Leading Creatives

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Katie Pattison

Vice President of Global Marketing, WATG

This interview is part of a combination podcast and written series in which DI's Bob Fisher investigates leadership of creative teams and organizations. In a candid discussion with Katie Pattison, vice president of global marketing at architecture and design firm WATG, we are privileged to learn her first principles around marketing, user-centered approaches, creative tension, reflective time and the importance of trust, vulnerability and aligned intention. To conclude this quarter's theme of "Impact," under our annual quest to increase influence among the design professions, this inside look offers timely, sage advice.

DesignIntelligence (DI): Let's start with your professional path. How did you get to where you are today?

Katie Pattison (KP): I started off outside of marketing, in the fashion industry. I modeled for two years, which wasn't something I originally thought I would do. I spent time in New York, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles and Paris. What those big cities had to offer was inspirational early in my career. That experience helped me become a global citizen and see how couture fashion related their stories to their customers.

I got my marketing degree here in London. My first job was working for Sir Stuart Lipton, founder of the developer Stanhope, on the Broadgate scheme. That was inspirational in his use of an eclectic mix of architects. His sense of place-making, use of public art and the connection between Broadgate and The City of London were fantastic.

From there, I worked for Hammerson, a property developer. They bought a building the IRA had bombed in London, and I was brought in to give it a new perspective after it was refurbished. I went on to Hammerson's retail portfolio across the U.K. and Europe. I started looking at the consumer. That was a fantastic journey, and I really grew up there. Being part of a broader team and bringing the marketeer's skill sets together with the commercial acumen of the development and the construction teams was where I started crafting my skills.

DI: In your first few positions, is it accurate to say your focus was to create the story of the place and involve the end users?

KP: Exactly.

DI: In those projects, you dealt with business-to-business and business-to-consumer marketing. Two different worlds. Separate specialties within marketing. How did you bring them together?

KP: At Hammerson, I sat in the middle ground because I had to look at the business-to-business (B2B) aspect first. We had to capture the imagination of the joint venture partner willing to invest in the project or the local authority in central Birmingham or Marseilles or Southampton, for example. We had to sell the vision back to them, mirroring their own legacy for a space they held dear. Then, I had to understand who ultimately was going to be living, breathing, using, shopping in and enjoying those spaces. The challenge and complexity of bringing the business-to-business and the business-to-consumer aspects together was fantastic. I loved it.

In the business-to-business environment, clients always have an end user. Being able to sell clients that story helps them see why a more sophisticated execution of the marketing material might benefit them in the long run.

That level of sophistication often comes in movie production, for example. The business-to-consumer world is superfast. You've got to catch people within three to four seconds, or you've lost them. It takes more budget and effort but bringing that dynamism into the B2B world is compelling and effective.

DI: What was your role as a marketer in the developer firms?

KP: My colleagues considered me a peer, so there was no discipline within the commercial developers I worked for that didn't want marketing advice or see it as equally potent as the architecture or accounts team. It wasn't seen as anything less, which was part of the magic. Organizations can have natural hierarchies, speak different technical languages and value one department more than another. But if you can tear down those walls and speak peer-to-peer, you're onto something. You get the left and right brains thinking. That's where the innovation happens.

DI: When you worked with developers, you were a client of architecture firms, on the receiving end of the kind of marketing you do today. What insights came from that?

KP: My experience as a client in architectural interviews and selection processes is highly relevant. If you have any soft skills or emotional intelligence, you will see whether a team is bound together.

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They will talk about the project, but what you're looking for is chemistry — between them, your team and combined aspirations for the scheme and its potential.

If that firm of architects has a strong cultural identity, are generous and have integrity in the way they inspire, you see it. You can see whether they are going to enrich your project and bring an energy you want.

DI: Do developers and architects approach marketing differently?

KP: There is a big difference between commercial developers and architectural firms. Historically, architectural firms have seen marketing as a response to RFPs. They often don't see the broader marketing mix that could power their strategic thinking. It's not highly budgeted for. It's not taken as seriously as it might be, so I don't see the full impact of marketing being embraced by architectural firms as often as I have with developers and owner-operators.

Architectural firms are sophisticated at being able to speak around the projects they're working on. What was the client's challenge? What was the solution? But most don't bring the other elements together through the business strategy and outward-facing celebration of their talent.

DI: What's different about the experience of working and leading in development versus architecture firms?

KP: With commercial developers, you might engage a team of 20 people internally with a whole team of suppliers, including the architects on the outside, for several years. You've got to know that team intimately through the highs and lows, some of which had nothing to do with marketing. You may be able to

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support, for example, because you had a marketing solution to a delay in the schedule or a site issue.

In development, marketing acted like a wrapper to the whole process. The team has bonded. You get to be the visual translators of those schemes, and the opportunity to express the aspiration for that place or space — what it's going to become.

There is less hierarchy in those types of teams. You're all pushing for one thing. You've got a completion date. You've got commercial metrics around that and a finite budget, which, in most cases, you've been able to influence.

It's a cohesive process. Listening, using the left and right brain. It's collegial and addictive because you all work together to the same vision. Where there may have been a hole in the ground or the area was deprived, you all imagine it together in manifesting the development.

In architectural firms, marketeers are a step removed from the projects the architects are working on. It's a different relationship. They create those spaces. You need to go find the gold dust, the kernels of the creative idea the architects imagine. Your responsibility is to actively listen and ask the right questions of those creators of the space and the potential it brings.

DI: One of the primary responsibilities of a leader is defining and shaping organizational culture. How do you approach it?

KP: I'm passionate about culture. That came to the fore during COVID-19. At the time, I was with another firm, and I had a team spread across offices. We couldn't see each other, so how could we maintain those bonds between us? That was a key part of how I ran our virtual meetings.

Meetings weren't just around process, timelines and budgets. They were also about the softer side. The key to creative team culture is holding it lightly. It's a precious, fleeting thing.

I've worked with my teams using Myers-Briggs and Strengths-Finder tests to celebrate and acknowledge how we work best. It's important to understand how team members work because some people within that creative environment process as they think. They're often extroverted and work it out in the moment. Others are introverts who need time to think, but their thoughtfulness often results in better enriched ideas.

Sometimes, I find the majority of my team members have similar personality traits. That's a dangerous place to be — a comfort zone of conformity and like-mindedness. You're not going to challenge each other. You'll probably just endorse one another. It's important to aim for a mix of mindsets and have different perspectives to challenge the status quo.

The creative space is difficult because commercial convention says you need to rush everything. Yet, if the team can stand on the edge of a dilemma, not knowing the answer and taking the time, that is where the creative juice often comes from.

There's also a piece around trust and vulnerability. Being able to allow that creative team to be vulnerable together is helpful, even though it might be scary. One individual in that group might be faced with a conundrum, and they're able to think aloud or acknowledge to the rest of the team that they don't know the answer — our collective thinking may find the solution.

As a leader, I'm frequently vulnerable with my group. I will say: "I have no idea what we're going to do with this. I don't have an answer, but we're all going to go and have a think on that." I'm willing to protect our time to think creatively for another 48 hours. I'm going to hold those internal clients off because we need to think about all the possible solutions. Certainty can blind us. Allowing the time for the team to go off and be opaque can be a good practice.

DI: What else contributes to team culture?

KP: Loads of things. Just having artistic license and a sense of freedom is important. Also, the ability to recognize and challenge our limiting assumptions.

There's another thing we do, which I encourage massively: We look at far-flung industries outside of our own for inspiration and ideation. Reading broadly and being able to share key observations and things we've heard and seen improves the collective.

DI: What structure did you put in place to ensure that type of sharing and the culture you want to build?

KP: I often have two meetings a week. The first meeting is about prioritization. What have we got to get done this week? What's on our table? The second checkout meeting was inspired by COVID. It was more about the team's mental health and their

ability to function and support each other. It was also time for us to do some creative work together, including learning by looking for lessons outside our industry. We'd take turns running a session to talk about things we'd read or observations we'd made.

The sharing of those discoveries would spark inspiration amongst the group or lateral thinking about something relatable to our industry or a project we might be struggling with. It is enriching.

Through these interactions, you get to know each other better, and it builds that trust where you're able to share your entire self, not just your working self. A strong team understands each other's pressures and vulnerabilities at any given time.

DI: Organizations whose business depends on the quality of their creative output face a paradox. They need creativity, which requires freedom and is notoriously hard to systematize, predict and repeat. How do you balance these two needs?

KP: If you have good foundations for processes like budgeting and scheduling, they act as a framework, and you don't need to worry about them. They're brilliant because they allow creativity to flourish.

Once the parameters are set and the expectation for each of those creative deliverables is agreed, then the creation can begin. It goes hand in hand with the commercial environment.

I love that I can put rigor around something creative. It helps everybody know where they are, but still allows you to quickly step into the creativity because the processes are in place. You can work the two together.

More from Leaders of Creative Organizations on "This is DesignIntelligence"

The interview with Katie Pattison is part of a larger series exploring leadership of creative organizations. It also includes three podcast interviews with leaders in industries as diverse as architecture, brand and innovation, and toys.

"This Is DesignIntelligence" episode 64

Pete Johnson, former head of creation at The LEGO Group, talks about his leadership journey through media companies, global advertising firms and one of the most beloved toy brands on the planet, as well as how painful mistakes can be great teachers for a developing leader.

"This Is DesignIntelligence" episode 65

Valerie Jacobs, chief growth officer of brand and innovation firm LPK, discusses the role of futurist thinking in strategy and entrepreneurship; how multiple crises in 2020 caused her firm to completely rethink its business model; and the way encouraging holistic growth in staff members builds a successful creative organization.

"This Is DesignIntelligence" episode 66

Lauren Schmidt, Principal at global architecture and design giant KPF, talks about mentorship and learning on the job; the importance of relationships built on trust, respect, and good communication; and how balancing uniqueness and consistency is key to successful projects and careers.

DI: Another creativity paradox is the need for helpful disagreement. Ideas tend to be richer when formed from opposing viewpoints. But disagreement can lead to conflict that derails a creative project. How do you help your teams manage this element of the creative process?

KP: There's the piece at the front, where you're trying to engender a culture of listening, the active listening piece. What I've done is try to create a thinking environment.[1]

Active listening allows each person's voice to be heard. You can do it in rounds, so you may have an eclectic mix of people around the table, ideating about something you're going to be producing, like a client presentation. You've got a graphic designer in the room. You may have me in the room. Maybe you have a couple of architects in the room. To start, you might hold the space for each person for five minutes. Nobody interrupts. It's theirs. They can give the room whatever they feel.

You've got to respect each person's perspective. Then, you might do another round where you challenge some of what was brought up. You must agree at the beginning that no one's going to take offense. You're just allowing some challenging or limiting assumptions to be lifted. Are there any elephants in the room? Is there anything they've forgotten? It's a way of ideating together. It builds trust in the team. I've always found it to be good at mitigating tention, although it's good to have a bit of friction, because its where the ideas manifest.

DI: If you're in a conversation that doesn't have enough friction, is it your role as a leader to create it?

KP: Often, yes. I naturally find the gaps. That comes with experience. You need some presence to be able to do that. It's hard to ask a younger marketeer to do, if you're in a room with a 60-year-old architect who's got a defined way they want something perceived or created.

Having the gumption to say, "Okay, I'd respectfully like to challenge a couple of things there," is hard. The mentorship culture of allowing your younger team to see that is key to how you develop them. That's how I learned.

I learned by being allowed to be in some scary places where I didn't know the answers, but I was experiencing this combat that might go on between the development head and the marketing head. They'd have a little spat, and I'd witness that on the sidelines and see how it was resolved. In some cases, not resolved.

One secret is around setting an intention, which I've gotten better at as I've got older. When you're going into a meeting where you suspect there may be some natural friction, you set the intention for the meeting. "What do we collectively need to achieve in the next 45 minutes?" That way, no one has any misconception about what you're trying to get out of it.

You asked about the leader. I had a situation with a commercial developer I worked for where they brought in a senior marketeer from a business-to-consumer market — from retail a retail background.

They wanted him because they felt they needed a closer alignment to the consumer, the end user of this shopping mall. How were we going to keep them within its walls? How could we offer them the retail tenant mix, as well as other things to enrich their experience of their day?

He was great at that element, but we had many conflicts with another leader developing that shopping center. They both thought

[1] *Author's note: see Nancy Kline, Time to Think (London: Octopus Publishing, 1999).*

they were the leaders. There was no agreement about the hierarchy or purpose of that meeting. Was it a development meeting or a marketing meeting? There wasn't any conversation about that beforehand.

It was a mismatch of perceptions, so the development lead would say, "What does he know about building a shopping center? He doesn't know anything about my world." We had discord from the get-go because they disregarded him as a marketer because he didn't understand development. He only understood the end user. That was inflammatory at times. People shouting and walking out of meetings. They chose to disagree to the detriment of the development.

DI: Sounds like the unproductive side of conflict came in because expectations weren't set at the beginning and shared goals weren't established.

KP: Exactly. What I've learned from that is that intention setting is critical, especially if you are chairing the meeting. With different, unspoken agendas, frustrations within the team come out. It's good to have natural friction in ideas, as long as we're going in the same direction.

DI: You've spent most of your working career in the real estate and architecture, engineering and construction industries. What is the most important lesson you've learned in that time?

KP: Working in the built environment is very real. Much more so than with consumer products. Architecture, engineering and construction produce living, breathing spaces that take on their own forms long after we've designed and built them. They are neighborhoods and communities. They can shape people's lives. It's a big deal. Once the gravity of that sinks in with some of my creative teams, it really gets under their skin. It's addictive!

Katie Pattison is vice president of global marketing of architecture and design firm WATG. She has more than 25 years of real estate and AEC experience at companies such as Stanhope PLC, Hammerson and CallisonRTKL.