

»CEOs MUST RECOGNIZE THAT STRATEGY AND CULTURE WORK TOGETHER, GUIDED BY A COMPANY'S PURPOSE (WHY WE EXIST), IDENTITY (WHO WE ARE), AND CULTURE (HOW WE BEHAVE AND TREAT EACH OTHER). THESE FORM THE COMPANY'S STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK THAT SHOULD ALWAYS STAY ON TOP MANAGEMENT'S AGENDA. «

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*Interviewed by Vera Pasynkova,
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You started your professional journey not in a marketing field, didn't you? Having a BA in architecture, one of your first jobs were as an architect in the computer-visualisation office. How did you find yourself later in a totally different field of marketing, advertising and brand management? What were the turning points in your career that shaped who you are today?

From a young age, I dreamed

of becoming a teacher, with drawing as my second passion. To prepare for architecture studies, I enrolled in a high school specializing civil engineering. During this time, I worked with a painter-illustrator, learning diverse drawing techniques, and collaborated with an architect to prepare for my entrance exam in architecture. Studying architecture proved to be both a creative and intellectual journey — one that went far beyond designing buildings, interiors, and landscapes.

It meant exploring ideas that shape the world today, understanding client needs, appreciating how different cultures utilize space, and reflecting on the values that define an ideal community.

After completing my BA, I spent three years working in an architectural visualization office while also attending marketing courses sponsored by the Austrian Chamber of Commerce. Around that time, Volvo was looking for an advertising manager and

valued my profile as an architect with marketing fundamentals - an opportunity that marked the start of my corporate journey. I then joined Renault's marketing department as a brand manager for part of the Renault portfolio.

In 2000, I decided to shift industries to see how basic marketing concepts applied across sectors. This transition - from the automotive industry to fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) - was a turning point, as I consciously chose to pursue marketing over architecture. At Droga, I began as a brand manager and later



moving into the role of director of corporate strategy. Throughout my corporate career, I often drew lessons from architecture. As director of corporate strategy, I helped lay the foundations of a new company by shaping its vision, mission, and core values. In mergers and acquisitions, defining brand architecture was crucial - a framework



consumer preferences. Regular meetings with brand managers from other countries provided a valuable perspective on global dynamics and created a supportive international network.

At Droga Kolinska, later Atlantic Grupa, I deepened my understanding of the intricacies of mergers and acquisitions. Beyond due diligence and transactions, I witnessed the profound cultural transformations such processes demand. Defining



Aleksandra Kregar, Rovinj. Aquarelle

became head of development marketing. In 2005, I played an active role in the merger of Droga and Kolinska, helping shape the new company strategy. Together with the consulting firm Stern & Stewart, we developed a new organizational structure and strategic framework. When Droga Kolinska entered the acquisition process in 2009, later culminating in its takeover by Atlantic Grupa, I gained firsthand experience of mergers and acquisitions from within the acquired company. At Atlantic Grupa, I first continued as director of central marketing and before

that organizes a brands, sub-brands, and products into a clear, cohesive identity. Just as architectural blueprints guide physical construction, brand architecture provides the strategic blueprint for building a strong market presence.

Looking back, what skills or experiences from your early career at Renault and Droga Kolinska have proven most valuable in your later strategic roles?

Renault gave me insight into international competition, diverse markets, and shifting

vision, mission, and brand portfolio was important, but even more critical was shaping shared values, behaviors, and mindsets that guided collaboration in the new organization. I came to appreciate the saying, "culture eats strategy for breakfast." This experience taught me that strategy and culture must evolve together, supported by open communication, transparency, and strong leadership—principles that continue to shape my approach to organizational development.

You completed the

Executive MBA program at IEDC. Would you recall what motivated you to pursue the EMBA at IEDC, and how did it influence your professional trajectory at that time?

My MBA studies were instrumental in my role at Renault, particularly in brand management. As an architect, enhancing my business knowledge was essential, and IEDC truly lived up to its reputation as “A School with a View.” The experience there was transformative and helped unlock my potential. I gained invaluable knowledge in finance, accounting, marketing, and sales, while also developing key skills such as problem-solving, resilience, and entrepreneurial readiness. Although the MBA provided solid textbook foundations, the greatest value came from case study discussions and project work with colleagues. I learned to collaborate effectively and make sound decisions, enabling me to navigate complex situations with confidence.

This program not only transformed my thinking and leadership approach but also fostered lasting relationships through a powerful alumni network. Overall, my MBA experience has been a cornerstone of both my personal and professional growth.

You are one of the people who seem genuinely adopting the life-long-learning concept and pursued a MSc, as well as a PhD program. The latter one requires a lot of persistence and deep reflection—what drove you to take that path

after an already successful career, and how did IEDC support you along the way?

From a young age, I felt a strong desire to teach, supported by positive feedback from presentations and conferences. This reinforces my belief that sharing knowledge and experiences is truly my strength, which led me to pursue a second career as a lecturer. To qualify as an undergraduate lecturer, I completed an MSc, and in 2005 began teaching courses on marketing and strategic company development. Earning my PhD was a milestone, enabling me to teach at both undergraduate and master's levels, while pursuing my business career. My doctoral studies were an integral part of my individual development program at Atlantic Grupa, where academic insights informed business practice, and business experience enhanced my teaching.

Balancing doctoral research with corporate responsibilities required support of many people. I am grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Marie Jansen van Rensburg, for her guidance; to Prof. Drikus Kriek for his encouragement; and to Iva Eibel for her attentive support.

Above all, I thank my parents for instilling in me a belief in lifelong learning, and my husband and daughter for their constant motivation and support.

In what ways did your doctoral research on the strategic role of marketing shape your views on marketing's place in business leadership?

In my doctoral research, I conducted a qualitative study on CEOs' perspectives regarding the role and impact of marketing in the FMCG industry in the ex-Yu region. Drawing on my corporate experience at Atlantic Grupa, I knew that some of competitors lacked a marketing position comparable to mine, yet I hoped that the research would reveal a different picture of marketing's impact.

Instead, the findings showed that marketing remained stuck in the fourth “P” of the marketing mix. Most CEOs described it only in terms of promotion, campaigns, and content, ignoring brand and strategy; failing to recognize that product development, pricing strategy, and customer experience are core marketing responsibilities. Ultimately, marketers were seen as working at the end of the



pipeline – promoting products for short-term returns.

Based on these findings, I prepared the recommendations for the marketing function with direct business application:

1. Marketing must reposition and rebrand itself – taking ownership of brand strategy, linking it to company's vision, strategy, and cash flow.

2. Marketing must "manage up" – understanding its primary consumer, the CEO, and building stronger ties with top management.

3. Marketing must lead co-marketing alliances – using knowledge to coordinate functions and create customer value.

Based on that, I developed a framework to guide marketers in defining their role and contribution at the levels of culture, strategy, and tactics. It can also serve academia, as many CEOs have noticed that universities overemphasize creativity at the expense of business orientation. While marketing's scope varies by industry, its impact can grow significantly. Without marketing and brand strategy, even the best tactics fails.

You've shifted focus in recent years toward consulting, academia, and employer brand. What prompted that transition?

After the sabbatical, I chose to transition from the corporate world to consulting while deepening my focus through PhD. Colleagues often saw me in an advisory role, given my

responsibility for processes, frameworks, and methods.

I enjoy consulting, though the field has changed significantly in recent years - not only with AI, but also with shifting client's needs. Beyond traditional advice, I now work as a partner, helping internal teams build capabilities and implement new initiatives. My focus areas are strategic marketing and HR topics; both functions share the same challenge: proving their value in front of top management.



Employer brand is a recurring theme in your work today—why do you believe it has become so crucial for organizations, and what trends are you observing? "You'll also be sharing your insights on this topic in the IEDC HR Leadership Program - what can participants expect to take away from your session?"

Organizational culture and defining employer brand have gained significant attention since the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by labor market changes, new work models,

and the entry of younger generations into the workforce. With ongoing brain drain in the region, companies need to create positive cultures that retain employees and attract new talent. A strong employer brand - how a company is perceived as a workplace - directly shapes competitive positioning and business results. Engaged employees lead to loyal customers, while effective employer brand reduces recruitment costs, improves hiring quality, and strengthens retention.

The IEDC HR Leadership program is designed to support HR practitioners in this area. One of the courses focuses on defining and managing employer reputation, guiding participants in shaping their company's employer identity and value proposition so that they align with company culture, strategy, and employees' expectations.

From your perspective, how can companies better align corporate culture, business strategy, and brand to succeed in turbulent environments?

The most crucial element is a top-down approach: CEOs must recognize that strategy and culture work together, guided by a company's purpose (why we exist), identity (who we are), and culture (how we behave and treat each other). These form the company's strategic framework that should always stay on top management's agenda.

Yet many companies underestimate the role of culture, treating it as "soft" and leaving it to HR. They post values on websites and walls, but fail to live them daily. Leaders often overlook their duty to model culture, assuming it is HR's responsibility. Warning signs of a broken culture include ignored toxic behavior, punishing those who speak up, favoritism, lack of recognition, withheld information, prioritizing politics over performance, and persistent micromanagement.

As someone who has worked at the intersection of marketing and strategy, how do you define the true value of marketing for a company's long-term success?

The actual value of marketing lies in shaping a customer-centric mindset and embedding it in company culture. If business strategy defines direction and long-term goals, marketing operationalizes it through market entry – deciding how to deliver value to customers and create benefits.

So, marketing is not just promotion, but the process of turning strategy into reality. My PhD research, however, shows that marketing is often still seen narrowly. Its role varies by industry: in some, it leads the full marketing mix (4P/7P), in others, it owns only a part when it should be involved and not just informed in key decisions.

Business development today often requires cross-functional thinking—what values do you believe leaders should embody to make organizations thrive?

In my consulting practice, I have observed that while leaders often bring strong professional expertise, they frequently lack key leadership skills. Employees consistently value guidance, transparency, listening, feedback, respect, trust, growth opportunities, autonomy, and appreciation beyond performance—but many feel leaders are not flexible enough across generations. Inclusivity and adaptability are now essential, both internally and in the marketplace. Today's environment calls for cross-generational mentoring,

stronger collaboration and communication, and the building of resilient teams. Above all, leaders must embrace lifelong learning for themselves and their employees.

What advice would you give to young professionals who want to build careers that are both impactful and meaningful?

First, uncover your "why"—your purpose. In my experience, understanding your purpose significantly enhances daily work engagement. Second, keep improving your skills; be proactive and take the necessary actions to build on your strengths while addressing your weaknesses. Third, find a mentor and surround yourself with supportive people. This network is essential for personal and professional growth. Fourth, develop strong communication skills, including giving and receiving feedback, empathy and compassion. Finally, embrace intergenerational exchange – and, if possible, choose a good boss!



WHAT ONE CANNOT FIND ON ALEKSANRA'S RESUME



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Do you play any musical instruments?

Unfortunately not. However, I enjoy music, particularly two very different genres: rock music and Slovenian chansons. I attend weekly dance classes with my husband, and we also enjoy dance weekends with our friends.

What is your favourite way of spending holidays?

I love travelling, and I always make time to explore architecture. I particularly look for works by Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster. I have a passion for sculpture; whenever possible, I bring back small statues as souvenirs.

Any country or a place on your bucket list for visit?

I've travelled a lot in the West, so now other cultures and civilisations are on my list. Despite all that, Scandinavian countries are still very close to me. In addition to nature, I am always fascinated by their modern architecture and a hygge mindset.

What's your favourite sports that you do or that you follow as a fan?

Skiing, cycling, walking, and hiking are my most enjoyable activities. For the past two years, I have been practising Pilates regularly, at least once a week.

Latest book you read and enjoyed?

Lately, the focus has been on professional literature, while I am currently completing a new

student book for my master's course, *Consumer Behaviour*. In our home library, we collect and value printed books mainly by Slovenian authors. If I had to choose, I would choose the novel *Belo se pere na devetdeset* (Whites wash at ninety), which was also made into a film.

TV series to recommend to watch?

My Netflix profile indicates that I primarily watch drama series. I choose shows that feature crime plots or are rooted in reality or recent history. I would recommend a title like »The Diplomat«.

If you had an alternative career, what would you do?

I wouldn't change a thing. I've made several career moves - from an architect to a career in marketing and then to strategy. I've changed industries. I've left the corporate world and am engaging in consulting, focusing on topics that combine architecture, marketing and HR topics. I share knowledge in the academic field, thus living my childhood dream.

What is your favourite childhood comfort dish?

Foods that take me back to my childhood are typical Slovenian dishes, such as šmorn and štruklji.