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Future Proofing Marketing

An Interview with Alison Simpson, Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Marketing Association

Alison Simpson:

Alison Simpson is the new leader of the Canadian Marketing Association and an award-winning marketer with experience in all facets of the profession.



Marketers have plenty to worry about these days. Their budgets are under closer scrutiny than ever. They are being asked to do more with less, just as the discipline grows more complex with every passing day. Consumer attention is scarcer than ever – ad avoidance is now the norm – buying habits are unpredictable. The planning and orchestration of multi-channel campaigns has become fiendishly complicated and highly technical. And there is a shortage of “T-shaped” marketers to do the work. The profession is mostly populated by novices who are infatuated with “fonts and followers”, as the notoriously acerbic brand consultant Mark Ritson puts it, bemoaning the fact that marketing has been dumbed down.

Marketing has split into two competing factions – brand and performance marketers – who co-exist in a state of constant tension, each battling to gain the upper hand, convinced the other side has it all wrong. In fact, the entire profession seems to have come apart at the seams, splintering into many different speciality disciplines, without a unifying model to rally around. Every budget decision, it seems, is a slugfest between duelling priorities. And these days the performance marketers are winning out, since they have the “clicks” to show for it.

On top of all that there are grave threats to the profession itself. Marketing is at risk of obsolescence unless it stops being seen as a cost centre and proves it can make a more meaningful impact on the business. In his book “Quantum Marketing”, Mastercard CMO Raj Rajamannar says marketing is facing an “existential reckoning”. He states that no one at the board level actually understands what marketing does anymore. The general impression amongst board members, he says, is that marketing is just about “ads and selling”. Marketers are held in such low regard, in fact, that most CMOs aren’t even welcome at the boardroom table. Their job is to obey the marching orders, not have a say in which direction to go.

It used to be so much simpler – companies made stuff and marketing’s job was to create demand. But today it is much tougher to draw a direct line between brand-building and market performance. That’s why marketing budgets are always skeptically received. And the low financial literacy of most marketers makes it hard for them to secure more funding. They tend to fall back on jargon that no one gets, least of all the CEO, who doesn’t see much value in marketing to begin with. Most worrisome of all is the long shadow of generative AI, stoking fears of massive job displacement. The grunt work of churning out low level communications – sales copy, press releases, promotional blurbs, e-mail messages, social media posts, and the like - could easily be handed off to an AI tool, wiping out a long-time training ground for marketing interns. The same goes for routine market and campaign analysis. Marketing’s value could be called into even greater question, its scope of responsibility pared way back. All that would be left for marketing to do is make pretty pictures. And AI could even take over that job.

With these doomsday scenarios playing out in their heads, no wonder most marketers are concerned about the future, according to a

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recent survey by the Canadian Marketing Association. The CMA commissioned the survey under the new leadership of Alison Simpson to help map out the future priorities of the organization which was first established in 1967 as the Canadian Direct Marketing Association.

Alison's roots in fact are in direct marketing, specifically digital marketing, but her career path since then has crossed over in to many different disciplines, making her a true "full stack marketer". That gives her a particular appreciation for the importance of upskilling and continuous learning. As a recent McKinsey report states: "The modern marketing opportunity is a skills and talent challenge".

I began by asking Alison why she agreed to take on the job as head of the CMA.

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Alison Simpson (AS): I certainly wasn't looking at the time, and I'd had a number of recruiters reach out to me with some really great roles, but it was always an easy no, because I was working at a startup in the PropTech space and loving the opportunity to build a brand from scratch. We'd launched in Toronto during the pandemic, and were scaling. So, normally if a recruiter called, it's like, "Great opportunity. Thanks, but no. Happy to connect you to someone in my network." But when this call came, it really was, it got my attention for a lot of reasons.

I've grown up in marketing. I absolutely love our profession. I've benefited greatly from being in the marketing profession. I've been involved in giving back, through being on the board for the ICA and for NABS. I've certainly been involved with the CMA on committee, speaking at events. And just the opportunity at this stage in my career to come in and have an even bigger impact on a profession that I adore and have benefited from, I just couldn't say no. So, I took the first interview, met with the board, got to see what a talented board we have, really connected with them and their thoughts around the association. One thing led to another, and it really became an easy yes. It was hard to say goodbye to the startup, but the opportunity to really have a lasting impact on our profession is simply too good to turn down.

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Stephen Shaw (SS): What do you understand to be the vision and mandate of the CMA? And I'm old enough to remember the CMA used to be called the Canadian Direct Marketing Association, and you may remember this too. Converted to the CMA, and hasn't looked back, obviously. But going in, I mean, the marketing profession, we're gonna

get into this subject quite a bit today, is going through some fairly transformative change, especially in the years ahead. What's the board's direction to you in terms of how you steer the CMA into the future?

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And Stephen, you've called out a core part of the DNA of the CMA is really being on top of change, and evolving as our profession evolves. And to your point, starting as the Canadian Direct Marketing Association, continuing to evolve, that will always be core to what the association does, and given the profession we represent, it needs to be. So, the board really are looking for... I've got a strong foundation to build on, which is a wonderful opportunity. I've got a very talented team. We have an absolutely enviable roster of marketing members to our volunteers with the association, starting with the board, but we've got a robust community of committees and councils as well. So, my mandate is really to set the vision for the CMA. And as part of my immersion into the role, I've met with literally hundreds of members. I've conducted quite robust research to ensure that the vision I have for the CMA and how to transform it will be ways that the marketers and our community really want and need. So, I plan to build on the foundation a few different ways. First and foremost, you talked about the industry going through a lot of change. That's only gonna continue to be the case. The speed's only gonna continue to accelerate. So, an absolute priority for me in leading the association is that the CMA become much more future-focused, so that we can really help our members and the profession manage through the absolute tsunami of change that consumers, brands, and businesses are experiencing. And I've got a number of different initiatives under that, but that's sort of the headline.

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Did you go in with a point of view on this? Is that what convinced the board to hire you? Or has your point of view emerged through the five or six months you've been in the job? Or has there just been a fusion of the two?

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It's been more a fusion of the two. Certainly, having been a member of the CMA, having been involved with the CMA, I certainly had a point of view. My conversations through the interview process with the board, it was a lot about uncovering where their heads were and where my head was, to see the opportunity, for sure. And then, when I started, I presented a 90-day plan as part of the recruitment process. And part of what I really wanted to do, I didn't want it just

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to be my opinion and the board's opinion. It's so important that every one of our members and the broader Canadian marketing community have a voice in how we're gonna shape Canada's largest marketing association. So, that's why I've spent a lot of my time since joining in one-on-ones and group meetings with members, and also wanted to do the research, so that we could have a safe and anonymous way for members and marketers to share their thoughts on what the CMA should be doing. (10.10)

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So, you're in a listening mode right now, but to go back to the vision, are you in a position to articulate what that is now? Or are you in a wait state and are going to pronounce it at some point?

AS

So, I absolutely am planning to build on the foundation of the CMA, with a much more future-focused approach. That will involve a number of things, starting with professional development. So, an example of a new initiative is a training course that we've developed in partnership with one of our senior marketing members. And it's, the headline for the course is "How AI Can Make You a Better Marketer." And our first session on that's gonna be in June. So, given ChatGPT and the emergence of AI, we wanted to be very agile, and provide training that our members could benefit from as quickly as possible.

And then another way that we're really being more future-focused is the types of events that we're creating. So, on June 6th, I'll be hosting our inaugural CMAfutureproof, and that's, by virtue of the name, it's absolutely focused on helping marketers manage today's business needs while preparing for the future. And I'm happy that we were able to secure the author of "Quantum Marketing" as our keynote. He's also the global CMO for MasterCard. So, that will be an afternoon of talking through where the future of marketing's going, and also equipping marketers to deliver on today's business needs.

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So, the CMA has, I think, around 400 corporate members. Have I got that number correct?

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Yeah. We have almost 450 corporate members, and then, under those corporate memberships, we literally have thousands of marketers across the country who are part of the member organizations and actively involved with the association.

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Okay. I was gonna ask you that question, because do you see a need at all to expand that membership base, or? Because it's been fairly stable, I think, over the years. And my other

question related to that is, if you've analyzed a change in the composition of that base over time, whether it's shifting within certain industries or new industries? You know, for example, the whole rise of DTC marketing has introduced a whole bunch of new players into this area, and I'm just wondering if you're seeing that influx of members coming in from other industries.

AS

So, absolutely, I would welcome more members to be part of the Canadian Marketing Association, and the makeup of our membership has absolutely evolved as the marketing profession has evolved. So, when I think about primarily all of Canada's top industries are represented, there's certainly an opportunity to get more members in certain industries, and automotive would be a good example of that. We've also significantly grown our agency membership, number of members. We've also got all of the platforms represented. And then with the emergence of new technology and MarTech, we certainly have a lot of MarTech companies that are members. We've got post-secondary institutions, not-for-profits, we've got crown corporations. So, it really does represent the breadth of Canada's business community.

SS

Right. There's a whole, a rise... You allude to it, the whole MarTech industry has just exploded in growth, and clearly the spinoff effect of that is a whole marketing technology profession that didn't exist 10 years ago, and so on and so forth. So, the industry's gone through quite a few changes. And again, we're gonna get into that a bit more. Now, one of the other roles of the CMA is as an advocacy organization, and currently in your sunsights, clearly, is the new privacy legislation to replace PIPEDA. What's the CMA's position on Bill C-27? I mean, certainly you appear to favor it. Modernizing it is I think the term you use. But are there any concerns with respect to the way the legislation is currently drafted? Are there amendments you're seeking? What's the position of the CMA?

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So, I'm six months now into my role. I've already spent a fair bit of time in Ottawa, meeting with all parties, and advocating on behalf of the important need to move forward with Bill C-27. And the primary reason for that is the current privacy legislation was created 20 years ago, and it's principle-based, and it's held up surprisingly well for 20 years, given how much the digital landscape in our profession has evolved. But it is absolutely time to have it updated. It's time to have it updated to protect Canadian consumers. It's

time to have it updated so that businesses can continue to innovate, and market, and build their businesses in ways that make sense for both the economy and for Canadians.

So, my number one priority is to really encourage all parties to make it a priority. It's now gone past second reading. The next step is to go in for committees. But it is so important that Canada's privacy legislation is updated and that it's done at a federal level. So, one of the concerns that we've been sharing is if the federal government doesn't proceed, then the individual provinces could be in a position where they might have to create their own provincial legislation. I mean, when you think of that from a Canadian consumer's perspective and also from a business's perspective, to have to manage through different provincial privacy legislation would be an absolute nightmare. (15.53)

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A patchwork quilt of regulations. So, this would make it certainly more uniform and easier to comply with. The other commentary I've read on this subject is the desire to not...to avoid, I should say, the GDPR mistake, if I may call it that, which is introducing a level of complexity which is proving a challenge for both consumers and businesses. Is that the case here that there's a desire to really simplify it for people, but at the same time, obviously to extend all the data protection rights, etc., that are required?

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Stephen, it's a great call out. We have the benefit of the GDPR being in market now for a few years, and it has absolutely created a staggering regulatory burden that governments can't afford, taxpayers can't afford, and it's stifling innovation and growth. And it also disproportionately impacts small and medium-sized businesses. So, if you think about Canada, where SMEs are 80% of our economy, to have the type of legislation like the GDPR in Canada would be absolutely crippling for SMEs.

And then on the consumer side, they're absolutely experiencing consent fatigue. So, having to log on and say yes to so many layers. There was some recent research where 72% of European consumers say they're annoyed by the level of permissions that are now requested. So, it's not working for business, it's incredibly labor-intensive and expensive, and it's not working for consumers either.

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And so, how do you avoid that kind of bramble bush, if you will, of overregulation in this bill? Like, what are the steps that can be taken to ensure that that doesn't happen here?

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So, two important ones that Bill C-27 address. First, it's principles-based, and part of the reason the current legislation in Canada has held so well for 20 years is because it was principle-based as well. And they're both technology-neutral, so those are two certain advantages, because it gives flexibility so that the law can address rapidly evolving technologies and business models, as well as what Canadians are expecting, and it won't become outdated quickly.

And another really important part of Bill 27 is that it will provide an effective level of privacy protection, and provide additional protection for consumers. So, Canadians have a new right to request that their data be deleted. They have the ability, greater accountability, and transparency requirements for organizations. And any businesses that don't follow the new bill will be subject to the highest financial penalties of any country in the G7.

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When you say principles-based, does that really mean it provides guidance, direction, but not a level of specificity to the actual regulations? I'm not quite clear what that means.

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Yeah, by being principle-based, they're not trying to anticipate every potential application. And when you think...so, six months ago, when I joined, everyone was talking about the metaverse. Now no one's talking about it. And six months ago, ChatGPT was not on anyone's radar. Now it's all we're talking about. So, given how quickly technology changes, to try to have privacy legislation that can anticipate that is, I would argue, impossible. And that's where being principles-based gives the government flexibility to take into account what they can't possibly know will happen in the years ahead.

SS

And my other question related to this is it seems legislation has moved very slowly through the funnel. What accounts for that? Just distractions on the part of the government, not a priority?

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Well, I've never worked in government. The advocacy piece of the CMA is quite new to me. And so, coming from the marketing world, where you and I are very used to things moving at warp speed, I share... It's been an education to see how things move. Part of it is priorities, and obviously the government has a lot to manage through, and that's a big part of why we're advocating to the degree that we're advocating, for the importance, and to keep this high in the priorities of all three political parties, and really help have them understand how it's gonna benefit Canada's economy and Canadians to make it more of a priority. (20.24)

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Right. So, well, it's very exciting to see you energizing the CMA, because I've always thought that...so, the CMA did have a big role to play here in helping guide the industry forward. And I kind of wanna move into that a little bit. You mentioned AI as being a key area, and clearly it is on everybody's minds. And it's interesting, you've got a session about how it's gonna help marketing as opposed to replace marketing jobs, which I think is people's main concern. Are there other industry issues that you're considering focusing on? So, there's obviously privacy. AI is a concern. Are there other big issues that you're monitoring and need to somehow intercede?

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So, we're certainly monitoring both issues, and then where we see opportunities. So, on the regulatory side, the other important priority that we have right now, the Competition Act is getting updated. So, on behalf of the marketing profession, the CMA is very involved in that as well. So, that, on the advocacy side, will continue to be important. And I'm very lucky to have a very talented team in our public affairs department, and then we have a number of members who are chief privacy officers of big companies within Canada, who are part of our public affairs committee. So, for us to be able to go to government with the breadth of expertise that we have is a really powerful combination for the marketing profession here, for sure.

And then when I think about future developments for the marketing industry... I'm a marathoner, I love to run, so I'll start with a bit of a running analogy. When I look at what marketers are faced with, we really need to win today's race while running tomorrow's. So, if you think about how quickly the pace of change is happening, how instead of managing two big technological changes at a time, there's now dozens that we need to manage through, that's where the CMA, from an education perspective, from a thought leadership perspective, our ability to bring together the Canadian profession, and talk through those emerging opportunities and issues, and figure them out real-time is incredibly powerful, and a crucial role of the CMA. And then, in my outreach and the research we've done with our members and Canadian marketers, a number of themes have emerged, and I can share some stats with you as well.

So, when I spoke through the research to the Canadian marketing profession, 97% of Canadian marketers prioritized

the future of marketing as absolutely the most important thought leadership that they want from the CMA. Now, obviously, that's a very big topic, so when you dig a little bit further into the research, 94% really are interested in how the latest technology advances are impacting marketing. Ninety percent are looking for learning and support on emerging trends, ChatGPT and Web 3.0 certainly being high on the list. Ninety percent are also really looking to us for privacy, competition, and other regulatory developments, and making sure that we're representing the profession, and doing everything in our power to ensure a level playing field for our profession moving forward.

So, those are all around the future, but there's also a good mix around today. So, if you think about the marketing roles you and I have held, we're always needing to deliver the business results for today and this quarter at the same time we need to be preparing for the future. So, 92% are looking for the CMA to help support how marketing is driving business results. Ninety-two percent are looking for best practices in measurement and investment across channels. So, it really does bring to life the need for the CMA to be supporting our profession to deliver the business results today, at the same time that they're preparing and evolving for the future.

SS

So, I'm going to come back to that question, because it's a huge one, in my mind, and has been for some time. Let's get into the state of marketing a little bit. And, you know, I just wanna say that marketing's always had a bit of a PR problem with the general public, kind of viewed synonymously with advertising, and Don Draper halo effect didn't help matters. And I could be wrong here, correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think marketing's a priority career choice in universities either. And it seems to me that a lot of people who get into this profession do so either accidentally, it's the last thing standing that they wanna consider, or they've had a communications background, it's the closest thing they can come to what their initial career option was. I guess my question here is, what can the CMA do to help make marketing more of an aspirational career path, for marketing to be seen, and I think these are your words, as a key driver of business? And today, certainly, I don't think it is. (25:35)

AS

So, we are already doing something. And you're absolutely right. It's ironic that the marketing profession has a bit of a marketing awareness challenge, for sure. But we have a

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robust program that's in partnership with RBC, called CMA NXT, and that's all around being on campus, and building communities and advocating and building awareness for marketing as a really desirable profession. Since I joined, we've evolved our approach to that as well, and we've hosted two virtual networking sessions, where the last one we had in March, 700 students from across the country joined our virtual networking. And they came to listen to 4 different marketers who are 5 to 10 years into their career, talk about marketing as a profession, what attracted them to it, why they're enjoying it, and to give students a real-life example of what it's like to be in marketing.

We also, through the work we've done with CMA NXT, we have an active community of 14,000 students across the country. So, we're working hard to bring more awareness to marketing as a profession. And when you think about it, like, I love our profession. You've been in it for a long time as well. Clearly there's a lot appealing about it. What attracted me to it is it's incredibly creative, and it's creativity to drive commercial value. So, I thought I'd be a lawyer at one point. Thank God I wasn't. Like, what has brought me to this career, what has kept me in this career is the business impact that we can have, and the way that we understand consumers to a degree that no one else around the executive tables I've been part of truly does. And that's powerful from a marketing perspective, but it's at least as powerful from a broader business perspective. For us to truly be the voice of consumers is, I think, a wonderful opportunity, and certainly an opportunity that I thrive on.

SS

Yeah, it's interesting, and I think, you know, we both, earlier in our career, marketing would've been held in higher esteem. It seems to have fallen out of esteem. And I do wanna get into that subject a little bit as well. I know that I interviewed David Kincaid a year, year and a half ago, or whatever, and he was bemoaning the fact that, you know, he grew up and his career was all around brand marketing. He said that discipline has virtually disappeared from a lot of businesses today. And this is what I was alluding to, that marketing really has a job to be done here to refurbish its image. Now, let me ask you, on that subject, that... And you are what I would call a full-stack marketer. Your list of specialties that you've mastered over the years is quite long. In your career, and you started out on the agency side, how has marketing... And this is 20 years or so. How has marketing changed in that time?

AS

You're being generous.

SS

Well, I won't say much more about the length of my career because it's gotten pretty long. How has marketing changed over that time? What are the big ways that it's changed from the time you started out in this profession to where it is today? Obviously, technology being, you know, a given here, but beyond that.

AS

Oh, that's such a great question. We could spend the next two days going through how, the many ways that it's evolved.

SS

That would be fun.

AS

That would be fun. So, many ways. Technology would be the obvious one, but the breadth of responsibility for marketers, and this is a little bit polarizing. So, in some ways, some marketers have become primarily advertising or focused on MarCom, and then other marketers, to use your expression, full-stack marketers, where it's everything from running a P&L, being responsible for product development, product launches, being responsible for the customer experience, for data analytics, for building out loyalty. And that's certainly the side of marketing that I've primarily been on and enjoyed. So, when I think about the toolkit that I've built, I think marketers can choose to go very deep in one area and be quite successful.

My approach has been I wanted to have a broader approach, and ultimately, to have a business accountability. That comes from very early on in my career. One of my very early roles was a combined sales and marketing role, and that really taught me that any marketing we do needs to be in the interest of advancing the business, and ultimately, making a sale or achieving a business outcome. So, having that experience early in my career really shaped my approach to marketing. And I think that that, from a profession perspective, I think that's an opportunity for us as marketers to raise the credibility of the profession by being as focused on the business outcome that we're driving. And certainly, in my conversations with marketers across Canada, they are here doing the profession they love in the interests of driving business forward. (30.53)

SS

Well, you started out in digital marketing at a time when, really, web was a department on its own, and no one really understood it very well, to today now it's, all marketing's practically digital marketing. I would think that's the big change. But the other one was what I was alluding to earlier,

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with respect to the concept of brand marketing itself. I was just reading a piece by Mark Ritson who was bemoaning the fact that there's very little literature on the subject of brand diagnostics, on planning, on, you know, both considering short and long-term performance. What's your perspective on that? Do you see a gap there and a need for the CMA to step in and help address that?

AS

I think it's a good example of the classic pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other. So, performance marketing, and with digital marketing, where we could draw a more direct line from action to sale, was a novelty, and something that marketers were craving to be able to say, "I can absolutely demonstrate how my marketing is driving a business outcome." So, the pendulum swung very far on that side. Now we're starting to see it swing back, and I'll use Airbnb as an example. They now are investing more of their marketing dollars on the brand side, because they have seen the need to build the brand awareness and build the brand for tomorrow, and being primarily focused on performance marketing wasn't gonna drive the long-term brand value and long-term results that they needed. So, I think in that way it's a classic pendulum swing, and it will balance out.

SS

Well, we're gonna come back to that question too, because I think, in marketing... I think I've read a study where just 15% of marketers are over the age of 45. So, you know, marketing is the only profession I know of where experience doesn't seem to count for very much. And maybe that's because things change so quickly. My own personal observation is that most marketing departments have been hollowed out, that there's no such thing as a senior decision maker anymore. A person is being given authority and responsibility with two years on the job, two years of communications training on the job. They don't seem to know even the basics of business. Financial literacy is abysmal. There just seems to have been a fundamental change in the character of the profession, and that, I think, has affected the ability of marketers to have any influence in the boardroom today. Like, I know that's a maybe extreme opinion, but it just seems to me that that's what's happened to the profession.

AS

So, it's a great question. It's obviously a very thought-provoking question as well. And when I sort of step back from it and think about my experiences and the experiences I've had in talking to the board and some of our senior

members, I'm seeing a lot of Canadian marketers who are older than 45, who are in senior leadership positions and do have the credibility and trust from their CEOs and CFOs for advancing the business. That's not to say that our profession certainly couldn't benefit from valuing age and experience to a greater degree. I'd certainly say, would agree that there is some ageism in our profession, and I think the onus is on marketers of all ages to really stay agile and curious. Part of the way I've thrived in the industry is always looking at what new skills should I be adding to my toolkit, and being very deliberate in doing that.

Other marketers that I might have worked with 15 or 20 years ago, if they didn't have that curiosity, if they weren't open to testing and trying new technologies as they emerged, it gets hard to catch up if you haven't stayed current. So, I think that's on the onus of marketers of all ages to really stay on top of and testing how the profession is changing, and then also being very protective of the consumer knowledge they have, and bringing curiosity there to make sure that they're understanding where consumer sentiment is, where Canadians are gravitating towards, because there's such a richness in opportunities if you really understand the consumers you have, the consumers you lost, and the consumers that you want to attract, and have a disciplined approach to that type of segmentation as well. (35.56)

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Well, it's interesting because you referenced performance marketing, and you're seeing a pendulum shift back to a greater mix of traditional brand marketing, if I can put it that way. But go back to Ritson for a moment. He calls it the tacticization of marketing, and it's all about fonts and followers. And I can't help but draw a direct line between the age question and that. And, in that today's new generation of marketers lives on social media, therefore that is their main focus, and that falls on deaf ears in the C-suite.

And the other factor that I think about is the financialization of business decision making, which is something David Kincaid talked to me about as well, that the decisions aren't being made based on what the customer needs and wants. It's how do I hit my growth figures over the next quarter or next quarter. Like, the corporate priorities seem to have shrunk in time span, and that's affected marketing's ability to be thinking about the long term. Sorry for the opinion piece, but what's your perspective on that?

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So, I think the onus on marketers is to be able to talk the other languages. So, how you talk to a CEO, how you talk to a CFO, if we don't understand what's important to them, what their hot buttons are, and if we can't define and clearly articulate how marketing is going to advance their business goals, is going to help them meet their revenue and profitability and growth targets, then it becomes very easy to be dismissive of marketing. So, I think we as a profession need to own that, respect, and have the confidence in how the important work we're doing is delivering business results. So, when I think about CEOs and CFOs that I've worked with, they don't care as much about the how we're doing it. It's like, what results are you driving? And if you build that relationship and speak their language, they will trust us as marketers to go, and hold us accountable, to delivering those results that we've signed up for.

SS

Well, the holy grail, certainly, is being able to prove marketing ROI, and that becomes, seems to be a more elusive challenge than ever, given the level of media fragmentation, the fragmentation of marketing into many different disciplines, all clamoring for a piece of 12% of, what is it? Marketing budget study, 12% of overall expenditures? You know, clamoring for their piece of pie, and how do you do that? Is that something the CMA can help with, going forward, is helping create integrated performance frameworks that enable that argument to be made at the C-level suite?

AS

So, we're certainly, your earlier point around it's very important to understand how to translate marketing into ROI. We absolutely have training around marketing metrics, and understanding how to translate and articulate marketing to ROI. It's part of the standalone training, it's part of the Chartered Marketer program. And then we also have a number of councils and committees that are looking at media measurement, and how can we more clearly assign attribution. So, we certainly don't have all the answers. That's gonna be an ongoing challenge. But we absolutely are bringing together the right members. And one of the sessions we're gonna have at CMAfutureproof is around some new technology that will enable that as well. So, it's absolutely a conversation that we are part of. It's tools that we are helping develop, to make the profession better in that area. And that's gonna be ongoing work for us as a profession, for sure.

SS

Yeah. And I have to think, just on the technology question, that there is so much technology out there. The concept of these Frankenstacks, you know, multiple software platforms stitched together through APIs is a challenge for a lot of organizations. Your ability to connect the technology partners to companies would be key as well, I would expect. You'd be able to help to showcase some of these technologies, and bring forward use cases that demonstrate its power. (40.23)

AS

Absolutely. And we actually have some... CMA has some thought leadership around, as you're building your MarTech stack, here are some of the considerations you should go through, here are some of the questions to understand what your particular needs are and what the right MarTech stack is for you. And then we certainly can, beyond the tools that we already have that can enable marketers, we can also connect them to members with expertise there, that can help them in that journey.

SS

Now, and then the other, I would say, argue, undeveloped, if I may use that word, part of this profession remains analytics. And I'm speaking here both of marketing analytics in its planning form, and what a lot of people talk about today is the analytics used to actually drive customer engagement, and then lack of expertise and depth in the industry around this. Now, I know these are subject areas, pet subject areas for you. How does the CMA help to address that gap in the marketplace?

AS

So, we do it a number of ways. We certainly do it through, we have a number of thought leadership articles. We also have a data analytics council that provides great input there. We actually added to the Chartered Marketer program, we added a new elective this year around insights, which is all about what you're talking about, because we, knowing that that's an important area of growth and learning for marketers, we wanted to ensure that it became an elective of the Chartered Marketer program as well, so we launched that earlier this year as well. So, those are some of the ways.

SS

Yeah, and to me, the soft underbelly has always been connecting emotional drivers to behavioral drivers, and bringing those two together to form a greater insight. So, there's a need for the industry to evolve. Are you working with external learning institutions, universities at all, and developing curricula around some of these subject areas?

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AS

So, we actually work with a number of marketers. So, across very different industries, primarily Canadian marketers. So, they're a lot of our instructors. We co-create content together as well, because we really want to work with marketers who are living and working in the particular area of expertise. And then we do, we have post-secondary institutions that are members of the CMA and that are actively involved in our councils as well. So, we do have a few that are part of our facilitators for different training sessions as well.

SS

So, I wanna talk a little bit about the marketing model. I referenced this earlier in our conversation. And, you know, marketing, for the most part still lives and breathes the AIDA model, to some extent, to a large extent actually the 4 Ps model. But those models were built 60 years ago. They're built for a world that doesn't exist anymore. And, you know, there's certainly a lot of books out there addressing new models, new frameworks, etc., but none seem to be adopted very quickly by anybody. So, we live in a very fractured landscape.

Do you see a requirement here, again, for the CMA? Or let me ask this differently. Do you envision a shift to a new model, a standardized sort of model approach, which incorporates all of the various elements of marketing that's in play today, along with a performance framework? I think Kotler calls it a more holistic model. So, the de-emphasis on tactics, the emphasis back to strategy. Do you see a need for the CMA to support and put forward some concepts around what that could look like, to help steer the industry forward?

AS

I think we can and should have a role in that as well. I think you nailed it with too many marketers have moved to... And this is global, not Canadian, have moved to tactics over the higher-level business strategy and role that marketing can and should have in advancing business goals. So, when I look at the 4 Ps, they're relevant, I think they're still relevant. The fifth P that is missing is people, like, having the customer at the center of it, because no matter how the technologies are changing, ultimately what marketers need to do is understand what need they're delivering for a consumer, how they're doing it in a different and compelling way to the competitive set, and what do they need to do to actually motivate that action to grow their business.

So, when I look at the 4 Ps, it's, the missing part for me, really, is the consumer should be at the center of it. And then

we, as a profession, while we need to understand and manage and think through how technological advances are changing how we market, we cannot lose sight of the core principles. And when I'm talking to Canadian marketers and members, another really important role for the CMA, and a challenge that they're facing, is the soft skills, and how to make sure that we're not just building marketers who know how to build marketing campaigns, but we're building business people, who are marketers. (45.46)

SS

So, that's exactly right, and I think, the way I expressed it to folks in our shop is that you need to think of yourself as a change agent, you know, an agent for transformation within the business. If businesses are going to become more customer-centric, I mean, they say it, but they don't really do it, then who takes the lead on that? And it's, to me, a big issue in organizations. Marketing should take the lead. But marketing often shies away from that role for whatever reason. They don't see their larger mandate being customer experience. They still see it as selling and not servicing. What are your thoughts on that?

AS

So, I am in passionate agreement with you. Customer experience, since I was at Bond Brand Loyalty, when I was at Holt Renfrew, I was the SVP of marketing and customer experience. I also had a data analytics team and loyalty team. So, absolutely, the marketer has a tremendous opportunity to be the voice of the customer around that executive table, and not just from a marketing perspective, but from all aspects of the business. And I think that, in many ways, that can be our superpower, because there isn't another executive role that should know the consumers to the degree that the marketer does. And if we're looking for increased credibility and influence, that's such a powerful way to have that. And part of what's bode very well for me throughout my careers is knowing the consumer and the prospects we're trying to reach, better than anyone else, makes you the person that people come to for advice, whether it's on store design, from a retail perspective, or even, like, how to invoice, from other businesses' perspectives. Like, what are we doing to make sure that the consumer's priorities and sensitivities and pain points are being paid attention to across all aspects of the business?

SS

Yeah, Scott Galloway argues that, you know, marketers should see themselves as their connection to the marketplace,

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and that's how they should sell themselves into the C-suite. It's interesting, I don't know if you've seen the movie about Blackberry that's just come out ...

AS

Not yet.

SS

...a great book, called.

AS

I'm looking forward to it.

SS

Terrific movie. I have to say it's very, very well done. And I'd read the book, "Losing the Signal," which is a fairly detailed examination of how Blackberry rose, and failed eventually. But you look at that situation, you realize that was a failure of marketing on the part of Blackberry. Not seeing where things were going, but wanting to look at the way they always viewed the world, which is, it's important for that device to have the keyboard, and Steve Jobs saw it differently, and the world got changed, swept out from under them, actually, in a very short order of time.

AS

That's such a great example, because you could say Steve Jobs was primarily focused on seeing where consumers' desires were evolving to, and that's bode very well for Apple.

SS

Precisely. Well, there's lots of case histories like that. I wanna ask you, get into a little discussion in the time remaining here, in terms of the future, and the next generation. So, we've got Gen Z now entering early career years, coming in with quite different attitudes toward job meaningfulness, in terms of their feelings about authenticity, so, both as consumers and as careerists. So, it suggests that a major generational shift's about to happen. How do you think that's going to impact marketing? What's going to be the lasting impact of this generation on the shape of this profession and how it evolves over the next number of years? (49:40)

AS

It's a great question. So, I think, in many ways, it will, I think it can be enriching to marketing, because if our audience are looking for authentic experiences and relationships, are looking to brands to contribute to their lives as well as the betterment of society, I think that's a very rich territory for the marketers that see the opportunity first.

SS

Well, you certainly have a lot of attention being paid to the concept of brand purpose, which is the brand standing for something other than selling you stuff, and that seems to have gained a lot of traction. Do you see that being wholeheartedly embraced by this generation, and really running with that idea, and steering clear of organizations that don't declare

themselves to be in the interest of the public good, or good corporate citizens? Do you see a convergence there?

AS

I think there's certainly increased visibility when a business says one thing and acts a different way. And I think the accountability will... They'll be held accountable, and the risk in not living up to your commitment will be painful for businesses that aren't smart enough to do it. I don't think every brand should have a purpose. I think every brand should, every business, should be looking to act in the best interests of the communities they're part of, at the same time they're looking to advance their business goals, and I don't see those two things as mutually exclusive at all. So, I think Gen Z will help accelerate that.

SS

Let's talk about, I wanna swing back a little bit to... Because we started this conversation around you polling your members around the top issues and the future, 97%, I think you said, wanted you to help them sort of peer into that crystal ball and see where things are going, but I imagine also to help, you know, shape that future. What are some of the top issues that, in your discussions with CMOs, whether it's corporate members or otherwise, what are they talking to you about? The things that are top-of-mind for them? The things that keep them up at night?

AS

So, talent is actually quite a big one, in looking at...twofold. So, how do I help my team stay on top of and thriving in an environment and a marketplace that is changing so quickly? And how do I help myself, as a CMO, do that? And then, to tie back to our earlier conversation, how do I ensure that we have a robust pipeline of students and young marketers who see our profession as desirable, and something that they wanna be part of for the long term? And the CMA does and can have an active role in both of those areas as well.

SS

So, searching for talent being key, because obviously, given the way the profession is today, so specialized, you need a feeder system to bring people on. What about mentoring, and again, go back to this discussion about ageism and the hollowing out of organizations. Is mentorship play a role here somehow?

AS

Absolutely. And mentorship currently plays a role for us in the CMA NXT program, certainly in the Chartered Marketer program. And part of my vision for the CMA moving forward is we will absolutely be expanding more broadly on mentorship, creating mentorship opportunities through the CMA. Another really important priority that I'm hearing,

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and that certainly is top-of-mind for the CMA, is helping our profession be as diverse as the consumers that we want to attract. So, on that note, we recently launched the CMA DEI Resource Hub on our website, which has an active and growing repository of tools, and advice, and recommendations to make sure that it's easier for marketers to recruit diverse talent, and to be marketing in ways that will be compelling.

We also recently completed our third DEI study, and we'll be sharing some more robust findings from that later in June, but I have a couple of findings that I'm happy to share with you now. So, 96% of the respondents agreed that diverse and inclusive workforces drive better business results. It's also absolutely integral to talent retention and talent engagement. So, what we found was organizations that do not have a diverse leadership team are 10 times more likely to lose talent, and 4 times more likely to have disengaged employees. So, if you think about an industry where talent is a top priority and challenge, diversity really represents a pretty compelling opportunity. (54.46)

SS

I'd say it's funny, because I look at the makeup of our company now compared to 20 years ago. I've been with the company 20 years. And it's phenomenal, the change. Like, it's an incredible polyglot of nations, and nationalities, and it's special. It's amazing. And especially in a collaborative environment where, you know, you're working closely together with people, it really bonds people, you know, to have that kind of interaction.

AS

Plus, the diversity of thinking and experiences, like, the, what you can create together, and there's so many great research reports around, how it delivers stronger business results as well. So, there're so many benefits to embracing diversity in all of its aspects.

SS

Sure, absolutely. And so, because marketing has become, you know, as I say, a very fragmented discipline, a lot of different specialties, what advice would you give marketers, aspiring marketers, I should say, that are just starting out in the field? What would be your advice? And you've had a very diverse career, and worked in many different industries and many different capacities. You've served on boards. What would be your advice to that aspiring marketer starting out, in terms of making the most out of their career?

AS

So, it's true for marketers starting out. I would say it's true for marketers at any stage. Your success is very directly

linked to your level of curiosity, your level of agility, and the degree to which you're willing to embrace change, because we all know change can be incredibly overwhelming and intimidating. If you're curious about it, and can see it as opportunity instead of overwhelming and intimidating, that will bode very well for a career in marketing.

SS

And I referenced you as a full-stack marketer earlier on, and you started out in digital, the right place. You had the experience in loyalty, but you've broadened that experience into other areas. Where should someone start? If they were, you know, to choose a specific discipline to be their entry-level discipline, what do you think that should be? Are they better off starting in an agency capacity or in a client capacity? You've done both as well.

AS

When I was starting out, what appealed to me about starting with an agency was the diversity of brands and businesses that I got exposed to very quickly. So, that absolutely worked for me. And then early in my career, going client-side in a sales and marketing role, that, I didn't plan it this way, but that became such a pivotal part of what shaped me as a marketer, really understanding and being accountable for marketing that ultimately closed a sale, has truly shaped me. So, I think a marketer starting out should start in either an industry or an area of marketing that resonates for them personally, that they can learn from. And I think the starting point is less important than the how open they are to moving to a variety of different roles.

I've benefited greatly through diversity, so my bias would be to encourage marketers to be open to trying very different things, and to choose their roles based on what they're gonna learn, how they're gonna build on the experience they already have, and not be so worried about a title or the salary jump. And I know, especially early in your career, money can motivate, but if you think longer-term, and think about where is the profession going, what skills do I need to add to my repertoire that will open more opportunities for me 5 and 10 years down the road?

SS

And if you had to recommend an inspirational book for an aspiring marketer to read, something that would put wind in their sails and make them think highly of the profession they've chosen, what would that recommendation be? I'm curious. Sorry to put you on the spot. I am curious about that.

Podcast

AS No, it's a great question. So, I would absolutely recommend "Quantum Marketing." I'm also a major fan of podcasts, so "Pivot," and it's not truly...

SS "Pivot." I love "Pivot."

AS ...a marketing podcast, but...

SS But it truly is.

AS ...it's a great podcast. It is in many ways. I would recommend this podcast as well. There's great ones. So, yeah, those would be my top three.

SS Great. Your benchmark for success here, you've got your membership base obviously, is clearly one measure, but as we talked about earlier, there's only so far you can stretch that. What are some of the other benchmarks for success here that you've set out for yourself, that one year from now, you go back to the board and say, you know, "Here's what I've managed to accomplish in this past year?" (59.47)

AS So, success for me will be measured on having increased the CMA's ability to help future-proof marketers, and give them very actionable ways to understand how to position their brands and businesses for the future. That will be through training, that will be through events, that will be through thought leadership. Another very important deliverable will be creating some new forums, and we'll be launching one of these at the end of this year, to make it easy for marketers across Canada to come together, in person and virtually, to learn from each other and to have a safe place to go to talk through and debate and challenge where we as a profession are heading. And then the third measure will be around diversity, and really helping enable our profession to, in the marketing that we're doing, in the teams that we're building, have a truly diverse and inclusive community.

SS Wow, that's a great...

AS Those would be three.

SS Just three, yeah. Big ones. But great mandate. And I just, as I said at the start, I'm so happy to see you trying to re-energize the CMA and pull the organization into the future, because we certainly need that kind of leadership at this time. So, good luck to you. It's a big mandate.

AS Thanks so much, Stephen. It's been an absolute pleasure.

SS Oh, well, ditto. Like, I thoroughly enjoyed this. Like, it's so nice to meet a, you know, experienced marketer who's been there, done it, and actually has some vision and passion. You know, so that's the other thing. You know, I kinda look at, sometimes, folks and say, "How much passion do you really have about this business?" And as you said, it's so easy to have a passion about it, because you're connected to what matters, really, if you're a marketer.

AS Absolutely. We can have a massive impact on the businesses that we lead, and the societies we're part of.

That concludes my interview with Alison Simpson. As we learned, the marketing profession is facing an uncertain, maybe even perilous, future. Businesses are heading into what can only be described as an Age of Upheaval with a massive wave of change expected to impact every aspect of society in the years ahead (the so-called 4th Industrial Revolution). Marketers have an opportunity to take a leadership role in helping their organizations adapt to change but only if they're recognized by executive management as change agents. That means marketers will have to do a better job of ensuring their priorities line up with the strategic imperatives of the business, and show they are making a real difference in achieving the business outcomes that matter to the C-suite. Unless marketers can "future-proof" themselves by becoming indispensable to business success, they are likely to be sidelined and deprived of any role in helping to shape the strategic direction of the business.



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