



Overview

Catherine Thomas is head of Retail Marketing for Land Securities, one of the largest commercial property management companies in the UK. Land Securities manages some £9.8 billion of properties. Catherine Thomas' role is to head up consumer and business-to-business marketing, as well as support the business development and sales and leasing arms of the retail business.

Engaging with the empowered consumer

Catherine Thomas, CMO at Land Securities

Q. What would you say has been your greatest success as a CMO in helping your enterprises (past or present) to meet strategic business objectives?

A. When I joined Land Securities just over 20 months ago, one of the first things I did was ask many different people in the business how they described what we did to people outside the company. I found that there was no consistent “elevator pitch” that encapsulated who we are, and what makes us different as a business.

We went through a process to define that proposition, engaging as many staff in the process as possible. As a result of that dialogue, we came up with our company mission: shaping the future of UK retail. I think it's a very bold proposition for property company to make, but we've defined our position with some key differentiators that set us apart from the competition.

Of course, it's nowhere near good enough just to state a proposition and simply talk about differentiators. You really need to identify clear evidence and proof points within the business that make that point.

That's where Smart Thinking comes in. At Land Securities, Smart Thinking is about understanding our retail customers; looking at the conditions in which they act and how their buying behaviour changes, whilst also challenging traditional thinking and acting with real, progressive retail affinity. Many of us now in the business are ex-retailers, which means we really understand how to drive footfall and sales.

Q. How do you think the recent explosion of data is impacting marketing?

A. When you're an organization that relies on engagement and interaction with customers on a regular basis, it compels you to use the tools that the customer finds most comfortable. For example, Generation X and Y are always connected. As a marketer, it's important for me to know that their smartphones never leave their palms, because that knowledge heavily informs my retail strategy.



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— Catherine Thomas, CMO, Land Securities



A recent example of this is the student lock-in we held for two hours in September and February this year at our St David’s shopping centre in Cardiff, which is one of the UK’s top ten. We literally locked the doors to all of the shoppers except students. It was Freshers’ Week, so there were about 30,000 students in Cardiff, and 6,000 of them queued around the block to enter our shopping centre.

The only way we promoted that event was through Facebook and Twitter. The students we brought in enabled those retailers to do their complete week’s planned sales in two hours. If you want an example of how powerfully the explosion of data has impacted marketing, then that’s it.

Q. How are you using social media to communicate with your customers? Would you recommend this approach to other retailers?

A. Generation X and Y are much less resistant to providing their data in return for something, whether that means access to regular offers, new product collections or email newsletters. Whatever it is, they’re absolutely prepared to give you their data as long as they get something in return, and they’re much less worried about privacy than we perhaps were in the past.

Because of this, we’re able to use platforms in a very effective and efficient way to communicate and engage with our corporate stakeholders and customers. We’re using tools such as Facebook, Twitter and foursquare to provide compelling reasons for our customers to engage with us.

My advice to other marketers would be to absolutely embrace social media as much as you possibly can. It’s a powerful tool, both as a call to action, and for having a regular dialogue with customers.

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Q. What's the most important customer insight that could change your business? How is your marketing organisation working to capture and use that information?

A. Most property companies ask: “How much space would you like in my new, shiny retail cathedral?” At Land Securities, our focus is very different. In a recent customer survey, one of our major anchor retail customers said that Land Securities is the only property company out there at the moment that asked them: “How can we help you grow your business? What do you need?” It’s the customer insight that comes from deep relationships – and the expertise that comes from market knowledge and market insight – that makes the real difference.

You cannot understand your customer too much. I try and talk to as many different layers of the organisation as I can to get real insight into how they manage the business, the challenges they face and the core objectives against which they’re aligned.

Q. What are the ways you are personally broadening or enhancing your capabilities, given the changing nature of marketing? What advice would you give to other businesses looking to achieve this?

A. Personally, I believe it’s about acting remarkably in everything you do, and finding best-in-class operators. So it’s really about thinking: “What is it that we need to do to make our offering even more remarkable?”

To me, acting remarkably means taking everything to another level – always challenging traditional ways of doing things, always looking at ways of making a difference. It sounds a little pompous, but I try and focus on finding ways of leaving a legacy in everything that I do. Good ideas like the student lock-in are very quickly copied, so it’s important to constantly look for ways of doing even better things next time around.

I think a big part of that is embracing as much new technology as possible. I listen to my children and my children’s friends to see the ways technology is integrated into their lives. It’s a fresh perspective. I’m an absolute news junky, so I’m constantly reading online, watching YouTube, and looking at the new ways of communicating that are emerging worldwide.

Q. How are you and your marketing organisation helping employees (and the business as a whole) develop, while still maintaining your corporate brand?

A. Meeting the challenge of retaining your corporate brand means being absolutely consistent in what you do. You have to have a very clear proposition that the internal team and your external ambassadors can consistently communicate.

I think that everybody you interact with needs to feel like it was a very special experience – whether it's the shoppers in your shopping centres or your business customers after a meeting. If engaging with you has been special, then it's something that they'll want to repeat.

For the customers of our shopping centres, it's never been more important to inspire this kind of feeling. There are far too many reasons to stay at home – to shop online, to watch TV, to watch movies, to listen to music, or to surf the internet. We have to keep giving people compelling enough reasons to leave their homes and come out and engage with us.

In order to attract, retain, and encourage people to act remarkably in everything that they do, you really need to recognize and celebrate those successes on a regular basis. But you also need to provide tools for them to do their job as effectively as possible and to ensure that you regularly communicate business objectives and successes.

Q. What's the most important thing you learnt from your role at Land Securities?

A. I've learnt that you can't over-communicate; you need to keep reinforcing your business objectives, and keep making individuals feel valued by recognising achievements. That communication can be on every single level: social media, traditional print media, and face-to-face meetings.

I would advise other CMOs to think about their staff in the same way they think about their customers; they're equally important to the success of your business. You need to communicate professionally, consistently and clearly to get the best out of your team.

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