

# Building brands better:

Key trends and opportunities in a new era for marketing services



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# Introduction: seizing the opportunities ahead

The future looks bright for brands and marketers that can ride the digital ‘wave’ and deliver solutions



Lorraine Ruckstuhl

Head of Technology, Media & Telecomms  
– Barclays Mid Corporate

For this report, we’ve canvassed the views of some prominent marketing services leaders to provide insights into the long-term trends impacting how brands engage with their audiences.

What these conversations have demonstrated is that marketing services agencies and their client brands have every reason to look forward with confidence – that is, if they can stay ahead of continuing technological developments and changing consumer expectations.

It’s clear from talking to our clients in the marketing services sector that one of the biggest opportunities for brands is harnessing the power of data generated by the ever-increasing online activity of consumers.

At the same time, an emerging challenge arises from growing unease among consumers about online tracking by third party cookies and the impending changes to privacy regulations in response to those concerns. Brands will be increasingly looking to their agencies to maximise the value of their first-party customer data.

Meanwhile, with public awareness of environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues higher than ever, there’s also an opportunity for brands to connect with consumers by making genuine commitments to ESG values and initiatives.

The greater accessibility of digital communications has broadened brands’ potential audiences, but that means messaging targeted and tailored to the needs of different end-user groups is more important than ever.

Brands and marketers riding the digital ‘wave’ and plugged into social media platforms like Tik Tok will be best positioned to succeed. Indeed, we’ve seen smaller agencies specialising in social media expanding their operations to become serious players in the sector, rivalling some of the more established full-service agencies.

Of course, any discussion of the current trends and opportunities in marketing services must inevitably take account of the extraordinary and ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As one of our contributors, Frisco Chau, CEO of M&C Saatchi’s data consultancy, Fluency, points out, in the context of such an all-consuming public health crisis, every brand needs to re-examine its relevance and role in helping to deliver wellbeing to its customers, at least to some extent. Amazon is just one example of how unprecedented circumstances have changed the perception of what was previously considered a utility brand into one seen as a “knight in shining armour” during the long months of Covid-19 lockdown.

The pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated a number of existing sector trends – not least that rapid acceleration of online shopping at the expense of traditional high street retail and the enforced remote working that has brought such huge changes to many people’s lives and consumption habits.

Brands have been presented with a unique opportunity to move to direct-to-consumer e-commerce, with everyone from retailers to restaurants pivoting their business model to 'cut out the middleman'. Such direct relationships with consumers clearly demand completely new marketing strategies.

The dramatic fall in demand and rock-bottom rates for TV advertising at the outset of the pandemic has clearly created opportunities for some brands they may have never previously considered. Equally, the way that many brands have repositioned themselves is a useful reminder of the importance of being agile enough to adapt brand messaging and media to suit the prevailing consumer sentiment and behaviour.

The consensus among our contributors is that marketing spend is now bouncing back strongly. That confidence is backed up by the latest Advertising Association/WARC Expenditure Report, the only source to collect advertising revenue data across the entire media landscape, which predicts that UK ad spend will grow by 18.2 per cent this year, to reach a total of £27.7bn. That's an increase of £4.2bn from last year.<sup>1</sup>

Managing that growth will present new hurdles for some agencies, and with returning consumer demand boosting agency workloads, retaining the best talent will continue to be critical.

### Lorraine Ruckstuhl

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# Putting digital first

“There is an exciting opportunity for those brands with a strong direct-to-consumer offer, rather than relying on third-party aggregator or marketplace platforms.”

– Ben Ennis, MediaLab



# Putting digital first

## Delivering high-quality online experiences for consumers is the key challenge for brands across all sectors

For both brands and consumers, the irresistible shift to digital has, of course, been greatly accelerated by the impact of the pandemic. It's a transition that's happening across every sector of the economy, from retail and consumer goods to essential services such as health and education.

Consumers that have made the move online are now coming to expect a high-quality, personalised digital customer experience and brands and their marketing agencies need to deliver on those expectations.

Christian Gladwell, CEO at M&C Saatchi Performance, points out that “marketers and brands can now choose from a dizzying array of channels and media touchpoints, virtually all of which are now digitally connected”. This, of course, includes navigating the explosion in video-on-demand services and the changing viewing habits of a ‘working-from-home’ population. Catch-up TV services like ITV Hub are increasingly investing in data science to understand what people want to watch and when.

Aaron Bell, Finance and Commercial Director, says: “Brands must create compelling digital content and bring it to life through different media – through film, through Twitter and Instagram feeds, through chatbots with the right personalised customer information but, most of all, through fresh, inspired thinking.”

On the flipside, a ‘digital first’ approach means traditional ‘bricks-and-mortar’ retailers face a huge challenge in creating attractive in-store experiences if they are ever to entice consumers back to the high street. Barclays has just released a report on this very topic, called Retail Unlocked: Strategies for a new future.

### Pivoting to digital

Covid-19 social distancing measures have hit experiential and print advertising particularly hard. By contrast, the agencies that have been best able to weather the storm and react to the fast-changing needs of brands and audiences, are those that have pivoted towards digital platforms. The lessons they have learned in digitising, and becoming more flexible and dynamic in their business model, should be of significant benefit as demand for advertising steadily recovers.

The need to digitise extends beyond the B2C context to all types of brand communications, including Radley Yeldar’s audience-led stakeholder communications: “There’s a lot of

conversation about digital first – the majority of our clients really want to embrace it and not just give it lip service,” says Aaron.

And the multi-sector impact of the digital first approach is underlined by what’s happening in financial services – an industry which tends to be relatively conservative because it’s so heavily regulated but which is nevertheless gravitating towards online. The change is in part being driven by disruptive brands coming to the market and using digital to make it easier for consumers to understand and engage with complex financial products.

That the digital customer experience is now paramount across every sector of the economy is evidenced by the way many charities have proved they can successfully reach out for support and donations through virtual activities after channelling resources and creativity into digital forms of engagement once the pandemic put a stop to face-to-face fundraising.

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– Aaron Bell, Radley Yeldar

## The end of third-party cookies?

For brands and marketers developing a digital first strategy, one of the key challenges to meet is the impending demise of third-party cookies and IDFA's due to the introduction of tougher data privacy regulations such as GDPR in Europe and the California Consumer Privacy Act in the US.

With reliance on third-party cookies dwindling, Ben Ennis, COO at MediaLab, believes the role of first-party cookie data from direct interaction with customers is set to take centre stage. "There is an exciting opportunity for those brands with a strong direct-to-consumer offer, rather than relying on third-party aggregator or marketplace platforms."

As well as opening up new ways for brands to capture customer data, this also creates the chance to make stronger connections with consumers through an enriched online customer experience.

Another digital trend, driven in part by the changing data privacy measures, is the move towards what Frisco described as the "democratisation of data". As consumers come to see the true value of their data, they're asking why they shouldn't have a say in how it gets used and what reward they should expect from the brands that use it.

It's this type of thinking on consumer data that has led, for example, to the rise of privacy-focused browser Brave, which blocks indiscriminate advertising but gives users the option to turn on adverts that reward them for their attention through the use of cryptocurrency.

These digital innovations are a reminder that the millennial and Generation Z consumers of tomorrow have a very different outlook and brands will have to continue to adapt to reach new audiences.



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# Harnessing the power of customer data



“Historically, digital marketing has basically relied on following consumers around the internet and serving them up with adverts for stuff they’ve just looked at. It’s a pretty blunt instrument and very uneconomical.”

– Christian Gladwell, M&C Saatchi

# Harnessing the power of customer data

Data science is the key to getting the right message in front of the right people

Brands and agencies are increasingly embracing data science to find the insights into customer behaviour that inform their marketing campaigns and help them get the right message to the right people at the right time.

An M&C Saatchi study<sup>2</sup> of over 4,000 US and UK household name brands found that a business's 'data fluency' is strongly linked to its market performance, with data-fluent brands building more valuable audience connections and continuously outgrowing their competitors. Key to building audience connections is the ability to rapidly decode a fast-moving world and continuously encode into fast-moving cultures with relevance and resonance.

Frisco says this is proof that "in this world of uncertainty where there's chaos and constant change, brands need to be much more data-fluent and much more evidence-based in how they make decisions".

Brands tend to fall into one of two types: 'digital natives', whose business models have evolved in the digital world, and the evolving traditionalists. Some businesses in this second group risk sharing the recent fate of some high street retail brands unless they engage with data science and digital marketing. In some cases, organisations that think they are digitally advanced still have some basic work to do to close the gap to be able to use data effectively to inform marketing activity.

## Resetting the digital dashboard

The limitations of earlier approaches to digital marketing are also becoming clear. Christian says: "Historically, digital marketing has basically relied on following consumers around the internet and serving them up with adverts for stuff they've just looked at. That's pretty unsophisticated. It's the digital equivalent of chasing someone down the street after they've had a look at your product. It's a pretty blunt instrument and very uneconomical."

Increasingly, brands and agencies need to use customer data in different ways, especially with the phasing out of third-party cookies on internet browsers. Instead of targeting individuals, they should focus on building data on consumer cohorts at the aggregate level to make more strategic marketing decisions, believes Christian.

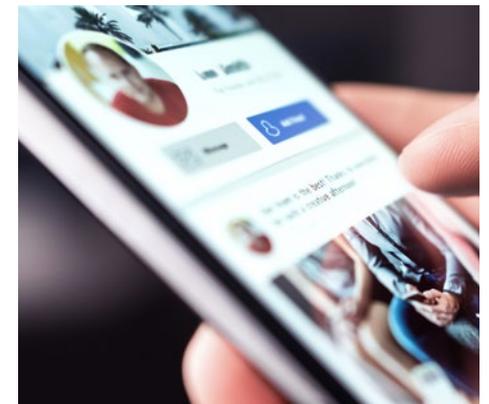
And there's certainly no shortage of data available – brands and their marketers can utilise artificial intelligence to draw insight from data that measures how people are spending their time online by channels, by touchpoints and by content type. The same applies to share of wallet.

Of course, a marketing campaign is more likely to succeed if there are clearly understood objectives, from which the right audience, messaging and media channels can be established.

Agencies can then plan their campaigns in response to a client's specific challenge, using data to inform decisions on how to get the right message in front of the right people at

"...in this world of uncertainty where there's chaos and constant change, brands need to be much more data-fluent and much more evidence-based in how they make decisions"

– Frisco Chau, M&C Saatchi



the right time, while overlaying that with human expertise, experience and intuition.

### Flexibility is key

Data science is also increasing marketing agencies' ability to monitor performance in real time and test and adapt campaigns quickly. Ben says: "Things change very quickly, so using data science to understand what's working or not working and being able to tweak an advert creatively or to reposition it is very valuable to optimise results." Consumer reaction to a campaign through social media channels, for example, is a powerful way to check the pulse of public opinion.

Another impact of data science is likely to be a change in the way media is planned and bought, with media planning increasingly outcome-focused, rather than using 'cost+' pricing models. Some marketing agencies have already moved to a model in which they don't own any media but buy it dynamically instead. As long as the channel used is brand safe, they are fairly ambivalent about where the performance for their client is coming from.

Looking ahead, brands will need a better understanding of the value of each of the channels they use. Such analysis is generally only sporadic or infrequent at present and is sometimes not acted upon, but those outputs, regularly assessed, can be an opportunity to use marketing spend to experiment, and discover what works and what doesn't.

### Informing the digital customer experience

With the technology available to them, brands and marketers now have an opportunity to use consumer data to transform how they make decisions about their customers' digital experience – to understand what their customers want and how to be more relevant, more entertaining and more useful to the widest possible audience.

A related trend that has been catapulted forward by the Covid-19 pandemic is the transition to a predominantly cashless society. The ability to track and analyse digital payments is a roadmap for brands and marketers to better understand consumers' behaviour.

This is leading some businesses to explore the role of blockchain in providing clues to consumer habits, while the more digital-savvy brands are already embracing 'tokenomics' and rewarding customers in cryptocurrencies.

However, changes in media planning and buying aren't likely to be adopted overnight. Some of the largest advertising accounts in the world are predicated on a set cost savings model rather than whether or not the right media is being bought. For some brands, and their creative services agencies, it may be that a true strategic shift will only come about as a result of harsh lessons learned from disappointing marketing outcomes.

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# Embracing the ESG agenda

A photograph of a person carrying a young child on their back. The child is wearing a white floral-patterned top and is looking out towards a beach and the ocean. The person carrying the child is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt. The background shows a sandy beach, the ocean with small waves, and a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

“I don't think it's brands that will innovate – it's people that innovate and brands that follow.”

– Christian Gladwell, M&C Saatchi

# Embracing the ESG agenda

People power is the driver as businesses re-examine their roles and responsibilities

Environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues have been brought into sharper focus more than ever before in recent times, forcing businesses of all shapes and sizes to re-examine their priorities, their impact on society and their relationship with stakeholders.

This is, of course, part of a wider shift in attitudes towards environmental concerns and the role of business in society that is placing sustainability at the heart of many brands, rather than being just a 'nice-to-have'. This in turn is having a seismic impact on their marketing strategies.

## Changing expectations

Corporates were already tackling ESG issues but their more recent approach to the topic can be seen in part as a response to an increase in the kind of consumer activism that has brought an outcry on issues like the exploitation of low-paid workers, and the rise of movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo.

With declining trust in governments round the world, consumers are increasingly looking to big business to use their resources and influence to address pressing global issues. Clearly, it's in their interests to ensure that their brands respond to and reflect changing public opinion. As Aaron says: "People are basically voting with their spending power."

It's likely there will be more and more scrutiny in the area of ESG, both from stakeholders like debt and equity holders and an emerging cohort of Gen Z consumers increasingly

interested in the sustainability credentials of the brands they engage with. Christian says: "I don't think it's brands that will innovate – it's people that innovate and brands that follow."

This, again, highlights the importance of data in informing marketing strategy. Those brands that are what M&C Saatchi describes as the most data-fluent and cognitive will be the most successful in engaging with their audience because the data will leave them in no doubt about consumer sentiment on the topics of sustainability and climate change.

Pressure from more empowered stakeholders is one reason behind the emergence of B Corporation certification, the global standard of social and environmental performance that's now recognised across 150 industries in 71 countries.

The growing importance of ESG reporting is increasingly reflected in the briefs that marketing agencies receive with some so inundated that they are having to turn work away. However, brands need to guard against accusations of 'greenwashing' from increasingly well-informed and sceptical consumers when it comes to claims about sustainability. This requires genuine commitment on the part of brands.

Aaron Bell stresses the importance of authenticity in the way that brands communicate about sustainability and that ESG strategy needs to be meaningful and effective. Research<sup>3</sup> by Radley Yeldar concludes that it's crucial brands avoid using sustainability greenwash and ESG messaging in a clichéd, unauthentic way, which can damage the brand and disengage its audience.



“Our view is that data diversity will drive better inclusion because it weeds out the unconscious bias that we have as human beings.”

– Frisco Chau, M&C Saatchi

## Finding new purpose

But it's not just about effective campaigns, reporting or employee communications – sometimes the real issue is the absence of a broader, long-term sustainability strategy linked to a brand's purpose and values.

Even some of the biggest corporates discover their strategy isn't right or has gaps when they try to communicate it in a sustainability report. For some businesses, the stakeholder engagement process can therefore be a way of crystallising their ESG strategy, including putting tangible targets and measurements in place to substantiate its claims, whether it's metrics around employee remuneration and diversity, data on carbon emissions or community impacts.

Partnering with like-minded businesses or suppliers is also an important way to strengthen ESG credibility – and this includes the marketing agencies that brands choose to work with.

This raises the profile of agencies' own sustainability credentials as key criteria in pitches and the importance of demonstrating commitment to industry initiatives such as the AdGreen Levy, which aims to tackle the negative environmental impacts of advertising production.

“People are basically voting with their spending power.”

– Aaron Bell, Radley Yeldar

## Driving diversity and inclusion

One aspect of ESG that may require additional attention is diversity and inclusion, but the combined impact of new working practices resulting from the pandemic, and the growing importance of consumer data in informing marketing strategies, has the potential to drive greater diversity and inclusion – both within the marketing services sector itself and in the broader business world.

Achieving greater diversity and inclusion is not only intrinsically 'the right thing to do' but has a powerful commercial driver too: brands need to better reflect their end-consumer demographics if they want to extend their reach to the widest possible market. They will be best placed to do this if they're able to draw on diverse teams with a wide range of experience and insights.

Businesses are also increasingly acknowledging and addressing the gender pay gap and the marketing services sector clearly has an important role to play here too. Although a clearer picture will emerge once all eligible employers have published their data in autumn 2021, PwC's early analysis of available gender pay gap data for the 2020-21 reporting year shows that the mean pay gap has fallen to 12.5% from 14.3% in the first year of reporting in 2017-18. However, a 2021 salary survey by Major Players shows there's still lots of room for improvement in the creative sector, with women still earning far less on average than men in comparable roles.

Greater workplace diversity could, however, be given fresh impetus as a result of the changes brought about by the Covid-enforced transition to remote working, with staff more able to live and work more affordably outside big city locations.

Ultimately, however, it may be the power of data on the online activity of consumers that could turn out to be the most important driver of diversity and inclusion across the marketing services sector. Objective assessment of this data will be the true test of whether the creative ideas generated by brands and their marketing agencies make a connection with consumers across all cultures. Frisco certainly agrees: “Our view is that data diversity will drive better inclusion because it weeds out the unconscious bias that we have as human beings.”

Rather than diminishing creativity, harnessing the power of consumer data will support it, with marketers and brands able to have much more confidence in their creative ideas because they're backed up by the facts.



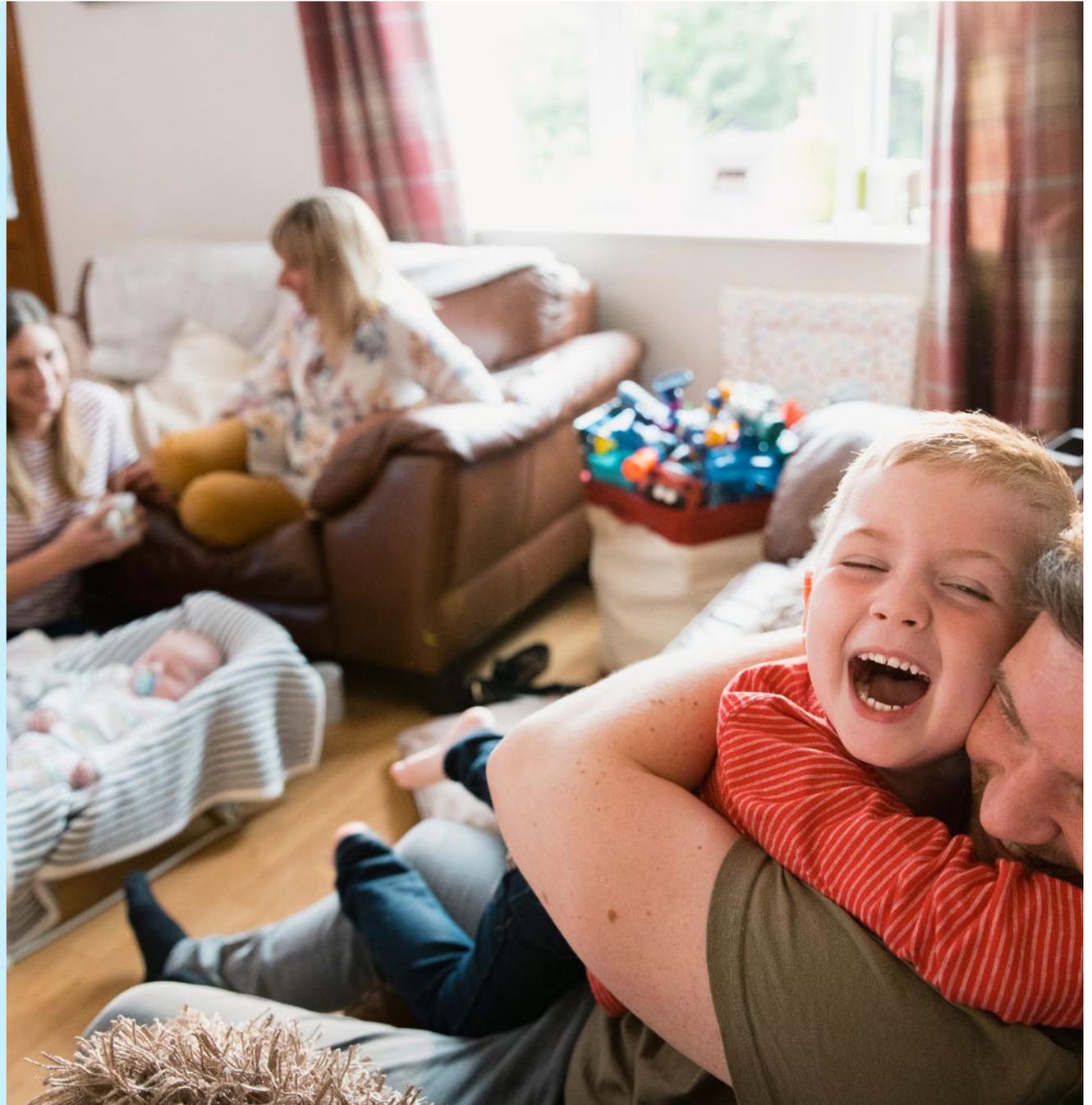
## Barclays and sustainable finance

Barclays has announced its ambition to be a net zero bank by 2050, setting us on a path to play a leading role in tackling climate change and helping accelerate the transition to a low-carbon economy.

We are committed to helping companies take action to address the environmental and sustainability challenges facing our planet and to enabling our clients to respond to the many regulatory, reputational and commercial pressures resulting from ESG issues.

This includes providing access to flexible financing at competitive rates to support environmental and sustainable activities – and deposit solutions to align surplus capital with green priorities.

Barclays Green Loans can provide funding for a variety of green and environmental projects, including energy efficiency, renewable energy, green transport, waste management and greenhouse gas emission reduction, with lending approved in line with our Sustainable Finance Framework developed in partnership with Sustainalytics.





# Engaging a broader audience

“It’s no longer the same audience that it was a few years ago – it’s now about employees, customers, commentators, influencers, special interest groups, policy-makers – and beyond.”

– Aaron Bell, Radley Yeldar

# Engaging a broader audience

Brands need to create messaging that is accessible to a much wider stakeholder base

A shifting marketing landscape has seen brands look to engage not just with their customers but a range of other stakeholders, including investors, shareholders, employees and their supply chains.

The pandemic has prompted many brands to reassess their impact on end-users and society as a whole. To meet this multi-audience challenge, and to strengthen stakeholders' belief in a corporate's vision and values, businesses and their marketing agencies increasingly need to create messaging that's consistent and genuine, but tweaked appropriately for different stakeholders.

Aaron emphasises that while the core of a brand story should be its purpose and strategy, a detailed or light touch can be used, depending on the audience. This means that if marketing agencies want to help their client brands succeed, they should always be thinking about multiple end-users.

Multiple audiences, with different needs and expectations, have particular implications for companies' annual reporting. Radley Yeldar's research<sup>4</sup> has found that annual reports now need to have more diverse appeal because the readership has changed.

"It's no longer the same audience that it was a few years ago – it's now about employees, customers, commentators, influencers, special interest groups, policy-makers – and beyond," says Aaron.

The research shows that these new audiences are far more engaged than some might think, with many reading reports from cover to cover and then going online to find further information. This puts more emphasis on the story being told, and a consistent creative delivery to bring it to life.

It's also important that annual reports embrace multimedia, making them accessible to as wide an audience as possible across different platforms.

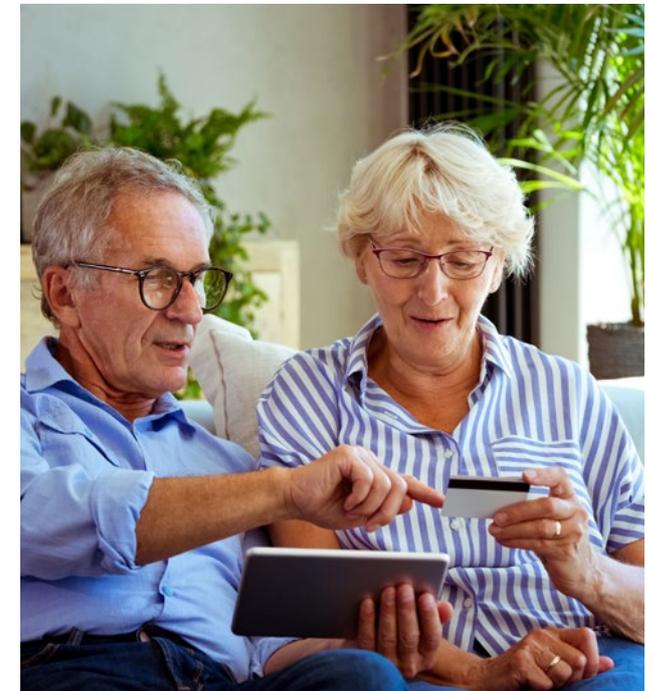
All this means that the days when annual reports were the exclusive preserve of a corporate's investor relations team are over. Instead, the report needs to be a combined effort involving multiple stakeholders, brand and corporate communication specialists.

## Employee engagement

Across all industries, internal communication of sustainability and ESG policies is increasingly important for employee retention and engagement – but also needs to be communicated in a way that's both inclusive and accessible.

Some brands excel at communicating with their employees about purpose and values, as well as learning and development opportunities, using online channels or physical promotions in the workplace – and there's increasing use of film, animation or even virtual reality to help bring a brand narrative to life internally.

Aaron says that, perhaps surprisingly, many corporates have invested less in communicating their vision internally during the pandemic, with the more pressing and immediate need to focus on employee wellbeing. However, with the ongoing pressure on corporates to attract and retain the best talent, he expects employee engagement activity to bounce back very strongly as Covid restrictions are lifted.



# About our contributors



**Christian Gladwell**

CEO, M&C Saatchi Performance



**Frisco Chau**

CEO, M&C Saatchi Fluency

M&C Saatchi Group is the world's largest independent communications network.

The Group operates across five core specialisms: Connected Creativity; Passion Marketing; Global & Social Issues; Brand, Experience & Innovation; and Performance Media. Each of these connected specialists are fuelled for growth through data, insights and technology.

[mcsaatchi.com](http://mcsaatchi.com)



**Ben Ennis**

COO, MediaLab

Medialab is a data marketing partnership. Through a blend of smart people and smart tech, they interrogate and understand data to find ways of connecting brands and causes with customers so they can deliver transformative growth for their clients.

[medialabgroup.co.uk](http://medialabgroup.co.uk)



**Aaron Bell**

Finance and Commercial Director,  
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Radley Yeldar is an independent, London-based brand, marketing and communications agency. The 200-strong team of specialists have been working with multinationals, start-ups, private companies and public bodies for more than 30 years. They tackle complex challenges for complex organisations by defining their story, communicating it simply, changing behaviours and delivering results.

[ry.com](http://ry.com)

# Barclays contacts



## Lorraine Ruckstuhl

Head of Technology, Media and Telecoms – Mid Corporate

Lorraine has over 25 years' experience of corporate and investment banking. Before joining the Technology, Media and Telecoms team, she spent five years in Debt Finance at Barclays, arranging and providing acquisition finance and term debt facilities to a variety of corporates.

Before that she spent seven years as a Relationship Director working with large UK- and European-based media clients, which took her regularly to France, the Netherlands and Scandinavia.

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## Ian Bain (ACIB)

Head of Technology, Media and Telecoms – Large Corporate

Ian started his banking career in 1984 with NatWest and from there joined Barclays in 2009. He has led various different business areas within both NatWest and Barclays and started his TMT team role in 2019.

Ian leads Barclays' national Large Corporate TMT business and is delighted to be working to support the growth and expansion of such a strong and diverse set of clients and the sector more generally. "TMT businesses are increasingly involved in everything we do today and so championing this sector for Barclays is a real privilege."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mobilemarketingmagazine.com/uk-adspend-to-grow-182-percent-this-year>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fluency.mcsaatchi.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/How-Data-Fluency-Fuels-Growth.-Chaos-to-Cognition.-Fluency-MC-Saatchi-2021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.b2bmarketing.net/en-gb/partner-downloads/why-youre-writing-about-sustainability-wrong>

<sup>4</sup> <https://ry.com/thinking/the-battle-for-annual-reporting>

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