

# ‘The Velvet Hammer’: who is Twitter’s new CEO and can she fix its problems?

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“I see I have some new followers,” said Linda Yaccarino, adding side-eyes and waving hand emojis to a tongue-in-cheek post responding to the social media explosion that followed her unveiling as Twitter’s new chief executive on Friday. Still weeks away from taking up the role, Yaccarino, a respected media veteran known in advertising circles as the “Velvet Hammer” for her silky but tough negotiating style, has already had a taste of the shambolic corporate environment that has swept the platform since billionaire Elon Musk bought it for \$44bn last October. Hours after teasing in a post that he had appointed a new chief executive, a role he had described as a “painful” job that anyone would be “foolish” to take on, Musk confirmed speculation that Yaccarino had accepted the challenge. The 60-year-old New Yorker leaves a role running the \$13bn annual ad sales business at the Sky owner Comcast’s broadcasting division, NBCUniversal. Prior to Musk’s announcement, she had been rehearsing to lead the company’s annual pitch to advertisers on Monday in the biggest event of the year for the business. Instead, Yaccarino will need to channel her considerable skills to convince many of those same advertisers to return to Twitter, which has seen ad sales halve from about \$5bn to \$2.5bn as brands have balked at Musk’s moves to drastically relax content moderation policies. “She is ideal for the job,” said Sir Martin Sorrell, the founder of marketing services giant WPP and digital ad business S4 Capital, who most recently spent time with Yaccarino at the Cannes Lions advertising event in the south of France last year. “I don’t think Musk could have found anyone better for understanding advertisers, both in analogue and digital.” Yaccarino has softly taken Musk to task over his cavalier decision-making and penchant for using social media to make announcements that have landed him in hot water with regulators, telling him at a recent event to perhaps refrain from making posts after 3am. However, when she suggested he be held to a “different or higher standard” of conduct, due to his ownership of Twitter and popularity on the site, the world’s second richest man shot back that would be a “diminishment of freedom of speech”. The appointment of Yaccarino, whose Instagram account features shots with stars including Vin Diesel, Rami Malek and Kim Kardashian, has prompted a scouring of her own background as observers seek to glean her potential decision-making strategy. Her role as chair of the taskforce on the future of work at the World Economic Forum in Davos, a target for conspiracy theorists and an event criticised by Musk, led to comments from some quarters suggesting she might undermine Twitter’s absolutist free speech policy. Musk responded with tweets telling critics to give Yaccarino a chance, while also indicating that he would not ditch his free speech policy in search of commercial returns. Some of Twitter’s right-leaning base also voiced concerns about her support for Covid-19 vaccinations and mask-wearing, including working on an educational ad campaign featuring Pope Francis for the Joe Biden administration in 2021, in her role as

chair of the non-profit advertising group the Ad Council. Liberal Twitter users have moved to point out that she has “liked” tweets from figures including Ron DeSantis, the conservative Republican governor with one eye on a potential run for president, and the rightwing commentator Jesse Watters. And in 2018, she was appointed to Donald Trump’s president’s council on sports fitness and nutrition. From a commercial perspective, Yaccarino is viewed as having the experience, close ad-industry relationships and professionalism that Musk needs to put Twitter back on track. Dan Ives, an analyst at US investment firm Wedbush, has described Musk’s move as a “home run hire” for Twitter. Yaccarino, who grew up in an Italian-American Catholic family and resides in an affluent village on Long Island, New York, with her husband and two children, is a liberal arts and telecommunications student who graduated from Penn State University. Her media career began as an intern at NBC Universal, which owns assets including Universal Studios, TV network NBC and the streaming service Peacock. She then joined Turner Broadcasting, which is now part of Warner Bros Discovery, and spent two decades rising through the ranks. In 2011, she returned to NBCUniversal and was said to have been considering a chief executive role, but was not selected to replace the boss, Jeff Shell, when he left the company after admitting an inappropriate relationship with an employee. While Yaccarino has now got her wish, the biggest question is whether the mercurial Musk will cede enough control to allow her to revitalise its ailing advertising business. The Tesla CEO, who has cut almost 90% of Twitter’s staff and overseen unpopular product rollouts and technical issues, has said he will leave “business operations” to Yaccarino – but will remain executive chairman, chief technology officer and head of product. “She doesn’t see it as mission impossible, she sees it as a fixable situation,” Sorrell says. “The big question is, will Musk give her enough room to operate and deal with the brand safety issue?’ That is the primary concern for clients who want to be able to advertise in a less controversial environment.”