

Featured interview >>

SARAH DOYLE, BRAND DIRECTOR AT EAT.



Making the local connection

EAT. is a leading brand in the £3billion specialist food and coffee 'to go' market. It sells a wide range of soups, hot pots, salads, toasties, sandwiches, baked goods and coffee, which are freshly prepared in-house by EAT. each day. >>



We caught up with EAT. Brand Director, Sarah Doyle, the woman behind the recent brand repositioning and launch of its flagship store on

the Strand in 2012. She tells us about the process behind the rebrand and how EAT. is developing its concept in an increasingly competitive market.

It's almost three years since you joined EAT. What was it about the role and the organisation that attracted you to the opportunity?

Quite frankly, it was my dream job. It's really important to me to work with brands that I connect with and EAT. is a perfect example of that. Prior to joining EAT., I worked just off Regent Street at the Digital Property Group and I always remember a colleague of mine returning to the office one day with a noodle

soup which he had bought at the EAT. on Golden Square. I had previously never come across the pho soup concept before and I was immediately intrigued. I left the office that instant to get myself one and since then, I've been a real loyalist to the brand. When the job came up, I knew I had to go for it. It was also attractive because it was an opportunity to completely reposition a brand. It's been a really good fit; I'm genuinely passionate about the EAT. philosophy and food and I think the way I operate also fits well with how the business operates. I feel like I've found my natural home.

What were the biggest challenges you faced when you first joined and how did you overcome them?

Transitioning from FMCG into retail was the biggest challenge for me personally. My FMCG background allowed me to bring discipline and process into the marketing operation,

particularly around driving a customer insight led approach, as the business gradually moved away from its founder-led, entrepreneurial phase. The challenge for me was to move my focus away from marketing single product or category brands, which I had done throughout my career in FMCG, to instead marketing a whole in-store experience. It involved me thinking, for the first time, about how the brand felt to customers when they walked into a store; so how the fridges looked, how the food looked in the fridges, what the floor was like and crucially, how good the customer service was. I had to broaden my knowledge as well as my network. In the past, I had always relied on planners in ad agencies and packaging designers, but now I had to get help from architects and interior designers – people I had never previously worked with. I had to really push myself, but I also had great support from Niall and Faith MacArthur, the founders, who had been working in this industry for over 16 years.

Niall and Faith are still involved in the business. How much influence do you ultimately have over the brand?

Having started out directing the marketing of the EAT. brand, last year I took over the food



Sarah Doyle

and menu development from Faith and so now all aspects of the customer offer sit within my area. Both Faith and Niall have moved to non Executive Directors of the business and are there to support where needed. As a marketer it's a gift to be able to work with the people who launched the brand and are able to inspire with the founding principles, so I take every opportunity to discuss and share ideas for the brands' development with both of them. They started and ran a business on the basis of being true to a set of beliefs around good, fresh, uncomplicated food and so my job is to interpret that and present a fresh and relevant view of it in 2014 and beyond. They have also founded a business that is dynamic and innovative and this is one of the key aspects of the brand that we aim to retain and continue to build in how we work and also what we do.

Which achievements or milestones are you most proud of so far?

The launch of our new brand concept was done simultaneously with the opening of our new flagship store on The Strand. I started in the role in March 2012 and we launched, successfully, in November that year. We moved really quickly and worked hard to achieve it, but I can now proudly say I was the person who led the process to bring this new brand identity to life. It's any marketer's dream to have led that significant a brand transformation; so obviously I'm most proud of that. The emotional truth of the brand remained the same, but everything else changed. We put in open kitchens, self-service bakery tables, changed the colour scheme, uniforms, recruitment and training processes and principles and moved from static menus to using digital menu boards. Despite the big upheaval, I believe we now have a new concept that is a massive step change from where the brand was before, but ultimately rooted in what the brand has always been about. The speed at which we worked, as well as taking risks like investing in the digital menus, despite not being able to demonstrate a business case for us doing so, was exciting. That intuitive approach is the main reason why I love working in the business and I suppose I'm proud of myself for successfully making the transition into that type of working environment; as I said, I think it suits me.



As it grows, how will you ensure the entrepreneurial spirit and agility of the business is maintained?

There are a lot of examples in the market where companies introduce greater discipline but then completely lose the momentum and responsiveness behind the brand. I'm very conscious of this and don't want to be responsible for bringing in marketing disciplines and project management tools that ultimately stifle our dynamism. For me, the dynamic nature of this business is something we need to nurture and cherish. That means holding on to that risk-taking ethos and making sure that our people are not afraid to fail. Crucially, we do this by bringing in people who fit into this type of organisational culture. So, generally, we like people who are confident, decisive and like to take risks. From a marketing perspective, I look for intuitive marketers, like myself. People who recognise that marketing is part art, part science, but who are more inclined towards the emotive art of marketing, rather than the absolute detail of the numbers. I believe that consumers are largely emotive in their decision making, so we need marketers who really get the importance of making that emotional connection with customers, through the brand. People are our biggest asset; so making

sure that we're recruiting the right people and that we're inspiring them, incentivising them and rewarding them in the right way, so that they're connected to our brand and its success, is of utmost importance.

"The launch of our new brand concept was done simultaneously with the opening of our new flagship store on The Strand."

What advice would you give to other 'blue-chip' marketers considering moving into small entrepreneurial businesses?

You have to be happy to be your own boss and operate at all ends of the functional spectrum, from strategic thinking through to general dogsbody. I don't have a big team and am generally the sole expert in my area. So, if you're not concerned about hierarchy and enjoy learning in other ways rather than just developing your own functional skills, as well as making a difference on a personal level, rather than influencing lots and lots of layers of people to drive change, then it's

absolutely the right place to be. Some days I'm writing a three year strategy and other days I'm responding to a customer tweet, because everyone else is in meetings. I love the variety, but some wouldn't. That's not to say that I'm not learning and developing, however. I've come into this brand and business with limited retail experience, so in the last two years I've been taking every opportunity to learn from those around me who have spent years in this industry across various sectors. I can now just about hold my own in a conversation about LFLs or NSOs.

How are you developing the brand concept?

Once the rebrand concept was established and we had decided what the brand would look like, the next challenge was getting people to connect with the brand, beyond the store. So, we set up a communications agency pitch process and selected Brave to help us with that. They'd done some really compelling work in the past, including Green & Blacks and Ecover, and they truly got our brand and felt as passionate and committed to it as we are. They also demonstrated that they could do

big thinking with small budgets. We don't go for the big brand approach to advertising but rather focus on making the local connection. It's important, therefore, that we help customers engage with our brand in a way that is relevant to

them and the geography they're in. Our main focus now is to finish rebranding all of our 113 stores; we've currently done 75% of them. After that, we'll start thinking about opening new stores.

As well as Pret a Manger, who else do you consider to be a competitor? How do you truly differentiate yourselves from your competition?

Our competitive environment is massively different to what it was when we launched 16 years ago. Today, we have a very broad competitive set which includes everyone from Tesco through to Costa Coffee and Pret a

Manger, as well as Subway, Wasabi, Itsu and the local guy who has just started selling deli sandwiches on the corner of Fleet Street; and of course, the street markets. Despite this, we believe we have a clear sense of difference in the market. This revolves around the quality and variety of our food, particularly our hot food menu, and the fact that the recipes are all developed and made by us and then served

"Our competitive environment is massively different to what it was when we launched sixteen years ago."

fresh to order. A lot of our competitors are choosing to pre-portion hot food and display them at the front of the counter where they might sit for a couple of hours before being picked up and eaten. We believe that the flavour and texture of our food is best when served and eaten fresh, so we make a feature of this through our in-store experience and our communication to ensure that customers see the difference.

What brands do you look to for inspiration?

The one that stands out for me in our space is John Lewis. If you talk to any John Lewis customer in the UK, the two words that the majority of people would use to describe the brand would be 'affordable quality'. This is because John Lewis has such a strong sense of purpose and positioning in the market that begins with its founding principle. Its real strength is that the brand starts with the people who work in the business. If you peel back the layers, right at the core of the brand is the engagement of its people. They are true ambassadors for the brand and business, giving the same quality of message and the same sense of what the brand is about, wherever they are in the organisation.

In which areas of marketing do you anticipate increased investment over the next few years?

I think digital and social will continue to be big areas of focus for a lot of brands. There

are conversations about brands taking place online all of the time that even the most experienced marketers won't even know about yet. The state of play is much less fixed than it used to be, and people's habits and the way they consume media and advertising are changing all of the time. The pace of change is just phenomenal; and also liberating in terms of people's ability to engage with other people and also with brands, anywhere and anytime. So, as a brand, the challenge is how to ensure that you are in relevant places and part of relevant conversations.

How do you keep yourself busy outside of work?

I've got four kids, so between work and home that's pretty all consuming. The food industry has a particularly close knit community and its fun to catch up with old work colleagues over a glass of wine whenever possible. Working in central London makes this fairly easy. Other than that, I now do personal training a couple of times a week. I run a food team and they will tell you that the minute a box of samples turns up in the kitchen; I am the first person with my nose in it. It's all research, of course, but it's meant I've had to work at losing the stone I gained when I joined the company!

Market snapshot

UK

2014 was a mixed year for the UK economy. Although unemployment fell slightly and GDP grew by approximately 0.7% in Q3, business investment on the whole actually declined. Britain's current account deficit matched a record high in Q3, due to the low returns on foreign investment, which in turn devalued the pound.

Although the UK's recovery is looking increasingly unbalanced, the economy is still expected to grow by approximately 3% in 2015. This will largely be driven by consumer spending, which has the potential to pick up further in the first few months of 2015.

UK firms also accelerated recruitment efforts at the close of the year with a greater number of UK firms making permanent appointments. This certainly suggests that economic growth for 2015 looks sustainable.

