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A CAUSE

AUTOMATION OR  
AUTOMATON

MARKETING'S  
IDENTITY CRISIS

CAN ETAIL SAVE  
RETAIL?

# CATALYST



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# FINDING HER VOICE

*Nationwide's CMO, Sara Bennison, on living  
the brand's truth*

Words MORAG CUDDEFORD-JONES

**P**rodigious is a good word to use to describe Sara Bennison, chief marketing officer (CMO) of Nationwide Building Society. Whether it is in terms of output, career path, number of interests (in her spare time she is a non-executive director of the Lawn Tennis Association) or the sheer volume of Perspex adorning her walls at home, there is a lot going on beneath that calm exterior.

We meet shortly after another hunk of plastic joins her awards shelf. Named *Marketing Week's* 'Visionary Marketer of the Year 2018', she jokes that it is all getting a bit embarrassing: "The children are teasing me." However, she also points out: "It's great for the team."

That she has a slew of awards is hardly surprising – her bosses clearly recognised her potential straight out of the gate. From starting at J. Walter Thompson ad agency as a graduate trainee, she transferred to the Bangkok office to lead its strategic planning function for the Unilever Regional

## Inside...

- ◆ Rapid career progression is possible if you **stretch your comfort zone**
- ◆ **Brand is vital**; marketers must advocate for it at board level
- ◆ **Build trust with customers** by finding the truth, however small it seems
- ◆ Find your brand's **campaigning voice**. You have a duty to use it

Innovation Centre. A mere five years after taking that graduate post, she was a board-level account director at ad agency Ammirati Puris Lintas, overseeing Unilever and Nestlé.

Crediting her time in Thailand as something of a career accelerator, she says: "It did give me an extraordinary ▶



range of opportunities to do things that were well outside my comfort zone, instead of the traditional way things would have progressed in the UK.”

To have landed straight into a board-level position must surely make her the envy of her marketing peers. The discussion today, more than 20 years later, is still how to get marketing taken seriously at board level. Bennison believes an experience at JWT was instrumental in shaping her views on marketing and the C-Suite.

“My first account at JWT was Rowntree’s. Part of that meant I was the custodian of a box of historical documents. I loved the letters that went back and forth from the agency to the board of Rowntree’s around the development of brands like Black Magic. At that stage, the value of creativity to the business was 100% aligned at the highest levels. It has dawned on me that, since that’s how it was in 1930, marketing has somehow lost some of its space at that table.

“That business was about creating brands that were infinitely desirable; a more desirable box of chocolates than somebody else’s. Deep down I had an innate sense that’s where it should be.”

The power of brand to build a business is clearly very close to Bennison’s heart and she will have no truck with marketers who suffer from impostor

**IT’S OFTEN WHEN YOU HAVE THE BIGGEST BURNING PLATFORM THAT YOU DO YOUR BEST WORK**



syndrome: “You do get used to your own industry belittling its value but it’s a self-inflicted wound,” she says. “I have learned since moving from agency to brand-side that the skills you bring as a creative brand person are important.”

### **BURNING PLATFORM**

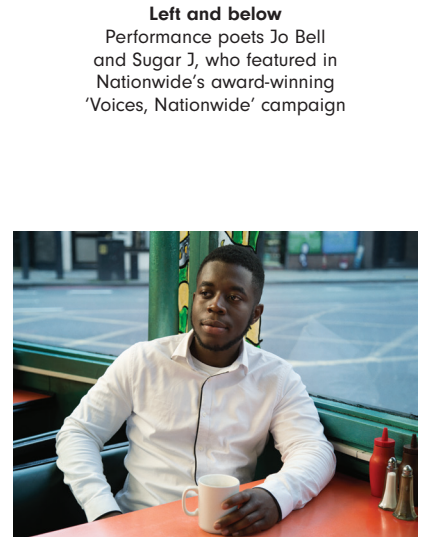
Having moved from agency-side to BT, her belief in brand values and their ability to sustain a business when all around it seems to be going sideways was very much tested when she joined Barclays in September 2008.

“Barclays was really formative and obviously challenging,” she recalls. “I started the week before Lehman collapsed, and I’d never worked in financial services before. Then, we went through the second challenge of the Libor

scandal.” For many marketers, beginning a role just as everything seems to be falling down around their ears might be discouraging. Not so for Bennison: “It’s often when you have the biggest burning platform that you do your best work.”

Bennison asks: “How do you rebuild reputation? It’s a really difficult thing. I was very clear that we needed to start around actions and things that were true and that people could touch and feel within the organisation, rather than some top-down love-fest.”

Those actions meant going back to the heart of the Barclays business to find its purpose, and an authentic way to communicate it. Simply regurgitating apologies and promises does not cut it. “It was about scanning across [the business] to find a story, and those



#### **Left and below**

Performance poets Jo Bell and Sugar J, who featured in Nationwide’s award-winning ‘Voices, Nationwide’ campaign



## CV

### SARA BENNISON

1989-1994

**JWT**

*Account director*

1994-1995

**Bainsfair Sharkey Trott**

*Account director*

1995-2000

**Ammirati Puris Lintas**

*Board account director*

2000-2003

**D'Arcy**

*Global account director*

2003-2003

**Bates Dorland**

*Group account director*

2003-2007

**Grey London**

*Managing partner*

2007-2008

**BT**

*Head of marketing  
Communications*

2008-2016

**Barclays Personal and  
Corporate Banking**

*Chief marketing officer*

2016-present

**Nationwide Building  
Society**

*Chief marketing officer*

stories were found in dark corners – they weren't designed to be particularly big things – for example, 'Digital Eagles', she says of the campaign to help older users get online effectively.

"You find something that is having a really profound impact on people," she continues. "It's very human, very real and very true to the culture. In a way it's similar to the Nationwide story. How do you find that core truth and how do you tell the story in a way that people believe you. That was the angle we took with Barclays and it worked very effectively."

## BUILDING ON TRUTH

This approach clearly underpins the work Bennison has guided during her tenure at Nationwide. She is very focused on what it means to be a building society, rather than any other kind of financial institution. So it is to her members – note, not 'customers' – that she looks for inspiration and brand truth.

"I haven't had to bring the business with me in terms of focusing on the member – that's very visible and tangible. The challenge for us is how you tell that story externally and attract a new generation of members in. For a certain generation, there used to be lots of building societies. That has changed."

That philosophy has driven a series of award-winning television campaigns for the organisation, notably 'Voices, Nationwide', featuring a range of citizen poets, riffing on the difference a building society account has made for them. It is not the usual 'faster payments, number of branches' strapline. The message goes straight to the heart of customer – sorry, member-centricity.

Having found a way to speak to the truth of what consumers want from a building society, or any financial institution for that matter, Bennison could be rightly proud of the plaudits this campaign, and the equally personal 'singing sisters' comedy duo Flo and Joan, were receiving. But she couldn't hide her shock and disgust when she saw what other attention the ads were attracting.

Both the 'Voices' campaign and Flo and Joan had attracted an astonishing level of vitriol and trolling – bullying, essentially. The singing sisters had been sent death threats – all for little ditties on a keyboard.

## STEPPING UP

"It was a real wake-up call for me because it would have been easy not to notice. Social-platform teams are there to catch this stuff, delete it and move on,"

Bennison admits. She only discovered the extent of the trolling when coming in early to work one morning and asking to see how much was really flowing through. Ignoring it wasn't an option.

"It was niggling at me. If this was real life and if what I was hearing was being said in front of me, would I really just turn away and pretend I hadn't heard and noticed?" While she agrees that, in general, 'do not feed the trolls' tends to be the best policy, she felt she had to act.

"If you ignore it, does it then just become okay? And the level of what's acceptable rises and has a massive knock-on effect far beyond ads and into bullying teens and women. If there's a small way to deal with this, we should do it," she insists.

The result was a collaboration between Channel 4, Nationwide, Maltesers and McCain to create a three-and-a-half minute film to show during the first episode of one of the channel's most highly-rated shows, *Gogglebox*. It featured the original ads with text overlays of some of the abuse aimed at the people within.

While Bennison is willing to hold her hand up to instigating the collaboration, she does not believe it is something she could have driven alone – however passionately she feels about it.

"I worked in the background with [the trade body] ISBA to think what protocols we could put in place with advertisers. We didn't want to stand forward alone because it's not just our problem. We went into meetings with Channel 4 to see how we could use an ad break and they came back with the idea. But we were clear all along that we couldn't be the only advertiser in it. It's kind of what building societies are all about – bringing people together to achieve things that on their own, they can't."

True to Bennison form, setting the anti-trolling response in motion is not a one-off. She goes back to the idea of 'truth', her own and the brand she stewards. It is often so easy to claim to be a values-driven marketer or organisation, but really embedding it needs a great deal of following through.

"It has been very interesting how the conversation has developed internally in terms of what we do when colleagues face abuse online or on the phone. I absolutely think brands can have a campaigning voice," she insists. "We have a responsibility to members, colleagues and society. We

have a voice and we can choose how we wish to use it." ◇

**Morag**

**Cuddeford-Jones**

is editor of *Catalyst*

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