

How Google breaks through

Lorraine Twohill, Google's senior vice president of global marketing, describes what has and hasn't changed for marketers trying to connect with customers.

Lorraine Twohill has made a career of pushing frontiers and forging connections. A 1992 graduate of Dublin City University, she spent a decade building brands for organizations across Europe. In 2003, Google tapped Twohill for its growing EMEA business, and in the process made her their first non-US marketing hire. Twohill advanced steadily from there; in 2009, she was named global head of marketing and then, in 2014, senior vice president of global marketing.

Twohill recently sat down with McKinsey's Jonathan Gordon to share her views on a new inflection point in marketing. What new technologies are arising, which best practices are emerging, and what fundamentals still hold true since marketing's first golden age?

The Quarterly: *Has marketing changed fundamentally since the first golden age?*

Lorraine Twohill: The core assets that were so important in the first golden age are as important today: a great central thought, great writing, great creativity. Back in the '60s, TV was coming onboard but all the work was in print. And the brilliance of print is that you have to have a really great thought and great writing. The bar isn't any lower today. You have to have authenticity, a great central thought. Those same skills that were needed back then are as critical today.

The way I think about marketing—and the way I tend to talk to my team about it—is “knowing the user, knowing the magic, and connecting the two.” Knowing the user means understanding who your consumers are, who your customers are. Not just knowing who they are, but what they need, what are their deep insights, and understanding how we can help them. Knowing the magic means knowing what’s in the hearts and minds of your engineers and your product managers, and what they’re building. Connecting the two means bringing the magic built by engineers to the world in a way that is relevant, meaningful, and compelling to the everyday consumer. So we create something that the world will be excited about.

The Quarterly: *What does the digital side allow you to do that you couldn't do before?*

Lorraine Twohill: The beauty of marketing today is that we can really show the return. The data allows us to demonstrate impact in a much more transparent way than in the past. It’s measurable, and we focus a lot on that. We’re very rigorous about the modeling we put in place and the tracking of our campaigns. Impact matters, results matter, tracking matters.

And I think right now we’re at a very interesting inflection point. The tools available to marketers today are extraordinary. They know far more about their consumers than ever before. They are able to have a much more meaningful, two-way conversation. It’s definitely the golden age for marketing in many ways.

We are excited about the automation of media planning and buying through the use of data and algorithms—what’s known as “programmatic.” I’ve challenged my team to hit a target of 60 percent for our display marketing via programmatic. You still have to define your audience but it is now much simpler to deliver the right message to the right person at the right time with precision. There are fewer wasted ad impressions. It’s also better for users because I’m not frustrating them with ads that aren’t relevant. And since it takes a lot of the grunt work out of media planning, it frees my team to focus on creativity.

The Quarterly: *How so?*

Lorraine Twohill: Google has a very data-led culture. But we care just as much about the storytelling and the brand, and how we tell the world about our mission. So I have found that getting the storytelling right—and having the substance and the authenticity in the storytelling—is as respected internally as the return and the impact. And with the use of the analytic tools we have, the storytelling becomes more important than ever. If anything, there’s too much talk about the science right now. I have a colleague who is writing a paper on the future of marketing: it’s data, data, science, science. I’m like, “It’s not!” Or rather, it is those things, yes. But if you fall down on the art, if you fail on the messaging and storytelling, all that those tools will get you are a lot of bad impressions.

The Quarterly: *How do you approach the messaging and the storytelling, especially given the challenges of proliferation? How do you break through the clutter?*

Lorraine Twohill: We start with the user, and we focus on what we call “one real user.” You have to think about the consumer as a human being. What matters in his or her life. And, honestly, you do not wake up in the morning and think, “I need a new browser today,” for example. You wake up in the morning and worry about getting your kids to school and paying your mortgage and saving for the future.

If we are going to interrupt you with something that we think is important to you, we have to find a way to tell you about it so that it resonates with you. There has to be a benefit to you. There has

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to be substance. So, we tell real-life stories. We say, “Listen, your life will change because our product will do this.” Or “Your life just got better because now you can have this.” We don’t do the storytelling unless we have that. Before we get into storytelling, we’ll sit with the team and say, “Okay, why does the world need this? What is going to change in a person’s life if they have this? What’s unique about this? What’s truly great about it?” There has to be substance there.

The Quarterly: *That’s interesting; we’ve also identified “substance” as one of the leading elements of marketing’s new golden age—along with science, storytelling, speed, and simplicity.*

Lorraine Twohill: Substance is really important. And I think that’s what gave marketing a lot of its bad name in the ’80s and ’90s. There was an awful lot of hype without substance. And a lot of exaggeration. You know: big hair, big everything.

Our engineers have a real sense of purpose and they care about building products and features that have substance and will make a meaningful difference in people’s lives; for example, look at the impact of search in giving people all over the world access to information. So that makes my job a lot easier and it gives my team something real to talk about. For example, Gmail launched the promotions and social tabs because we realized everybody’s inboxes were getting flooded with promotional emails and social-media emails. So we created two tabs where they all just immediately go: “Job done.” And people just loved that—a little feature for a mature product that people went nuts over because it was a real pain point. We call them “toothbrush problems.”

The Quarterly: *Toothbrush problems?*

Lorraine Twohill: Toothbrush problems—small problems, pain points—like you brush your teeth twice a day. But they are recurring problems, and we should just make them go away. And at the same time, we also look at big problems, like the deaths on the road from cars; whereas if you had driverless cars, that problem would go away. We look at what we can solve, from everyday toothbrush problems all the way up to epic problems.

The Quarterly: *Would you say, as well, that achieving the best customer experience means not only getting better at telling stories to the customer, but also getting better at listening?*

Lorraine Twohill: Certainly. I think that should be marketing's role in the company—to really be the champion of the consumer, the face of the user internally, and the guardian of the user's best interests and the user's needs.

We can put products in front of people and get consumer insights back almost in real-time. We can test and iterate, test and learn. Even more traditional companies can now exist in the digital world, and be smart about how they use the Internet as a great focus group. You can more quickly get user insights, and reach more people. And we can very quickly get that feedback to the teams as they go through their evolutions of a product. Then we bake that feedback into the product as it gets better.

The Quarterly: *And yet, there is still room for disagreement and creative judgment.*

Lorraine Twohill: Storytelling is the ultimate example of creative judgment. And in my view, the one thing you cannot train marketers on is creative judgment. You can train on most other things. But the folks who have great creative judgment—and you really know it when you see it—are few and far between. You can have principles and guidebooks and frameworks and brand guidelines. You can have the whole kit and caboodle. But just innate gut instinct, brilliant, creative judgment—that's what we look for, and that's where you see results.

The Quarterly: *How do you make sure your marketers stay in touch with prevailing trends?*

Lorraine Twohill: Well, you have to look at the world around you. You have to leave the building. Not enough folks do that; too many become very internally focused. They're in management team meetings; they're working with cross-functional teams. But you have to go out and look at the world around you—see the people, how they use your products, go into homes, walk around the city. No matter where I go in the world, I don't just go somewhere for meetings.

For example, if I go to Tokyo, I won't sit in the office for two days and fly back. I'll take a half a day to walk that city. You don't understand the idea of paying with a phone until you actually pay with a phone. You walk into any store in Tokyo, *beep*, and it's done.

I'll also take the most junior folks on the team and say, "Where do you hang out, where do you shop? Put me around your neighborhood. Take me to where you buy your groceries. Show me what you're excited about." They love this! And I learn so much from them—I come back bursting.

The Quarterly: *It's a smaller world.*

Lorraine Twhill: And a faster one. You know, it's not a two-year lead time for a Google product. It's much quicker. Being able to bring insights to the table, consumer insights, in real time and get insights back in—being able to test and iterate, test and iterate—is extremely important. We also like to keep a healthy sense of urgency, the feeling of being on a small, multifaceted team up against the odds. Usually, that's drawn from our own people: engineers, creative, and product managers. It's very creative because engineers are creative at heart. And when you bring creatives together with engineers, you get phenomenal ideas and phenomenal thinking.

The Quarterly: *What's it like working with engineers?*

Lorraine Twhill: It means marketing needs to raise its game. Engineers look at the world in a different way than the rest of us. They see things that are broken and want to fix them. They're big visionaries, big thinkers, because they have huge imaginations. They think of crazy ideas and go build them. You have to be as good as that. You have a seat at the genius table with people that can code, people that are creative, and are extraordinarily talented. To have a seat there, you need to raise your game. ○

Lorraine Twhill is Google's senior vice president of global marketing. This interview was conducted by **Jonathan Gordon**, a principal in McKinsey's New York office.