

Are advertising agencies the cobbler's children? (Part 1)

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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During her time at Ogilvy & Mather, Lauren Woolf, now founder of strategic creative marketing consultancy [Mrs Woolf](#), recognised a paradox in the advertising world that led her to write a thesis on the subject as part of her MBA at the Berlin School of Creative Leadership.

She couldn't understand why the creative companies that she had worked for, and with, did hardly anything about their own brands. "Here we sit at the bleeding edge of contemporary marketing practice as creative businesses, and yet we're so focused on our clients, understandably, that I felt that as we were creating, ideating and innovating for our clients to grow, there was so little focus on the company itself," she explained.

Woolf shared her career journey and search for the reason for this in her talk about 'living, learning and leading for creativity' on Day 2 at the Johannesburg version of [Business of Design](#) 2017.



Lauren Woolf aka Mrs Woolf

After spending five years at Ogilvy & Mather Cape Town, she moved to Lausanne, Switzerland, where she spent two years working at British American Tobacco on Lucky Strike, the American brand of cigarettes and the sexiest brand to work on at the time, she said. But this came with its challenges. Switzerland is a nanny state, she explained. It's a highly-regulated environment, as is the tobacco industry, so she learnt much about the beauty of constraints. "To work on tobacco was a gift as a marketer; to work in the world of constraints... and the tighter the constraints, the higher the creativity." As such, the people she worked with took the most astonishing creative risks, and it taught her a great deal about being a marketer.

After her time there, which included an additional three years working on her own business, Antipod, she rejoined Ogilvy in a client service leadership role, this time in Johannesburg, where she approached her then leader (now head of Facebook Africa) Nunu Ntshingila, who agreed that the agency needed a CMO, somebody who was going to consciously think about what the shop window should look like.

Your dream job does not exist, she always says, but there's always the opportunity to create it, and so after working as CMO, she took on the role of chief marketing and talent officer. "This was an amazing visionary foresight of Abey Mokgwatsane, who I was working with at the time. Together we created this role because we understood that the link between marketing and talent had become transparent in organisations."

Mokgwatsane allowed Woolf to take up her studies at this point and so she applied and went to the [Berlin School of Creative Leadership](#), part of the university Steinbeis-Hochschule Berlin.

Aha moments

Woolf shared two key snippets or aha moments from her time there.

The first one links to her area of interest. I'll let her tell the story:

“ *It was a Harvard Business School case study on the Saatchi brothers. They founded Saatchi and Saatchi and a spin-off currently very active in our community here is M&C Saatchi Abel. They realised that a passion is not a business until you consciously make it one, and when you do make that commercial leap, you have to do something about it. And what they did is, once a week, they would close their door, and they would sit and think about unbelievable ways to market their business. How could they win great clients? How could they keep the ones they had? How could they win amazing people and attract them from other agencies in the market? And how could they make them stay? This was a moment for me, which again fed my interest and enthusiasm about creative companies and how they work for themselves.* ”

“ *Well, the girl who told the story is an MBA friend: Jackie Walker, who was in the module with me. She's the creative director of Walkers Shortbread and Jackie sat next to me in class and told a few of us a story about her father and grandfather. They had these three letters sewn onto their shirts – every new shirt they buy, either at the back or on the cuffs. They have it printed onto their notebooks; they have it handstitched and framed in their offices; and they have it printed in gold leaf on their desks, and they are very proper English gentlemen. And when we said to Jackie, well what does it mean? She said, well, it means 'quit f*cking around'.* ”

For Woolf, this meant getting on with her thesis, in which she endeavoured to answer the question, 'Are advertising agencies the cobbler's children?'

Look out for Part 2 next week for Woolf's explanation of the paradox of the cobbler's children having no shoes and how this applies to creative companies and their lack of focus on marketing and business innovation for themselves, as well as her key findings, the problems and the implications.

*That's just a taste of the current flavour of design-thinking. [Click here](#) for our *Business of Design* coverage, and be sure to follow [@busofdesign](#) for the latest updates.*

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. marketingnews@bizcommunity.com

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