



THE CONSUMER-CENTRIC MARKETER: AS GURU OF EXPONENTIAL GROWTH: KELLEY STYRING

A fearless innovator provides her blueprint for integrating consumer insights into the heart and soul of a company

Kelley Styring spent fifteen years building a formidable skill set in Consumer Insights with P&G and PepsiCo; in 2001 she became Director of Frito-Lay's Consumer Strategy and Insights team. She may well have been the first "write-in" candidate hired by P&G, and since then she has been expert at bringing new relevance and influence to consumer insights. But in 2003, Styring chucked corporate life and relocated to Newberg, Oregon, where she is Principal of her own consultancy, InsightFarm, Inc., and where her husband operates a vineyard.

KNOW recently had a chance to talk to Styring—an inimitable conversationalist—about the consumer-centric company, the true value of consumer insights, and her new life as a one-person consultancy.

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT "CONSUMER-CENTRISM" IN THE 21ST CENTURY, WHAT DO WE MEAN? IS IT JUST THE SAME THING THAT COMPANIES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN STRIVING FOR, OR IS IT SOMETHING NEW?

To me, being consumer-centric is more a principle—the driving value of a company—than a process. It's in a company's DNA, top to bottom. It shouldn't mean that you are just going to do what the consumer wants. It means you recognize the diversity across the face of consumers, and that you are open to observations and opinions other than your own; this allows you to be an *advocate* for the consumer—whether you are a leading innovator or packing boxes in the warehouse. Consumer-centricism is a philosophy that is ingrained

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in some companies, while others simply pay it lip service. The question is, Do you see consumers as the driving life force of your company for as long as it exists, or do you see them as simply a hungry group of people that needs to be satisfied so your business will grow in the short term? One is internalized; the other is externalized.

CAN'T ANY COMPANY THAT USES MARKET RESEARCH SAY, "I AM CONSUMER-CENTRIC?"

I think you can say that you are consumer-*dependent*; I am not sure you can say you are consumer-*centric*. To be consumer-centric you have to execute against it. It requires a holistic company approach to actually fulfill consumer-centrism; we must understand and advocate for the consumer, recognizing that there is great diversity in the consumer mix. If we just do what the consumer *says* that he or she wants, that often leads to mediocrity—a tyranny of the majority, or paint-by-numbers innovation. Everyone, from the CEO to the people directly interacting with customers and consumers, must buy into the fact that fulfilling consumer needs is the key to marketplace success; and that broad swaths of humanity represent a wide variety of needs and wants, so tailoring to targets, or occasions, or needs will help you connect with this consumer. The reason the entire company or DNA is important is that if

you say the consumer is important, then fail to deliver or act in a way that lets me know that, you're not consumer-centric. You're not true

to the mission. If, on the other hand, you tell me you're about "me" and then you deliver, I'm sold forever.

CAN YOU THINK OF A COMPANY THAT IS DOING A GOOD JOB OF THIS?

One of my favorite phenomena right now is the girl-specific product market—and I am not talking about lipstick and makeup. There is a skateboard manufacturer called Curly Grrlz, and their mantra is, "This ain't your brother's skateboard company"; they produce completely awesome decks and wheels for girls. They are sold almost exclusively online or by phone. They know girls. They know skating. Your order comes on time, perfect and with extras you didn't ask for, like t-shirts and stickers. The designs are cool, but "girl cool." Another is Daisy Rock Guitars, which makes electric guitars for girls; the guitars are smaller for girl bodies, and some are shaped liked hearts and daisies. When you have something so narrow, you have a defined target, and you can get really close to the consumer; everything you do serves that audience.

Among the bigger companies, one that I think consistently delivers on consumer-centrism is Apple. They have a clearly defined target; they are not trying to appeal to everyone. They don't sit back and say, "How can I sell more computers?" Their

audience has clear needs—but they don't let their audience tell them what to do; they analyze those needs, then they experiment until they find solutions that appeal to the audience. They are close to their consumers, they are constantly in touch, and they are honest in how they apply their technologies to those needs.

DO LARGER COMPANIES HAVE A TOUGHER TIME BEING CONSUMER-CENTRIC?

Yes, they do, because to be truly consumer-centric you have to be intimate with your consumer—really close in terms of a definable target with clear needs. Then you have to be really honest in how you apply your company's resources to that goal. For a big company that has to produce big innovations that are broadly appealing, the vast mix of consumers makes it hard. If your consumer is every oatmeal eater in America, and they range in age from 3 to 80 and live in every state, it's a huge challenge to deliver something that resonates with each of those people.

So I think consumer-centrism will continue to be a challenge for larger companies; you might be able to address it at the brand level or in a smaller way, but you basically have to go with whatever idea pulls in the most bodies, creating the biggest business the most quickly, and that's not necessarily the most creative or resonant. Most companies I have worked with tend to respond to either the majority or the loudest voice—the person who calls in to complain. I have worked with a couple of companies that quickly pulled advertising when they

got five or six phone calls from irate people. In that sense, responding to everything that a consumer says can be a real Achilles heel.

ARE THERE SPECIFIC STRATEGIES THAT YOU THINK LARGER COMPANIES CAN USE TO BE MORE FLEXIBLE, MORE CONSUMER-CENTRIC?

One would be “in-sourcing” your innovation group—separating these groups so that they are isolated from the politics of profit and from consumer tyranny, if you will, so that they have an incubated environment. This gives them permission, for a time, to explore smaller, leading-edge consumers and trends—growing new ideas separate from the perils of delivering profits. The other tactic I have seen work is real diligence on the part

YOU HAVE TO LINK RESEARCH OUTCOMES BACK TO COMPANY STRATEGY

of a consumer insights group in doing what is called “voice of the customer” research—a constant kind of consumer contact. This has been done well via online communities, continuous surveys, longitudinal qualitative studies and many other means. To use research to drive consumer-centric thinking successfully, you have to link the outcomes back to the strategy of the company; it has to really integrate with what the company's doing on every front—again, from the CEO to front-line sales.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHALLENGE OF DISSEMINATING FINDINGS—GETTING THEM IN FRONT OF ALL OF YOUR INTERNAL CLIENTS?

I think the whole concept of “disseminating information” is symptomatic of how consumer insights groups sell themselves short. We complete a report, we distill it down, we integrate “scintillating insights,” and we send them out to people; then we say, “Why didn’t they do what we told them to do?” Sometimes we do presentations; our colleagues say, “Thank you very much,” and then they make different decisions than what we recommended, and we scratch our heads and wonder what happened. So, the whole idea of “dissemination” is the problem.

I want to introduce the concept of “activist insight.” Activist insight is grounding your organization in consumer knowledge; it is about drawing people *toward* the insights, rather than pushing data *out*. True consumer insight draws people to your ideas; you become a marketer in a very real sense. I am not talking about “selling” research, or making research *seem* more important, but rather, an applied marketing model. First,

INSIGHT REQUIRES CONNECTING THINGS THAT PEOPLE DON’T CONNECT—INTEGRATING DATA SOURCES, THEN GOING OUT ON A LIMB

think about who your constituents are within the company—targets—and what their insight needs are. What are the things that are valued in your company, and how does the insight—the research product—play

a role in growing the business? Then, how do you get visibility for your insight, via media/promotion vehicles? We adeptly advise our clients on how to better market to their consumers. If consumer insight is our product, why wouldn’t we use marketing principles to activate our company to act in ways that we know will help it grow? That’s “activist insight.”

CAN YOU TALK A BIT MORE ABOUT WHAT CONSTITUTES AN INSIGHT, AS YOU DEFINE IT?

Too often research is all about *what*; insight is about *why* and *so what*, and that requires creativity. It requires connecting things that people don’t connect—integrating data sources, then going out on a limb.

When your responsibility is consumer information, your product should be *insight*. Insight is the amalgam of information and experience, from research and from other sources—things you read about that other people did, things you found out last night on the news, things you read this weekend in *Esquire*. Here’s an example: People say in surveys that they are into health and wellness,

yet the behavioral data shows that people often don’t behave in the way that they claim. I’ve even heard people say that respondents are just lying on these

surveys, providing normative answers. I don’t agree. I think the insight is that people are answering those questionnaires with their *best intention*; this is how they’d really *like* to be. For instance, people have more wellness



behaviors early in the day, early in the week, and early in the year; they start out with great intentions, then they have physical functional barriers. Any brand or product that *enables* those good intentions will have a solid emotional relevance for a consumer—that is a powerful business insight.

IT SEEMS, THOUGH, THAT PEOPLE ARE SOMETIMES HESITANT TO MAKE THAT LEAP FROM DATA TO INSIGHT.

We researchers should not be afraid because we actually own the very tools to measure if something is a good idea or not. I can go as far out on the limb as I feel like, because I can say, “I’m not making this stuff up. I have data, and it leads me to think in this way. Guess what? I am the owner of all of the tools to measure what you would do with that insight, that idea. And I am going to coach you how to measure XYZ to make sure it’s a good idea.”

Researchers are very precise people. We don’t want to be wrong—ever. Now let me explain why accepting the risk of being wrong can be a strength. If we give our opinion, we are engaging in real partnership

with our marketing partners; it gives us skin in the game. The real loss is when we don’t give an opinion—it’s a huge opportunity cost for the company, a great resource wasted.

SO BY PARTNERING WITH MARKETERS AND COMPANY LEADERS, YOU ELIMINATE THE NEED TO “DISSEMINATE” FINDINGS IN A MORE TRADITIONAL, ONCE-REMOVED WAY?

You have to create visibility to build clout for your insights. And you have to understand how to do that in such a way that it draws enthusiasm for what you are saying. One step is to identify key points in time in the strategic planning cycle of your company; most companies have two or three different points in time, and integrating consumer insight means delivering the top ten things that we know about consumers in that area, then developing a product around that.

You can also insinuate yourself into these visibility platforms where senior leadership is going to see some outcome; that goes beyond your individual project scope into really understanding the mechanics of the company—how do things get done and how can I become a part of that? That’s earning a seat at the table; when you have that seat, you have access. Then, it’s up to you what you do with that access.

I never went to a meeting without a little plastic folder that had my schedule in it; behind that I always had the two or three ideas that I was shopping around at that moment. Double Jeopardy [*Ed.: Ehrenberg, 1988*], for example, is the theory that there is a very high correlation between penetration and frequency. I’ll often hear clients say,

THE HIGHER YOU GO IN THE FOOD CHAIN IN TERMS OF THE DECISION MAKERS AT A COMPANY, THE LESS THEY VALUE DECISION-MAKING RESEARCH.

“We’re on a penetration strategy,” or “We’re on a frequency strategy.” My perspective was “No, you’re not”; our data showed that a product might appeal to fewer people very strongly—so that fewer people are buying it at a much higher frequency—only if it was very, very innovative. This is applicable in very few cases and is not a strategy for growth for an existing business. Just by shopping that one piece of data—ostensibly from the standpoint of getting input—I was able to get a lot of traction for Double Jeopardy as a concept and inspire new thinking about growth strategies that might work.

Your colleagues may not be enamored with the latest and greatest research technology, but if you position it as a new and different way of thinking about their consumer, that can be very successful.

CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONSUMER-CENTRIC RESEARCH THAT MAKES A LONG-TERM DIFFERENCE VERSUS JUST SERVING TODAY’S NEEDS?

I had an employee who was very committed to running every decision-making task with perfection—making sure that each variable was isolated. I said to this person, “You’re going to help our brand group take a \$5 million idea and make it a \$7 million idea.

On a percentage basis, that’s huge; you’re making their project 40 percent bigger. But the time you spent on that kept you from identifying a new target group that could deliver \$50 million to the

company. So, because you were working on lower-order decision-making research, and not higher-order consumer strategy, you cost the company \$48 million.”

I think that is a difficult concept to convey, because our decision-making research has immediate, tangible impact—there’s a real product being sold, a real plant being built. But you have to look at the trade-off between how much time you spend on that and its relative value to the company. The higher you go in the food chain in terms of the decision makers at a company, the less they value decision-making research. That keeps researchers believing that the senior-most people “don’t care” about research, when they actually do. They just care more about things that are going to have a bigger impact in their company. I think Roger Enrico at PepsiCo called it “making big changes to big things.”

HOW DO YOU THINK THE INTERNET HAS CHANGED OUR ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE WITH CONSUMERS—FOR RESEARCH OR MARKETING?

That’s such an interesting question. In terms of innovation that I’ve seen coming from the research industry in using the

Internet, it's been somewhat disappointing. I'm seeing a lot of excellent execution of the same old stuff; it has taken our current tools and made them much sharper—such as finding very small target groups. But I feel a twinge of disappointment, because you would think that something so unique and culture shifting would inspire more invention, more innovation, in terms of using the tools for what they uniquely do.

I'll give you an example: I had a friend who went to work for a startup luxury goods company that was online. The Web site would ask you four or five questions about the type of luxury watch you were looking for, then it would give you a selection from which to choose—the twenty-five or so watches that met your needs. Well, interestingly, the company then took all the data that they got from people selecting their products, did a massive and continuous conjoint analysis, and developed *new* products based on their customers' needs. How brilliant is that?

IN 2003, YOU LEFT YOUR CORPORATE ROLE AS DIRECTOR OF INSIGHTS AT FRITO-LAY TO PURSUE A NEW LIFE. CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT THAT?

Sure. It was a three-year process undertaken by both my husband and myself to build what I'll call an "intentional life." We were what I would call "white-collar migrant workers"—we basically went where the employment was, and as a result had lived in four cities in seventeen years together. We also took opportunities that were offered, rather than creating them for ourselves. This led to dramatic life imbalance with two

young children and two high-octane careers, along with social activities and board memberships—we had a hard time saying "no," and we were crazed.

We thought we were smart enough to design something better if we were more intentional about it. We began applying all of the templates and techniques we'd learned in corporate life to build a "Life Strategy"—beginning with what we wanted our life to be and building pieces to support that, rather than piecing together the parts we had collected and trying to "balance" everything. After three years of work on this "project," we decided that our life should be a home-based tapestry of family businesses. We sold everything we owned to make it happen. We moved ourselves to Oregon in 2003 to start Styring Vineyards [*Ed.*: www.styringvineyards.com], specializing in artisanal Pinot Noir and Rieslings. I sold my Lexus to buy a tractor. InsightFarm, Inc., is my consumer strategy consulting practice that I started in the laundry room between the dryer and the muddy boot rack. During the slow start-up days, I got a lot of laundry done.

It's a good life—not perfect, but good. Many pieces of the puzzle fit. But there is risk. We've left the security of a steady income, and things get tight from time to time. We have minimal health insurance; but, ultimately we're responsible for our own success or failure, and that's energizing. In a way, it's the ultimate consumer challenge—to invest your own money, and the people you love, in something you believe in and risk it all to bring a dream to life. ▀

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