

# CMO interview: Changing the perception of marketing from brand to revenue generation

What this B2B marketer has done to create new revenue streams and internal engagement for her organisation during the COVID-19 crisis

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Vivianne Arnold

There's a positive side to come out of the COVID-19 crisis for Hudson's chief marketing officer, Vivianne Arnold, in the way she's repositioned the professional services' marketing function from content and brand to revenue generator.

It's a situation many marketers – well those outside of FMCG anyway – will be familiar with: Either being relegated to a comms and content focus, or being “elbowed out by other functions who claim their territory”, Arnold says. And it was arguably a situation this CMO could have wound up with at the recruitment firm a little less than a year ago.

But an appetite for looking at things differently, pivoting quickly to answer client and candidate needs, and strong leadership during the [COVID-19 \(https://www.cmo.com.au/tag/covid-19/\)](https://www.cmo.com.au/tag/covid-19/) firmly changed all that.

“Previously, we were seen as content generators, thought leadership and brand. Now, we're seen as product development, monetisation, rapid response, and as driving real revenue,” Arnold tells *CMO*. “We're taking new products to market and new monetising services that weren't available previously. I have loved having the opportunity to show what we are capable of.”



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The first step when the pandemic struck was to help people through the very large redundancies happening across industries from tourism and hospitality to retail. Arnold explains her team at Hudson took a two-lens approach: Industry and candidate.

An initial program was Hudson's 'response care' campaign, targeting specific sectors rapidly responding to changing customer demand in the peak of the pandemic around capabilities such as ecommerce, call centre support and consumer-facing mobile apps. Key skills required in the short-term included digital and technical IT skills for IT helpdesking and remote working, ecommerce build, and user and digital experience design.

"We embarked on industry by industry campaigns, worked with recruitment leaders to talk about the numbers needed now, and putting candidates into contracting roles," Arnold says.

The second string was talent management and career transition services. With Australian organisations making redundant or standing down two to 2000 people from their workforces, looking after exiting employees was vital.



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"In A/NZ, we've not had this kind of recession that looks like this before. If you remember the 'recession we had to have', it was about blue collar men. With the GFC, we had stimulus around infrastructure and construction," Arnold comments. "So the government is used to responding to that kind of unemployment, and a lot of programs and policies the government has in place are around those jobs, or compliance, specific skills and dealing with less than 5 per cent unemployment. During COVID-19, we're seeing very different redundancies - white collar workers.

"It costs the economy \$10,000 per month to have these people unemployed, and there are no assistance or programs for targeting these kinds of workers."

In response, Hudson kicked off a major integrated campaign, 'Back to work', providing career transition series for highly skilled professionals. Tapping artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, and available via mobile, individuals were offered remote access to coaching and 'nudges' that could help them navigate job loss.

"We know inertia creeps in quickly and you become demotivated quickly. These professionals may have been in roles for 10 years, and not have dusted off the CV for years," Arnold says. "We pivoted our capability quickly to make it remotely accessible to nudge people to ask if they did CV yet, and offer up coaches you can book online for sessions around their LinkedIn profile, mental health and encouragement.



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"For example, you might not have done an interview for 10 years. You can schedule online and get online coaching about the questions they might ask, get prepared."

Arnold says take up has been "astounding". Importantly, this initiative was marketing-led.

For clients who were exiting large numbers of employees, Hudson also pivoted its in-person explainer workshops to an online certified professional development course in three weeks. These are not only open to HR directors, but all line-of-business leaders who find themselves actively involved in transitioning employees, Arnold says.

"Because of the scale of redundancies in COVID-19, it's not just HR but the people managers doing these interviews. I had to let go of two people, and I wanted to deal directly with those, rather than have them managed by HR. But I'm not trained on managing exit interviews," she explains.



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"We quickly put the course online, and turned it into an online certified professional development course as we knew people right now are upping professional development and have this need. Again, this is a marketing idea that's helping our core clients in a time of need, plus we're able to tap and go the course and anyone can pay for it, making another revenue stream for Hudson."

It's these sorts of innovations Arnold says show how the crisis has lowered opportunity costs for organisations and the marketers within them.

"I can suggest things that may have been nice ideas we'll do later, to delivering that immediately. Now, we are about to really change, pivot quickly and marketing has the opportunity to show value to the company like never before," she says.

## Lessons in coping with a crisis



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It's not Arnold's first unprecedented crisis. In her inaugural week as a global marketing leader for Microsoft based in Seattle, the 9/11 terrorist attacks hit the US. One of the lessons she took from that time was the importance of having strong leadership both

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"As the pandemic hit here, the fear, uncertainty and need for a strong, consistent internal and external voice was the same as 9/11," Arnold says. "One thing I got to see in Seattle was those leaders that stand strong and who have the gravitas, empathy and battle gear needed to be the public face, versus those who don't have it. The voices that were strong, consistent and empathetic could reassure people internally and also reassure the market.

"That was a big lesson for this time. With messaging, I also knew you had to be very focused."

During COVID-19, this has seen Arnold turn to Hudson CEO, Mark Steyn, to lead the communications charge. He'd already been front and centre during the 2019/2020 Australian bushfires.



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"Our CEO has strength behind him and is also very empathetic. We are a people business, and every aspect of our products and candidates is people-led. We have recruiters who translate hard, soft skills and culture fit. We have career transition, and coping in times of need. Talk about a time of need," she says.

However, things became complicated when this CEO tested positive to COVID-19, and was put into self-isolation. "We had to do all messaging by video app on the mobile phone. Talk about having to pivot quickly," Arnold says.

Internal team momentum is another important facet to the CMO role during the last few months. For Arnold, this meant helping a largely millennial-based workforce cope with their first economic and global crisis. During a company-wide call, she labelled COVID-19 the team's 'Voldemort' moment, harking back to the popular *Harry Potter* series of books and films.

"I stressed this is the time to build resilience, and your future self will look back to see how strong you stood as you helped your client and got the job done. So build your resilience, make the work happen, and be strong. This will be your first battle scar," Arnold says.



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"This really resonated with the millennials. Again, I got that from being in Seattle. We had people bringing handguns to work - I got given a loaded gun by a colleague as part of my take care of your package. It showed me the extreme impact if you hadn't

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Leaning into brand building is a key way IAG's NRMA and CGU businesses are getting through the COVID-19 pandemic, chief marketing officer, Brent Smart, says.

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"A leader has to teach you how to react, how to be professional when you're living in a share house and expected to make 30 calls per day in a tiny kitchen. It's tough. I needed to do skills training internally to build that resilience."

## Sustaining innovation

As for trends and programs of work that will carry through in the new normal, Arnold was confident Hudson now has a wealth of new business models and products that are here for the long haul.



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A small example she points to is transitioning Hudson CEO's biannual global tour to a livestream forum. The first was held in the very early days of the global pandemic, after Hudson lost a China recruiter to the virus.

"It was very upsetting for the business – we then had Singapore going into lockdown, Hong Kong was a riot, New Zealand was shutting down. So I set up a live stream with all leading in different countries to come ask questions, come together, and ensure they were informed," Arnold says.

Since then, Hudson has launched regular internal virtual catch-ups to encourage collaboration, engagement and camaraderie. At time of writing, Hudson was also embarking on its next digital tour.

Another significant example of [innovation](https://www.cmo.com.au/tag/innovation/) (https://www.cmo.com.au/tag/innovation/) Arnold sees being sustained long-term is AI-based and remote assessments. Once a fall back for bulk recruitment, these have become a preferred real-time individual assessment option for job applications.

"Our 'Back to work product is a whole new product, where we have assessment at one end, a matching portal of skills at the back end, and recruitment in the middle. We did it because of the need for remote access, and already we have a government agency piloting this with us to get people back to work more quickly," Arnold says.

As for sustaining marketing with a big 'M' in the new normal, Arnold is equally confident of her chances of success.

"We had a strategy day this week, and were a little overwhelmed with what marketing is responsible for. Talk about being vital to the organisation - we're never turning back," she says. "We repositioned marketing through speed to market, monetisation and innovation of product. It will only ramp up. I've been given more money, headcount and more opportunity in a time when people have been cutting costs.

"If you haven't unearthed the value of marketing and moved the dial during this time, then you need to rethink what marketing is."

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