



Dedicated follower of passion

Premium chocolate brand Lindt's success in Australia is dazzling. Yet marketing director Andrew Curran thinks there is plenty more work to do. [Rob Grant](#) examines what drives this true brand believer.

Illustration by Sara Hingle.

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Rich, luxuriant chocolate. Exquisite Swiss craftsmanship. A smorgasbord of gourmet flavours and delicious varieties. It is easy to see how a marketer could fall in love with the Lindt brand.

Andrew Curran, an engaging and animated expat who moved to Australia with Lindt three years ago, certainly fell hard. But he believes the job of marketing any brand starts with personal adoration, so he's hardly fazed. The more you listen to him talk – in a still fresh English accent – the more you believe he would exhibit devotion to any brand on which he works. It's an interesting spin on the higher calling of a marketer: to share your passion for a brand with others, so they can enjoy it too.

"The biggest reward [as a marketer] is when you see other people getting passionate about your brand. We're all super passionate about Lindt. When our activities convince other people in Australia to be passionate too, it's so rich and rewarding," explains Curran excitedly.

After he graduated from a northern English university with a degree in French and management studies, many joked he should go and manage the French. Funnily enough, he did exactly that several years later. But marketing was his early calling and it has been ever since.

"A couple of things really interested me about marketing. One is that it's very big picture, which is my style. But, at the same time, it looks at granular behaviours day-to-day. You can be both strategic, but also in the here and now. It's very real," he says.

A singular obsession

Picture the scene: it's your last year at university and you land a dream job in one of the world's strongest brand-based companies. Not only that, they make beer.

Manna from heaven for a student. But Curran did not land a graduate trainee role with global alcohol company Diageo by accident. This was the result of months immersed in the rigorous assessment processes of a handful of global companies. It speaks of a determined streak, one that has guided his career and the brands on which he has chosen to work.

Curran was assigned initially to the Guinness brand and it didn't take him long to discover that when the people at Diageo talk about brand obsession they mean it. During his first week, he went for drinks with new colleagues from the marketing team and made a rookie error. He candidly recounts the tale as if it were yesterday, "The guy came to take our order and I was the first to be asked. So I asked for a pint of lager. After my order, there were 15 Guinnesses ordered. That was the last time I ordered lager for two years."

Keen to make amends and prove his passion, Curran had four different roles with Guinness and buried himself in every aspect of the brand. One role was in sales and this early commercial exposure helped him acquire a taste for the numbers. He thinks this is vital to success in marketing and is often lacking in marketers early in their careers.

“There’s a creative element to marketing. But there’s also a hard-nosed element, which is numbers driven. Sometimes marketers fall down because they don’t get the balance right. At the end of the day, as unsexy as it sounds, you’re employed to deliver a profit. You’ve just got to deliver the numbers,” he says.

Do one thing well

After five years delivering results at Diageo, Curran felt the need for a change. The desire was exacerbated by a role that wasn’t working out. He recalls, “I was put on specialist projects, removed from the rest of the business. Partly because of this and partly because of the mix of personalities, I didn’t feel like I was delivering well. So I started taking the recruiter calls that I would never have taken before.”

Looking back on this time, with the benefit of several years’ hindsight, Curran feels it provides a lesson for anyone in a tricky work situation. “If there’s ever a problem in your role, a sustained problem, not just a one-day issue, talk to somebody. I didn’t want to raise it as an issue, because I thought it made you look weak. Then I found out the marketing director was really disappointed and wished I’d spoke to him earlier,” he says.

Nevertheless, Curran moved to global water, dairy and nutritional product company Danone. This brought new

Career timeline

UK

2000-2005: brand manager, innovation manager, key account manager, Diageo

2005-2007: senior brand manager, Danone

SWITZERLAND

2007-2008: international marketing manager, Lindt

SWEDEN

2009: marketing manager, Lindt

FRANCE

2010-2012: marketing manager, Lindt

AUSTRALIA

2012-present: marketing director, Lindt

skills and valuable learnings. At the time, the company’s revenue was over £200 million, but it only had four brands and spent almost all of its marketing budget on TV advertising and in-store activations. It was a deliberately narrow focus and Curran has held this principle dear ever since.

“It’s almost always more effective to do fewer things and do them really well. At Danone, the marketing mix was super simple. It brings more cut-through for the brand. You focus on the things that work, that you can test and prove the worth of. Then once you’ve proved they work, you can invest heavily,” he says.

Pack your bags

Although Curran’s career has taken several serendipitous twists and turns, there is one aim he had at the very start: to work overseas. Even in his

early days at Diageo, he made it clear to management this was his plan. At Danone, with a few more years under his belt, he took his attempts to realise this ambition to the next level.

“If you want to get an international move, you need to push and push and push and never stop pushing. Make it clear you want to move and continually have those conversations in terms of setting a time scale. At Danone, I had the CEO of the company, the HR director, the marketing director... everyone making calls for me. Everybody was doing everything they could,” he says.

Despite all this effort and support, the right role simply did not appear. So Curran set a deadline and, once the date passed, took the matter into his own hands. He resigned.

“I said to my girlfriend, ‘Right, we get married in September 2007 and, if I haven’t got a job by then, I’m just going to quit and move overseas.’ We had to draw a line in the sand, which I think is a really important thing to do.”

Curran applied for visas for Canada, Australia and New Zealand, among others. At the eleventh hour, before he could board a plane, the phone rang. “I got a call from a recruiter about an opportunity in Switzerland, a country I’d never thought about. It was Lindt and I love the brand, so I decided to go and see what would happen,” he recalls.

Choc to the system

On the first day of his long cherished overseas assignment, Curran had a rude awakening. It was winter in Zurich,

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home to the global headquarters of Lindt, and he felt like a duck out of water. “When a planned move actually happens you have a sudden moment of realisation. The first morning I went off to work, it was dark outside, it was raining, I didn’t know a single person and I didn’t speak a word of German. What have I done?” he says.

Fortunately, Lindt’s head office operations are largely conducted in English and before long Curran learned what makes this global chocolate juggernaut tick. If Diageo stirred in him a passion for brand obsession and Danone taught the benefits of simplicity, Lindt brought the two ideas together and took them to the next level.

“Lindt have a clarity of approach, which is refreshing and not overtly complex,” says Curran. “They have a very clear brand story and stand single-mindedly for just one thing: being the ultimate chocolate delight, based on the best quality possible. Everything that every single person does, in the whole business, supports that.”

Curran saw this brand obsession firsthand when he spent two days working the line in one of Lindt’s production facilities – mandatory for employees to help them understand the product offering. He describes in detail the process used to make the Crème Brûlée block chocolate, which is almost exactly how you’d make the dessert in a restaurant kitchen.

Working for Lindt, one of the world’s most passionate brands, was a marriage made in heaven. Curran worked in three different European markets within five years. After Switzerland, where his wife also worked in a high-profile marketing role, he took a role in Sweden. This meant commuting on weekends to see his wife, which brought a degree of personal stress. Yet because it was a first marketing manager role, with responsibility for the Swedish and other Nordic markets, it was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

His final role in Europe, before moving to Australia, ticked off another longstanding goal; however, it created – at least initially – another career challenge to be reckoned with. Curran had long wished to work in a market that operates in a foreign

Advice to younger self

Don’t sweat the small stuff. It’s really easy when you’re junior in your career to be consumed by small problems. But it’s amazing how unimportant things can seem with a bit of time perspective.

“It was a tough working culture and it requires an extra 20 percent more mental energy when it’s not your language. In meetings, when you’re disagreeing, it’s a bit like a game of chess. You are thinking three moves ahead. When it’s not your mother tongue you can’t do that. You’re just trying to understand what is being said. I think for the first six months, I lost every argument. It was really frustrating,” says Curran.

Land down under

Success in the French gig, against the odds, put Curran in prime position when the marketing director role became available in Australia. Both the promotion and move to warmer climes were just what he was looking for. “It was always this aspirational thing. It’s an idyllic place in people’s minds. When this role came up, I was high-fiving the guy I spoke to. I was absolutely delighted and so was my wife,” he says.

Being the lead marketer in an organisation was always something Curran hoped for and he now relishes the role. Unsurprisingly, it’s the ability to be the passionate voice of the brand he cherishes the most. “I do appreciate being the marketing director. I think it’s very motivating to lead a whole department. You sit on the board representing the view of the consumer and the brand, and that’s a really important role to play,” he says.

Having worked in five countries in his career, Curran is well-qualified to talk about how to understand a new market in those initial hazy days. Like the positioning of his brands, his approach is refreshingly simple.

Top five learnings for marketers:

- 1 be obsessive and single-minded about the brand benefit**
 - 2 do fewer things well (bigger and better)**
 - 3 interact intimately with consumers and retailers all the time**
 - 4 speak out in times of trouble, and**
 - 5 deliver the numbers, always.**
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"I just ask lots of questions, a huge amount of questions," he says. "Never feel dumb about asking questions. Have you done this in the past? What did you learn from it? How do retailers approach these issues? You just always ask."

Beyond the persistent questions, Curran likes to observe brands in action firsthand and seek the counsel of partners. He advises all marketers to put in the hours with consumers, retailers and agencies.

"I spend a lot of time out in the trade, stood in supermarket aisles just talking to people. I think you look

Five books marketers should read (and why)

The Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell. Basic premise is a handful of the right people, fed the right message, can have a massive impact on your brand performance. Teaches you to really think about what makes your message compelling or not and who your core target should be.

Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning and Control by Philip Kotler. This was the first marketing book I ever read (like many others who studied marketing) and is written by one of the greatest marketing brains on the planet. Comprehensive, intelligent and easy to read, this is essential for anyone who wants a broad understanding of marketing.

Eating the Big Fish by Adam Morgan. Sensible principles and great brand examples that provoke you to think differently and give you renewed energy to take on the incumbent market leader.

Ignore Everybody and 39 Other Keys to Creativity by Hugh MacLeod. I didn't necessarily agree with every point in this book, but it provoked me to consider things differently and think about how to make my brand stand out from the crowd.

Purple Cow by Seth Godin. A great argument against bland marketing. Encourages you to try and make every piece of marketing remarkable, in order to cut through and change behaviour. Otherwise, can we really justify our efforts and spend?

a bit nuts, but just talk. Also physically attend as many consumer groups as you can, rather than waiting for the debrief. As soon as I start a new role, I ask the agency to do a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). It's always interesting to get their view, as it can be fresh."

Clear as dark and white

Occupying a senior leadership role at Lindt Australia, Curran is now able to devote more time to another professional highpoint: recruiting and nurturing rising marketers.

He is clear on what he looks for in team members. First, the ability to demonstrate structured thinking is of paramount importance. Second, he's looking for people who have the same passion for brands as he does. Or at least come close.

"I want candidates to have a decent level of structure to their thinking. Even if they haven't been trained to do task A or task B, they can understand a problem, break it down for me and provide a recommendation based on logical rationale. The other one I always look for is passion and energy. If someone doesn't have passion for what they do, belief, conviction and a drive to succeed, they are not going to fit in with the culture of the teams I build," he says.

Once they're under his wing, Curran does everything he can to keep employees motivated and focused. He does not like losing good talent and has more than once persuaded a quitter to stay.

"There's nothing more frustrating than losing a good person. It grates on you, because you're so passionate about your own brand and what you're trying to do," he says.

Looking ahead to his own career, Curran is unlikely to sit back and wallow in Lindt's success in Australia. His love of the brand will not allow that and he talks animatedly about the opportunities for Lindt in the future.

"There are something like four billion chocolate consumption occasions a year in Australia. About four billion times people make a decision to eat chocolate. But, of those four billion, over 90 percent of times people do not choose Lindt and that really frustrates the heck out of us. Why wouldn't you choose the best chocolate? This is what drives us. What would make them choose Lindt? You have to have the right products and right positioning to make the product relevant on more occasions. That is what passion is about."

So spare a thought next time you eat a chocolate treat that is not Lindt. There is a marketer in an office on Elizabeth Street, Sydney who wants to know why. **M**