industry, how do you envision the future of e-mobility and what role does Solvay play in shaping this future through the e-motor solutions?

I would say that this is a super exciting time, being able to be in the position that I'm in today, in this moment where you're seeing this mass transition to e-mobility, I feel very fortunate. For me, this transition has brought about a wave of new e-motor innovations. You have a lot of brilliant people in this industry that are coming up with incredible new designs, and those new designs are really pushing the performance boundaries of incumbent materials. And so I see our role as making the impossible possible, opening up the design space for engineers, allowing them to have materials that are going to help them enable cleaner, safer and more energy efficient mobility.



“Incorporating sustainability is something that is a core value at Solvay. It's in everything that we do, it's not an afterthought. When we're in there talking to engineers about the products that are going to provide value in their applications, we're also talking with them at the same time about the sustainability profile of that product.”

You actually answered two of my questions, because my next one was the one regarding the approaches driving the adoption of sustainable and efficient technologies in electric vehicle industry. Do you have anything to add to this?

One of the things that makes Specialty Polymers really great is that we have one of the broadest portfolios of highly engineered thermoplastics in the industry. That comes with some great pros, but it also comes with some cons. One of the advantages is that we have the ability to pick the right material for the right application. Materials that are going to balance performance and economics. But when you look at our portfolio and you see thousands of grades of material, it can be very overwhelming to know where to even start to select the right material. A few years ago, our marketing decided that we were going to shift from being product-focused to being market-focused, and more specifically for automotive, systems-focused. We wanted to understand the systems and the value our materials can bring to those systems. For eMotors specifically, that meant working with our internal experts to identify solutions for applications where we thought we could add value. But you have to prove that value to your customer and speak their language.

Read the full article in the [latest issue](#) of Women in Power Systems.