

Customer
first
thinking.



Cultural Intelligence

An Interview with Anastasia Karklina Gabriel, Senior Insights Lead at Reddit and Cultural Theorist

Anastasia Karklina Gabriel:

Anastasia Karklina Gabriel is a cultural theorist and the author of the book "Cultural Intelligence for Marketers".



When Apple suddenly incurs the wrath of the public for a cultural gaffe, it is clear times have changed.

The offense was committed earlier this year when Apple released a 10-minute video titled "Out of Office", the latest installment in a lighthearted promotional series called "The Underdogs", which follows a team of co-workers as they travel to Thailand on a quest for a new packaging factory. While overseas they have to overcome various local challenges such as language barriers, quirky locals and less than swanky accommodations. The film's depiction of the country's culture outraged Thai citizens and officials who felt it misrepresented them, forcing Apple to shut down the video after calls for a nationwide boycott.

It was a rare misstep for Apple which is of course famous for its deft touch at tapping into the cultural zeitgeist. But Apple is certainly not alone in inadvertently trampling on cultural sensitivities. There are many ways for marketers to go wrong anytime they venture across cultural boundaries. Cultural values and norms can vary dramatically from one part of the world

to another, from one segment of society to another, and those differences are not always understood by brand marketers who are trained to bucket everyone according to their demographics and lifestyle.

Marketers can also go wrong when they attempt to exploit a new social trend. Think of the conservative backlash to Bud Light's social media promotion featuring the transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney. Or the infamously tone-deaf commercial showing Kendall Jenner handing a police officer a can of Pepsi in what was seen as a shameless attempt by the beverage company to co-opt the Black Lives Matter movement. And then there was of course Gillette's widely mocked attempt to piggyback on the #MeToo movement with its "toxic masculinity" ad.

These days it's riskier than ever for brands to take a stand on hot button issues or show empathy for marginalized groups in society. Some progress was made following the racial strife of 2020, when companies "woke up" to the need for a diverse and inclusive workplace. But then the cultural wars erupted between the "anti-woke" activists and social justice warriors. Today no brand wants to invite a boycott of their products, so many have backed off the idea of openly pushing for social change.

Still, many people want companies to do what's right—to be socially conscious—especially the under-30 generation who expect brands to be a unifying and positive force in society. But in order for brand marketers to serve as agents of change, they must first become more attuned to the social changes going on around them, and be hyper-aware of cross-cultural differences.

In short, marketers must strive to raise their level of cultural knowledge, according to Anastasia Karklina Gabriel, a cultural theorist with a doctorate in cultural studies, whose current job at Reddit is to help brands do exactly that. In her book "Cultural Intelligence for Marketers", she lays out a pragmatic framework for more inclusive marketing. Despite her corporate role, she remains a social activist at heart, and a self-described "revolutionary".

SS

Stephen Shaw (SS): In your LinkedIn profile, you describe yourself as a revolutionary. I don't know many marketing people brave enough to actually describe themselves that way.

AG

Anastasia Karklina Gabriel (AG): I absolutely love that we are starting with that question! It's probably one of the most interesting questions I've gotten at the beginning of an interview. If you had told me five years ago that I would go into marketing, I would have laughed, because that was completely opposite of what I was doing. I was studying culture, and very active in social political issues. And now I really see that as my biggest superpower in marketing.

A lot of times as marketers, we look at the brands that we work on from a very commercial lens. But most people don't think about brands in the same way that we do. And so I really draw on my activist background to think about what people want from brands.

The revolutionary part of me comes from wanting to challenge ideas, to question the things that we take for granted, because I truly believe that is what drives innovation, drives new ideas, drives new thinking. And so while I'm no longer on the front lines of a protest, demanding change, I'm very much thinking about change and innovation in my work. And really the core of what I do is to push us as marketers towards new ideas, new ways of thinking, so that we can be better. So that's why I still identify as a revolutionary in my work.

SS

What drew you into the world of marketing?

AG

I vividly remember sitting at my desk as a fifth year doctoral student, having just received a fairly prestigious fellowship that allowed me to be free of any kind of teaching or research responsibilities. And that was any academic's dream, to just sit at my desk, research, write, immerse myself in knowledge. And as I remember sitting there, I realized that I didn't want to do this for the rest of my life. And the reason I felt that way was because I'm so passionate about what cultural knowledge can do for the world. And I realized I was studying culture primarily by looking back at what has happened, looking at the history that has shaped art, literature, society at large. And I thought to myself, no, I want to be immersed in culture as it is happening. And this knowledge that I've acquired through my academic training could be so valuable in shaping policies, ideas, and strategies. And so at that moment, I realized that my whole trajectory of being an academic and following a traditional tenure track might not actually be what I want to do.

And so I went out and started talking to marketers, consultants, strategists, until I stumbled into cultural insights and strategy work. And in that moment, about a year after that realization at my desk, I thought, oh, this is it. This is a space where I can apply my training in a way that influences culture and actually shapes the future rather than just study the past.

SS

There can't be too many other marketing specialists as well versed in cultural knowledge as you.

AG

I transitioned at a very opportune time, after 2020, when a lot of brands realized they hadn't been paying enough attention to issues of identity and inclusion. So at that time, a lot of agencies were looking for expert voices who could help brands navigate that moment and create strategies that would resonate with audiences in a way that was sensitive, inclusive, and ultimately commercially profitable and viable. Since then, I have expanded my focus to talk about culture through the lens of marketing more broadly, precisely because so much of what we do as marketers is thinking about cultural trends, about where culture is headed and how it is affecting consumer behaviour, how it is affecting the customer journey. And so now a lot of my focus is really helping brands understand where culture is headed and how it impacts marketing as a whole. Because so much of what brands do today is to show up in culture to capture attention and be relatable and relevant.

SS

You're currently Senior Lead in Global Insights at Reddit where your job, in your words, is to decode culture. I love that expression. But what does that mean exactly? And what attracted you to Reddit to begin with?

AG

I oversee the insights function and work with our sales teams and external agency and brand clients to activate what I call cultural knowledge: asking what matters to people, how do people create meaning and how we leverage that knowledge to be successful. Coming from an academic background, Reddit was such a fascinating place to work and continues to be, because it is a platform that houses thousands of communities of people who are talking about everything, from sharing videos of their dogs, to their patient journey with some form of illness. And the depth and richness of those communities is really fascinating to think about as people seek belonging and authenticity.

SS

Is this directed research where brands come to you and ask about the cultural trends in a specific category, or are you extracting insights and then offering it as a value added service to brands?

AG

Brands can partner with us in a variety of ways. We do work with clients on custom research projects where we provide deeper human insight into their audience. And there's also broader work that we do in terms of advertising on Reddit. There is an opportunity for brands to show up on the platform in the context of people's passions and interests and be part of those conversations. And so our role is to help our clients do just that.

SS

By that you mean understand how to participate in the conversation as opposed to simply talking at people.

AG

Exactly. And to leverage the power of contextual marketing. So appearing in the context of where people discuss their passions, needs, problems. You wouldn't want anybody following you at a party trying to sell you something.

SS

It must be an absolute goldmine of insight to probe the trends in these conversations. In your work, are you aided by specific tools that help with that process?

AG

Oh, absolutely. We work with a variety of research methodologies. So that would involve a lot of standard social listening that we conduct, but also a lot of custom work. So designing custom surveys and research studies for our clients, which really speaks to my academic side and something that I enjoy doing quite a bit.

SS

In your the book you state that understanding culture isn't optional, it's essential. Can you define cultural intelligence and then just explain why you think it's essential.

AG

Cultural Intelligence is the practice of tracking and analyzing cultural signals and movements, consumer behaviour within culture, and the commercial and social implications and then acting on that knowledge. A lot of the time in marketing, cultural intelligence is thought of as having empathy for people. And so I wanted to help marketers understand culture from the perspective of what's dominant versus what's on the horizon and what's emerging.

SS

And you believe it's essential for what reason?

AG

Largely because brands draw on culture to appeal, to connect with and to speak to their customers. Every single brand draws on the outside world for inspiration of how to connect with customers. Brands are drawing on cultural codes of what's meaningful to people. Nike, for example, drew on the trope of athleticism and excellence in performance, yet the meaning often shifts and changes and is affected by the way that society evolves. So, for example, the body positivity movement, and increased attention to women's representation - those are not just social impact issues. Those are the

expectations that all consumers are forming of brands and the kind of marketing that they want to see.

SS

How did the concept of cultural intelligence emerge in business to begin with?

AG

Cultural intelligence emerged as a response to increased globalization and the reality that doing business meant that one would have to engage teams across cultures that one might not have been exposed to in the past. It allowed professionals to expand their worldview and form stronger business partnerships and bonds across markets, across cultures, across the world. But in marketing the focus is not just on working with cross-cultural teams, but rather connecting with audiences and customers that might have different cultural norms, that might have different expectations, and that might have their views, perspectives and needs shaped by their lived experiences. And I think that is particularly important in multicultural societies like the United States or Canada, UK, you name it, where we realized at some point that marketing was too focused on the dominant audience. And as an example of that, we see a shakeup in the world of beauty, where for the longest time, people with darker skin tones could not find beauty products that matched their skin tone.

SS

How would you describe the state of cultural intelligence in marketing today?

AG

We are in this moment of transformation, I believe, where it is not just about doing right for the sake of being an activist brand, which might have been the case in 2020, when a lot of brands awakened to this need to connect with social issues. But we are increasingly, I think, seeing that kind of inclusive marketing permeate all aspects of marketing strategies as a way of connecting with consumers on a deeper level.

What I would like to note as an example is that long before the Bud Light fiasco, which is often used to show that inclusive marketing doesn't work, Bud Light used to be a proponent of LGBTQ communities and marriage equality. We forget that social consciousness in marketing matters to more and more brands, simply because culture is evolving, and consumer's expectations are evolving.

SS

The other trend, until there was a backlash around it, was the concept of brand purpose. Would you also call that out as an inflection point, where brands felt it important to take a stand?

AG

Yes, I would say that there obviously has been a lot of pressure on brands to be purposeful, to be socially engaged. However, I do think

that what we're seeing now, certainly in the last twelve months or so, is the pendulum swinging back. And I would even argue that it's swinging too far back where we are seeing a lot more commentary from marketing leaders about how brands should go back to "being funny" and how purposeful marketing has hijacked creativity.

You know, who says that brands cannot be funny and entertaining without also being socially responsible? And what might happen if brands actually combine social responsibility with humour and position themselves as brands that haven't lost touch, that can make audiences laugh, that can be entertaining, that can be relatable, and yet can be socially responsible. And for that reason, I perhaps differ with some of my colleagues who do believe that every brand should have a social purpose. From my perspective, I am more interested in embedding inclusivity across marketing strategies and focusing on how every brand can be socially responsible and inclusive in representation, and storytelling, and creativity, without needing to lead with social purpose.

SS

I think the problem, to some degree, is the conflation of brand purpose with advertising and communications. The role of purpose is to help an organization do the right thing. Which brings me to the capability of marketers to actually lead change. Because the knock on marketers is that they don't have the gravitas, the temerity, the courage, if you will, to lead radical change. They're followers more than leaders. Does that make it difficult for a marketer to try to stand up and say, no, we need to do the right thing? Do you see marketers as change agents?

AG

I do. If anyone has ever tried to advocate for something, they know that any sort of progress is hard. As marketers we have to know how to be an unpopular voice in the room. My book is not meant to say that every marketer needs necessarily to lead the charge of revolutionizing marketing, but that every marketer should feel empowered to understand the impact that they have on culture. I also think that the new generation of marketers wants to do more meaningful work.

SS

There is a significant generational change underway, and hopefully that does drive change. But the other thing you mentioned in the book is that inclusivity, cultural representation and social responsibility are the future of marketing strategy. Yet at the same time, you also point out that the marketer's job, at least today, is to persuade. How do marketers reconcile those goals?

AG

Research by the Association of National Advertisers suggests that only about 11% to 13% of the U.S. population are actively

opposed to issues of culture being included or represented in marketing and advertising communications. And 76% of the population say that they are comfortable with seeing inclusivity and diversity in marketing materials. For that reason, we need to shift our mindset from all brands needing to be brand activists to actually infusing inclusivity, diversity, and equity into research, into insights generation, so that it becomes more ingrained into how we understand audiences, how we speak to them. If anything, when we do that, our persuasion is going to become more powerful because we're not just going to be shouting from the rooftops about our values as a brand, we're actually going to use the power of inclusion and diversity to understand our customers, what they care about, what that looks like in their everyday reality and their everyday lived experiences.

SS

In your book you cite the women's shaving brand Billie as one of your best-in-class examples of how brands can be more culturally intelligent. How did they get it right?

AG

Billie is a prime example of what it means to understand the category as it intersects with culture. Billie used to be a direct to consumer brand of women shaving products, and now you see them all over. They completely disrupted the category by showing in their marketing and advertising communications women with body hair and in 2018, that was scandalous. That earned them a lot of headlines, and a lot of rage from social media because they dared to show a woman shaving their armpits or legs where you could actually see body hair.

Why is that such a great example? Because they recognized and acted upon a cultural movement toward body positivity and women's empowerment. And so they earned a following, a loyal customer base. And from there, they evolved over the years to speak more broadly to women's issues. I think that's a fantastic example.

SS

What are the biggest mistakes that marketers make in this whole area of cultural intelligence?

AG

The examples of marketing that has failed really have one thing in common: jumping on an issue to say something for the sake of seeming relevant and relatable without really understanding how the brand exists within that specific aspect of culture, without thinking how those values are actually reflective of the organization. It is when brands state that they value certain ideals and then not being able to live up to them.

SS

In other words, being hypocritical.

AG

Right. We always say actions speak louder than words. I think when it comes to brands engaging customers, the same kind of logic applies. If a brand is going to engage in a social issue or speak to some kind of cultural topic, then it is imperative for a brand to have some kind of partnership by amplifying the voices from that community, rather just speaking at their customers.

SS

What do you see as the challenges that most organizations face if they want to get there faster than they might otherwise?

AG

The tension between purpose and profit, between ethics and business, between being moral and commercially successful. As a culture and a society, we have accepted this belief that making profit without consideration for ethics is acceptable. We have normalized that thought. And maybe that's where my revolutionary spirit comes in. Well now, consumers, particularly young people, are challenging that.

I don't necessarily place the whole idea of social responsibility on marketers. But I do think at the organizational level, we need to ask the question of how do we do business in our society? And that certainly exceeds the role of marketing as such. Because at the end of the day, marketers, and this is just the reality, are operating under tight budgets, short timelines, and limited resources. But it is our responsibility to make our marketing more inclusive, more attentive to issues of diversity and equity.

SS

So how do organizations resolve that dichotomy between ethics and profit?

AG

I think it's important to support a move towards organizational change where questioning the accepted norms is more welcome and more appreciated and more understood as part of what it means to market in an increasingly diverse world.

SS

We're living in this polarized world of opposing worldviews and culture wars. Do you sense that brands are now starting to retreat, to move backwards in the face of potential acrimony?

AG

I think you're absolutely right. And if anything, the talk I gave at Cannes Lions just a couple months ago was specifically focused on cultural intelligence in times of uncertainty. Should brands speak up or stay silent? And as you might have picked up, I'm very passionate about breaking away from binary thinking. We might not have easy answers, and we might need to make some decisions and choices that feel uncomfortable. But the solution to me is not to

completely throw our hands in the air. And so a better question to ask is how should brands engage in culture? And for some brands that have historically been more socially vocal, it might make sense to stand by their commitments because that is what their customer base expects of them. For other brands, it might actually mean spending time understanding how they can act on their values in ways that don't just include being actively outspoken. For example, Lyft, recently launched an initiative that allows women riders to opt into the program where they are matched with a female driver whenever that is possible. So we need to ask not if, but how, we can arrive at more creative and innovative ways to be engaged in culture.

SS

A thought experiment for you. Let's just say you're working with a global brand, and you find yourself in the elevator with the CEO of the company. You have two minutes to make a pitch on the criticality of cultural intelligence. What would that elevator pitch be?

AG

Oh, that is a really good question. Well, good marketing is rooted in data driven decision making. So today we know that for every customer that will reward the brand for backing off on their stated social commitments, there are four to five customers who will reward the brand for staying true and authentic to what they say they believe. So cultural participation is not a matter of morality. It's a wise business decision.

SS

Well, if I can shorten that pitch, it's "just be human."

AG

Absolutely. Understand your audience. Take time to really understand how people create meaning and what matters to them.



Stephen Shaw is the chief strategy officer of Kenna, a marketing solutions provider specializing in customer experience management. He is also the host of a regular podcast called Customer First Thinking. Stephen can be reached via e-mail at sshaw@kenna.ca.