



THE LEADING QUESTION

*OLIVER UK group CEO Amina Folarin on
building marketing fit for the future*

WORDS Morag Cuddeford-Jones

PHOTOGRAPHY Phil Adams

INSIDE

- ◆ Leadership can be a talent, but it must also be **learned and honed**
- ◆ Formalised **learning brings inclusion**, and inclusion breeds success
- ◆ AI is for everyone, it's **non-negotiable**
- ◆ The **triple bottom line** drives business success



magazine?

amina Folarin is not, and has never been, a marketer. So, what is she doing in the Chartered Institute of Marketing's

Well, for a start, as OLIVER UK group CEO, she heads up an organisation that claims to be the first and only company to design, build and run in-house agencies and ecosystems for brands. But how does someone without a marketing background end up leading one of

the UK's – and possibly the world's – top marketing agencies?

She did it by identifying perhaps the most crucial gap in many senior marketers' resumes – leadership – and using her own experience to fill it.

“Marketing and HR are quite similar in how they're viewed. For most CFOs, they're cost centres. They don't need to be. As an HR professional, you spend a lot of time driving leaders, supporting them and getting them to be better using leadership development courses. That's the thing that makes the

difference in both marketing and HR – how well leaders lead,” Folarin insists.

EDUCATIONAL LEAD

This is going to be needed more than ever now AI has entered the chat. With most organisations still unsure what the implications of new technologies will be long term – not just on productivity but cost, human resources, skills and even business offering – strong leadership in a marketing context will be key.

“What the industry needs now is not necessarily AI experts. It needs people who

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know how to lead through change. They're not in their jobs because they've done their time running a client. They're there because they can take people on a journey."

She talks about today's VUCA environment – volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous – and how both business and government are making mistakes in their responses.

"Learning and development is usually the first budget to go. That's a huge mistake; it's needed more than ever. There are aspects to everyone that make them a good leader, but they need to be honed and crafted. You need to learn from other people and be brought together in a learning environment. I don't think that happens enough."

A case in point to the agency's commitment to learning, OLIVER was one of the founding businesses for CIM's Level 7 Apprenticeship in Marketing, which 25 of its employees completed with Cranfield University. Folarin recognises that many marketers do simply 'fall' into the role, coming at it from a diverse



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range of academic (and even not-so-academic) backgrounds. But once there, formalised learning really helps them, and their organisation, shine.

Folarin herself took a quirky route through further education (and one that this author was somewhat spooked to find almost identically mirrored her own). Applying initially to Birmingham University to study law, she didn't quite grasp the three As required, but there were options. Hustle to get the B to an A, take up another unconditional offer to study French at King's, or English literature at UCL where her best friend was going. Friendship won.

Unfortunately, English literature didn't float her boat, so she switched to French, thinking she'd beat a path to the EU's door. Only upon graduating did Folarin find out that you need two foreign languages plus English to work there, so it was time for a rethink.

That rethink led her to an entry-level job in retail, which soon took her into an HR

CV HIGHLIGHTS **AMINA FOLARIN**

2023 – present

OLIVER Agency *CEO, UK*

2021 – 2023

INSIDE IDEAS GROUP *Chief Inclusion and People Officer*

2016 – 2021

OLIVER Agency *Global People (HR) Director*

2015 – 2016

DigitasLBI *Senior Talent Partner*

2015

DigitasLBI *Talent Partner*

2014 – 2015

ITV *HR Project & Change Manager*

2014

ITV *HR Manager, Broadcasting*

2012 – 2014

Metro & Metro Play *HR Manager*

2011 – 2012

Metro *Interim Head of Talent & Culture*

2010 – 2011

Metro *Talent & Culture Executive*

administration role at Burberry, then talent and culture and HR roles for Metro UK, and then HR and change manager roles at ITV.

A CULTURE OF CHANGE

'Talent, culture, change' are three key words that reveal how Folarin's ethos shapes OLIVER today. Change is inevitable, yet it's one of the biggest causes of stress in the workplace. The marketing industry endures more than its fair share of change, with new platforms and technologies popping up right, left and centre, combined with a competitive and sometimes even combative marketplace. Projects and clients aren't secured or signed, they're won or lost.

How you manage change in that environment is crucial, so it is with getting on board with artificial intelligence.

"As with any change, you've got the early adopters, the naysayers and the people in between. Early on, we got AI training up and running and said to our people, 'You've got to do this.' At first, it was voluntary access and,

of course, the early adopters didn't need to be told twice,"

But still, Folarin noticed the project wasn't getting the adoption it required. "Now, we're going to give you a day off to learn. It's still not mandatory but the day is there so you can't use time as an excuse."

Giving employees a day off to learn slightly increased adoption, but it still wasn't enough. Time for the tough talk. "We made it mandatory, because this is for everyone. If it's not for you, if you don't want to learn how to use this technology, then you probably shouldn't work here anymore because this is the direction of travel."

Clients are just the same, Folarin adds, it's an industry-wide challenge. "Some are early adopters: it's a shiny new toy, give it to me. Then those who want it, but fear using it themselves. And then the biggest bucket is smaller to mid-sized clients who can't see what AI can do for them, apart from ChatGPT. CEOs are worried about AI, not because they

don't agree with it, but it just feels like a huge thing they don't know how to navigate."

If that weren't enough, there are still what Folarin calls "the big, thorny questions" – legality, the stance on generating humans, using synthetic personas for research. But ultimately: "I don't think it's any different to any other disruptions. The internet was a huge disruption – remember when everyone was called 'Digital X'? Humans have a huge capacity to problem solve, but CMOs need the right partners to help them navigate the change."

A SLICE OF SUCCESS

As we said, OLIVER considers itself to be the 'first and only' in-house agency and ecosystem builder. Now it's adding its proprietary AI tools to the mix – Slipstream and Pencil. When I ask what this particular offering will add to an already overwhelmed marketing community, what Folarin does next is a perfect example of why talent, culture and learning are at the heart of what she does.



**YOU HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY
TO MAKE YOUR
ORGANISATION REFLECTIVE
OF THE PEOPLE YOU'RE
TRYING TO SPEAK TO**



Grabbing a marker pen, she leaps out of her chair in front of the screen and dives towards the whiteboard handily lurking in the background.

“Can you see this?” she shouts from the back of the room, and proceeds to draw up OLIVER’s ‘Pizza Slice’ explanation. The layers cover the various teams involved in bringing a brand to life – the in-house team, the client’s brand, and other layers outside like global production, creative strategy and so on. The Pizza Slice is OLIVER, slotting into the client internally where the expertise is needed most, and then more layers are added as strategies change and progress. “It’s the bit that sits inside their world, where they get the full benefit of an agency ecosystem, but they don’t need to have it all, all the time. They can switch it on and off, accessing it via their in-house team. We build these teams that are deeply entrenched in the client’s business.”

Adding Pencil and Slipstream on top is just about bringing in a tool, the same way you might have brought a word processor to the



I’VE GOT TO GO AND KICK SOME DOORS DOWN AND SHOW THEM A NEW WAY OF DOING THINGS



typing pool decades ago. “All marketers understand that they need better content, delivered to market faster and cheaper,” Folarin explains.

“We now have a product that ticks all those boxes – and more effectively. Brands are creating loads of digital landfill. You don’t know how effective it will be and whether it’s going to take your designer three days to make one round of amends. We can do that in 10 minutes.”

Don’t mistake that as making designers redundant, or at least part-time. “It’s an accelerator. See it as your best friend that can do 30-50% of the things you wish you had time to do. You can train it to do things for you, so you can focus on the 20% of things that make a real difference in your role.”

There is no scope for complacency. For every marketer saying AI isn’t for them, or they’re not getting on board yet because it’s too opaque, or not quite ‘finished’, there are younger, hungrier people champing at the bit.



“We need Gen Z and Gen Alpha because they don’t need to be trained in GenAI. It’s all they know,” Folarin warns. She adds that there’s double trouble waiting down the line for businesses that aren’t willing to embrace new

thinking – worse, companies that are willing to even take a step backwards, particularly when it comes to D&I.

“Bringing the triple bottom line is so important to me – people, planet, profit. Yes, we can make shareholders happy and deliver profit. But can we take our people on the journey and create inclusive organisations? As soon as Trump started rolling back on D&I in North America, a big agency network pulled all mention of it from their reports. I’m sure we can imagine why, but they won’t win doing that. Gen Z and Gen Alpha won’t stand for it. I’m a leader, first and foremost, but I use my platform to remind people that inclusion is good for business.

“It’s good business to have middle-aged, white ladies in positions that young people can learn from. It’s also good business to have 25-year-old black kids from inner-city London to advise businesses on what Gen Z and Gen Alpha want. Inclusion isn’t about feeling good. You have a responsibility to make your organisation reflective of the

people you're trying to speak to. If you're an organisation that wants to win, we all need to find a way to have a voice around that table.”

It's clear Folarin's focus is to put every possible tool in OLIVER's people's hands, to help them succeed. But she can only lead these horses to water – they have to want to drink. If anyone can persuade them, it's the woman who, in high school, was told there was no money for prom but went ahead, raised the funds, and made it happen anyway. And the future? She has ambitions that stretch beyond OLIVER and onto the public stage.

“I've made no secret of it to my team here. I have my sights set on the FTSE. Only 6% of FTSE CEOs are people of colour and maybe 2-3% are women. I've got to go and kick some doors down and show them a new way of doing things.”



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Morag Cuddeford-Jones is editor of *Catalyst*