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Time Out global CMO on the brand's growth strategy

The magazine and online publisher revolutionised its brand in 2012 by becoming free-of-charge. Now, under the helm of a global CMO for the first time, it is embarking on the next stage of its international growth plans with a focus on combining content with commerce.

It is no secret that traditional media brands have been struggling to boost revenues as consumers switch to digital channels for content. But the publishers that continue to resonate are the ones that have been reinvigorating their proposition to cater effectively for this shift in consumer behaviour.

It is almost three years since the entertainment and listings magazine Time Out made the bold decision to realign its business strategy and abandon its cover price in London, with news-stand sales languishing at 11,000 per issue and a headline ABC circulation figure of 52,000.

Opting for a 'freemium' model - free distribution on streets, £30 for an annual postal subscription - has enabled it to reach more Londoners than ever before. Web traffic is up to 7 million with double-digit percentage growth in users across digital platforms since ditching the paid-for model, while print circulation is higher at 300,000. It was a strategy deemed successful enough to be replicated when Time Out relaunched its New York edition in April, in a city where 'freesheet' publications are relatively rare.

With the company having invested heavily in restructuring over the past couple of years, it is now the job of global CMO Sarah Bartlett, who took up the newly-created role at the beginning of the year, to realign the business from a marketing perspective and lead the next stage of its growth.

"Our mission is enabling people to go out better. We want to be an 'inspiration platform', so everything we do needs to be consistent with that," she says. "We have a huge opportunity to be a trusted companion for consumers so we really want to drive deeper engagement as we go forward."

In particular, this involves growing the commerce side of its business, which Bartlett says constitutes a "chunky" share of overall revenues, though she does not disclose how much. It includes the ability to buy tickets and book restaurants, for example, yet she adds that Time Out needs to increase consumer awareness of these services (see Q&A, below).

Enhancing Time Out's membership programme and growing awareness of booking services will be key to its new strategy

After commissioning a global research study to assess the business and its new direction, Bartlett is in the process of implementing a five-pillar strategy for the brand. This involves looking at its positioning on a global level; continuing to drive deeper engagement with customers; making the marriage between commerce and content more central; strengthening the business-to-business local advertising proposition; and investing in people from a marketing perspective.

"There has been a lot of investment in technology to make sure we get the digital proposition correct and there is now the opportunity to expand the team and bring in the specialisms that we need to really help us grow," she says. "I have been able to build a case around what we need to do from a marketing perspective and the investment we need in order to make that happen."

Bartlett, who was CMO at Lastminute.com owner Travelocity International, plans to introduce a 'hub and spoke' model, into which Time Out will bring expertise in areas such as insight, research and digital. Using these, the brand's central hub will test and learn with marketing initiatives "to make sure we are using data in the right way to drive efficiency and effectiveness" before scaling the strategy up to a global level.

"It's a model I've used before that enables you to understand which marketing channels work for you, how to drive return on investment on the performance marketing side and then how to take that across the company network [to other markets such as] New York and Paris," she adds.

User-generated content will play an increasingly important role as the publisher looks to increase collaboration with consumers.

"We're looking for local experts or what we're currently calling 'tastemakers' internally - people who go out a lot in their local area and can then share their expertise. On the back of that we'll also organise meet-ups and create a real sense of community," says Bartlett.

This will be enhanced by a review of the Time Out membership card strategy to create greater engagement "because we find that the more people are engaged with the brand, the more they do with us and the more they see the benefits of what Time Out can do for them".

Finally, according to Bartlett, the new strategy will be communicated to consumers with a focus on what they can expect from the modern incarnation of the Time Out brand.

"We are looking to do advertising [next year] so will be beginning the planning process in the coming weeks. It's the perfect time for us to communicate what Time Out is today. We want to remind people of what we are and how we can help people's lives."

Why was the global CMO role created and what is your main objective?

From a brand perspective Time Out is very cohesive. The way it looks and feels is really consistent across the globe. We've just launched a couple of new sites so we are now in 109 cities across 38 countries but the user experience is the same. My role is very much about how we continue to drive scale and take the business forward at a macro level and then on a global scale.

I have been doing a lot of analysis, including a big piece of global research with [agency] Hall & Partners, to really get under the skin of the brand and understand the scope of the opportunity. That has taken a couple of months because I wanted to really understand the business first before I made any recommendations to the board around what we need to do.

Marrying content and commerce is a big growth area for the business, how will you be developing that strategy?

Our research shows that people come to us for inspiration but they also want us to make the journey easier for them. At the moment you can book restaurants and buy theatre tickets, and we do some interesting offers and live events, but we need to let people know about that.

The core DNA of the brand is about helping people get the most out of their city so there is lots of opportunity for us from a brand perspective. We have 80% brand awareness in London and our research shows that 95% of consumers who engage with Time Out then act on it so it's really powerful.

What kind of a threat do digital start-ups operating in this area pose?

There are some great start-ups coming on to the market but they tend to be more niche. Building a brand doesn't happen over night and the heritage and love we have for Time Out is so strong that I just see it as a huge opportunity for us to be a trusted companion for consumers. We are looking at how we become even more engrained in people's live to help them navigate the complexities of all the different things that come screaming at them all the time.

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By Lucy Tesseras

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