

SWEET TALK

C-Sweet seeks to connect women executives across industries rather than siloing them

By PAT MAIO *Staff Reporter*

C-Sweet is not a political organization that takes up the flag on social causes.

It's not a #MeToo group and doesn't take sides in presidential elections. Neither is it right- or left-leaning in its politics. Rather, co-founders and Co-Chief Executives **Beth Hilbing** and **Dianne Gubin** describe it as a networking organization designed to help women executives in the C-suite understand the path up the corporate ladder and help women outside the C-suite learn how to advance in.

The C-suite — from which C-Sweet coined the title of its trademarked name that it fought legally to use — includes an alphabet soup of crème de la crème titles in corporate America: CEOs, CFOs, CIOs, COOs and CTOs.

The Malibu-headquartered group hosts podcasts and events and is now expanding its offerings in other U.S. cities with aspirations of going global.

At the beginning of the summer, C-Sweet began charging \$395 a year in dues for membership. The group has 200 members and a mailing list of 3,500, and it held a chapter launch in Chicago in early October. It also has plans to launch other chapters in 2022 in New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Phoenix. And that's just the beginning. They have feelers out to establish international chapters, starting with London and Sydney down the road.

Members include C-level executive women, executives from major tech companies, founders, emerging leaders, board-level executives, and women who write checks in venture capital, private equity, family wealth offices, investment banking, institutional finance and angel investing.

C-Sweet produces weekly podcasts, called "C-Sweet Talks" featuring stories from high-level executives, such as insiders with **RealReal Inc.**, the San Francisco-based marketplace for luxury consignment; Southern California Edison, the Rosemead-based power utility of **Edison International**; and California Gov. **Gavin Newsom's** appointments secretary, who evaluates political jobs people want inside state government.

It just started a new podcast series, called "C-Sweet After Dark," in which guests discuss sensitive topics such as bad bosses and sexual harassment.

Some of C-Sweet's upcoming events include a business roundtable scheduled for Nov. 4 with



Seat at the Table: C-Sweet's in-person and virtual panels on business topics draw hundreds.

Alison Burnham, chief data and analytics officer with El Segundo-based **RepairSmith Inc.**, a mobile car repair and maintenance service, and a Women on Boards roundtable on Nov. 16 to discuss ways to land a corporate board position and what's required to serve on a corporate board. The events have been known to attract up to a 100 attendees for panel discussions.

Gubin and Hilbing have dissimilar backgrounds — one has an aerospace background while the other has a financial pedigree — but they use it to their advantage and stick together. In addition to sharing titles, they do interviews together and collaborate on C-Sweet's strategy.

They first met during a panel discussion on diversity and inclusion in the mid-2000s at **Amgen Inc.**, a Thousand Oaks-based biopharmaceutical company, and kept in contact over the next decade until founding C-Sweet in 2017.

Gubin and Hilbing sat down with the Business Journal to discuss their plans for C-Sweet, expansion and the importance of their group in helping other women network for C-suite jobs.

How did C-Sweet come about?

Gubin: I was running in all the tech spaces' networking, and I was running around in the finance spaces' networking, and the business partner I started Amplify (an IT staffing agency) with, retired. And what I saw is the hole in the market and what I talked about with Beth (Hilbing) is that there was nothing for executive women that was designed for senior executives and up here in Los Angeles, right? So, we have all these silos of events in technology, finance and something for this woman and that, right? There was nothing that covered many industries at the executive level.

Where did you both meet?

Hilbing: We met in the mid-2000s when Dianne was leading the L.A. Chapter of Women in Technology, which is an organization that holds networking events. We hit it off. And then, Dianne, of course, talked me into leading the mentorship committee for the Women in Technology summit. Dianne has had different networking groups over the years that I've stayed in touch with.

As we've made career changes and so forth,

we kept in touch. And then I was like, 'You're in a career change and had time for C-Sweet.' I said, 'Let's do it.'

What did you see happening with women in the executive ranks in the mid-2000s?

Gubin: Well, there was a lack of women at the senior levels within tech. Companies didn't seem to have a concerted focus to hire women.

If women are working together ... we will pull each other up.

DIANNE GUBIN
C-Sweet

Why?

Gubin: Tech is very much a boys' club. And, in many ways, everybody likes to know people who are like them, whereas within C-Sweet, we call it diversity. So, you find within the IT departments of major companies around Los Angeles that everybody is pretty much the same. Not every company is like this because health care firms tend to promote women. But for women in aerospace, in particular, Beth had an extremely senior-level job. And she just should have had a better title considering how many people she had reporting to her.

Hilbing: There was not a networking organization for senior-level, C-suite, women. We felt there was a need to help bring these women together and start working together, start hiring each other, start promoting each other. We have seen that happen in our current environment.

Why did you move to a membership model this past summer?

Hilbing: To ensure that we had revenue coming in to support our programs and our events because we have lot of events and charge

minimal costs though we have sponsors and members, as well.

Tell me about some of your live events?

Hilbing: We just launched in Chicago on Oct. 7, and we had the event at the City Club in the old Sears Tower (now known as the Willis Tower), on the 66th floor. We had a panel discussion on how to empower your workforce and business innovation. We also had a good networking event recently at the City Club Los Angeles. We had 40 women attend the pure networking event where we talked about diversity, equity and inclusion.

Gubin: So, why did we do this? It's our answer to the MeToo movement (which has emerged in recent years to focus on sexual harassment and sexual assault), or to any of the social movements that we see today. We truly believe that if women are working together at the most senior executive levels, we will pull each other up, will hire each other, will help our communities and help our businesses. We truly want to do business in a different way, and we see C-Sweet as a national movement. This is a movement we started.

Given Covid restrictions, how many people are attending your events?

Gubin: We had up to 700 people on a Zoom call last summer for our diversity, equity and inclusion program. So, when you have a program that is that large, how do we figure out who you need to meet with so that we can fulfill our mission? Well, we've started smaller focus groups — roundtables we call them — so that everyone can really meet each other to work together and do business together. Besides our monthly Zoom calls, which are open to everyone, we have a business roundtable where we have members self-facilitate.

Hilbing: Zoom has handled our calls very well. Obviously, there was a huge focus, given all that went down with Covid and the (U.S. presidential) election, on diversity, equity and inclusion. Some of our panelists have included Renee Brown, chief of basketball operations and player relations for the WNBA (from 2005-2016), and Heide Gardner, senior vice



C-SWEET

HEADQUARTERS: Malibu

BUSINESS: C-Sweet produces exclusive educational networking events for women executives.

FOUNDERS AND CO-CEOS: Beth Hilbing and Dianne Gubin

MEMBERS: 200 members; 3,500 on its mailing list

DUES: \$395 annually

NOTABLE: Besides Los Angeles, C-Sweet expanded with a chapter launch in Chicago in early October. It also has plans for other chapters in New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Phoenix in 2022. International expansion is planned for London and Sydney after more U.S. chapters are established.



Game Changers: C-Sweet members share insights to help others succeed.

president and chief diversity officer for advertising and marketing firm InterPublic Group.

Gubin: Companies need to do a better job teaching and living diversity, equity and inclusion, and not just making it lip service. That was the takeaway (of the Zoom call last summer). We have to make sure you feel like you belong, that you feel like you're meant to be where you are.

Why are there two directors running C-Sweet?

Hilbing: Well, because we back each other up, and we bring a diversity of skills and a complement of skills.

Gubin: Beth is really a Fortune 500 type of gal, right? I'm more of a middle-market, fast-growth company type of person. Between the two of us, our networks are just different. Beth has been in IT, and I'm now in tech and finance.

Hilbing: We talk multiple times throughout the day, constantly texting. It really does take all of our skill sets because we manage three to four sessions that we run a month for our women, for our members, plus we do a newsletter, plus we do a biweekly podcast, plus we do in-person events across the country.

Gubin: We back each other up. So, between the two of us, we make sure everything is covered.

How big do you see this getting?

Hilbing: We are right on the cusp of really putting it out there and getting as big as like a 3,500-person organization.

Gubin: We just don't see a cap on C-Sweet because we're going to go international at some point. We have someone in London, somebody expressed interest in Australia, but we're just not ready for that yet. We need to do what we're doing here first.

Where do you see growth areas within your group?

Gubin: Our Women on Boards initiative has really taken off. Part of what we have found within our group of women is that, as we started this journey of women on boards, women didn't know how to get on a board. So, we started off with the real basics. You know, what does your resume have to look like? Where do you even apply? Where are the board positions? Once you are on the board, what do you do? What are the committees? What's the expectation? And that journey continues. We don't see that ending. There's so much information on there, and everybody is super hungry. In fact, that's one of our most popular programs, 'Women On Boards.' We want women on boards before the board positions get filled, right? There's only a certain number of positions.

What do you hear from your members?

Hilbing: With the podcasts, we talk to these women; we ask them about their career, their career path, what they're doing, how they got there, what do they think has helped them so that they can give that advice to listeners and other women in their space or coming up as emerging leaders.

What are the main issues that your members are facing?

Gubin: I think the issue is that women get very siloed within their companies. And men do it too, right? Part of it is that none of us network enough. So how are you going to meet the right people? Let's say you are a senior level woman, where are you going to go to meet other women to make these relationships and potentially do business. That's what we're creating.

Hilbing: Our executive women have told us time and time again that they have to have a trust factor if they are going to move forward. This intimate networking with C-Sweet helps create that for them.

C-SWEET'S CO-CEOS

DIANNE GUBIN SOLD SUNGLASSES AT EAST COAST BEACHES, mostly in Long Island's posh Hamptons during summers at the University of Connecticut. That's how she paid for her bachelor's degree in journalism.

She traveled Europe for a year after graduating but never really put her yearning for journalism to use.

"My college roommate was a journalism major. 'That looks like fun,'" she said of picking her major on a whim. "Obviously, when you spend all of that time working for the school paper, your grades go down because you're always working at night," she recalled.

Instead of penning for a newspaper, she pursued a career in selling staffing services.

Her specialty has always been in technical recruiting for professional and executive roles.

In the mid-1990s, the 59-year-old Gubin formed Dianne Gubin & Associates to provide staffing and recruiting services for information technology firms.

In 2012, she became president of Malibu-based **Amplify Professional Services Inc.** where she helped hire and provide contract staffing services in Los Angeles and New York for universities and Fortune 500 companies.

In addition to her work with Amplify, she also became a principal with **Capital InVentures** in 2014, which has offices on both coasts of the United States.

With investment banking firm Capital InVentures, she has helped emerging and middle-market companies raise equity and debt financing, pursue merger and acquisition deals, complete bond raises, and provide financial analysis and due diligence in takeovers.

Since 2015, Gubin also has been the global co-chairwoman of the **Los Angeles Venture Association**, which provides forums on the financing of companies from start to exit.

Gubin met **Beth Hilbing**, her C-Sweet partner, in the early 2000s while running a networking event for **Women in Technology International** in L.A., an organization that promotes the achievements of women in technology and extends support, opportunities and inspiration. They co-founded Malibu-based C-Sweet in 2017.

— Pat Maio

DIANNE GUBIN

EDUCATION: BA, University of Connecticut

INDUSTRIES OF FOCUS: Talent acquisition, finance

OFF THE CLOCK: For relaxation, she reads the New York Times and Forbes.



THOMAS WASPER

BETH HILBING

EDUCATION: BA, Webster University; MA, Cal State Long Beach

INDUSTRIES OF FOCUS: Aerospace, information technology

OFF THE CLOCK: Hilbing admits she is a workaholic, ending her workdays between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m., then falling asleep in front of the TV.



THOMAS WASPER

BETH HILBING HAS CLIMBED THE CORPORATE RANKS OF major aerospace companies over her multidecade career.

Doing so was not an easy task in a male-dominated industry where retired military officers have historically been welcomed into second careers with aerospace and defense contractors.

Hilbing has worked for two of the largest powerhouse military contractors in the United States: **Northrop Grumman Corp.** and **Boeing Co.**

For the past three years, she's held the post of senior information technology business partner with Chicago-based Boeing, which designs, manufactures and sells commercial airplanes and military jets, missiles, rockets and satellites.

Before Boeing, Hilbing, 57, ascended the ranks of Northrop Grumman, once headquartered in Century City, but which bolted to the Washington, D.C., suburb of Falls Church, Va., a decade ago.

When she left Northrop Grumman in 2017, Hilbing was vice president of information technology, managing a \$90 million budget and running a large program with control over an engineering and operations organization.

Previously, she was responsible for all areas of information technology at a credit union connected with the military contractor.

She also was at Time Warner in January 2000 as part of one of the biggest corporate mergers, when AOL agreed to buy Time Warner for \$164 billion.

Hilbing worked in the Burbank office of the combined company's **Warner Music Group Corp.**, the third-largest in the global music industry, after **Universal Music Group Inc.** and **Sony Music Entertainment Inc.** At Warner Music, she managed an \$11 million budget and 50 employees, overseeing network systems, a help desk, corporate standards, and procurement and vendor management.

Hilbing received a bachelor's degree in business from Webster University in St. Louis and a master's degree in business from Cal State Long Beach. She also has an associate degree in computer science.

It was during her time between her jobs at Northrop Grumman and Boeing in 2017 that she and Co-Chief Executive Dianne Gubin reconnected to co-found C-Sweet.

— Pat Maio