

# Customer first thinking.



## Brand Experience

An Interview with Allen Adamson, Co-Founder of Metaforce

### Allen Adamson:

Allen Adamson is a leading authority on branding and the author of the book "Seeing the How".



At this year's Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity NYU's marketing superstar and provocateur Scott Galloway asked the audience at his packed session to take a red pill.

"I think the era of brand is over" he bluntly declared, knowing it would rattle everyone in the crowd whose livelihoods depend on brand messaging.

This is the same guy who once said, "A brand is the face of a business strategy". Has he suddenly become an apostate? Not exactly. He was simply acknowledging what everyone in the room is reluctant to say out loud (especially if they work for an ad agency or media company): traditional brand building through advertising is dead. "People aren't watching ads anymore", he emphatically said, adding that "many ads are a tax on the people who are unable to avoid them".

Marketers have always had a tough time distinguishing between ads that generate sales and branding. Or they choose to do one at the expense of the other. They take it as an article of blind faith that consistent brand advertising will eventually lead to revenue growth

because they've been repeatedly told that mind-share is crucial to converting shoppers into buyers.

The problem facing most marketers, of course, is that saying your brand is better or best does not make it so, no matter how large a share-of-voice you may have. And getting an ad noticed, never mind remembered, has never been harder in this age of media fragmentation and clutter. Yet advertising remains the main crutch marketers use to promote their brands, notwithstanding evidence to suggest that it is becoming less and less effective, as Galloway noted.

Marketing's job is to build brand equity but that is not to be confused with brand image. Brand equity has to do with how important the brand is in the lives of people. As the legendary brand expert David Aaker once wrote, "The really strong brands have gone a step beyond achieving visibility and differentiation to develop deep relationships with a customer group – that is, the brand becomes a meaningful part of the customer's life".

Brands that are on the periphery of people's lives – that are me-too products – that lack a clear and distinctive identity – that are perceived to be substitutable - are doomed to compete forever on price. Whereas the most successful brands today offer a winning combination of product superiority and an enriching experience. The quality of that experience – the extent to which it becomes a "sharable" story, not just a credible one - is what earns a brand a loyal base of "fans" and keeps customers buying again and again.

The challenge, of course, is gaining the confidence of customers that the brand deserves to be a part of their lives. To do so, marketers have to set their sights on changing those lives for the better, argues the noted brand consultant Allen Adamson, whose latest book "Seeing the How" chronicles how various innovative brands were

able to do so. The trick, he says, is to deeply examine how people go about their day-to-day lives and the obstacles they face. He says the differences between products are so slight today that the only thing that can differentiate one from the other is the novelty and utility of that experience.

Allen began his career at Ogilvy & Mather in 1979. I began by asking what enduring branding lessons he learned then that have stayed with him to this day.

**AA** **Allen Adamson (AA):** Yeah. The one lesson that I've learned, many things, when you first start in any job your learning curve is pretty steep, so you tend to get a lot from your early experiences. But the one thing I got from Ogilvy that has helped me every day is learning how to write and recommend and communicate a strategy or an idea, something intangible. You know, when you learn to write in university, you know, it's more of a narrative and it's engaging. But when you learn how to write for business, particularly the way it was done back in those days, you learned how to put a recommendation in an email, a letter, here's what we recommend, here's why, here's what it gets you. You learned how to communicate in a business way. And Ogilvy was very disciplined, as you know, that, you know, part of their success was their ability to help their clients understand the recommendation, and then put enough rationale in it that it was a smart business decision, not because it sounds like a fun idea, let's try something crazy.

**SS** **Stephen Shaw (SS):** Right. So there's always a logic, obviously, a brand strategy really behind the communications program.

**AA** So I'm thinking, you know, what's the idea? Bring it to life, but why you should do this, one, two, three, four. What are the implications? Just a different way to communicate. You know, they're very diligent about how to write well. In fact, the former CEO way back when wrote a book called "How to Write Well."

**SS** Well, David Ogilvy, really, the lessons he conveyed in those books are still true today. It's one of the great books in advertising that have been ever written. Well, let me just ask you this then. Your career spanned four decades now, you're one of the leading foremost experts in brand building in the world. What shifts have you seen, and I'm describing

these as seismic shifts in brand strategy and thinking, between those O&M days and now that you think have been impactful?

**AA**

You know, I think the biggest shift is that back in the good old days when you solved a consumer problem and something came to you from the lab or engineering, and you had a product. I was lucky enough in my second chapter of my career to work at Unilever, and, you know, they had something called Dove soap, which was a better product. It was not just a soap, it was actually, without getting too detailed, a detergent which had better properties for your skin. And that advantage lasted them for 15, 20 years in the market where all they had to say is Dove doesn't dry your skin like soap. And with that sort of differentiated product, that sustainable competitive advantage, you know, then their task was to make sure to constantly keep that fresh and relevant and make that believable. The world we live in today is by the time someone hands you, I got this new great phone, and you say, let me just do an ad for it or some communications, what's the differentiation? You know, they're gonna be five things just like it - there are very few better mousetraps.

And so from a communication point of view, if you have nothing different that matters, there's no unique selling proposition, you know, it is much more different. I also spent a big chunk of my career working with P&G. Their success was often driven by a very old-fashioned idea, it was a demo. In the middle, they'd show this plate is washed in Dawn and this plate is washed in something else. Look how much cleaner this is. This shirt's been washed in Tide, and by showing the difference, people say, wow, you know, I'm gonna...you know, that shirt is whiter, you know, those teeth are cleaner for Crest. I don't get cavities, 26% fewer. But those days are, you know, gone, you try to define the difference between one laptop and another one, one car and another, it's a nightmare, you know, from the coffee cup holder to the phone interface. I rent a lot of cars when I travel, and when you're inside one of these, it's really hard to tell the difference between a Mercedes and a Hyundai.

**SS**

So, the shift that you're describing here is product parity has forced brands to move away from trumpeting functional value, is what you're suggesting?

AA

Right. Yes. It's no longer as easy as somebody in the lab coming to you and saying, you know, I have this new product that's going to cure headaches faster than anything else. There is, of course, still product differentiation happening, but as a percentage of what's in the market, you don't have to be a marketing expert to know when you go down the aisle at Target and try to buy almost any product, it's really hard to tell the difference in one shampoo and another. It's a sea of similarity, and I think...sea of sameness, a better word. And in that world, the challenge of marketing is exponentially more difficult.

That's one change. And, of course, the other change is that, you know, we've all been trained to tune out more and more because there's so much media coming at us that it's exponentially increased, you know, there are two things that have happened to the consumer. One, they've learned how to put on the force field, and they don't pay attention to anything anymore. But two, they've also learned to multitask and their attention spans, you know, the average consumer has a mild case of ADD. So they're not gonna listen to a long story as to why, you know, this car is better than that car - they either get it fast or they internally change channels. (10.13)

SS

Right. There's an attention deficit challenge for the entire industry as the communications paradigm has changed rather dramatically. And again, I wanna go back to your early training at P&G, and you're right, that was a training ground. Unilever was a training ground, O&M was a training ground, D&B was a training ground. Are there brand orthodoxies, myths that persist today that you'd like to see retired that basically are past their best-buy date?

AA

You know, I think a lot of the basics still apply. They're really hard to do. I'll tell you a story, you know, the need for focus and simplicity to break through because if you have a simple idea, which is my first book, "Brand Civil", you can get more powerful creative, and if you get more powerful creative, you get noticed, you have a better story. And I was working at Ogilvy and I was just outta business school, and I'm very excited. And I was on a coffee brand, and the creative director said, you know, "We've got a new campaign. Why don't you put together, you know, a memo," which is an email for your listeners, you know,

"What are the key points of this coffee and what should we communicate in our new campaign?"

And I was, well, I got this and I went back to my office and, you know, did the work, spoke to the client, and I put together a two-page email, where the beans were from and where it was roasted and the taste. And I was really excited. I brought it into her office and I said to Carol, "Here's the brief. And she looks at it, and, "Oh, really? Now I know what you've been doing, Alan, for two weeks. This is really fabulous. You know, you've got this incredible depth here." And then she takes a corner of the page and rips off the corner and shows me this little piece of says, "Alan, when you can put what you want to communicate about our coffee brand, your client's coffee, in this little scrap of paper, come back into my office again, but never come back in. This is good for the Wikipedia entry, but if you want breakthrough creative, you better figure out the one thing we've gotta communicate."

SS

Well, I think that's always been a challenge for the industry, is really creating concise, creative briefs that cut to the heart of why that brand should matter to people. Right? It's always been...

AA

And it's hard.

SS

It is hard.

AA

But what hasn't changed, I think, is that I'm a big believer that we're all in a world of non-linear problem-solving, conceptual problems. And so you just can't put all the facts on a piece of paper and add 'em up and divide by two and say, there's the answer. The catalyst for breaking through is somebody who is able to look at all those facts and come up with a completely fresh way to tell it that's relevant and different. Because in today's marketplace, there's so much noise that if you just say, I want to tell you about a coffee, and here are three reasons to buy it, you don't even get to reason number one before somebody swipes across and you're gone.

SS

Which just may be the argument that brand may be even more important today than ever, frankly. I mean, in yesteryear, you know, '50s, '60s, '70s when there were actually print publications, you had a little space and time to tell your story.

AA

To tell your story. Right. Now you have a TikTok second. Yeah. That is a piece of that. You know, every year I watch the Super Bowl, like many, for the ads, and here it's like the finals and you've got 30 brands each spending, you know, whatever number they want, every possible celebrity. And of those 30 brands or 35 brands, you know, you probably don't remember 15. You know, not that you're out getting a beer or something, but they just vaporize. The remaining 15, you sort of...I remember a commercial for a car, I don't really remember what brand it is, it had a rabbit in the back, and then for maybe five you say, I remember the car, it was a BMW, and they had this test track, but didn't convince me. And only like three or four get to the end goal, you know, breakthrough, it tells you something about the product that you remember, and that's something they tell you. Just, you know, makes you want to go out and say, I'm gonna buy a BMW. And so even in the World Series of advertising where everyone is...you know, although their scale, you know, is a little different because there's so much pressure to say, hey, look at me, that if you just go with a great story and you don't have a breakthrough way to get it across, you still fail. But it just shows you how even though there's been creativity and marketing and business for a long time, that remains difficult to do.

And what's hardest to do about it, which you know and everyone else knows is, you know, human nature is hard to buy great advertising because it's gonna be different than everything you've seen in your rearview mirrors. So you're gonna go and say, we should do this with this dancing duck. You know, it's gonna sell a lot of health insurance because no one can pronounce Aflac. But, you know, it's never been done before, it seems silly. We can't really prove it, but we gotta spend millions of dollars just to find out if it works or not. It's a really frightening thing. (15.48)

SS

Well, and you talk in the book about...I don't think you use the words divergent thinking, but I think you encourage companies to embrace diverse points of view to get to create a vision. We're gonna come back to that theme because I think it was super important, but, you know, our career started, and we're about the same vintage, I think, when ads were really the primary source of information for consumers. And today, of course, that's blown wide open. So the game has changed. And again, this is something you talk about in

the book is the idea of rule-breaking, which you were just alluding to, is think beyond the guardrails and figure out how to tell either the story differently or create a different value proposition. Again, a key theme in the book, which we're gonna come back to, but I wanna pick up on something else we were talking about a short time ago, which is the idea of differentiation. So in the book, you make the point that points of differentiation alone are not enough to sustain a brand and you also get a little bit to this idea of distinctiveness versus differentiation, which seems to be an ongoing debate. So what will sustain a brand if it's not being seen somehow as big or better or best than the competing alternatives?

AA

You know, that ties to the first point we talked about, which is that even if you have something distinctive, the days until you have three other people that have the same thing are gone, you know, you're instantly gonna get a better mousetrap. Ultimately, a brand needs to solve somebody's problem, you know, at the highest level, the brand or the product or the service has to solve a problem. And you have to constantly be looking at that problem and say, am I solving it in the best way possible, you know, and in a way better than our competition? And often now the difference is not so much the obvious one that your engineers develop.

I mean, I hate to go back to the cell phones, but, you know, you try to differentiate between the 10 leading cell phones, smartphones, and it's pretty hard to do. They all have the same apps, they have the same camera. Maybe Google's phone takes better pictures or, you know, Samsung's has a larger screen, but ultimately they're all playing on that stage of telling you that this thing has features. But I would argue that the way Apple is staying ahead is, yes, they have to have as many features and toys and speeds and feeds as the other brands, but they're winning on customer service.

You call up AppleCare, and especially for now that I'm an entrepreneur, and I'm having trouble with my Mac and I can't get the PowerPoint open, and somebody will spend 20 minutes, 40 minutes, an hour with you. You don't have to line up at a Genius Bar and that soft service to say, you know, I'm buying not only the technology, but I'm buying somebody there that is gonna help me. In fact, when my daughter dropped her phone and her screen broke, you know, she's in school, they gave her a loaner for the week. So until they said... and so thinking through, you know, and that's all

about the experience and that's a whole much more difficult way to compete because crafting that experience. But that's what I mean when I say, you know, you have to zoom out a bit and say, yes, if you have a better phone, do tell that story and hope you have more than 60 days to enjoy your view from the top of the mountain until you find out there are 5 other people at the top of the mountain with you with a slightly better mousetrap.

SS

Well, and just sticking with the concept of service being a differentiator, service to some extent has become table stakes too. And just knowing that customer satisfaction ratings haven't budged in 10 years would suggest that expectations keep rising. So you used to leapfrog in terms of product functionality, today you're trying to leapfrog in terms of service differentiation as well, aren't you?

AA

And it's much harder to do, we can talk about that in terms of some of the findings from my latest book, because, you know, just having someone say, were you reasonably happy with the way we, you know, made your coffee today? They'll say, yeah, but does that mean...? I tell this story often. We were working for a pizza chain in the US., a big one, I won't name it. And they were saying, "Look, we've just done this research and, you know, 78% of our consumers like the taste of our pizza, they like the restaurant, but our sales are down so the advertising can't be right or something has to change."

And then a smart moderator from the research firm said, "Well, let's ask another question. Let's ask, you know, if this company went outta business, what would you do?" And instantly, "Oh, I'd go to Papa John's." So even though they said it was good, it was not good enough to spend 10 cents more on a slice than across the street. So you have to be careful when you say, you know, how am I doing? Because consumers want to give you the answer, "Oh, Stephen, you're doing great." Okay, no one wants to give bad news, but really to find out what it takes to get you to go, "Wow," that's a different challenge. (21.11)

SS

It was a great anecdote in the book. I remember reading that because it harkens back to a client I've worked with where, you know, they were quite happy with their Cust Sat ratings because most people said, "Yeah, we're happy with the experience." But then you asked them the question of, "Do

you prefer us over the competition?" And half the people said, "Well, you're about the same," and that's death to a brand to be considered about the same, I would say.

AA

Right. Exactly. If you can't see the difference, why pay the difference?

SS

Exactly. And so, yeah, it's a key thing. So we're gonna come back to some of these points a little later, but another debate, if I can put it that way, going on in the industry today is the idea of brand building versus performance marketing. I'm sure you saw the article recently in "Harvard Business Review" on this exact topic. There's factions have been created within companies, us against them on this topic. How can marketers achieve some sort of equilibrium between the two, between traditional brand building, which builds the brand for the long term, and this idea of performance marketing, which is really short-term demand generation? How do they get there? It's a difficult topic for a lot of companies.

AA

Well, you know, it's easy if you have a better mousetrap than, to some extent, if you want this performance and just telling that story through demand gen, it works. But in most cases, it's not one or the other. It's both. And if you don't have the brand solved, you're gonna spend a lot more money on demand gen that's gonna be a lot less ineffective. So it's finding that yin-yang and it's hard, you know, it remains hard because demand gen can be, you know, much more digitally, accurately delivered, getting brand messages all the way down to that granularity of every eyeball is a little more difficult. And a lot of brands don't have a clear story anyway. So, you know, people spend money on brand and they're out there saying, you know, we're quality, we care about our customers, and the message, you know, for a brand to be successful, it has to have a great strategy. And lots of marketers, as you know, get instantly enamored with the bells and whistles and the activation, and don't focus on do they have the right story.

SS

Well, it's part of, I think, generally the challenge that marketers have today is they've been expelled, if you will, from the strategy discussions because they are doing exactly what you're talking about. They're talking about activation as opposed to creating new value for customers. I wanna delve into that a little bit more because it does relate to brand,

and again, this is something you touch on in the book is the idea of brand versus branding. They're not the same, right?

AA

Yeah. I mean, I think it's a simple nuance, but if you stop and think. I like to tease 'em apart, a brand is your story. When someone hears your product or company name, when I hear, you know, Delta Airlines, what story pops into my head? You know, branding is how you get that story. Delta's always raising expectations to whatever the brand promise is. I think it's close to raising expectations.

Once you get that story right, then branding is how you get it from the PowerPoint into somebody's head. And it could be advertising, it could be owned media, it could be a customer experience, it could be somebody at the airport, you know, influencers, there are 50 ways to get a brand story or strategy into someone's head. But marketers tend to always look at the shiny objects and get really focused on, are we gonna do influencer or what's our social strategy? You know, do we have enough direct-to-consumer work here going on? And, you know, that's important, but there's usually not enough pressure testing and saying, well, even if I get this story into Stephen's head, you know, is it going to work? Is it the right story? Is it clear? Is he gonna care? So, you know, but because it's so much more interesting on the branding side, you get people say, oh, you know, our sales are down, we must need a new ad, or we must need a new identity, or we must need a new influencer because the instance...if things aren't working, people jump to it must be one of the little levers on the dashboard. (25.46)

SS

Or they're making the case for likes and followers, you know, it's...

AA

Yeah, exactly. You got lots of likes, it's gotta work. And so it's really, as you know, you can have a great brand story, you know, and also fail because you have bad execution, you have bad social media, and so you can fail on both sides of that equation. But if you don't think about them separately and together, if you just think about one and not the other... Yeah, I talk to my students often in class when I do some lecturing, you know, if you go into the Gap, what's Gap's problem? Is it a brand or branding problem? And students will say, well, they're advertising is boring, or the stores are, you know, generic, or the jeans are not that nice, and those are a product. Those are all branding things. And my answer

is, I don't know, I haven't worked with the Gap, but I would argue that if you go in and talk to 10 Gap employees, you just go into the floor of a Gap store and say, can you gimme something typically Gap to wear? They have no clue what typical Gap is. And so, yes, their advertising probably is not great, and their store design and their help, they have lots of other issues on the branding side. But if the core is like if no one on the floor can tell you, you know, "Stephen, this sweater is really Gap, let me tell you why it has that Gap edge," whatever it is, and that's hard to do in fashion, but if you don't start to make that story, if it's just come to the Gap because we've got lots of stuff on the floor or online and we're a decent price, not a good story.

SS

Well, and if you go back to that HBR article, Jim Stengel co-authored it, they try to make the point that tying the concept of brand equity to the measures that matter, the CFO and the CEO, is really key because otherwise, no one really understands what brand even is for the most part, right?

AA

Too many people think it's awareness or, you know, likes as opposed to this, you know, is it a driver of business value? Can we charge more for our product? Because people think, you know, if I buy this toy, it's better than that toy, or this service is better than that service.

SS

There was also an ongoing debate beyond brand building versus performance marketing around brand purpose. And it was the hottest topic of the day for a while. But now there's a lot of contentious debate around that as well. In your view, how important...and this goes back I think to the question of brand strategy, how important is purpose to building strong brands?

AA

I think it can be important, but my take is it's really hard to do and it has to extend well beyond, you know, what the marketing department does. Because to truly deliver a purpose, it needs to be a commitment of the entire company. It takes a long time. You know, if I think of the cases where purpose has paid off, Patagonia, everything the company did was tied to sustainability, from how they compensated their employees to fly, to, you know, carbon...and it was a long journey. But most often today marketers say we have this purpose, you know, and they do an ad campaign and, one, it's hard to believe, and two, you know, they're not convincing people that they really stand for something. So

while everyone gets excited about it, yeah, everyone gets excited about it because it's above the product level, but I think for every 10 purpose brands, only 2 are successful because it's hard to execute.

SS

But go back to a core theme in your book, which is to be successful today a brand has to, I think I'm using your words, be entrenched in people's lives. Is it the idea of brand purpose to say we are there to improve those lives, and if the two can be done in conjunction, that is in delivering value, that does truly improve people's lives? And that's, in fact, what I stand for as a business, isn't that the ideal state here? (30.05)

AA

Sometimes it's too high level. You know, in other words, an old principle is to be successful in brand you have to focus. If your promise is too broad, it's too general. So if you just make people's lives better, and you're a candy company, really tough to do. You know, I think the purpose tends to be...I think it needs to be a promise that's at that level, but something that you can own a little bit and believe.

So I hate to go back to a Unilever product, but I do think Dove's Real Beauty has been a good example of a purpose and end benefit above when I was at Dove, you know, about soft skin, and they've done a pretty good job of staying with it and bringing it to life. And it's relevant for, they're in skincare and beauty, but for every Dove, there are five other brands that have said something either too big or they haven't been able to pay it off even if it's small.

SS

Right. And it only really works if it truly is a North Star for an organization with all stakeholders, not just consumers, right?

AA

Right, because otherwise, if it's just a marketing department, it's a communications...it's a spin thing. And the one thing about consumers is they've grown, they've had a better nose for BS and they're just more skeptical than ever. So if you tell them that you're machine bolt companies here to make the, you know, we have bolts, that it's gonna make the world a better place, click.

SS

Right. I think the other adjunct conversation here is that it's also about values, right? So I think people today want to obviously do business with companies that have good values, and I don't know that you can have good values without being clear about, you know, what value you're bringing to

the world. But I wanna reference one of your colleagues at NYU Stern School of Business, Scott Galloway, he was at Cannes recently, and as his usual provocative self declared, and I'm sure you read this, the era of the brand is over, he said, and one of his proof points was that even some of the most trusted brands in the world, and he referenced Apple as well, are in fact cutting back on ads. What's your perspective on that, on his point of view that the era of the brand is over?

AA

Well, you know, I didn't hear his talk, although I like listening to, you know, one of his seven podcasts that he does.

SS

I dunno he has time to do that.

AA

Yeah. Well, you know, I have trouble with the linkage of Apple's brands to how much Apple spends on advertising. I think part of what makes the Apple brand successful, it's probably least connected to advertising and probably more tied up to the in-store experience, the customer service, the product design, you know, the fact that the core...getting back to my story where the creative director rips off the corner of the page. When I think about Apple, I think about, you know, its core thing on that little scrap of paper that somebody handed to the creative director is if you have to read the instructions, it's too complicated. And if you remember technology from 10 or 20 years ago and you bought anything electronic, even a clock radio if people remember what that was, you know, the instruction book looked like you were gonna launch a nuclear missile, you know, and it was written and translated Chinese, and so there was nothing intuitive about technology and no one wants to be seen, you know, as inept. And so I think, yes, I think brands are different. And I think Scott, yeah, the reason he was able to go to Cannes, you know, and be on his yacht is because he started a pretty big brand firm called Prophet Yeah, He did. It was a great brand. Yeah. And did very well by it, that's for sure. And Scott Galloway, I might add, has a great brand.

SS

AA

Yeah, he's done polishing that pretty well. But not a lot of advertising, but, you know, instead he's probably got a clear brand strategy as to the right amount of edge, the right amount of, you know, surprise and a little bit abrasive, and picking things that are completely contrarian. So he knows, his GPS is already...even though he says brands are dead, his GPS is helping him build a personal brand that's better than most.

SS

Yeah, absolutely. No, I did think that was ironic when he said that. I thought, well, Scott, if you didn't have a brand, you wouldn't be the guy you are today. So let's move on to your book because the book's great, and I particularly like how you interleave your personal stories with concrete examples of companies. And there's really no discussion of advertising in the book at all. This is really about, in my mind anyway, value proposition. But let me just see if I can summarize the gist of the book and just get you to comment on whether I've got this right or not, but it seems that the gist is that you're saying that companies gotta...well, this is the title of your book, but that companies need to be asking how not what, it's the most important thing a brand can do today to be successful, that brands can lead us to experience the world differently. Have I got that right? (35.41)

AA

Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, tying off the ramble we had earlier in the conversation where, you know. Two things are going on. One, there's not that much real meaningful product difference. So if you're only out there saying, buy this brand because it tastes 12% better than some other brand, tough haul, and, you know, the one media channel I haven't talked about that much is that the elephant in the room today is a word of mouth and word of eye, online, are powerful. They've always been powerful, but now so very powerful. But no one gets up and says, you know, I had breakfast...no one gets on social media and says, "I had some cereal this morning and it was okay. Oh, and, you know, it tasted pretty crunchy and it didn't upset my stomach." They don't share good performance, and they don't share ordinary things. They're only gonna share if you opened a box of cereal and a mouse came out, you know, that will do well on social media, or if it was such a phenomenal...that you could run the marathon afterwards you had so much energy. So in that world, you have to look at how your brand, service, product, whatever offer is gonna fit into someone's life and how you can make it... ironically, going back to what you said with purpose, make their lives better in a way that goes a little beyond just it cleans teeth 12% better than the other toothpaste.

SS

Well, and I particularly liked your comment that average is over, average doesn't win you many sales anymore. And to your point, people talk about their great experiences,

the things that they particularly remember, and the bad ones. But so is the objective here to create memorable experiences, is that the starting point here? If you're thinking about, go back to the point about differentiation, how can I create a memorable...?

AA

The objective is...In my generation, and when you started marketing, you started in P&G, say there was a box of detergent on the conference room table. When I was at Kraft, there was a box of cereal on the table. So where we always began was when the product appeared, the car drove onto the showroom floor. And my thought is that, yes, if you have a better car and it's unique, that's a good place to start. But if you're like most cars or most products, there's not a lot there anyway, zoom out and think of how is this product gonna fit into someone's life, and what do we need to do around it to make that overall experience from purchase to use, to reuse, to repair, to convenience better? And some of it could be as easy as taking out some friction so it's easier, but a lot of that friction's already out. For most categories, you know, it's not too hard to get anything anymore, you don't have to line up, you know. But part of it is remembering that a product/brand has to either give a benefit and make it really easy and fun to use or different to use, make it shareable, do something that surprises people, or solve a problem in a slightly different way.

SS

Well, and I wanna jump on that because many of the examples in the book, and all of them are examples of successful companies that had thought in a divergent way about the category, so they've actually rethought the category, how they got to that epiphany is often through personal experience, it would seem. But that seemed to me the starting point, not how can we do this big, better, or best, but it's how can we do this differently in a way that will fit in better with people's lives. (39.40)

AA

Yeah, exactly. And, you know, I don't think, it used to be you needed a big tech offer to do this, but you know, lots of the technology to do better brands is right in front of us. You know, I don't think it made the book, but I took my car a couple of years ago, a year-and-a-half ago...when you buy a car, sometimes they throw in the first service at the dealership, so I took it to the dealership. And, you know, the usual experience, having owned many cars, you know, it's



always a challenging experience when you do car repair, at least in the U.S., you know, they come out and say, “Allen, you know, we’ve looked under the hood, we put the car up, and your blank, blank, blank is not connected to the XYZ. And, you know, unfortunately, that’s a really expensive part. It’s gonna be, you know, \$600.” And you go, I guess I need it, and you hopefully trust the person. And so my car went into the dealer and all of a sudden I get a text saying... you know, open it up and it’s a video and it says, “Hi, I’m at the dealership, and we’re under your car now, here’s a little video and I wanna show you your brake pads. You know, you see this shiny thing, that means they’ve already worn through. Now, I don’t think we need to replace that right now, but I wanna show you that when you come in next, we’re really close. But this gasket here...” And all of a sudden you’re doing, like, a video.

And so for years, I’ve had the same experience no matter if I went to an expensive dealer or Billy Joe’s little garage down the street, it was the same, “Trust me, this is what I found,” unless it’s a tire and you see it’s blown out. But all of a sudden the simple piece of, you know, not quite an iPhone, but letting them take a smartphone and make that, it’s changed...I think it will change how you get car service. No matter what the issue is, you wanna show me, take me under the hood, and show me that belt that’s broken before you tell me I needed one, and you have to trust me.

SS

Yeah, no, it’s a great, great example of really zoning in on an issue that bothers people, and then coming up with what clearly was a very ingenious solution.

AA

Again, yeah, but it’s looking at the consumer and saying, well...and there’s no one saying if you went to someone and said, how can I make your car service experience better? You went to the consumer, they go, well, charge less or make it faster, or, you know, gimme better coffee while I wait. They wouldn’t say, you know, why don’t you take your iPhone and make a little movie of what’s wrong underneath? So you can’t ask the consumer for that because they’ll just say, well, like every other car place, you’re fine. Yes, I think your coffee’s a little bitter.

SS

I wanna come back to that because it’s really key to success here and that’s clear in your book. I do wanna come back to this idea of entrenching the brand in people’s lives because that’s a pretty high bar. Most brands, I would argue, live on

the periphery of people’s lives, they’re not core to their lives. So the word entrenched would suggest that they’re central to those lives. Does that brand have to become indispensable, you know, something they can’t live without? Or can it live on the periphery and still be entrenched in people’s lives? Explain the demarcation there for me.

AA

You know, because there are different ways to get entrenched. You could get entrenched because you have a product and there’s nothing else like it on the market. And so you’re used to playing with this tennis racket, and you’ve always won your games with this. And so even though you can’t define what tennis racket...why your Prince is better than...you know, you’re entrenched. But often today entrenched means they’ve done something...usually it’s to make it better for you and you feeling special or customized that this is my brand. And customization’s been around for a long time, but, you know, I do think, it is still important, particularly in categories where there’s...you know, you look at hotels. It’s hard when you’re in a hotel, traveling on business, you wake up, you don’t know what city you’re in. The room has the same flat screen TV, maybe this one has a fluffier pillow, so creating some differentiation there is gonna be tied to whether it’s a loyalty program or them really knowing you much, much better. And when you travel these days, all of a sudden, every airline, every car is getting better and better at that customization thing.

I recently read...I’m a fan of Delta having worked with them for a couple of years back in my career, but, you know, here’s another example, they added something to their app, which says, when you get off the curb at most airports, it will now tell you not only that you’re at Gate 42 and your flight’s at 10:05, which is nice to know, important to know. You can always look on a screen too, but it will also tell you how long it’s gonna take you to get through security. That gate is a 15-minute walk, you know, the line at the Starbucks there is also 10...In other words, it’s a way... So all of a sudden, you know, providing you with...and once they get you hooked on you know when you fly Delta that if you’re at this airport, the TSA line’s too long, you know, you can’t stop and talk to somebody. So again, it’s like if you ask somebody, how can I make this flight better? They wouldn’t get to, you know, in a crowded airport with people coming both ways, how long is it gonna take me to get to 42B? (45.32)

SS

And this is where I think marketing empathy comes into play, and again, we're gonna swing back to that shortly. I do wanna pick up on one other comment you make in the book, which is customer-centricity is a concept most marketers don't fully understand. I couldn't agree more with that statement. My question to you is, why do you think that is? Why do you think it's such a challenge?

AA

Yeah, one, as you said, it's a cliché. If you ask any company, what do you do, right? We really know our customers, you know, we're customer-centric. It's probably one of the most overused words in business, but I think there are many reasons, but one of the reasons that - I experienced it when I was in marketing - is you're so busy in meetings, reading emails, you know, going from...that you lose your observational skills, you lose seeing things firsthand. And most executives read a top-line customer satisfaction, look at a dashboard, you know, net promoter score up 6%, and that can tell you how you're doing on the macro scale. But, you know, by the time lots of those indicators move, it's usually game over and it's hard to catch up.

And so part of it, I think, is the need for marketers to realize, and this is another premise in my book, that in theory, marketers should be the ones closest inside the company, whether it's a dry-cleaning shop or a big company, closest to the customer. And if they think their job is more than just selling the product, but to really know Stephen and watch him and scratch their head and do a little Jerry Seinfeld, you ever wonder why, they should come back with that. Not so much, so here's how you sell Stephen a pair of glasses. But they should say, you know, "I think we could solve Stephen's problems better if we did..." They need to take a bigger role in innovation and changing the offer and being the one to suggest to their car service friends, you know, in the service department that why don't we show little videos?

So customer-centricity means that they have some macro sense that their customers, as we went back to earlier, are happy. But everyone knows you're happy until somebody gives you a better offer. You know, people were probably happy with the Edsel...not the Edsel, the Model T until the next model came out. So, you know, it's hard to do because it's constantly changing and it does require getting out from inside your bubble.

SS

It's a transformation in mindset from product-centricity to customer-centricity because all of the reasons we described earlier, and the challenges that organizations have in embracing it culturally and organizationally, and how they're organized, which is...I'm approaching that topic here because one of the things you emphasize, and it's so true, is that as the opportunities are incredibly hard to see, they do require, I think you use the word "seeing things other people don't see." Is this an argument for systematize first principles, for divergent thinking, like as sort of a standard process within an organization? Like, how do we get there? You can't hire clairvoyants.

AA

No, I think part of it is, going back to something we touched on earlier, is keeping fresh eyes. So, you know, you go to a company, I'll pick a beer company, and you talk to them about marketing the beer. "I've been in the beer business 15 years. This is how we do it." You know, and they learn what is, and then they feel comfortable in that world until what is doesn't work anymore. And I remember a conversation I had with HBO about eight years ago, and they were doing something really interesting. I didn't put this in a book here, but it was in my previous book, one of my previous books, they would hire interns from universities. And the typical thing for interns used to be, or is, you know, go in this cubicle and here's a pile of numbers and, you know, do something.

But they forced their C-suite to get the interns, to have these 20-something kids, you know, as a way to keep their executive levels understanding what's going on with 21-year-olds and Gen Z and Gen X because they realized that the higher up in the company you went, the more inside the bubble you became. And, you know, it's important... and a 21-year-old will still ever say, "Gee, you know, why don't you do this?" And at a certain point, people don't ask, why don't you do this anymore? They lose that, you know, everything looks sort of normal.

I mean, you look at what the pandemic did, and if I had said to my team, "We're gonna pitch a client in Dallas, but, you know, we'll try something different. We're not gonna fly down to Dallas and go into the conference room. We're gonna suggest that they get on FaceTime and we're gonna do it virtually, and we're gonna tell 'em we work smarter."

But culture...you know, to change people's...you know, and all of a sudden, if you tell somebody, "I wanna fly out and talk to you for 30 minutes," the client will say, "Yeah, that's great. Thank you very much, Allen, but first of all, I only have 20 minutes and I'm not paying your bus fare here, so let's do it on Microsoft Teams." (51.17)

SS

Well, I think that resistant mindset is the reason why a lot of digital transformations, business transformations, in fact, fail. It's such hard work and takes such fortitude and perseverance. And, you know, as I said earlier, like, this podcast is all about marketing transformation and it's extremely difficult for marketers today, I think, to embrace some of the changes that you're recommending here.

So let me ask you this then, if it does require this divergent thinking, how do you organize around that? You know, let's go back to the challenge here. So you have traditional product management in place. You have marketers whose job it is to take what the guys in product management come up with and make and sell it, which largely they've been confined to that role. They aren't the voice of the customer, they should be. I agree completely with that. How do you reorganize to facilitate, systematize. sort of the shift in thinking that's required, and the development of value propositions ultimately, that would enable companies to replicate what a lot of the case studies in your book have succeeded in doing?

AA

You know, if it was one simple thing like, you know, take two aspirins and call me in the morning, everyone would do it, but the problem is it's both...it's multidimensional. But, you know, one of the things, the easy one, is that we tend to, in business, hire people that are just like us most of the time. Oh, you went to this school, you were in my fraternity, you're in. And, you know, all of a sudden you got 10 people, all who had the same experience all looking at the world through this tunnel. And so part of success is, you know, you need to hire somebody from the left and right, not better school, different school, but with a different background, a different part of the country, different experience. So there's that need to zoom out and get people on your team that just have different skills. Otherwise, you know, you'll think you're great, but you'll be...and I see it a lot in professional service firms, when the consulting firm is pitching us in a big company, you know, everyone has a black and white

picture. They all look the same, you know, they'll have the bio. There's, you know, again, a sea of similarity. But they can help you be more aware of that. The other thing that we do internally that's bad in companies, and the bigger the company, the worse it is, and you see it all the time when they're on "The Wall Street Journal" about to go outta business, is there's a culture of Stephen saying, you know, "I think this is the case, Allen. I think we should...oh, right, Steve." There is such a pressure to not disagree with the boss. In fact, before the boss's meeting, everyone says, "Well, here's what we're gonna say. Now, if the boss says he doesn't like it, you know, no one argue with him." And there is this ability to...you know, to be different is hard inside a company, you know, to have a contrarian point of view. And there was a great movie with Robin Williams where he plays..."Dead Poet Society," and early on, he's a crazy poet at this prep school in New England, but he talks to the kids about how important it is to make sure they get comfortable with their difference. Everyone has a difference. And I think in companies, step one is zoom-out hiring, be more...if there's not a good debate, if everyone says great idea, I'd say, you know, danger. Sometimes it could be.

And then there is a colleague of mine who's a CMO of Accenture said this, you know, fail quickly and often, in other words, rather than package it, and let's do the pre-meeting before the fall thing, just get it out there, put it out there and do it quickly. Don't spend a year polishing things and then fail. It's better to put it out there, try it, iterate. And I think we're in that world where execution matters. Lots of companies fail, not because they have the wrong idea but because they only executed it 80%.

I like the Calendly story from the book because, you know, Google had calendars, Apple had calendars, and everyone was doing the same game until somebody in sales said, you know, the problem with the calendar is not inputting that I'm having a call with Stephen at 2:00. The challenge is finding, you know, when is Stephen free. And it's 14 calls and I have 2 assistants doing it, as opposed to...So in other words, it just took somebody who was out of the category and they had all these big tech companies who all had the technology to make a better calendar system, but it was created by an entrepreneur because, you know, they're not seeing the real problem because if you had somebody... (56.07)

SS

Yeah, it's a great example. It's in your drill-down lens chapter in the book, and it is a fabulous example of focusing in on a specific pain point if you will, and figuring out a way to solve it. I have a couple of more questions just in the remaining time here. And I wanna go back to this issue of marketing myopia. And I don't know if you've seen the movie "Blackberry," but it's gotta be the classic business case for, you know, a company that rose to fame and fortune very quickly, finding a problem in the market and solving it creatively, and then turning its back on on creativity by sticking with what they knew to work.

And, and it was, you know, back-to-back, like one moment they've come up with an idea that basically created a category, and the next moment they're being destroyed by a company that's reimagined the category, which is, of course, what Apple did. So marketing myopia, you know, Theodore Levitt wrote about this issue, you know, many years ago. What will it take for organizations to...and we were talking a little earlier about change management. Does this require the ability to have, basically, people who are creative thinkers who think outside the box as a group of provocateurs in a company looking forward instead of backward and bringing, with research, these ideas to management to say, "Look out, here's what's around the corner for you?" Is there a requirement here for organizations to arm themselves with this type of cadre group that, you know, would rattle the chains if they had to?

AA

Yeah, I looked a lot at this topic. I worked on Blackberry just as it was crashing. And other big brands at that point, yeah, myopia is one of them. Kodak thought they were in the film business and didn't realize that that was going away. Blackberry, you know, had a... But, you know, like, everything is usually more than one factor. Blackberry had a lot of arrogance. They said, no... they didn't wanna believe what they saw. And another big one is that, you know, if a product's making some...no one really gets serious about changing anything until the sky starts falling. So if sales are up and you're making money, we're not gonna take \$10 away from Stephen who's selling a lot of Blackberries and, you know, invest in something new because we're making great margin here, no margin there, and by the time sales start to fall, you're usually too late, you know.

So that's why the more successful the company is, the more vulnerable it is to being incredibly disrupted because

they then move to the optimization of the current game. And anything else they do besides make little boxes with keyboards is gonna be less profitable. Again, it's really hard to...but, you know, those are the times and the team that ultimately gets to be the captain of the ship in those very successful companies tends to be far more operational, they tend to be better at optimizing and taking cost out and, you know, winning the hand they've been played. They tend not to be great at saying, well, gimme four new cards and let me think what I can do with 'em.

SS

Exactly. Yeah. That's exactly right. Well, that's a great way to end this interview. Allen, I think, that's a terrific book again, is a terrific, easy read too. It's very accessible, you're a great writer. So quite enjoyed the book. And you have some important lessons, I think, to convey here to folks who are looking at how to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. So thank you for this.

AA

Thanks for inviting me. It was a great conversation. I enjoyed chatting with you.

That concludes my interview with Allen Adamson. As we learned, the old school approach to brand building through advertising is no longer effective in a world where achieving a sustainable advantage on product superiority alone is no longer doable. It is only a matter of time before a competitive product comes along making the same claims. For any brand today, the starting point should be thinking about how to make people's lives better, not how to get them to buy. If that experience is novel – if it solves a vexing problem for a customer in a way no one has ever thought of, or even realized was a problem – it can fuel brand growth in a way that no amount of advertising can ever hope to do. But that requires marketers to be able to see past their assumptions and biases – to look at the world differently. And that can be tough when in many businesses conformity is more valued than imagination.



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