

Executive Insights: An Interview with Gord McLean, President and CEO at ANA Educational Foundation

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Abstract

I discussed the current state and outlook of marketing with Gord McLean, President and CEO of ANA Educational Foundation. He shares his insights about the misconceptions surrounding marketing, key takeaways for marketers from the pandemic and striking the right balance between the qualitative and quantitative sides of marketing. He also stressed that the profession needs to do a better job of 'marketing' marketing to students and the greater use of AI and other technologies does not mean the end of traditional marketing.

What is AEF and what is its mission?

We are the Association of National Advertisers Educational Foundation and our mission is to serve as the bridge between the marketing industry and academia. Everything that we do is about connecting marketers and agencies with universities, professors, and students.

The AEF has two key areas of focus. The first one is developing and nurturing the next generation of marketing and advertising leaders. We have a substantial marketing and advertising internship program where we placed over eighty students last year, and we have a campus speaker program where we send hundreds of practitioners to campuses to familiarize students with the current practice of marketing. The second area is about advancing marketing education and curriculum. We have a Visiting Professor Program where we provide a weeklong immersion on the growth areas of marketing such as technology and data, society and sustainability and more traditional areas such as brand management. We also have an academic journal that

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focuses more on the softer side of marketing. It is called Advertising and Society Quarterly and is published in cooperation with Duke University. We also have marketing education certificate programs for students offered through the AEF.

What are the biggest misconceptions concerning marketing and how does AEF address them?

I think the first and most disturbing is when students try to define marketing. They believe that it is mostly about ‘advertising and selling stuff’. As you know we are much more than that. We need to be a force for good in society as well as a force for growth in business. The second misconception is the question of what constitutes a career in marketing. We have not done a very good job of charting career paths for entry level marketers. If you think about what marketers do today, and how they progress through the industry, there is no straight line. I had a conversation just a couple of weeks ago with the CMO of a major retailer. He told me that he has over forty roles and job descriptions just within the purview of the CMO and the marketing organization of the company. There is a wealth of different routes to enter the industry, and we need to recognize that today’s talent comes from everywhere. We need to do a better job creating this awareness.

With the greater emphasis and usage of A.I. by many firms, there is a concern that many marketing roles and jobs will become obsolete. Is it premature to say that traditional marketing is dead? Why or why not?

It is fair to say that for every job that is replaced by AI, another one will be created. We need to be thinking about a whole new way of looking at skill sets. That is why the industry needs to partner with universities. The most important area of growth and development is in data and analytics. The universities do a great job of equipping students with the requisite skills in those areas, but that is just the starting point for student preparation. The question is: how do we take data and analytics and turn it into actual insights that lead to action? Students also need to be equipped to create a narrative or build a story rooted in that data which is the essence of brand building. AI will come and then there will be the next iteration of AI, but critical thinking and the human factor will endure.

You may think that traditional marketing is dead and we may joke about the fact the 4P’s or 5P’s are artifacts of history. However, I see a bright future for marketing which combines both the qualitative and quantitative disciplines together with the classic discipline of brand building.

As we are making our way out of the pandemic, what are the key takeaways for marketers?

The pandemic was transformational to marketing in at least four ways. One, remote work has changed the workplace forever. Even as companies look to return to the office, younger employees are comfortable working remotely and really look for the flexibility. And whether companies like it or not, they are going to have to adjust to this expectation.

Two, the rise of the attention economy. Think of the ascendance of TikTok and its community of influencers just over the last 24 months. It's not just a social force, but now a very powerful marketing and advertising vehicle. It is incredible what they have done in so short a time, and they are not alone.

Three, the shift to e-commerce and direct to consumer. It was well underway prior to the pandemic, but now it has accelerated four or five-fold.

And finally, the pandemic confirmed brands must put purpose at the center of their business. Young marketers are not just looking for jobs, they are looking for meaningful careers. And if brands are not genuinely authentic to their purpose, they will lose not just employees but Gen Z customers. There was a time not all that long ago marketers thought they owned their brands. The pandemic showed us that customers are in charge – as irrational and unpredictable as they may be!

What advice would you give to marketing students regarding skills that they need today and in the future?

Of course, hard skills are critically important. But in addition to building hard skills, you should cultivate the softer skills. Your future employers prize curiosity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. If you can combine them, you've got a big career ahead of you. Marketers are really looking for fully formed marketers who can balance the qualitative and the quantitative sides of the equation. That is absolutely critical. A path to the most senior roles in marketing is no longer possible without it. That is why the AEF is focused on creating partnerships between marketers and educators. We want to help strike that balance.

Is there a risk that the quantitative side of marketing will win over the qualitative side of marketing?

Okay, here is where I get controversial. There has been a stampede to performance marketing and a hyper fascination with measurement, but none

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of that succeeds without brilliant storytelling. Within marketing, the pendulum swung too far to the quantitative side. We must get the pendulum back in the center again. The way to do that is to bring the best of both worlds together and ensuring we have a diversity of thought. Somebody recently said that nobody builds brands anymore. I do not agree. As long as human beings are relational in nature and want to connect with each other, the storytelling side of marketing will never be obsolete. The AEF is building a campaign that focuses on 'marketing marketing' to students. Which is ironic because we are supposed to be the marketers! We are marketing the profession in a way that showcases the best of the quantitative and the qualitative sides, and that positions marketing as a truly meaningful career. As we say, a force for growth and a force for good.

What is your biggest barrier to attracting students to marketing?

There is low awareness of how creative and exciting jobs in marketing can be, and how those jobs can lead to a fulfilling career. In other disciplines, career paths are clear. In marketing, not so much. In my experience, I have found that students who are drawn to marketing exhibit curiosity and critical thinking that often translates into more resourcefulness and an inherent desire to find their own way. But I think what we need to do is to make it easier for them. Secondly, we need to get marketers on campus more, more engaged, so that they are either in the classroom or professors are coming to their companies. The interaction between marketer and professor is pure gold because it translates into such a better educational experience for students. The other important piece is around curriculum, and that's where practitioners can also help supplement with some of the more future focused and societal aspects of modern marketing. We need to come together to better prepare our future leaders of marketing.

Thank you for making the time to talk to Rutgers Business Review.

Executive's Bio

Gord McLean is President and CEO of the ANA Educational Foundation. As an AEF Board Member for over 10 years and a past-Chair, he led the AEF's merger with the Association of National Advertisers and is committed to advancing the AEF's mission to be the bridge connecting the marketing, advertising, and academic communities. Previously he was Global Managing Partner at the Young & Rubicam Group, one of the world's leading providers of integrated marketing communications and services. At Y&R Group he worked with clients around the world to help build their businesses across geographies and across all disciplines.

He also drove the Group's cross-company business development initiatives. Gord joined Young & Rubicam Group in 2007 from Y&R Advertising, where in his last assignment he was CEO for North America. Over his 16 years at Y&R, Gord acquired global experience spanning every region and almost every category. After first serving as Managing Partner of Y&R Toronto, he made the move to New York to lead global clients such as Colgate-Palmolive, Ford, Citibank, and Chevron. Gord has also served as Y&R's President, Chief Operating Officer for Asia-Pacific, and President of Global Client Services.

Interviewer

Erich Toncre is Vice Chair, Director of Marketing Education, and an Assistant Professor of Professional Practice in the Marketing Department at Rutgers Business School. His areas of marketing expertise include marketing consulting, small business/entrepreneur marketing, digital marketing, and strategic brand management. He is a management and marketing consultant with twenty years working with small businesses to Fortune 500 firms in the areas of sales, marketing, general management and corporate training. He is a senior partner with Compass Strategies Group, a management consultancy firm that specializes in financial and marketing consulting. As a consultant, he stresses the importance of education and training as a vehicle for providing continuous learning to continuous improvement for firms.

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