

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”.

I started out by asking her why she described herself that way, when most marketers would be very wary of making such a bold claim in this era of cultural acrimony.

SS

Stephen Shaw (SS): So in your LinkedIn profile, you describe yourself as a cultural theorist, a brand strategist, a social critic. And I kind of smiled at this as a revolutionary. Now, I don't know many marketing people who are brave enough to actually describe themselves as a revolutionary. So I'm just curious, like, how do you mean that? What context do you mean revolutionary?

AG

Anastasia Karklina Gabriel (AG): I absolutely love that we are starting with this question. It's probably one of the most interesting questions I've gotten at the beginning of an interview. I really come into the marketing from a very non-traditional background. I am, by training, a cultural researcher, theorist and activist. And, you know, probably five years ago, if you told me that I would transition to marketing, I would laugh hysterically, because that was a completely opposite of what I was doing. I was studying culture, I was in academy, I was really deeply versed in theory, and I was always very active in social political issues. And so that's kind of where that sentiment comes in.

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 or look after from a very business lens, right, a very commercial lens. But ordinary people don't really think about brands in the same way that we do. And I really draw on that activist background to think about how ordinary people think about businesses, what they want from brands, and how ordinary people now increasingly want brands to, if not challenge the status quo, at least be aware of it.

And so that revolutionary piece for me has always been, a part of my academic background, of wanting to challenge ideas, to really shift paradigms, to question the things that we have accepted for granted, because I truly believe that that is what drives innovation, drives new ideas, drives new

thinking. And so while I'm no longer perhaps 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

Well, it's perfect, really, given where marketing is today, at an inflection point, it's going through a bit of an identity crisis. It does need to embrace a lot of the principles and practices that you talk about in the book. And we're going to come back to that subject, because it's a deep one. Let me just go back to a bit of your background, you're a Poli Sci Major at Duke. I was actually a Poli Sci Major as well. Later, you earned your doctorate in cultural studies, as you alluded to.

How did you get drawn into the world of marketing, of all things? As you were just discussing a moment ago, this seemed like such a remote possibility when you're in academia. But - so how did you enter the world of marketing and why?

AG

I remember the moment that started it all, and I did not see where my path was headed, but I vividly remember sitting at my desk as a fifth year doctoral student, and I had 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 your desk, research, write, immerse yourself in knowledge.

And as I remember sitting at my desk, I had this realization of, I don'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 culture and what cultural knowledge can do for the world. And I realized I was studying culture primarily, looking back, looking at what has happened, looking at the kind of 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 as it's occurring. And if anything, this knowledge that I've acquired through my academic training could be so valuable in shaping policies, ideas, strategies, etcetera. 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. And this is a space where I can apply my training in a way that influences culture and actually shapes the future, rather than just studies the past.

SS

Sure. And you entered sort of a niche area of marketing, too, where there can't be too many other specialists out there who are deep in knowledge around cultural studies and given marketing's attachment to culture, it was obviously an appropriate fit.

AG

I transitioned at a very opportune time, so to say, after 2020. Obviously, as we remember, a lot of brands had a moment of realization. We haven't been paying attention to issues of identity or belonging and inclusion.

So at that time, a lot of agencies were looking for expert voices that could come on board and help brands navigate that moment and create strategies that were resonating with audiences in a way that was sensitive, inclusive, and ultimately commercially profitable and viable.

But since then, I have expanded my focus to really talk about culture through the lens of marketing more broadly rather than a kind of niche specialty, 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 customers journey.

And so now a lot of my focus is really helping brands understand where culture is headed and how it is shaping, not just some of these niche – and by niche I don't mean small but specialist areas dedicated to social impact or social responsibility, but how culture impacts marketing as a whole. Because so much of what brands do today is to show up in culture, to capture attention and to be relatable and relevant.

SS

So true. And a number of times in your book, you come back to this thing constantly, is that marketing, or brands, I should say, are both a mirror of existing culture, but also shape culture. And you have some interesting examples in the book which we're going to come back and talk about.

I do want to ask you, though, about your current role. You're at Reddit, you're a Senior Lead in Global Insights there, and your job, in your words, is to decode culture. Love that expression. But what does that mean exactly? And I'm curious, what attracted you to Reddit to begin with?

AG

In my full time role, I use data, essentially, and I use data and cultural knowledge around audiences and the kind of conversations that are having on our platform to help a brand understand what is happening in their category, better understand their audiences, really unlock the insights through the conversation on social so that they can show up within the context of people's passions and interests in a way that is most relevant and relatable.

So in my seat, I oversee the insights function and work with our sales teams and external agency and brand clients to really activate what I call cultural knowledge. Essentially asking what matters to people, how do people create meaning and how we leverage that knowledge to be successful. So that's what I do.

And I should say, coming from an academic background, Reddit in particular was such a fascinating place to work and continues to be, because it is a platform that houses thousands, thousands of communities of people who are talking about everything from funny topics like, cat memes or, you know, sharing videos of their dogs, to talking about their patient journey with some form of illness, where they are looking for community.

And the kind of the depth and richness of communities that exist on social is really fascinating to think about in terms of marketing as well as people seek community, seek belonging and seek authenticity at a time where there's a lot more skepticism around, say, influencer marketing.

SS

Well, Mark Schaefer says that really community is the future of marketing, which again, we're going to get into that subject a little bit later on. But I am curious, was there somebody in your position before you arrived, or are you carving out sort of a new position within the company?

And I guess the adjacent question is this directed research where brands come to you and say, tell us about sort of cultural trends in this specific category area, or are you kind of surfing and pulling out insights and then bringing it back as a value added service to brands? How does that work exactly?

AG

Brands can partner with us in a variety of ways. We do have offerings when we work with clients on more custom research projects. So those are projects where we really help clients understand their business problem and how the

insights generated from community conversation can help them have an unlock in kind of the territories of opportunity that they might want to explore, or really provide a deeper human insight into their audience.

So that's one way in which we work with brand clients. And there's also a broader work that we do in terms of advertising on Reddit. We know that there is a greater attention to privacy, and although Google has just announced that they're not proceeding with cookie depreciation, we know that privacy first marketing is the future. So there is an opportunity for brands to show up on the platform in the context of people's passions and interests that really exists organically within those conversations. And so our role is to help our clients do just that.

SS

Understand how to participate in the conversation as opposed to simply talking one way to people, is what you seem to be saying.

AG

Exactly. And to leverage the power of contextual marketing. So appearing in the context of where people discover or discuss their passions, need points, problems, etcetera, rather than, sometimes we talk about it as kind of, you wouldn't want anybody following you at a party telling you something and trying to sell you something you want that discover in the context of organic conversation. And so that's the power of contextual marketing and reaching your customers in the context of the interests that they are already organically coming to explore in these digital spaces.

SS

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

AG

Oh, absolutely. And I should say prior to my current role I was an independent consultant, as I alluded to before, and I was always convinced that I would remain independent and work with agencies and brand clients in a more contractual capacity until the opportunity to be at such a fascinating company and have access to such an archive of human data became a possibility, which was a hard offer to refuse.

And we work in a variety of mixed method research methodologies so that would involve social listening, so 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

So I want to move on now to, I mean, the core and theme of the book obviously is around Cultural Intelligence. And so I'm going to ask you to define that for people who like myself prior to reading your book, wasn't really that familiar with the term. And in the book you state that understanding culture isn't optional, it's essential. So if you don't mind defining cultural intelligence and then just explain why you think it's essential.

AG

Cultural Intelligence is the practice of tracking and analyzing signals, social movements, cultural movements, consumer behaviours within culture, and understanding their deeper commercial and cultural implications and then acting on that knowledge. So a lot of times we find in marketing, cultural intelligence is being thought of as having empathy for audiences, which is in definition borrowed from cross-cultural management studies where originally the term itself was coined or we kind of use it in a way that doesn't mean much of anything. It's cultural intelligence as a way of tracking culture.

And so I wanted to give it a little bit more specificity to help marketers understand culture from the perspective of what's dominant versus what's on the horizon and what's emerging, and really think about cultural intelligence through the importance of research and importance of having a solid insight that underpins strategy. So that is how I define cultural intelligence.

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. Oftentimes I feel rather passionate about the way that the marketing discourse has relegated culture to the questions of identity or social impact and kind of siloed it into this specialist niche.

And I really want to push on that because every single brand draws on the outside world for inspiration of how to connect with customers. That is true in 2024, it was true in 2020, and it was true in say, 1980. Right? Brands are drawing on cultural codes of what's meaningful to people. And that might be, you know, I'm thinking of Nike, for example, as one of iconic brands that drew on the trope of athleticism and excellence in performance in, you know, the late 20th century, and continues to draw on that particular code, yet the

meaning often shifts and changes and is affected by social events, by standards, ideas, the way that society evolves. And so any brand, if it wants to evolve, needs to keep up and adapt to how these universal human tropes that brands step into morph and change shape as culture evolves forward.

So a lot of marketing that we see still taps into these insights that are relevant to us on a human level. But the level of nuance is going to shift based on what is dominant in culture and based on what's emerging.

So, for example, body positivity movement, 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 in front of them.

SS

Now, the term cultural intelligence entered the lexicon somewhere around the early millennium here, 2003-2004, around that period. Can you just sort of trace the evolution of the term over the years as it applies to business? And then, was marketing a bit of a latecomer to the scene in terms of embracing it and then trying to apply it to marketing practices?

AG

Cultural intelligence emerged in cross-cultural management studies, and it 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. And there was a lot of conversation at that time about approaching these cross-cultural interactions with more sensitivity, with more empathy, with more kind of expansive understanding of norms, rules, styles of communication and so on. And it essentially, as a practice, allowed professionals to expand their worldview and form stronger business partnerships and bonds across markets, across cultures, essentially across the world.

And we see that definition enter marketing in a different kind of sense, where that 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 United States or Canada, UK, you name it,

where we realized at some point that marketing was too focused on, let's call it, dominant audience, forgetting how other audiences have been overlooked and have not always been centred in the process. And as an example of that, we see a kind of shakeup in the world of beauty, where for the longest time, people with darker skin tones could not find beauty product that matched their skin tone. Right? And so now that precedent or concern is really evolving and is taking the centre stage.

And for that reason, I say in the book that we need to be really clear about the terms we are using, what are we working towards? And wouldn't be enough in the marketing setting to just borrow the term from the cross-cultural management studies, but we really need to adapt it to the everyday responsibilities that we have as marketers. (19.20)

SS

You mentioned 2020 being an inflection point, certainly in terms of understanding the whole diversity side. But even before that, Dove's pioneering efforts in really trying to change the beauty category would have been an inflection point, like, in terms of marketing's adoption, trajectory, if you will. Where does it begin, and then how would you describe the state of it today in marketing?

AG

We see Dove come out as one of these big players. But what I like to note, which is what I learned recently, is that actually, before the fiasco with Bud Light ... Bud Light used to be actually a proponent of LGBTQ communities and equality, marriage equality, which is not something that a lot of people know. So it is often used as an example to say that inclusive marketing backfires, doesn't work, it's dangerous, is not commercially advantageous. But I recently learned this fun fact that, in fact, Bud Light used to be quite active in, 20, perhaps 12 or 2013 around issues of marriage equality.

So I find that in this conversation, we are often lacking nuance. And there is a propensity in our profession to go to these extremes. And I have written before on the dangers of binary thinking. So we think of these big players like Dove, Patagonia, and Ben and Jerry's, etcetera. And oftentimes we forget that increasingly, that sort of social consciousness in marketing matters to more and more brands, simply because culture is evolving and consumer's expectations are evolving.

So now 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 kind of 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. And I'm happy to name some of the examples that I think are good examples of integrating inclusivity in customer experience that really goes beyond just stating one's values as a brand or making proclamations about the brand's stance on one social issue or another.

SS

I do want to come back to examples a little later on, and you do offer a great one in the book, a number of great ones in the book, one in particular, and I want to come back to that a little later on, but I just want to pick up on this idea of inflection points. The other, I guess, trend until recently anyway, until there was a bit of a backlash around it, was this concept of brand purpose. "Start with why", etcetera, and its attachment to social responsibility and certainly social consciousness. Now there appears to have been a bit of a retreat there. We're going to come back to that subject a little bit later on. Would you also call that out as an inflection point where brands felt it incumbent upon themselves to have a declared set of values and purpose?

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 in the marketing discourse, 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, quote unquote, being funny and how the purposeful marketing has hijacked the creativity and that brands need to get back to humour.

And again, I start questioning the binary of the choices that we are offered or the way that the marketing conversations are structured around these ideas of profit versus purpose, purpose versus humour, being socially responsible versus being funny. 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, entertainment and position themselves at brands that are 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 close colleagues who do believe that every brand should have a social purpose or should be socially engaged. 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 be a purposeful brand, or without needing to lead with social purpose, which I'd argue is appropriate and beneficial in some cases, but might not be in others.

SS

I think the problem here, to some degree, is the conflation of the concept of brand purpose with advertising and communications, that really the role of purpose is to serve as a beacon within the organization in terms of doing the right thing. Whether that's expressed outwardly toward the public is another matter, but it's just corporate behaviour that really it's trying to address there. And I think that's a bit of a confusion that sets in, which brings me to this one subject area that's a particular pet subject of mine, which is the capability of marketers to actually lead change. Your book is a, reads like a manifesto for revolutionary thinking and marketing, if I may say.

But you know, the knock on marketers is that they're not taken as serious people, quote unquote. They don't have the gravitas, they don't have the temerity, the courage, if you will, to lead radical change within their organizations. They're followers more than leaders. So does that make it difficult for a marketer to try to stand up and say, no, we need to do, as an organization, not as a marketing department, as an organization, we need you to do the right thing. Do you see marketers as change agents?

AG

I do. And let me just say that any change is difficult and hard. You know, and if anyone has ever tried to advocate for something, to win a policy or a change, they know that any sort of progress is hard. And that's the nature of what it means to better society, better our organization, better our teams, right? We have to know how to be an unpopular voice in the room. And, you know, I love that you described the book the way that you describe. And, you know, the book is not meant to say that every marketer needs to necessarily lead the charge of revolutionizing marketing, but that every marketer can feel empowered to understand the impact that they have on culture by virtue of putting these messages to

masses and masses of people, and can make a difference from their own seat, even if that means asking yourself, how can I be more inclusive in casting? Or how can I be more attentive to issues of diversity of experiences and how I understand my customers, where I'm designing my research, right? Because I also think that the new generation of marketers wants to do more meaningful work. And I now talk to a lot of junior mid-level marketers and strategists who are coming up and who are entering agencies or in-house companies and are really desiring to do more meaningful work.

So besides of having that conversation around brands ability to be culturally relevant and resonate with customers. I also think that as a profession, we have a real conversation to have around retaining talent and retaining the younger generation of marketers who are coming into the profession and who from where I sit in the conversation that I have, are no longer just satisfied by the idea of making profit and want to be more intentional and meaningful in what they do in their nine to five.

SS

That is so, so true. There is a sort of a generational, significant generational change on its way, and it's going to be a shift in values, and hopefully that does drive change. But the other thing you mentioned in the book is that, and you say this, you know, quite specifically, you say that inclusivity, cultural representation and social responsibility are the future of marketing strategy. Those are powerful words, the future of marketing strategy. But at the same time, you also point out a little later on that the marketer's job, at least today, is to persuade. So how do marketers reconcile those goals? One is a sort of elevated view of we've got to do the right thing in the world, and we've got to help organizations get there, because obviously values are key here. On the other, we still have that work ahead of us of convincing people to buy from us. So how do they reconcile those two things?

AG

Well, I always go back to research, right, a profession that is tasked with making data driven decisions about who our customers are, about what's relevant to them, about what's appealing to them, and ways in which we can, to your point, persuade them. And I do think that there is a kind of imbalance in how we see issues of inclusivity and social responsibility when we talk about the future. I think that that future is a whole lot closer than we might imagine.

The research by the Association of National Advertisers suggests that only about 11% to 13% of the U.S. population are actually actively opposed to kind of inclusivity or issues of culture being included or represented in marketing and advertising communications. And that, if I'm not wrong, 76% of the population say that they are rather comfortable with seeing inclusivity and diversity in marketing materials.

So one has to ask whether, as marketers engaged in these powerful debates that sometimes get heated and all of us are so invested into what we do, whether they kind of overinflate the chasm between where we are and where we are going when research suggests that 57% of all US consumers today say that the tastes, opinions, preferences, and subcultures of historically overlooked consumer segments. So that's black, Hispanic, Asian, pacific islander, LGBTQ+ are actually shaping their own brand preferences today. So I want to close that gap that we often see between what we have to do now versus what's coming. And so, again, I think it's a little bit more narrow than we think. And for that reason, you know, I am talking to marketers about also shifting our mindset from all brands needing to be brand activists to actually infusing inclusivity, diversity, and equity into your research processes, into the insights generation, so that, that sort of work can become more organic and 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, but 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. To me, that's an opportunity rather than a risk to the marketers' task today.

SS

Well, and the demographics would suggest that inevitably, we're going to get there anyway because we're going to be multiracial, multicultural societies by the mid-century mark. Canada, Toronto specifically, is already the most multicultural city, most cosmopolitan city in the world. And we see it in the way that our communications are formed. They certainly have to take that into account. And now cultural intelligence has broadened quite significantly out of inclusivity to include other areas like sustainability and social responsibility. So that's a tall order. I want to

reference, though, and we talked about earlier best in class examples in the book, and you call out Billie as one of your favorite examples, your best in class examples. Can you just explain why that's your best in class example?

AG

In the book, Billie is a prime example of what it means to understand the category as it intersects with culture and then connect that insights to the product and the offering of the brand. So, for those who are not familiar, Billie used to be a direct to consumer brand, and now you see them all over, that offered women shaving products, and that was their primary product.

However, they did so in a way that completely disrupted the category by showing in their marketing and advertising communications, women with body hair. And in 2018, that was scandalous. That disrupted the category, that earned them a lot of headlines, that earned them a lot of rage from social media because they dared to show a woman shaving either armpits or legs where you could see her body hair actually there.

Well, why is that such a great example when nobody else was doing it? Billie was already engaging in the practice of cultural intelligence, which is the practice of tracking cultural movements, social trends, and consumer behaviours that are on the horizon. And as we mentioned, analyzing, understanding their commercial cultural implications and acting on that knowledge. So what they did when no one was doing it is say, well, the culture is headed towards these movements of body positivity and women's empowerment. We want women to see authentic representations of themselves, because that is what our audience wants, and that's what our audience is currently lacking.

And so they just went there, and they did that, and they earned a following, a loyal customer base. And from there, they evolved over the years when, if you look at what they do now, they speak to women's issues more broadly. Just last year, they released this card game, I believe, or some kind of, a game that spoke to women's experiences of doubting ourselves, of apologizing, like these very nuances of lived experiences of being a woman in society. And they started speaking to those experiences, connecting with their audiences beyond just providing a shaving product.

I think that's a fantastic example. I mention it in every interview I do, and I never get tired of talking about it,

because it's really showing marketers what it's like to find a social issue, if you will, that is relevant to the category, relevant to the brand, relevant to the product, relevant to the audience, and then really go full force on it and dominate the marketplace.

SS

And be authentic in the conversation that follows. So true. And you use this term a lot in the book when you criticize marketers for performative marketing quite a bit. There are many examples that you also offer in the book. I do want to come back to that subject momentarily. I do want to ask you, though, about Procter and Gamble, because, unless I'm mistaken here, I didn't see much reference to P&G, and it's the number one brand building company in the world. It declared itself some time ago as being a force for good. And it's got a bit of a track record here in terms of its investments in cultural intelligence, both internally and how it expresses itself. How would you evaluate P&G's efforts here?

AG

I did nothing speak in depth to P&G, largely because during the time as I was writing the book, there was a lot of conversation about P&G potentially abandoning purpose and social responsibility. And that generated a lot of headlines that had the tone of, see, social purpose doesn't work. It's not commercially viable, etcetera.

While there were some conversations that I was exposed to suggest that a lot of things are happening, more so on the front of portfolio management, commercial decisions that might be interpreted by the outside marketing community as a kind of testament that social responsibility or purpose doesn't work without the kind of nuance of internal conversations, internal dynamics and the hard business decisions that need to be made that a lot of us are not privy to. But of course, you know, it stands out as one of the giants in the industry. That said, I always want to emphasize smaller, less known brands like Billie, for example, because what we end up with when we are focusing on P&G, on brands like Nike, Patagonia, Ben and Jerry's, you know...

SS

Unilever.

AG

Yeah, Unilever, Unilever. They roll off the tongue, uh, because we are so familiar with them, is that assumption. That is, well, this is something that is reserved for big revenue corporations that have all of these resources, right? And if I am a small business owner or I run a mid-sized

business, that this conversation is not relevant to me, or that is not something that I can take on and execute successfully as a marketer. And what I think is so powerful about the example of Billie, for example, is the very fact that it was a startup that emerged as now is such a competitor in the space where you can now walk into Target and see Billie sitting next to brands are trying to emulate it. And so for that reason, it seems so important to highlight these other examples, to say, cultural intelligence matters for all types of businesses of all sizes, and not just these big players in the category or in the, our profession more broadly.

SS

And I guess if you look at the track record of disruptor brands that have been successful, many of them have rolled or surfed, I should say, the cultural zeitgeist in many respects, and tapped into those underlying sentiments, even in some cases shaped them. So that's certainly understandable - tougher to do if you're a big corporation with activist investors on the board who are questioning your every move in this area, as happens quite frequently. Let me ask you this though, and again, your book references a lot of the stereotyping that's gone on in marketing over the years. I referenced the term that you use quite a bit, performative marketing. What are the mistakes that marketers make, consciously or unconsciously, in this whole area of cultural intelligence? [39.54]

AG

The mistakes are visible in brands that fail, that brands that generate backlash that we often see as a kind of evidence for purpose or conscious marketing not being effective, which I always call a form of confirmation bias from ourselves as marketers.

So I think the examples are there and the examples of marketing that has failed really has one thing in common. It is a brand 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 and how that relates to customer experience and the consumer journey, as it relates to the brand. A lot of that performativity has to do, I think, with what I have now coined kind of, you know, shouting from the rooftops around your ideas, with a brand as a brand, without thinking about execution, without thinking about how those values show up in various touch points within the customer's journey, and how those values are actually reflective of the organization of the business, which is when and understandably brands

receive backlash for stating that they value certain ideals and then not being able to live up to that.

SS

In other words, being hypocritical.

AG

Right. And it's, you know, it's, when we think about it on a human level, it's so obvious of, you know, we don't admire people who just talk, 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 I go to a party and then there's this loud person just going, boasting around what they believe in and sharing their values, opinions on social issues, I don't know if I might connect with them. But if I see them helping somebody and noticing those aspects about that individual, I probably going to feel more, more connected to that person.

And so it's such a simple example, but I think it applies to brands, and why I focus quite a bit in the second part of the book of arguing that if a brand is going to engage in a social issue or speak to some kind of cultural topic, then it would be imperative for a brand to have a, some kind of partnership in place or a way to engage the community or share the platform by amplifying the voices from that community, rather speaking at their customers.

SS

So I want to move on to some of the challenges that you see, and you've addressed many of them obviously in the book, but some of the major challenges that organizations have in being more culturally fluent, another term you use quite a bit, is it the fact that that frankly most marketers aren't that culturally fluent? That's a starting point, certainly. But also that the culture of the organization isn't ready for being more progressive along these lines? What do you see as the challenges that most organizations face if they want to start shifting in this direction, what do they have to address to get there faster than they might otherwise?

AG

The binary between purpose and profit, between ethics and business, between being moral and being commercially successful. At a very macro level, I think as a culture and a society, we have accepted this belief that making profit without consideration for ethics is acceptable. And then maybe, maybe that's where my revolutionary spirit comes in. Add the very high level of doing business. As a society, we have accepted this idea that ethics are secondary to how we make profit, right? And we have normalized that thought.

Well now, consumers, particularly young people, are challenging that. And they of course there are nuances where we still see young people shop with fast fashion brands, you know, but we see that awareness of structural issues and the way that there are systemic barriers to doing business ethically.

So for that reason, as I mentioned, I don't necessarily place the whole idea of social responsibility or marketers and advertising communications to your point earlier. But something that has to penetrate the entire organization and has to be supported by the leadership, because at the end of the day, marketers, and that is just a reality, are operating under tight budgets, short timelines, limited resources for continuing education, which is why I wrote the book, to give marketers like, a resource to read something that can actually be tangibly applicable.

In the meantime, it is our responsibility to make our marketing more inclusive, more attentive to issues of diversity and equity. But in the grand scheme of things, I do think at the organizational level, we need to ask the question of how do we do business in our society? What have we normalized, and how business leaders can drive a new way forward. And that certainly exceeds the role of marketing as such.

SS

Yeah, I think the other challenge clearly today is that performance marketing now trumps brand building. And a lot of what were talking about here is brand positioning, image building, brand purpose, that lie outside that strict role of pushing people through the sales funnel. So that change obviously stands in the way of progress. Well, is it, should organizations hire a, I'm going to use this term cultural czar, to come in and figure this out?

AG

Well, certainly I do think that hiring external expert voices is often helpful. And I talk about that in one of the chapters in the book when I discuss engaging with overlooked communities. So oftentimes we don't have the voices from those communities at the table. And that's why you see marketing fail, you know, and oftentimes as just from the perspective of a consumer, one has to ask, how was this allowed? Wasn't somebody in the room?

So from that perspective, I do think that that sort of expertise is important to bring on. However, that's not a sustainable

solution for transforming marketing organizations and making marketing function more organically inclusive and attentive to culture. So at the end of the day, I think it's so important for leaders to support a move towards organizational change where questioning the accepted norms in marketing or how we go to market, how we do research, how we understand customers is more welcome and more appreciated and more understood as part of what it means to market in an increasingly diverse world where marketers don't have to always be an unpopular voice in the room in kind of pressing us to do better when it comes to historically marginalized groups, for example.

All that is to say, I don't want to let us off the hook for those of us who are not just consultants, but sit in-house and organize teams. And so I know, for example, I'm very lucky to say that on my team that sort of thinking is very much encouraged. And even though in all cases we might not execute or put that in practice right away, it is an ongoing conversation around pushing our research processes, methodologies, our strategies, to be better, to be more fluent, and to make that the ethos of the team and that's up to the leaders to take on.

SS

So in the closing moments of this interview, I just want to touch on what's going on today in society. And we're obviously living in this polarized or increasingly polarized world of opposing ideologies, of opposing worldviews, clashing cultural perspectives. So one's progressive, clearly the other regressive, wants to return us to the past. Do you sense that, and I think you referenced perhaps a little bit earlier, sort of the nervousness of brands being too bold these days, but do you sense that brands are now starting to retreat, to move backwards in the face of this backlash, of this potential acrimony that that they may face? Are we taking a step backwards instead of having any kind of forward momentum? What's your sense of this current state today?

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. And the way that I framed that conversation was that oftentimes we now hear this question, should brands speak up or stay silent? And as you might have picked up, I'm very passionate about breaking away from binary

thinking, which is something that I keep bringing up. So a lot of times I think that sort of binary outlook, whether brands should speak up or stay silent, is really keeping us away from innovating through uncertainty and precarity where 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 step back and throw our hands in the air. And so a better question I suggest to brand leaders and marketing professionals is to ask how should brands engage in culture? And for some brands that have historically been more socially vocal, it might make sense to continue to be vocal and continue to stand by their commitments because that is what their customer base expects for 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.

And one example that I do want to mention, for example, is Lyft, which is another case study that I mentioned where they have recently launched a women plus initiative that allows women riders like myself, for instance, opt into the program where I am being matched with a female driver whenever that is possible, you know, in the market where I'm getting my Lyft.

And so that is one example of how brands can still integrate and speak to issues of, inclusivity in this instance, gender issues and gender equity and attention to the specific experiences of women that actually connect with the customer within the context of their interaction with the brand and their customer experience as opposed to just making a statement about women's rights or women's issues, etcetera.

So we are lacking that kind of nuance, in my view. And if we break out of binaries and we just ask not if, but how, we can arrive at more creative and innovative ways to continue being engaged in culture without making moves that we might regret later as marketers.

SS So I have one final question for you, and it's a bit of a loaded one, but let's just say you're working with a global brand and you get yourself, you find yourself in the elevator with the CEO of the company, and you have two minutes to pitch him on the criticality of cultural intelligence and fluency to his company. What would that elevator pitch be?

AG

Oof, that is a really good question. Well, I would drive with the data because, as I mentioned, I do believe that good marketing is rooted in data driven decision making. So today we know that cultural participation is no longer an option. And research by [INAUDIBLE] suggests that for every one 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 staying authentic to what they say they believe. So cultural participation is not a matter of morality. It's a wise business decision. And as we know, culture is becoming increasingly more multicultural. As I mentioned earlier, today 57% of all consumers say that their own brand preferences are impacted by the subculture states and opinions of overlooked customer segments. And that number rises to 81% for Gen Z. So if we think about who's going to dominate the market in the next five years and beyond, a smart business decision is to invest in cultural intelligence today so that your brand can be prepared for that future when it arrives.

SS

Well, if I can shorten that, it's "be human", because that's who we're serving in the marketplace.

AG

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

SS

Yeah, and that's in sync with sort of the customer experience ethos, which is treat customers well and they'll treat you well in the end.

AG

Absolutely.

SS

Well, this has been delightful, and your book is a wonderful recipe for organizations to adopt or be more culturally fluent and really, you know, be in the vanguard of the cultural intelligence movement, which is an inevitability after reading your book. So it's come to the conclusion that notwithstanding the sort of regression that we've had over the last maybe year or two, it's an inevitability given the generational change ahead of us. So the book is a wonderful playbook in that respect.

AG

Well, I'm so delighted you found it meaningful. And thank you so much for having me here. This was a huge pleasure.

That concludes my interview with Anastasia Karklina Gabriel. As we learned, marketers have a responsibility to accurately reflect diverse cultures in their communications. By becoming more culturally fluent – more knowledgeable of cultural differences – they can not only avoid offending people, they will have a much better chance of aligning their strategies with people’s preferences and orientation. And by respecting the values and beliefs of different cultures, they are far more likely to find audiences receptive to what they have to say. Brands have the means to shape culture – to foster a social movement – to be a catalyst for change – to rally people around a cause – to draw people closer together. But first marketers must figure out the most meaningful and authentic way to be part of the cultural conversation - to tell stories that genuinely reflect the rich mosaic of society. And, above all, to make a difference in the lives of the communities they serve.



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