



ONE-ON-ONE
MARIE GULIN-MERLE
Global VP of Ads Marketing



IN-DEPTH LEADERSHIP INTERVIEW SERIES

In this interview, Google’s Global VP of Ads Marketing and member of the Global CMO Growth Council Leadership Team Marie Gulin-Merle talks with the ANA and WARC about the state of the digital ad industry in the wake of the disruption brought on by the pandemic and racial injustice around the world. Gulin-Merle shares what she is hearing from industry leaders, as well as how the Google Ads product roadmap is pivoting to help businesses meet the changing needs of customers.

1. What does your “new normal” look like when it comes to marketing at Google? Has marketing’s role changed within your organization during this time?

Any marketer would say the same thing: it’s the speed of change. We’ve seen 10 years of change in five months. How does the organization prepare for this ongoing change — for what’s happening now and what’s next? There are many questions: Which products do I need to focus on? Which channels do I need to use? Which messaging? It’s the whole holistic view of marketing — a constant helicopter view. You learn and constantly adjust, and around you the world is changing quite fast.

The consumer journey has become more complex. It’s a fantastic opportunity for us to continue to put data at the center and have it be the source of truth. The role of the CMO is really to be this source of truth, seeing what’s happening with the consumer and constantly adapting. It has a next-level meaning during the pandemic.

2. Is there anything that you’ve taken away from this experience that you think will define your future role as a marketer or the role of marketing at Google?

The pandemic has introduced another dimension of marketing dexterity. We do things that could have taken weeks or months in days, and sometimes we make decisions within hours. CMOs need to understand that the environment can change very fast and they have to respond to what’s happening in real time.

We’re getting back to what marketing is about: understanding what consumers want, what the sentiment is, and delivering what’s best. We’re going back to the roots of marketing at the speed of light and with everything that technology can offer.

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3. In terms of your marketing processes, what has the biggest change been in the last few months? Is there anything that you will take from there and implement after the immediate crisis is over?

I firmly believe this fluidity in the processes is here to stay. You have to get comfortable with the idea that things are so fluid and dynamic. You can't rely on how you were doing things. You can't only rely on patterns. You have to constantly check data. I think data helps ground things in consumer truth.

You also need hyper-empathy for what consumers are going through. You have groups who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic; you have differences between countries and regions. I'm doing a world tour every week, although I can't travel. I'm constantly spending time with teams in different countries to hear about their realities.

4. We talk to different brands which are now turning around a television commercial, for example, within a few days. Some are worried about burnout on the team. How are you navigating these challenges in terms of managing a marketing team while also wanting to be on the front foot all the time?

The approach we've been using is "sustained readiness." Marketing cannot be in constant crisis management, to your point about the well-being of the teams. It has to be about a new state of doing marketing instead of running from one crisis to another.

I also think we have to reinvent the role of CMO, with leadership skills in hyper-vigilance and hyper-empathy. When I was talking about hyper-empathy with consumers, it's also true for your marketing teams. It's really about what the leaders can do to help consumers and to help the teams. A lot is on our ability to re-invent, transform, and sustain.

5. How are you acting on consumer signals? What are some of the key lessons or interesting trends that you think will continue once this is all over?

We're seeing three buckets. Firstly, the "shock to the system" behaviors. For instance, panic buying. When remote schooling started, we saw surges in demand for some of our hardware devices or Wi-Fi hubs. The second one is a "step change," or a way of doing things that has accelerated. For instance, existing telehealth or e-commerce behaviors that were (already) existing and are now being accelerated due to the pandemic. Then, thirdly, sometimes it's just speed, like the speed of change in omnichannel behavior. It's not about a lack of data, but a lack of ways marketers can decode and make sense of things.

It's about looking at the signals and trying to decode what consumers want now and in the next phase. The key word that I keep using is "readiness" — readiness of consumers, readiness of organizations, and readiness of leaders.

6. As you look forward to the rest of 2020 and into the first half of next year, what do you think is going to be the single biggest challenge and the single biggest opportunity that faces Google?

Continuing to be helpful to people and businesses is both a challenge and an opportunity. When you're a leader, you need to continue to lead by example. Being there for them at this moment is what's most important for us. I read stories of businesses which turn to us every day to adapt to new consumer shifts, demands, regulations, or restrictions. Meeting that level of expectation on helpfulness is going to be our guiding principle.

7. A number of big tech brands are investing a huge amount into brand-building. Have you changed your approach to marketing the Google brand during this time, or is it a time to hold steady?

What we are seeing is that it's really not about what Google wants to do, it's about the consumers. They're interested in what we can do to help with the current situation. They don't just want to hear from public officials, they want to hear from brands.

They also don't want to see the same type of PSA-like advertising all the time. There is a dilution of messages if all the pandemic ads are the same. We're a technology partner, so we help people find information. During this time, it's even more important. You have to explain what you can do with your brand and products for consumers, which in a way is the essence of marketing. I think it's an extremely good marketing lesson to all of us.



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8. The diversity conversation is something that's been really top of mind in recent weeks. How is Google handling this conversation, both in terms of what you think Google's role is in this and any changes you've made within your business to respond to it?

At Google, we're committed to building, enabling, developing, and increasing inclusivity on our teams and in our work. We started to do it many years ago. I think the recent crisis is guiding us to be even more accountable, and to bring more measurement to the table.

One priority is the marketing work. We've been using both machine learning and human evaluation to look at all our creative content — anything we produce, from videos to banner ads or display — so we can understand inclusivity in our work at scale. That includes presence too: thinking about who is in the foreground, or getting the most speaking time, or if we're succumbing to stereotypes. And we've been sharing similar analysis with the industry, via our partnership with the Geena Davis Institute. Last year [we analyzed](#) more than 2.7 million ads on YouTube to help the industry understand how representation differed across countries and industries.

This work cannot stop with just marketing campaigns. It also has to affect products and how teams work on products. Queries such as "Black-owned businesses," or "Black-owned coffee shop near me" spiked at a very rapid pace. When we saw these searches, we decided to enable Google Maps and Google Search for businesses to be found with the "Black-owned" attribute. So again, it's taking immediate action on something we see in response to a sense of urgency that our users are communicating to us in terms of what we do with products.

I keep saying to my team, "It's not a passion project." It's a part of accountability of leadership, but it's everyone's responsibility to fight racism and injustice. It's in every meeting, every email, every body of work, every piece of messaging, and every decision we make.



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