

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:05] DC: It takes the right skills and the right innovation to design and manage meaningful print marketing solutions. Welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse, where we explore all facets of print and marketing that create stellar communications and sales opportunities for business success. I'm your host, Deborah Corn, the Intergalactic Ambassador to the Printerverse. Thanks for tuning in. Listen long and prosper.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:34] DC: Hey, everybody. Welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse. This is Deborah Corn, your Intergalactic Ambassador. I have two guests on the podcast today. The first is Deborah Brandt. She is the Founder and CEO at Fig Industries. Deb established the studio in 2000 with a mantra of Design for Good. A few years later, her belief that exceptional design and creative communication can transform businesses and communities led her to create Fig, a multiplatform communications package.

We also have Meredith Collins. She is the customer marketing manager at Domtar. She is located at the headquarters in Fort Mill, South Carolina. And she has been with Domtar for more than 20 years and can sometimes be found inside the cougar costume.

Hello, ladies. Welcome to the program.

[00:01:33] DB: Hello. Thank you so much for having us.

[00:01:35] MC: Yeah. Thanks, Deborah, for all your support. Appreciate it. Glad we could help. Glad we could be on here today.

[00:01:39] DC: Yes. And, you know, I love telling people that sometimes you're in the cougar costume.

[00:01:43] MC: Yeah. Thanks for that. Yeah, it's come full circle.

[00:01:47] DC: It really is. And it's like a mascot costume. Tell people about it, Meredith. It's one of my favorite things about you.

[00:01:51] MC: It is. Well, actually, fun fact, we actually have another cougar costume. We have relived that. Don't be shocked if you see it making appearances in your local regions. But, yes. I wore the cougar costume 20 years ago when I first started at Weyerhaeuser at the time and then it was Domtar. Yes, full-on cougar mascot. And now, 20 years later, I am wearing it again. There you go, folks. It doesn't matter how much you climb the ladder. You always end up wearing a costume again.

[00:02:24] DC: That is so funny. Well, I'm really glad you got a new one. After some years, I'm sure it was a little ripe inside that thing especially being in the South. Meredith, can you tell everybody a bit more about your role at Domtar and how Fig Industries got on your radar?

[00:02:43] MC: Yeah. Sure. I am a channel marketing manager at Domtar. And my focus really is on our merchants, our printers and our creative community. I've become the brand ambassador for our printing paper's grades; Cougar®, Lynx®, and Husky®. And I really do a lot with marketing to those audiences. Talking about our products. I'm connecting with our customers to ensure that our products are meeting their needs. Making sure that we're providing materials that are useful, that are interesting, that are relevant.

I actually was first introduced to the Fig magazine via a sample that was submitted to our Domtar paper gallery via one of our account managers. I got this sample and I loved the backstory. And, Deb, we'll talk a little bit about this. But, really, Deb had the excellent taste that she wanted the magazine to be on uncoated paper. Because, naturally, magazines on uncoated paper, just chef's kiss, are so much better. Just my opinion. My unbiased opinion.

And so, I got the magazine and I really loved the story and I really love the concept of the Fig Magazine. I set up a virtual call with Deb What was that? In 2021. It's been a couple of years. Yeah.

[00:04:04] DC: Oh, goodness. I might have been the end of 2020. That's when we made the switch.

[00:04:10] MC: Yeah. Yeah. We did a virtual call just because I wanted to interview Deb. Learn a little bit more about the magazine, a little bit more about her. Instantly semi-girl crush once I talked to her that first time. And then, as luck with have it, I actually went out into the field with the account manager that has a relationship with Deb, Gilbert Goodworth. I have to give a shout-out to GG. He's one of my faves.

But when I came to the area, he made sure that we came by to meet Deb in person. I mean, instantly, as Gilbert said, he saw hearts, and butterflies and the stars aligning. And she and I immediately flicked. From that came all of these really great things that we're doing. Because I think they have a really cool and interesting story.

[00:05:00] DC: I agree. And I was so happy to meet Deb and her team and learn about their story. And you actually parlayed that into us all working together for two Project Peacock episodes that are on Project Peacock TV. Links in the show notes. We also worked with Sam Kirchner from The Standard Group. We filmed with him.

Deb, I really want to focus on you for a little while here. I had the experience of meeting your amazing team in your amazing office in what I turned out to be an amazing location of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Who knew? Right? But an amazing team is truly the result of an amazing leader. And what is your philosophy behind Design for Good? And how does that fit into your work, your partners, your culture and your team building?

[00:05:57] DB: Wow. So much to unpack. First of all, thank you to Meredith and to you, Deborah, who, by the way, great name, for having and and telling our story today. As you mentioned, our tagline has always been Design for Good. It was important to me when I started my own business to have a positive impact on the community.

As a graphic designer, at the time, I worked in New York City in the 90s. Moved back to my hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 2000 and really was looking for a way to give back to the community using great communication and using design. Wondering how are we possibly going to find a way to do that?

Our team, it's been an evolution. It's been a lot of learning. A lot of experience over a lot of growing and learning over the course of the past 20 years. Actually – oh, goodness. Coming up on 24. To get to this point, our team is absolutely amazing and so passionate about what we

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do. And part of it is the magazine that we create called Fig. We're out there in the community all the time and it allows us to have a really tangible impact on our neighbors and on the city.

[00:07:06] DC: I want to dive a little bit more into Fig Magazine and especially how you turned an idea into a profitable printed product, which you also describe as a multi-platform communications package. Can you share with everybody what you mean by that? And, very specifically, what Fig is?

[00:07:28] DB: Yes. Thank you. Fig started back in 2005. And Fig is an enthusiast's guide to local dining, shopping, arts and community. The reason that we started it is that we saw this great little city. And there were wonderful small businesses around our pillars, which we believe make a great city. Arts and culture, shopping, dining, education, history and community. But no one was really pulling together those assets and branding the city as a unified destination.

And so, we thought what if we can do that? And what if we can – now, remember, back in 2005, create a direct mail piece for the city of Lancaster. And that's essentially what Fig has always been. I also believe that great communications is all about layers and all about reaching people in the way that they are receiving information.

Of course, as soon as social media, way back when, was being used for business, we started our social media channels and have had tremendous organic growth there. As well as we have some digital channels, e-news, things like that. It is multiplatform. And we represent small business and the collaborative good that, when you work together, the impact that you can have. And the city has changed considerably over the past 18 years. And we like to think we're a small part of shifting that perception and bringing people into the city.

[00:08:54] MC: Deborah and Deb, that was really one of the things that drew me to Deb into Fig too was just this idea of what she's doing for these small communities. Our office, our headquarters is in beautiful Fort Mill, South Carolina. I live in beautiful Rock Hill/Edgemoor, South Carolina. We're the upper part of the state of South Carolina. We are sort of the suburb of Charlotte. But a lot of these communities around us are small. A lot of them are not necessarily thriving due to just industrial changes, textile industries leaving that sort of thing. And I really love this idea of revitalizing towns through the idea of print.

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We kind of forget the power that print has, the power of direct mail, the power of sending things to people in the mail in that tangible way. And you capture their attention. They keep the magazine. They keep the piece. And I think I have such a love for that concept of really marrying things together and doing positive change with print. I think that's why I just loved what Fig is doing so much just because that holds a place that's very close to my heart.

[00:10:06] DC: I have always believed in the power of print and the power of paper. And I 100% believe that positive messages through printed communication is coming back. Because it's something you can hold in your hands. It's something that you can keep on your coffee table, you can put it down. It will be there when you come back. And it's trusted. I don't think that that will ever go away. I do believe that it needs to be very targeted. And the message needs to be very clear. And it needs to be solid, positive communication.

[BREAK]

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:11:39] DC: I also think it's the power of storytelling. In many ways, Fig Magazine – do you refer to Fig Magazine a Fig guide? What?

[00:11:46] DB: Fig Magazine. Yup.

[00:11:48] DC: In a lot of ways, Fig Magazine is like a city guide, you know? But you're telling the stories of the people in it. I read about a really cool restaurant in there. I didn't just see a 4-star review, and an address and a QR code to scan. I got to learn about the restaurant.

The other thing that I thought was so amazing just being in Lancaster for two days was seeing the buy-in of the community on this magazine. It was in stores. It was in my hotel room after I found it. But that's because I couldn't find my magazine rack not because it wasn't there. Because I was like, "Why is it in my hotel?"

Also, I'm not sure if you remember, but when I was walking around coming to your office and I saw these painted stencils outside of businesses, I was so excited to show you. And I was like, "You should do this for Fig." And you're like, "That's actually us." I'm really interested in how you cultivated and convinced the community that this was good for them. And did the city of Lancaster itself get involved?

[00:12:56] DB: Mm-hmm. Good questions. Everything takes time. I won't say it was a success right out of the gate. It probably took us three or four years for people to realize what we were trying to do and to really start saying, "I'm going to jump on board."

I believe in, as I said, a positive communication. And one thing I think that's missing in the world right now is connection. Telling those stories of these small business owners, it makes it personal. And if you can make it personal, then people feel like I want to go and support that small business. And then, all of a sudden, you're starting to build a community. A community where a stranger walks in the door of a business and says, "I saw you in Fig. And I want to learn about your business. And I want to buy something from you."

Any way that we can make connections. Whether it's a retail trail that we do for retailers. We have a restaurant guide for restaurants. But pulling those small businesses together and making those connections within the business community themselves. These people are my friends after 18 years. They're my friends.

But, also, connecting strangers. Connecting readers to something great is happening in the downtown. And you can read about it in this little magazine. And then you actually feel like you get to know these people. It's about communication and connection.

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[00:14:12] DC: We're referring to it as a magazine. But I want people to – they haven't seen it. It is like a book. It's not exactly like a people magazine that people would think of. It is more like a city guide. It's perfect bound. Yes, it's –

[00:14:27] DB: Yes. Yes.

[00:14:28] DC: Just talk about the format. Because it's very interesting.

[00:14:32] DB: Yeah. We made it 8 inches by 8-and-a-half inches so that it's just about square. It is perfect bound. It's 124 pages. It comes out four times a year. It is seasonal, which is really nice for businesses that want – they mix up their message each year.

We take care of all of the photography. Fig Industries is a design and marketing firm. I didn't want to create something that relied on supplied artwork. The majority of everything you see in every issue, we've actually captured those photographs and created the stories and built the content into the design. That gives it a cohesive feel and a nice look.

They're also almost all full pages, which is helpful as well. It's creating more of a gallery approach. And within the pages of Fig, these businesses can really shine because our Fig template, the design, is very gallery-esque.

[00:15:28] DC: It is. It's also an amazing digital bridge. Because you have an entire web-based, digital-based component to it. Can you discuss that, please?

[00:15:39] DB: Yes. We have two people, that are dedicated to social media and digital stories on our website. There's lots of content that you don't even see in the book itself. And we do call it a book, by the way, because it does feel to us like more than just a magazine.

And one thing that really sets it apart from any other publication is the paper. My goal, my hope was to move to uncoated stock for many years. And I finally pulled the trigger in 2020. That story is actually pretty interesting. It's making lemonade out of lemons during COVID when I couldn't get the stock that we normally used. And I reached out to our friends at Domtar and that's when we made the switch. And I will not go back. Because there's so much about it that I love so much better on the uncoated stock.

[00:16:26] DC: When I was at your office and we were at the Standard Group filming Sam Kirchner, who I mentioned before, she had a really poignant story that he was a fan of the magazine. He kept seeing it everywhere. And he's like, "I'm a printer. Why aren't I printing this? I actually love it." I want to know how you establish that partnership with him. And how he was involved in – once you knew that you wanted to go to uncoated paper from a coated stock, we're talking about a magazine. And if people have an idea of what that is, normally they think of glossier paper and things of that nature.

Actually, in this podcast, check the links in the show notes. We're going to post some photos of the magazine so everyone understands that it's a book and a magazine. But it would have been a pretty significant shift in design. I mean, the paper is now a part of this design. Not just how it looks. But also how it feels. And it is definitely going to affect how you're used to treating images. And now you might do them differently.

I want to understand how collaboration with your printing partner, Sam from The Standard Group, really made this manifest into real life successfully.

[00:17:55] MC: Absolutely. First, an answer to the first part of your comment or in comment to the first part of your comment, I love that people feel that Fig is their book about their city. And it really has become a pride piece for people who love their community. And that is so important to me. The fact that Sam reached out, oh, gosh, 12, 15 years ago at this point and asked if he could quote on printing the job. One of the reasons that we gave him a shot at doing that is because he's local.

Fig is all about local businesses. And so, everything we do has to be within our local footprint. The printing is done probably 20 minutes away from our office. They are an offset sheet-fed printer. And as I mentioned, we were printing on a coated stock for quite some time. And we switched over to the uncoated. It was a little scary. I have to be honest with you. But that's where partnerships come into play.

Because we've been working with Sam so long on not just Fig but on other client projects, we treat it like a partnership. We say, "These are our goals. This is what we're trying to do. And can you help us figure out how to do that?"

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Now, in this case, we had a paper shortage back in 2020. When we moved to this paper, there were a lot of variables happening. But Sam knew that color is everything to us.

My experience when I worked in New York, I worked in fragrance and cosmetic packaging. I would travel all around the country on press checks. I'm very familiar with press checks on press and many different types of printing. And so, I knew it was going to be different. And I knew that we could trust Standard to show us proofs on the actual stock to make sure that that first time we went on press, we had to see all of it.

And now, because they're our trusted partner, we still see part of each book. But we trust them to adjust as necessary. Opening up the mid-tones. Brightening the color. We don't want our darks to suck into that uncoated paper. And what I will say is Lynx. That's what we use from Domtar. The finish is beautiful. And it really does reproduce the all different images quite well.

[00:20:14] DC: And, originally, why did you want to go to uncoated sheet for Fig?

[00:20:18] DB: With my background, as I mentioned, in fragrance and cosmetic packaging, luxury to me does not mean slick and glossy. Luxury to me means a nice, beautiful satin finish, which is uncoated in this case. It just has a more refined luxurious feel. I like the way that it feels when you touch the paper as well as what it looks like. It has a nice crispness to it that the slippery glossy papers just feel cheap to me.

[BREAK]

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:21:43] DC: Meredith, there's been a couple of times that I've been involved in conversations with Domtar in where we have worked with some of the publishers out there and actually help them move to an uncoated sheet and print their magazines. Yet, it was Fig Industries that you chose to highlight in Project Peacock. And why did you want to share their story? Although I'm sure everything Deb just said is music to your uncoated paper ears.

[00:22:12] MC: It is. We love to hear that. And our whole thing with uncoated is it gives a different vibe. That's what I tell people. There's a place for all the different coatings, coated versus uncoated, there's always a place for it. But I think utilizing uncoated especially Fig mag book – or what was I going to call it? Bookazine? What they're trying to convey? And I think the Lynx product showcases that beautifully.

But, Deborah, you know I love collaboration stories. I remember we started all of this – gosh. I guess it was 2022 at this point. Just this idea of the beautiful music that gets made when a creative or marketing entity works really well with a printer who works really well with the merchant, who has a great relationship with the paper manufacturer. That was one reason why.

But really, after I met Deb, the team at Fig Industries, Sam, the team at Standard, I thought it was really important to talk about the story of collaborating for good. Not just the good that you're doing in your community or the place that you live, but really wanting to do better and do good. That's not proper English. But wanting to do better in your marketing message and the things that you're doing, the things that you're producing.

I love how they're always – Sam and Deb are always working together to do better to add interesting things. To kind of change things up. And I love that idea. Because I think paper really is limitless. And people are like, "What?" But as long as you have that creativity and you really have that desire to experiment, to figure things out, to throw stuff against the wall, "Is this going to work?" I really think you can do just about anything. And I love hearing that.

And just even – I knew from talking with Deb a couple of times, I knew the story. But then once we met with Standard, and I was there when we filmed the video, just to even learn even more

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of all the great things that they're doing. I think it's a really important story to share with everyone.

[00:24:24] DC: We've mentioned collaboration. And in that conversation, we have collaboration between the creative and the printer. We have collaboration between the types of presses and technologies that are going to be used to – one of our episodes is creating a wow moment that we're not going to spoiler alert. People need to watch it. The other one is about partnerships.

And in that, I like to remind people that paper is also a technology and part of a collaboration in all of this. And there is a reason why Deb can count on knowing what her images are going to look like if she uses Domtar paper and works with her printer who has worked out what the magazine wants to look like.

But there are a lot of people making sure that happens before Deb says, "I want to use Lynx paper. And to make sure that creatives will get consistent results that they can count on. And Deb can say, "We've sent the file. I don't need to worry about this anymore," which is a gigantic relief for a creative person. Let alone the owner and founder of an agency.

Meredith, I really want you to talk about Domtar's commitment to providing education, inspiration and sustainable materials to the creative community and printers. And what goes into making sure that that sheet acts like it needs to act?

[00:25:57] MC: That's a great question, Deborah. There are many, many elves that work to make your Domtar paper every day. From our mills – we continuously invest in our paper mills that manufacture Domtar products. And the people that work at those mills love what they do. They're dedicated to making consistent product. What you get, you're always going to get. There's not going to be that variation.

I think sometimes, when things get tough, we speak out things that might be cheaper or kind of laying around. And we're sort of not strategic in how we source our paper. It's important to make sure that you're engaged in purchasing from a reputable paper source. And, also, you're consistent in using the same product again and again and again. Rather than jumping around, price shopping, that sort of thing. Because you're not going to get that consistent look and that consistent feel.

Domtar, as a paper manufacturer, is extremely committed to the environment and providing sustainable paper products. Our Lynx product is FSC-certified. That's not going anywhere. Our mills are extremely sustainable. Extremely green. And that's something that we are very much committed to. And we continue to really investigate how we can do more. How we can do better for our communities. How we can do better for the environment.

From a marketing perspective, I very much believe we need to do more to help educate our creatives, our marketers, our printers around paper. That's one of the things that we're working on now is building out a more robust education platform. We've launched our Cougar Paper Trails. I can share more about that later maybe.

But, really, we have a lot of people that are coming into our industry. It might be folks coming into the print industry. Folks coming into that creative and marketing space. And the paper education isn't quite what it used to be. We have people leave. They're not sharing their knowledge with younger folks.

I personally found it very important to do more. To provide more resources. But really to provide it in ways that are more digestible, that are easier to understand. We're notorious as an industry. We're talking about paper. But we think everybody can speak our language already. And they can't. Trying to break it down to the basics.

And I actually had the honor of presenting our newest piece to Deb's group a couple of – well, I guess it's been about a month or so ago. It was exciting to show it to them first. They actually were the first – my guinea pigs in presenting it. But really to engage with them. To see what they're interested in. To see what questions they had. Because we are committed to the sustainability of this industry both the paper and the printing industry. And we want to make sure that we all see it succeed, and grow and continue to flourish as the years go on.

[00:28:59] DB: Meredith, thank you. because education is so important. And you're right. I think when I was back in art school, they taught us all about paper. And they're not doing that so much anymore. It's our responsibility to pass that information on.

To that point, one of the main reasons that we chose Lynx is because of its sustainability. Fig Industries, our company, is a certified B Corporation. And that is a benefit corporation. Every three years, we get recertified and we get graded essentially on our environmental footprint, on our cultural footprint, on how we treat our team, and our community and the impact we have on the community. That is very, very important to us. Which means that we have always printed on an FSC-certified paper. We needed to continue that when we made this switch.

Lynx is actually – we print on Lynx Opaque Ultra. And it is on sustainably, of course, wood fiber that's manufactured in North America. And that was really a non-negotiable for us.

[BREAK]

[00:30:04] DC: Like what you hear? Leave us a comment. Click a few stars. Share this episode. And please subscribe to the show. Are you interested in being a guest and sharing your information with our active and growing global audience? Podcasts are trending as a potent direct marketing and educational channel for brands and businesses who want to provide portable content for customers and consumers. Visit printmediacentr.com, click on podcast, and request a partner package today. Share along and prosper.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:30:39] DC: I love when a partnership comes together. As they say on the A Team. Or a plan comes together. Deb, when I first introduced you, I mentioned that Fig Magazine is a printed product. Because it is a product now. And I really wanted to leave some time for you to discuss about, talk about the growing Fig family and how people listening to this podcast might become part of it.

[00:31:06] DB: Yes. Thank you for that opportunity. We have had other locations of Fig beyond Lancaster that were company-owned in the past. And just the beginning of 2023, we launched our national franchise. We do have the ability now to spread the Fig love to other cities across the country.

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We currently have Fig in Columbia, South Carolina. And also, in Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania. And here in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. And so, we would like to – we're talking to several cities right now and we would like to see this love local message be able to spread to other cities.

And the cool part about it is it's about collaboration. It's really using the Fig platform and harnessing that power of that message and that mission and putting it in the hands of local agencies and design studios who want to create Fig in their city.

I've been doing this personally for 18 years since Fig has been around. And it's just – for me, I happen to be an extrovert. But for me, I love being out there in the community all the time. And it really just has been a joy. And we want to be able to connect that same energy to other studios and agencies in great cities.

[00:32:27] MC: I just want to share one insight that I think it's very important for this audience. No matter if you are a printer, a design, a marketer, anything within this realm, I encourage you to be bold and not be afraid to take these little small ideas and grow them and nurture them. Because Deborah started with this little seed of wanting to do good and wanting to make change in her community. And it has grown and it's turned into this really beautiful thing.

If you ever have the opportunity to stop in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I said it right, finally. If you're from upstate South Carolina, you know it's Lancaster. I get ridiculed every time I come to Lancaster because I don't say it right. But if you ever go to Lancaster, you can really see. If you spend five minutes with Deb, if you walk around the city, you can really see the impact that Fig and Fig Industries have had on the community.

Columbia is my old stomping ground. I went to the University of South Carolina. Go Gamecocks. And so, it's fun to see this beautiful idea has really grown into something really great. And I encourage people, if you're in a smaller town, if you're in a town that could benefit from basically really great PR and really beautiful stories, welcome this idea to your community. Because I think we need to do more to help our communities flourish and to help our communities grow and remain sustainable.

There's a lot of beautiful history and a lot of beautiful things in these older cities that I think we need to do more to promote. I would encourage people to reach out to Deb. They're doing

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really great things. She's got a really great team at Fig. I would encourage you to reach out and connect with her if you can.

[00:34:04] DB: Thank you, Meredith. That was so kind.

[00:34:07] MC: And it's from the heart. I don't say that all the time. But it is from the heart.

[00:34:11] DC: Links for everything you need to connect with Deb, learn about how to franchise, learn more about Lynx paper and all the offerings from Domtar in the show notes. Until next time, everybody.

First of all, ladies, thank you so much. And to everybody out there, print long and prosper.

[OUTRO]

[00:34:31] DC: Thanks for listening to Podcasts From the Printerverse. Please subscribe. Click some stars and leave us a review. Connect with us through printmediacentr.com. We'd love to hear your feedback on our shows and topics that are of interest for future broadcast. Until next time. Thanks for joining us. Print long and prosper.

[END]

Mentioned in This Episode:

Read more about Fig, The Standard Group, and Domtar: <https://paper.domtar.com/project-peacock-fig>

See Fig Magazine, and meet the team that creates it in this episode of Project Peacock: <https://projectpeacock.tv/video/create-a-city-magazine-to-celebrate-your-community/>

Meet the curiously creative team at Fig Industries: <https://figindustries.com>

Want to visit Lancaster, PA? Fig Lancaster is your guide: <https://figlancaster.com>

Bring Fig to your city! Find out about Fig Franchising here: <https://figmagazine.com>

Deborah Brandt on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/deborah-brandt-55207730>

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Meredith Collins on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/meredith-collins-mc/>

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