

**Crafting brands
for life**



“Seriously, I will never forget that girl, she was amazing. She was born in a family of three brothers, in one of the poor communities around here. She told me that for years she wanted to be like them, surf like them, play football like them, because they were strong and they knew their ways. She was struggling with her long hair, which prevented her from being exactly like them. Physically and emotionally, it was in the way, it was the sign that she was a girl. Until the day she cut it, really short. And then she hated herself. Since then she has been trying to rebuild her identity, as a young woman. Now she does kickboxing - but she does it with pink gloves!”

Marc Mathieu is the Senior Vice President for marketing at Unilever. That day he sat on the grass, as he told the story, talking to a 27 year old Brand Manager, on the lawn overlooking the beach of a hotel in Búzios, a short drive from Rio de Janeiro. Around them, scattered around the swimming pool deck, small groups of executives were sharing similar stories. There were people from Turkey, from Argentina, from Indonesia, from the Philippines and more - a dozen nationalities represented. There were people from R&D, from the global marketing team, as much as local managers, people from media and advertising agencies, and more. The setting was beautiful: the local guest house where they had settled was far from luxurious, but it was right on the beach, quiet and relaxed. The holiday atmosphere suggested by the Hawaiian shirts and shorts was only an illusion. The team had dived into an intense workshop. In three days, they would set the basis for a total turnaround of the brand they worked on, Sunsilk.

Making marketing noble again

Marc had joined Unilever a few months earlier. At Coke, as Senior Vice President of the Coca-Cola brands, he revived the belief in the iconic power of the Coke brand to better the world with stubborn optimism even in the worst of times. This led the brand to embrace happiness again, as a key human theme around which to activate and cultivate. Further, Marc helped craft the ‘Live Positively’ program of the Coca-Cola Company, a program that

put the company out in society to contribute beyond profit in a branded way. All of this brought back an ailing Coca-Cola brand to growth. It also fed Marc's belief in the miracle of marketing and in the power of brands.

Marc however also experienced how hard it can be to create a brand with the ambition to drive a new culture, a purpose-led brand that takes a leadership position to change how people think and behave. After leaving Coca-Cola, he set out to create a company called BeDo, a journey in which Christophe dived in to help. Together with about 30 other people from diverse backgrounds, Marc and Christophe imagined a world where it could be easier to connect those who desire to do good and those in need of it. They imagined leveraging the power of brands and the power of social networks to do so. They invited people to be the change they wanted to see in the world. They imagined a product that would be something like an e-bay for doing good. The purpose of BeDo was to inspire and free the good in all of us, and they wanted to enable people, companies and communities to do so.

It did not work out this way. They could not translate this cultural strategy into a viable commercial strategy. Maybe they just did not leverage enough the power of people to make this happen. Maybe they did not know how to fully leverage the power of digital. Maybe they just did not have a big enough lever to have the impact to make this happen. The truth of the matter is that they did not manage to turn this idea into a business reality and after two years of effort this project ended. At least in the way they initially intended.

So when Keith Weed, the Chief Marketing Officer at Unilever, approached Marc for his help to turn Unilever's new CEO Paul Polman's business vision into a marketing reality, he embraced the opportunity. Marc was, however, well aware of how much effort it would take to get Unilever to craft brands and do marketing in a new way. It is hard to change your ways when these ways have been key to your success for so long.

Crafting brands for life

Unilever is the second biggest advertiser in the world: it gives the company's 7,000 marketers a powerful lever in terms of what millions of people believe, what they buy, consume, or think.

It is, also, a company with a rich history. At the end of the 19th century, Lord Lever, one of its founders, believed he could make money by bringing hygiene to the workers that piled up in UK cities after the industrial revolution. To do that, he was the first person to create a brand that did not bear his name, but rather stood for an idea that people wanted to buy into, next to a product to buy. Branding his bar soaps "Sunlight", he ran advertising that claimed it made "linen whiter, and homes brighter".

When he arrived at the helm of Unilever as CEO, Paul Polman embraced a similar ethos, placing "sustainable living" at the core of his growth model. Polman outlined that business growth should benefit all people, and the next generations – not just shareholders, claiming "business and brands have a powerful role to play in creating sustainable living. They can inspire and enable change."

Marc's job was to turn this vision into a reality, changing the company's marketing model so it could drive business and sustainability in a single move. To achieve this, he would need to gradually change the job of thousands of marketers who manage hundreds of brands across the globe. For him to succeed, they would need to declare themselves and the brands they are managing to be contributors to society at large, not only to their company and the category they are active in. As marketers, they would need to throw themselves into life as individuals who make a difference.

Marc and a small team started pondering what change was needed to get marketers at Unilever to build brands that have a more positive impact in people's lives, and assure that sustainable living practices are integral to all their marketing efforts. As a great marketer, Marc knew that an important first step to any change program is to 'brand' it. Anthropologists know it – people and objects only truly exist when they have a name.



Empathy and Imagination
create our world

‘Crafting Brands For Life’ was born to allow people to engage with this change program and to enable Unilever managers to ‘be’ and ‘do’ certain things differently. It was about “putting people first”, uncovering the people in consumers and to do so, the people in the marketers; creating an embodied understanding of these people, not just a theoretical knowledge of their behavior. It was about “building brand love”, engaging fully into the logic that brands are not simply trademarks, but the combination of “a product to buy and an idea to buy into”, recognizing that strong brands are fed by a purpose that people can connect with. It was about “unlocking the magic”, bringing out the magic of the brand in everything it does, and building a “brand experience” rather than just a product and its communication.

As any good brand must do, this brand had to ‘feed the faith’ of the Unilever tribe and all their partners. It had to help them accomplish what they set out to do, making it worth their while on a professional and personal level. It had to be about creating change that people, both inside and outside the company, want to believe in and can contribute to.

In a world full of cynical and conservative marketers, this was anything but a piece of cake.

Empathy & Imagination

In his very first month on the job, Marc engaged us in conversations about “humanizing” Unilever. It appeared that two human capacities would serve as a base to build change: empathy and imagination. Not exactly concepts or capacities with a high currency in the business context. Yet without these human qualities, any attempt to craft brands for life would be doomed for failure.

Empathy is needed to get back into people’s life in a more meaningful manner. Empathy is needed to shift our attention on the larger patterns of which we are part of and to transcend the barriers that stand between us. But most of all, empathy is needed to spark a response of engagement with people’s plight, attend to their needs, strive to ease their suffering and add to their pleasures and joys.



Imagination on the other hand is needed to conceive what does not yet exist. The general assumption is that a will to act must precede imagination – you decide to do something, before you imagine what it is. The reality is that imagination and empathy come first. It must, because unless we have the emotional and intellectual capacity to conceive of what does not yet exist, there is nothing towards which to direct our will and resources. Without empathy, without imagination, there is no way for an organization to enhance the quality of life of those around us. Crafting Brands For Life requires people as marketers to feel and imagine a world that can better people’s lives, and cultivate this world with better products to buy and ideas to buy into.

Our challenge was to assure that these human capacities were put to work in each of the three challenge areas that were presented by the Crafting Brands For Life team. Luckily for us, Marc and his team had the courage to experiment, understanding very well that this would not be a silver bullet process.

Our first point of focus was on how to help brands better define what they really stood for. At Unilever, as in most FMCG companies, every action of a brand – as ubiquitous as it is – is rooted in a positioning statement. At Unilever, it is developed under the form of a “Brand Key”. We thought that as long as the Brand Keys did not reflect the empathy and imagination needed to drive brands, change would not happen.

The wisdom of crowds

We realized, also, that the centralized process used to develop Brand Keys was not helping. We saw extremely solid marketers developing great brand ideas, but fighting for months to see their construct embraced by the local markets. Sometimes for good reasons: it feels difficult for a global brand team located in London or Singapore to have enough understanding of the people in Rome, Rio de Janeiro, Moscow, Bangkok or Manila to be able to craft a brand that works across so many different cultures. Global teams usually solve this by conducting global research projects, where specialized agencies scour the world to come back with a wealth of insights. But we knew only too well – as Dabao and a few other projects had taught us, this was just not enough. Empathy needs to be a first-hand affair.

This was a question of “consumer knowledge”, but not only. Empathy and imagination had to be brought to the core of the process.

James Surowiecki, in *“The Wisdom of Crowds: Why The Many Are Smarter Than The Few”* has argued that broad groups make better decisions than small groups or individuals – under four specific conditions:

- 1. Diversity of opinion:** each person should have private information even if it’s just an eccentric interpretation of the known facts.
- 2. Independence:** people’s opinions aren’t determined by the opinions of those around them.
- 3. Decentralization:** people are able to specialize and draw on local knowledge.
- 4. Aggregation:** some mechanism exists for turning private judgments into a collective decision.

Building on these principles, we thought that rather than making the Brand Key the affair of a global brand vice-president and his core team, it could be co-created by the “crowd” of people who operate the brand every day. The brand VP should, of course, keep the leadership on the group and the ability to make decisions, but could nurture his thinking by a co-creative process where diverse, independent, decentralized opinions would be

aggregated into a stronger vision for his brand. The people who develop cultural insight, those who craft advertising, those who develop long term innovation and those who run the day to day business, across geographies, would be able to contribute to a much richer thought process.

Also, if we could get them to craft a single vision together, it would allow them to go back to their countries and function with their minds set on the same ideas. They would be able to run their different roles with the same perspective, saving hours of discussions and lengthy “cascade” processes.

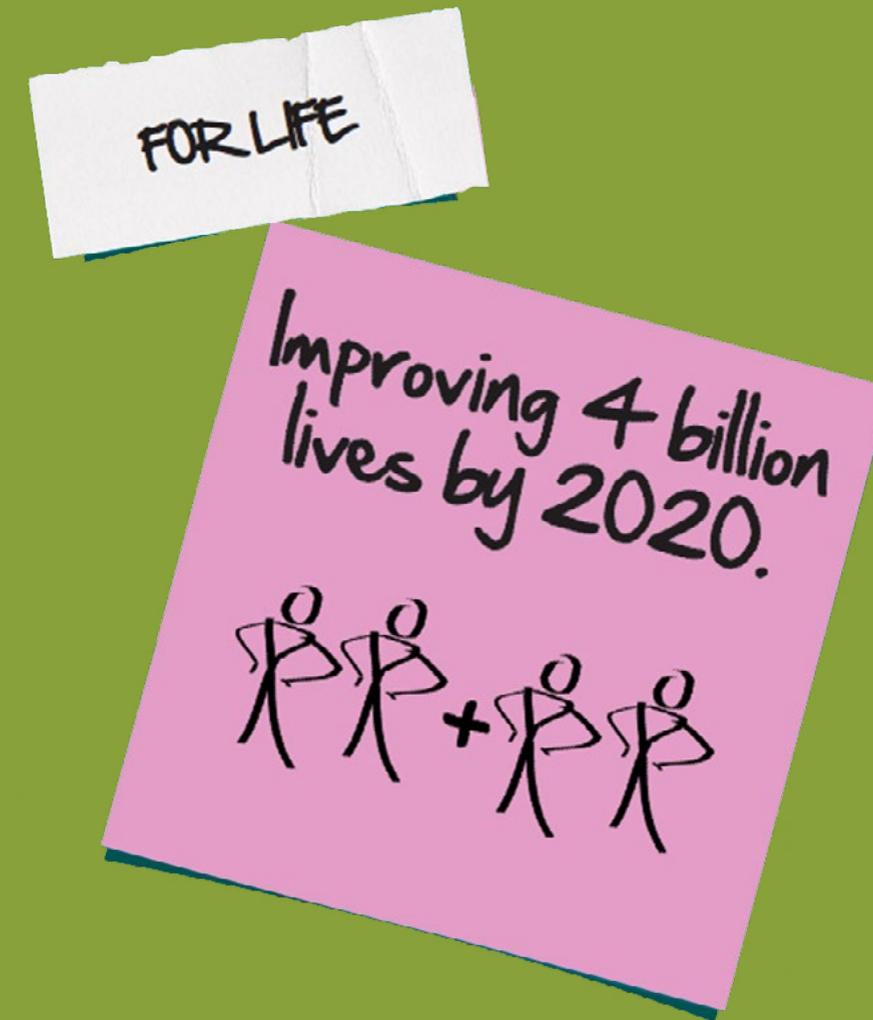
We just needed to find a way to do that. It was what the Búzios workshop was about.

Deep Diving

The Sunsilk team gathered in Brazil exactly fitted Surowiecki’s brief on what could make a “wise” crowd, rather than a “committee” building a dull, superficial brand story. They were diverse in opinions – the teams from South-East Asia, Latin America and India actually landed in Rio with a clear view that their consumers were different, and that their business hence needed to be treated differently. They were decentralized, in the sense that they represented teams that worked on different aspects of the brand, from the social media activation to innovation. Keeping them independent was a key priority: we needed to ensure that the voice of the most senior people would not force others into alignment. Aggregation was our point of focus, and we had carefully crafted a program that would allow bringing their knowledge and skills together.

It was, however, an experiment. Not everyone was ready to believe that putting 40 people on a beach for three days could help crack a brand’s positioning. We were, on our side, not 100% sure that it would work.

But Surowiecki, it turns out, was right.



The program we crafted used a combination of approaches that we would come to re-use again and again to crystallize the “Brand Deep Dive” process.

We sliced the work in limited, simple tasks that the group discovered hour after hour. No agenda had been released prior to the session to break away their usual thought process. They gradually build the pieces of a puzzle that would come together over three days.

We brought people together, pushing them in small breakout teams for every task, letting them solidify a point of view only to break the group and inject new thoughts for the next exercise – hence gradually creating a unified point of view within the entire group. The place for the session was important. Sitting on the beach was not about having fun. It was about getting people who had never met and worked largely through email, to exchange as human beings. It released their abilities for empathy, for imagination, by breaking the barriers between them to facilitate exchange.

We further celebrated “play” during the meeting, breaking all boundaries: we asked the team to express their thoughts through creative writing, through theater pieces, through songs, helping them simplify their ideas to the bare, powerful essential, cutting away their over-rational thinking. Marketing teams are used to thinking conceptually, and with subtlety. Capturing a brand idea in a two-minute play, using pink wigs and oversized glasses as props, requires other skills. A sense of simplicity, the ability to capture a simple human insight and build a story upon it. These types of skills were those that we needed to surface.

The program started with “people”, of course. Every participant in the session had been sent into an “Immersion” with a young Sunsilk user, in his own country, before flying over. They came back elated, changed, having discovered young women who carved out their lives with energy and strength. Sunsilk serves girls from the middle classes, mostly in developing countries. The team discovered how much all of them, in their own way, try to build their own stories in a world that pushes them to follow the footsteps of others. Like Marc, they fell in love with these girls, their ambitions, and their genuineness. We spent time sharing their stories, and mapping out the tensions that fueled them. “Tensions”, we explained to the

team, are fertile for brands. There are the areas of our lives where we want to change things, where we need help to be someone different, change our world. They are the places where a brand can help! We explored the history of the brand, diving into 50 years of advertising – not just to look at the product news, but to find out how, symbolically, Sunsilk had always celebrated women’s freedom. We explored the product dimensions of the brand – and the role of hair, in real and in symbolic terms, in the way these women see and build themselves. Hair is, after all, a powerful symbol of femininity. It grows from us, and reflects our strength, our mood, who we are and who we want to be!

And the magic happened. People were moved, they laughed, engaged. In just three days, a virtual team in which people hardly knew each other bonded. They discovered how equally touched they were by the people they had met. They saw, as we had expected, that at some level, these women all shared the same tensions and aspirations, even if their cultural expression could differ. They realized – and embraced – how much their brand could do for them, how it could champion ideas that would make their lives better, and use these ideas to create products that sell. They created the platform of thinking that now drives the work of Sunsilk – and fuels solid growth.

The process, of course, was scary at times. And at times, as they would later admit, some of the teams felt uncomfortable. But they loved it. As we prepared a follow-up workshop, Sandrine Conseiller, the bubbly French VP that heads Sunsilk globally, summarized the feeling into a beautiful compliment: “Do not share the agenda with me”, she told us, “I know you guys will do crazy things, and I might refuse them. I’d rather trust”.

From prototype to process

“Seriously, I will never forget that girl, she was amazing...”

Marc is on stage, and he is addressing a marketing crowd of two hundred people in Mumbai. A year has passed since the Búzios workshop. Marc and his team are traveling around the globe to roll-out the approach that was pioneered in Búzios. One more time, he is speaking about Tatiana, sharing the importance of people to people empathy in the marketing process.

After Búzios came another brand – then 5, then 20. The global market research team at Unilever embraced the Immersions as a richer way to engage with consumers – so that we trained a few hundred market research specialists to allow them to facilitate the sessions.

It soon appeared, also, that the Brand Key format was not rich enough anymore to reflect the richness of thinking that was conducted in the Brand Deep Dives. In every session, we engaged the team into clarifying the purpose of their brands – the reason why it was there, the way it would contribute to a better world, and how that purpose would be the driver of their business. But where to reflect these thoughts in a positioning document that left no space for them? After intense discussions, the Brand Key was changed. Today, the “Brand Love Key” includes, for each brand, its “purpose” and how it will “contribute to sustainable living”, guiding marketers towards a more meaningful view of their role.

“Probably Unilever is the first company in the world to do something like this”, Marc says proudly, and rightly so. Just as it is, probably, the first to bring together the diverse people who run a brand, to build the common convictions that will power a more meaningful way to do business.