

## The Marketing The Ultimate Profession

Your Excellency, the British High Commissioner, Honourable Ministers of State & Members of Parliament, distinguished ladies and gentlemen...

Let me first state that it is indeed an honour to be involved in this inaugural activity of the Global Marketing Network Ghana. I have an even greater sense of pride because this also marks the first **World Marketing Forum** to be held on the African continent. Ghana, has established her credentials as a nation that specializes in notable firsts and therefore, it is no surprise that we were selected to host the continent's maiden event. I shall be investing a lot of time and effort in convincing Darrell Kofkin (CEO of GMN) and the Global Advisory Board that, just as the World Economic Forum has Davos, the WMF needs a permanent home and what better positioning than to locate it in the City that sits closest to the centre of the earth, Accra.

Fortunately for us all, you will not have to endure any attempt by me to transfer knowledge. We have a very competent and expert line-up of speakers to do that. I will restrict myself to general remarks about our profession and the direction in which it is going. Ours is a profession that is firmly mired on the slopes of what appears to be a perpetual growth curve. I often feel that just when I have grasped the theoretical underpinnings of one marketing concept, I am made aware of the next giant leap in the development of the field.

I therefore, thought that a good starting point would be to explore the evolution of the definitions of marketing to get a clearer view of the nature of these changes it had undergone. I must confess that I approached this undertaking with a slightly prejudiced mind, convinced that I would uncover a trail of inconsistency, contradiction and lack of clarity. Certainly, I had personally come across many diverse manifestations of marketing – I had come across marketing as distribution, as merchandising, as salesmanship, as branding, as advertising, as promotion, as positioning, as differentiation, as customer relationship management, as digital marketing and sometimes, as all these things at once.

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Intuitively, I could not help but wonder if this could not be the cause of the credibility crisis that marketing faces today. How can a so called discipline, indeed a profession, have such an identity crisis? Or could this just be the nature of the beast? Isn't a profession meant to be stable and well-defined? So why did the profession of marketing appear to be in such a state of flux?

Ladies & Gentlemen, in the next few minutes, I will share with you some of the thoughts that this line of enquiry generated. I will try to build the case that marketing is indeed a profession and probably one of the most critical when it comes to business. Other professions – engineering, law, accounting, human resource management, information technology, medicine – all appear to have attained a large degree of structure, stability and credibility whilst marketing is often seen as the preserve of creative types, plying a trade that lacks rigour, structure, replicability and most critically, predictability.

There is no doubt about it; the rate of evolution of the profession has been and remains, phenomenal. The profession by its very nature responds to changes in the nature and behaviour of society and so it should not come as a surprise that it has responded accordingly. Yet, this very responsiveness, which forms the essence of the profession, is often perceived to be symptomatic of a lack of structure and discipline.

So the question remains; can an industry that has the quest for differentiation as one of its fundamental tenets be professionalized in the same way that the other professions are?

To begin to answer this question, permit me to share with you what I uncovered as I researched the definitions of marketing. Without exception, every single definition talked about certain common things. In general terms, marketing is about PRODUCTS, SERVICES & IDEAS being made available to the public by some means of DISTRIBUTION at a certain PRICE which was related to its real or perceived VALUE. These common threads remained constant irrespective of the

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time or place from which I sourced the definition. So my prejudice was proved to be unfounded. Yet, there was the inescapable fact that the marketing world seemed to be projecting or promoting a different notion or concept all the time. After all where did concepts such as cross-selling, below-the-line, differential responsiveness, inter-market segments, positioning, re-positioning, perceptual mapping, etc. come from?

I eventually arrived at the conclusion that it was not so much that marketing was changing for its own sake. What was actually taking place was that the industry was responding to changes in the environment. Over time, consumers were becoming more difficult to influence. The balance of power had gradually shifted as consumers became more knowledgeable and had easier access to information. By the time that a consumer interacted with a brand, they would have done a lot more research about it than in the past. How did one respond when consumers expectations were being shaped by information, experiences and desires whose origins lay half way across the globe; in places that the consumer themselves may never even have been to before.

As though that was not enough, the concept of Competitive Advantage, which had held sway since the early days of Michael Porter's insights, was being turned on its head! Whilst the theoretical underpinnings remained valid, its practical application had changed almost beyond recognition. Barriers to entry had become fleeting and transitory as response times to changes in the competitive game fell. The competition, with easier access to funds, access to alternative or upgraded technology and an increasingly global marketplace, were able to replicate successful business models, in real time. As a senior colleague of mine once exclaimed during a board meeting at which we were tussling with strategic initiatives, "Where have all the barriers to entry gone?"

To make matters worse, or maybe more exciting, the profession has had to contend with relentlessly changing technology and its application in information

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sharing. The age of print, radio and TV is being eclipsed by the age of the internet, mobile telephony, social networks and digital devices.

Now, if these environmental changes were singular events in time, then the changes in the marketing body of knowledge and their application would probably have taken place in an orderly and structured manner. But we are all aware that these forces are disorganized, chaotic, disruptive and unpredictable and the marketing profession has had no choice but to respond in like manner.

Some see this continuous evolving as indicative of a profession that is out at sea. In short, this is the main charge often leveled against marketing whenever an attempt is made to pin the “not-a-profession” tag on it. After all, a profession according to the Australian Council of Professions, is supposed to be - *A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and uphold themselves to, and are accepted by, the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized, organized body of learning derived from education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others.*

Upon first looking at this definition, it would again appear that marketing, as it is often practiced would not cut it as a profession. After all marketing types are not renowned for being disciplined – on the contrary, the popular perception is that marketers play fast and loose with rules. On the issue of possessing specialist knowledge and skills, marketing faces its biggest challenge. Everyone believes that they can do the marketers job. The widely held view is that marketing is about common sense and being able to tell a good story. Then there is the dimension of an organized body of knowledge derived from education and training at a high level. The elephant in the room is that marketers on average enter their profession with a lower set of qualifications than most other professions – in fact, there is no universally accepted entry qualification for the

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industry. Unfortunately, marketers compound this by a failure to continually invest in the acquisition of up-to-date skills in their chosen profession.

Based on this, the prognosis looks bleak for acceptance into the community of professionals. Except that there is a contrary view.

Marketing needs to be properly understood – unlike others, it is a profession which cannot be easily codified or defined by a set of rules and prescriptions. Yes, like all professions it has certain enduring fundamentals and there is a growing and constantly evolving body of knowledge that underpins everything that a professional marketer does. But equally importantly, it is a complex and subtle blend of art and science. A marketer must understand the nuanced interplay between all aspects of business. Done properly, the marketer must be involved from the inception of a business/product concept to its establishment on the market and long thereafter.

Therefore, marketing, much more than any other area of business, requires the practitioner to constantly update themselves and to enrich practice by drawing from experiences from all over the world. Marketing **IS** a Profession; and a good marketer must be disciplined, must have high ethical standards and must be directly connected to the sources of up-to-date and critically refined knowledge. A good marketer must continually enhance their own knowledge based on the conviction that their skill can only add value if it is current – in other words, state-of-the-art.

Ladies & Gentlemen, I have sought to establish that marketing by its very nature is complex because it operates at the interface between business and society. In the routine course of their work, marketers have to be many things at the same time – the social scientist, the communication expert, the innovation engineer, the statistician, the IT guru, the cost accountant, the logistics planner, the brand champion, the business model designer..... and, in any specialised field,

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attempting to be all things without the benefit of solid knowledge is nothing short of being a charlatan – put differently, unprofessional.

Arundhati Roy, in her book “The god of small things” described a directionless and culturally bereft people as being “pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away”. The marketing profession, especially in Africa, is at a critical intersection in its growth. If we fail to make the right decisions and choices, this description may be the one that best fits us. In my view, the confluence of the academic resources and the practitioners’ trade represents the only sure route to professionalism for marketing. The Global Marketing Network presents a clear opportunity for marketers to re-position our profession. It offers credibility, recognition and standards. It provides a means for satisfying all the criteria of a profession by connecting a specialized body of knowledge to a set of practical skills. It establishes the minimum acceptable standards of practice and behaviour and galvanizes its membership to maintain these by giving them a common mission. Every marketer who shares these aspirations for themselves and for their profession must join up and be a part of the GMN.

Finally, it is entirely appropriate that GMN is setting out its stall on the continent of Africa, sometimes described as the last frontier. Ours is indeed a continent pregnant with opportunity and therefore, now more than ever is the era of the African marketing professional; an individual with a solid understanding of what marketing is and how it contributes value to the entire business of business; an ambitious professional who sets very high standards and who exercises a relentless focus on the changing consumer and relates it to the evolution of consumers in other countries and in other times. The means to seizing the moment and making the most of the African opportunity lies in adopting a global and professional posture, in seeking to be leaders in all spheres of endeavour.

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May I end by proposing two things: firstly, each and every marketer owes it a duty to the profession to develop themselves such that marketers are seen as an attractive option for the job of CEO. Linked to this, the profession must set out to make every CEO a marketer. This in essence is the GMN proposition.

Secondly, as a continent, we have tried everything to get ourselves onto a growth trajectory - aid, debt, foreign direct investment, debt forgiveness, structural adjustment ... and yet we are where we are. May I humbly propose that now is the time for a marketing led renaissance of the Continent. Such an undertaking can only succeed with the growth in skill, knowledge and numbers of a cohort of professional African marketers. This, is ALSO the essence of the Global Marketing Network.

I thank you for your attention