An interview with Patou Nuytemans, EAME Chief Digital Officer at Ogilvy & Mather UK

As a chief digital officer, Patou Nuytemans sees herself as a change agent responsible for radically transforming Ogilvy & Mather agencies and the marketing disciplines within them.

Apart from a brief stint on the client side at Microsoft, Nuytemans has spent the bulk of her career, 17 years, with O&M working with its agencies and global marketers, including Barclays, Bristol-Myers Squibb, British Airways, The Coca-Cola Co., IBM, Nestlé, Philips, SAP and Unilever. Based in Belgium, she travels frequently to agency and client offices in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, advocating for change and the integration of digital tactics across marketing disciplines that include advertising, direct marketing, customer relationship management, promotion, public relations and shopper marketing. Nuytemans is tasked with infusing digital approaches and tactics into all O&M services.

eMarketer: The role of chief digital officer is relatively new. What is your vision for the position?

Patou Nuytemans: It's mainly a change management role and one that hopefully won't exist one day, along with any title with the words “social,” “mobile” or “digital” in it. Hopefully it doesn't exist in the foreseeable future, not because these titles don't involve a specific set of skills, but because ultimately, what brands need today is to solve the same marketing problems that they've always solved. They still need to build brand presence. They still need to generate demand, activate shoppers, make customers more loyal and sell more to existing customers. They just need to do it in different ways than before. The channels and the media opportunities have significantly changed, but consumer behavior—consumers’ needs and wants and desires—has also changed.

“...digital access has dramatically transformed the way that brands can engage with audiences...”

My role is a transformation role. We have to make ourselves digital-age ready internally. We do that by developing a strategy and supporting that through initiatives to help our different agencies. We look at different types of skills, structures and solutions that they need to implement. I also play that role with some of our key clients. Using digital to transform an agency or any business is not an easy thing.

Do you find varying degrees of digital readiness and expertise in different markets around the world?

Nuytemans: Yes, to a certain extent. When you go to remote corners of Europe, the Middle East and Africa, you hear either a client or our own folks say, “I know it’s different here, and we're behind” or something like that. But to be honest, that's not really true. Some brands might be further along in digital. But I find that in every market—whether you go to Russia, South
Africa or Kenya—in all of those places, digital access has dramatically transformed the way that brands can engage with audiences in new ways.

There are certainly markets where mass media still plays a quite impactful role, more than in other markets. But I see an increasing appetite across the world for taking up digital channels to engage and interact, socialize and communicate in different ways. There are just differences in how accessible and available the digital media are.

What keeps you inspired and motivated each day?

Nuytemans: While I was in South Africa, it was absolutely amazing to see slightly older people—highly conceptual creative directors who are certainly not the most advanced users of digital—sit together around a table with people who are 20 years younger and don’t really understand any of the big brand ideas but understand anything about digital. They sit together around the table and come up with new ideas, whether it’s for building brands or activating shoppers, because they have an attitude and a willingness and respect for each other to figure things out. That gets me excited.

I like to think about and figure out problems and try to come up with great ideas. I love the combination of magic and logic, creativity and science. This is just an absolutely amazing time to be in this business. I love things that are difficult. I’m constantly surrounded with young people, old people, TV ad makers, content creators and digital user experience people. And I constantly learn. Together, we’re trying to figure out how to do great things for clients. New ideas and technologies come along all the time. It’s a constant learning curve.

What excites you most about the quickly changing digital landscape?

Nuytemans: I think it’s the fact that the internet is or will be embedded in everything. Our refrigerators, shavers and toothbrushes can be intelligent. I’m a new mother of an 18-month-old baby, and I have a baby monitoring system. For the moment, it isn’t intelligent—but it so easily could be. It could tell me about my baby’s sleep patterns and make me a smarter mother. We don’t want digital technology taking over our lives. But I do think there’s a tremendous opportunity in terms of utility for people. The internet is everywhere. How can we make the most of it to live better lives? I’m quite excited about the kinds of things that we will see and the opportunity that they open up for brands to play a much bigger role in peoples’ lives.

Mobile, especially in the developing markets, also gets me really excited. I lived in South Africa and saw how advanced mobile is there. People haven’t got internet access at home, but they have a device that allows them to be connected and able to access things. There’s a great opportunity for us to educate as well as communicate with and provide services to people through the mobile medium.

How does eMarketer help you navigate the velocity of change occurring today?

Nuytemans: I’ve been an eMarketer user and client for a long time. First and foremost, this is a world where we still need to convince a lot of people, and we need to do that based on factual evidence and datapoints—eMarketer is the source for that. We find the evidence for the stories that we want to tell and the solutions that we want to convince our clients about. We find a lot of that information to demonstrate what consumer behavior is and what it looks like in today’s world on eMarketer.

This is a peer-to-peer world, collaborative world, and we have to listen to many opinions. It’s good to have people who try to make sense of all the information that’s out there and offer some kind of direction on where to start or how to form a point of view.