

# (marketingday)

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# MAGAZINE

**LUISTEREN WE VOLDOENDE  
NAAR ONZE KLANTEN?  
RESULTATEN VAN HET IVOX ONDERZOEK**

**THE FUTURE WILL BE  
CUSTOM MADE  
INTERVIEW WITH LESTER WUNDERMAN**

## YOUR GAME, MY RULES

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**BIOGRAPHY**

Wunderman was born in the Bronx and educated at New York City public schools. He attended classes at each of New York City's colleges and universities so he could create his own "degree." Though highly educated, he still does not hold a formal college degree.

In 1947, he was hired as a copywriter at Maxwell Sackheim & Co. While there, he noted that their "mail order" accounts had the potential to be built into a broader line of business. He introduced a "direct marketing" approach to service them, using the medium of clients' mailboxes as a way to develop a more personal connection with potential customers than general advertising had previously found possible. In 1972, President Nixon contacted Wunderman in order to spread the new zip code system so that many of Wunderman's direct marketing techniques could be used to educate the population on the new system.

## Lester Wunderman

# THE FUTURE WILL BE CUSTOM MADE

*Lester Wunderman is a man who has really done justice to his family name in a career spanning over 50 years. The father of modern marketing and direct marketing set up his own agency in 1958, single-handedly came up with many major innovations, wrote books (including 1997's 'Being Direct') which are still regarded as milestones in the field and won innumerable prizes. On Thursday 28 April he was the keynote speaker to a crammed and enthusiastic room at Marketing Day in Brussels. A day before this, we were able to quiz him at the grand Stanhope Hotel in Brussels.*

**Do you still remember the moment when you thought 'Marketing is my calling'?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "Not the precise moment, but certainly the period. When I was young I had never heard of marketing. It was only when my school career was coming to an end and I began to wonder what I wanted to do that I realised that marketing and the use of language were things that appealed to me. I have always been in love with the English language."

**You first worked as a copywriter.**

**WUNDERMAN:** "Yes, at Maxwell Sackheim & Co. in the 1940s. Deep down I was always a writer. Throughout my school years I wrote stories and I loved the creative process of writing. I dreamed of finding a job in which I could work with language and communication."  
"Still, it could all have gone very differently. When I was young, my parents wanted me to become a doctor, a prospect that I detested. And then my father died when I was nine. It was 1929, the period of the Great Depression, and I grew up in a period that marked the end of the years of prosperity and the related optimism. Unemployment was everywhere, so how could you fantasise about a creative job when you grew up in a city – and in the Bronx – where nearly all your friends' fathers had lost their jobs and were wondering what would become of their family? And so for my first job I ended up in a factory in a

New York suburb where they made toilet cases for ladies. Factories in that era were built without lifts, they were complete fire hazards and dangerous. In that factory they fitted mirrors and other things to the bags and my job was to remove the surplus glue from the mirrors.

Hence I sat at a table wiping off glue until one day a female colleague said: 'What in God's name is a clever guy like you doing in a dreadful place like this?' That comment struck me, so deeply that I said to myself: 'Get out of here!' So I began to look for a better job, in the service sector, and I found employment at a debt collection bureau on Madison Avenue. There we did work with language, because the men there spent all their time talking on the telephone to other people who had to write letters to collect late payments from the major New York department stores and companies. In other words they used the post and the telephone as tools to collect money.

My job was to put those letters in envelopes and I thought: 'It would be great if I could write these letters myself later in my career.' That didn't happen. (laughs) But I think that was the spark that further ignited my desire to do something with communication.

I also had an uncle who was a writer. He wrote plays and books, was regularly on the radio and was well educated. Since I had lost my father at such a young age, he became a father figure, an example, my hero. My uncle had a vast number of intellectual friends. At that time the southern part of New York was full of cafés and clubs where writers, actors and other artists met and he hung out there too and often took me with him.

As a snotty-nosed thirteen year old, I sat between the greats in the famous Café Royal while they talked nineteen to the dozen about writing, acting, plays and literature. I heard the stories about their colourful and romantic experiences and thought: 'I want to be part of this too!' When that later happened – initially as a copywriter, then as a marketing professional and photographer – it felt like a calling that had been fulfilled. I felt like I was in my place. Right from the start I was good at what I did and I enjoyed it. And I still do."

**You came up with various innovations in the world of direct marketing, such as the 1-800 free phone number, loyalty programmes and subscription cards to magazines. In 1972 President Nixon asked you to help make the new zip code system known to the public at large. What do you think is your greatest professional achievement?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "The fact that I cottoned on so quickly to what was going on in the digital world. I was fortunate that I knew people at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, one of the most prestigious technical universities in the world, ed.) and at CalTech, the California Institute of Technology. I was hugely interested when they took their first steps in the digital world. I closely followed the evolution and realised that this was the future. In due course people would be able to communicate with one another all over the world, and not just advertisers with consumers but the other way round too: consumers who talk back. That dialogue would be the greatest commercial change since the Middle Ages. What am I saying? Since the time when the first traders sold their goods at the market!"

"Of course, in the meantime we also had the breakthrough of telephone services – with the free 1-800 number that for the

first time gave consumers the opportunity to communicate upstream – and television advertising, all new forms of commercial communication. I quickly grasped that a completely new age had dawned."

**I can imagine that, as with any major innovation, people initially had a lot of doubts about the Internet**

**WUNDERMAN:** "Everyone had their own thoughts, and put forward just as many opinions. However, we had the industrial age behind us, several decades of production and marketing in one direction, and suddenly you had a new invention that made a dialogue possible, wherever you were in the world.

Well, I was not the only person to realise this. If you knew what was going on behind the doors of the leading universities – they had been communicating with one another via ARPANET (Advanced Research Project Agency NETwork, ed.), the original version of the Internet, since 1969 – you could see what was coming."

**The way in which we communicate nowadays has changed incredibly quickly under the influence of the Internet and social networks. Political protest and demonstrations are started via Facebook and/or Twitter, in the Middle East dictatorial regimes are being pushed aside using the same new media. How do you regard that?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "It is now indisputable: the public, the people are the boss. In the commercial world, we have long known that the consumer is in charge. We are now also seeing it in the political protest and revolutions that are encouraged via the Internet: the people are the boss and the era of monopolised power is over. It is not for nothing that the Chinese authorities are trying to prevent people using the Internet freely and censoring certain sites or networks. Even though the Chinese are computer users by nature! (laughs) But it is a battle the government cannot win, the evolution is irreversible. A sort of global democracy has come about under the influence of the Internet. Consumers will increasingly influence manufacturers, just as the people will also exert greater influence on politics and in some cases even steer it.

Dogon maternity figure



So it is the consumer that is the hero, not the product or the manufacturer. And the dialogue between the manufacturer and consumer determines how products are made. In this information age, the information we provide will motivate manufacturers to serve us in a more personal way. That is why I call this new time the age of personal manufacturing. The credo of the industrial revolution was 'I am making this, do you want it?'. But the credo of the information age is 'This is what I need, can you make it for me?'. The means of communication available to consumers also strengthen them in a way that has never been seen before. At the time of the French Revolution, solitary rebels had to recruit followers from their local community using their inner fire, their passion. Now they recruit them via information. The public, the consumer, is stronger than ever."

**You defined the term 'direct marketing' in 1967, during a famous speech at MIT. What would you add to that today, with all the new evolutions and information in mind?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "For the first time in history, information is a valuable treasure, like gold back in the day. We live in a time where gathering, possessing and using information is equivalent to power. It is no longer just about industry that makes mass products and then lets them loose on the market. Even more, I

think we are experiencing the beginning of the end of mass production. We are increasingly evolving towards personal marketing and personal production. The future is therefore custom made. It is no longer difficult to invent machines that can make personalised products. That fact, combined with information, will create a brand new system of made-to-order, customised products."

**You are also a photographer and art collector. Are these artistic passions a necessary counterbalance to your commercial work?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "I never wanted to restrict myself to one form of communication. I always wanted to work with language and ideas and images. My many interests led me to study various fields such as plays, writing and photography – at my own pace and when I was in the mood. I now have photos on display in many museums; so photography as a means of communication and an art form has become an important part of my life. But I make no distinction between my passions, I wanted to communicate via different media. I have managed to achieve that and it gives me huge satisfaction. The bottom line is that my

deepest ambition was always to be a creative person. That was – and I admit it – an ego trip, because as I said in the environment in which I grew up, you had to become a doctor or businessman. And I wanted to be a cultural, artistic person. But if you said that outright, you were laughed out of court. (laughs)

(conspiratorially) What I didn't know then is that, like everyone else, I had an inspiration, what the Chinese call 'a well', and you can tap that well. I later read that the Chinese often represent people with a symbol and I wanted to be symbolised by a well. So that I could let everything flow out of me. And I did." (laughs)

**It is well known that you also have a deep affection for the Dogon from Mali in West Africa. What do you find so fascinating about this people?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "I discovered the Dogon via a sculpture. I was in Hollywood on business and saw a gorgeous woman smoking a thick black cigar in front of a shop window. The shop sold art from different cultures. We got talking and she showed me a splendid sculpture by the Dogon. I was so taken with it I bought it on the spot. When I was back in New York, I began to look for stuff about the Dogon and to study their culture like crazy. I wanted to know everything about a people that could make such extraordinary art because through them I realised that Picasso and

Matisse and many other modern painters had drawn their inspiration for their cubist works from Africa.

It also struck me that the Dogon were trying to capture something essential in the universe via their art. They are continually searching, and when I noticed that these so-called 'primitive' people were so intensely concerned with the search for a way of expressing that feeling and created such miraculous art, dance and costumes, I realised that there is something fundamental in man that has nothing to do with manufacturing or industry or selling, but that meets a deep and existential need to express eternal beauty."

**The Dogon say they make contact with the world of spirits and the forefathers via these art forms and rituals.**

**WUNDERMAN:** "It is their church. Just like us westerners, they have their own way of coming into contact with the eternal or the supernatural. That is reflected in the art they make and it is pure magic – they touch it. That is why I became a fanatical collector of "objets d'art" that have that quality, that capture the divine aspect in one way or another. For me those objects are a prayer in material form. I felt a connection and that made me a practicing believer in the immeasurable power of the creative spirit. When I grew up, all my friends had to go to some religious service or another. I refused. I thought the institutionalisation of that divine spirit or ecstasy was wrong. Great artists and poets had to be able to make a different connection, I thought. I was determined to find that connection, I wanted to incorporate that sort of inspiration in my own life. I managed to do so via photography, writing and art, and via people in my circle of friends who also experienced that connection."

**Did you feel that the Dogon taught you something you were missing before?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "Oh yes. Through them I discovered, after I lost my own faith, that there was another form of 'belief' and that you could touch the essence of things via cultural and artistic expression. The discovery of the Dogon culture marks an extraordinary period in my life. I later developed a special friendship with these people, the start of a brilliant exchange of ideas."

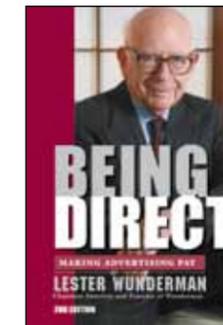
**I find that striking, because when you talk to successful business people – and especially marketing professionals and people in commerce – they are mostly worried about figures and sales. This is a different story.**

**WUNDERMAN:** "Yes, that is true. But everyone develops in their own way, and this was apparently mine. But I am convinced that it also helped me progress in business and commercially. I used the inspiration I found in Mali as food, as an infusion for my own creativity and activities. And I still do."

**I read that you have also helped the Dogon with water supplies and that they rewarded you with a special honorary title.**

**WUNDERMAN:** "I was given the title of tribal chief and a name to go with it, 'Amma Sagou', which means 'Beloved of God'. When I married my wife, we went to Mali on honeymoon and they organised a three-day wedding ceremony for us. They said: 'You are one of us, so you need to marry in our way too, not just in the western way.' So my wife and I have been joined in matrimony several times, which I think is great because I like being married to her. (laughs) First we married twice in New York: once in a legal ceremony and then in a spiritual ceremony. We then married again when we spent time abroad in the south of France. And then there was our 'Dogon wedding'. There is also a small island in Japan, near Hiroshima. There are just 9 villas there and no modern conveniences because people strive to dedicate themselves to spiritual matters. It seems to me to be an ideal place for our next wedding. I like the idea of remarrying the same person, as it is a renewal of your vows and a permanent confirmation of your love for one another."

## MUST READ



### BEING DIRECT: MAKING ADVERTISING PAY

Wunderman is to direct marketing what Bill Gates is to software. The many marketing techniques he has conceived and perfected over his long and brilliant career are to certain to help shape the interactive marketplace of the future. In this book, Wunderman tells the fascinating story of how he created the business known as direct marketing.

**You have been working in advertising and marketing for over 50 years. What is the most important lesson you have learned in that time?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "Empathy. You have to be able to understand the problem that your customer presents to you. Doing business is like life, you have to look at different levels: physical, psychological and spiritual. What exactly does the business using your services do? Does it just make a product? Or is its culture, its tradition important too? And why do they make that specific product? Is it just about the profit? Or is there someone with a particular inspiration behind its activities, and does that spirit live on in the company? Consider Microsoft: a giant, born of the inspiration of two people. Or Facebook: an unlikely success story, born from the inspiration of a single man. Such processes have always fascinated me."

**Finally: you are 90 yet you are still travelling, taking photographs and giving enthusiastic speeches to crammed rooms. How do you remain so driven?**

**WUNDERMAN:** "It's what I do. My need to communicate will never disappear. Nor will the pleasure I experience in the human spirit and its various forms of expression: practical, commercial, aesthetic, religious or political. It is my life force. The Dogon believe that there is such a thing as life energy and try, via their art, to capture the core of this energy. They call this force nyamaa and I want to connect to and stay connected to that. This is the reason I do what I do at 90 instead of staying home and arguing with other old men." (laughs)

**Interview: Yurek Onzia**

Do you have any practical tips for the professionals reading this interview?

**WUNDERMAN:** "Three rules of thumb. One: always focus on the long-term relationship and reward consumers for their loyalty. Customers who remain faithful to the same product for their whole lives are like gold or diamonds to companies. We have to encourage those people to remain loyal and find new ways to achieve that – I am thinking, for example, of a free car for retired consumers who have driven the same car all their professional lives. Two: time is valuable so don't waste the consumer's time. Nowadays everyone is very busy so advertising and commercial messages have to be short and to the point. Three: our commercial success depends on our talent and our flexibility to adapt products and services to the different needs, cultures, ages and locations of the consumers. More than ever they need to be served in their own specific way."

