

INSPIRED AND ACTIONABLE IDEAS

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Think Social, Act Social

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Our Work, Services, and Leadership Team

Think Social, Act Social

We are in the middle of the Social Media “hype.” A growing number of companies regard themselves as driven by the topic and keep on looking for adequate answers on how to adapt to this development: There is no other topic that has provoked as many requests for consulting over the last years as Social Media currently does. Some companies, in contrast, still appear very cautious and doubt that the hype will last—it is nothing more than an (exaggerated) positive impulse pushed forward by service providers.

If we move the focus away from the hype/market agitation and simply concentrate on Social Media facts, we will be able to detect some remarkable developments in the very core. At the same time, it will become evident that the handling of the topic, both from the service providers’ and companies’ positions, has to be questioned.

Fact: Social Media is hands-on—not limited to customers.

But: Given that both customers and employees are already using it, the issue is whether it is at all a company’s choice to deal with Social Media? Is it still possible to simply ignore or postpone addressing this topic?

Fact: There are already best practices for Social Media.

But: Is it really wise to limit the focus to already well-known brands and to their Social Media means that primarily serve specific communication purposes? How will this be any help to the majority of companies that are already experiencing difficulties in other channels and setting different priorities with regard to their marketing strategies?

Fact: Social Media can be used for a variety of purposes other than “just” communication.

But: Why are most of the main drivers of the topic still communication service providers/departments? What about other company divisions such as HR (just think of the employees using Social Media) or the support and service division (that always has to interact with customers)? Or even the legal department that is also accountable for positive employee activity via Social Media?

Fact: In the near future, Social Media will completely alter the entire interaction between companies and their stakeholders.

But: Why is the Social Media discussion mainly centred on platforms or “what measures to take now” (e.g., “What can we do on Facebook? How can we profitably use Twitter?”)? Successful companies normally choose a strategic approach to such issues—why do they only scratch the surface when it comes to Social Media?

Fact: Social Media offers a lot of potential for companies in the medium term—not only through a more effective and efficient configuration of stakeholder relationships.

But: Why do investments in the Social Media landscape still cling to a level that will not allow exhausting its full potential? And if companies are eager to remain on this initially low level of engagement, why don’t they try to systematically gain new experiences instead of following the “Trial and Error” track?

This confrontation of facts on the one hand and (partly disputable) behaviour of market participants on the other hand makes it clear that the entire discussion is centred on “how” to deal with Social Media rather than “whether” to deal with it at all. A systematic and strategic handling of the topic is essential to fully embrace its significance and potential as well as to benefit from the chances resulting for companies. Only this way, a compromise can be found between the extremes of either acting too high-spirited or remaining in a stand-by position.

From our point of view the following implications for companies can be derived:

1. **Every company must deal with Social Media and specify a clear attitude towards it**—no matter if eventually “only” existent Social Media activities are continued, alternative approaches are tested systematically, or a fundamental transformation of the company is initiated.
2. **The debate about Social Media must take place in a context specific to the situation and the company**—in order to select and implement the best possible platforms and measures based on the predefined attitude towards Social Media.
3. **Social Media must be dealt with across different departments/divisions**—even if this might lead to a consciously limited usage of the full potential available in the very beginning.
4. **Social Media requires a strategic approach**—in order to precociously put things on the right track and to use resources efficiently and effectively with regard to the almost indefinite range of platforms and possibilities.
5. **Substantial strategic investments in Social Media are necessary to realise the underlying potential.** The adequate determination of the extent of the company-specific potential in each case as well as the investment requirements and grading is only possible if the above listed points are taken into account.

Companies should therefore liberate themselves from the current “hype” and primarily do their “homework” on Social Media that is composed of the points above. In this context the service providers certainly do not have to worry about their share: As soon as a company-internal course is set, new broad and sustainable business opportunities will result. However, the current partly exaggerated hysteria is counterproductive, especially when companies are forced to Social Media action-taking.

Actually, all parties involved could be a bit more relaxed when dealing with the topic of Social Media—as long as steps are taken in the right order: “Think social, (then) act social.” ☺

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The Importance of Creative Thinking

I grew up as a consultant in the school of “fact-based problem solving” where opinions were irrelevant. What mattered was building a strong fact base and approaching the issue with a systematic process. In the past, surprisingly few consultancies and even fewer agencies were able to provide this service.

No longer. Today, coming up with data, analyzing it and transforming it into fact-based recommendations is easy to achieve. Any big company can do it in a very powerful way. The problem is that their competitors can do it too, so developing marketing, branding and innovation decisions based strictly on facts is no longer enough.

What truly differentiates a brand is taking those facts, completing them with non-traditional sources of inspiration and applying a process to spark creativity and result in powerful ideas. And this is truly hard to do.

The main issue is that most companies find it hard (if not impossible) to think in a creative way. They look and look at data and do not know what to do with it. Or they come up with a powerful analysis that provides great strategic business direction, but does not translate into powerful brands or breakthrough products.

The issue is finding ways to fire the inspiration that fuels creative thinking and innovation as outlined by Andy Stefanovich, Prophet's chief curator and provocateur, in *Look at More*.


Conversely, however, there are some very tactical behaviours that can kill creative thinking. Here's my take on some of them:

- Being driven solely by financial results. Excessive focus on market share, revenues or profits kills the soul of the business and prevents employees from being inspired. Employees are human beings, and if those in your company are driven purely by money, then you probably have the wrong ones.
- Businesses need to define and communicate to their employees a higher-order objective, and this objective needs to be inspirational. It can be articulated around the social impact of the product, the development of new intellectual property, the challenge of building something new, the recognition from clients, or the desire to crush the competition. The trick is to find the inspirational objective that fits best with the organisation's situation and ambitions.

Working from home. Modern business life aims at providing work-life balance by encouraging remote working. But the truth is that excessive remote work presents a barrier to team problem-solving, which is key to creativity. Also, working remotely inevitably results in working alone, hindering the sharing experiences (both professional and personal) that can spark the creative process. Stop working from home and start sharing with and learning from your colleagues.

Political correctness. There is always some “corporate policy” that makes no sense. Take employees of a big insurance company who mainly interact with each other who must wear suits and ties to work. Such “politically correct” behaviour is reinforced as “the corporate culture” and dictates how to dress, how to behave, and what to say. It's another enemy of creativity, as it reduces people's desire to take risks. Let your employees be free, let them wear anything they want when they are not meeting a client, let them go out for lunch, let them speak freely, take them out and don't censor their behaviour. Let them do anything that inspires them.

Routine. If you have done the same job for a long period of time, staying inspired requires considerable self-discipline and intellectual curiosity. So break your routine by doing small things. Change your agenda. Meet with employees from departments with whom you have never worked. Go out to conferences. Meet with people who are doing your job in other industries. Businesses need to reinforce this behaviour, and avoid the pitfall of thinking such activities are a waste of time.

There are many ways to kill creativity. The challenge is to go ahead and discover those “creativity destroyers” in your company—and find ways to either eliminate them or reduce their level of influence. 

How to Make Your Competition Irrelevant

David Aaker is the Vice-Chairman of Prophet, the author of *Brand Relevance: Making Competitors Irrelevant* and a regular blogger on branding at DavidAaker.com. Here he explains how to use branding as a weapon against your competition.

Q: Is the right goal to make one's brand relevant or to make one's competitor's brand irrelevant?

A: Both. The goal should be to drive market dynamics by making your brand relevant and competitors irrelevant. Engage in innovation that is substantial enough, or transformational enough, to create a new category or subcategory defined by one or more offering enhancements that some customers will consider "must-haves." These "must-haves" could involve self-expressive, social or emotional benefits as well as functional benefits.

The task then is to attract customers to the new category or subcategory and create barriers to competitors. Think of Apple's iPod, Chrysler's minivan, Mr. Clean Magic Eraser, Westin's Heavenly Bed and others that changed what people bought with "must-haves" and created years and sometimes decades with no real competitor.

In nearly all categories from beverages to cars to computers to financial services, the only way that a firm can gain a meaningful sales change is through this type of innovation. Expenditures on marketing and product refinements to win the "my brand is better than your brand" battle rarely changes the marketplace because of the momentum of habitual behaviour.

Q: What causes brands to lose relevancy?

A: There are three risks. First, a brand can remain strong but customers start buying another category or subcategory. It does not matter how much a customer loves your minivan brand or how strong it is, if they are now buying hybrid sedans. The challenge is to make the brand relevant to the emerging new subcategory or defeat the subcategory—convince people that the minivan is a better choice than a hybrid sedan.

Second, a brand can lose energy and visibility to the point that it is not considered and, thus, not relevant. The task is to either energise the business like Apple and Nintendo have done or to find something with energy like the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer and attach it to the brand.

Third, a brand can create a negative, a reason not to buy the brand. It could be based on a perceived lack of social conscious or a quality problem that undercuts credibility. Avoiding a negative is not always an exciting initiative, but it can have strategic implications.

Q: What should a company do if its brand is being attacked?

A: If a brand is attacked with an innovation that has a "must-have" characteristic, there are several responses. The brand can gain parity (become close enough so that the reason to exclude is removed) like McDonalds did with McCafe when faced with the loss of customers to Starbucks at critical breakfast and snack times. The brand can leapfrog as Cisco does by buying firms and adding the Cisco synergy. Or the brand can fight the new category

as the hamburger chain In & Out did by simply excelling at providing indulgent products in the face of a healthy-eating trend.

Q: Is it possible to learn how to make a brand relevant by asking customers?

A: One challenge to the development of new categories or subcategories is to find and evaluate the right idea in the first place. Asking the customer is one approach but often will not result in insights. As Henry Ford observed, if you ask a customer how transportation can be improved, they would ask for a faster horse.

It can be more productive to be a customer (Zappos.com was inspired by shoe selection being so limited), live with customers (Marriott observed business travelers in hotel lobbies), partner with customers (P&G linked with Walmart to improve logistics) or to look to non-customers (why are people using motorised bikes instead of cars?).

Q: How would you fix the Microsoft brand?

A: Microsoft is a polarised brand. For some segments and markets like Japan, it is known as an indispensable aide that empowers. However, its negatives tend to be high because others believe that it exerts excessive power and is arrogant. Actually, the Bill Gates Foundation, in my view, has softened that attitude just as the sustainability programme of Walmart has made it harder to hate Walmart. I would be aware of the negatives and the perceived arrogance problem and try to develop responsive relationship programmes.

Microsoft also has an innovation problem in that the huge Office and Windows businesses swamp any innovation. An embryonic offering just looks insignificant. So I would attempt to find ways to encourage and nurture substantial and transformational innovation that will create and own new categories and subcategories.

Q: How would you attack Apple?

A: Apple has a remarkable record of creating new categories, with at least five in the last decade. They have built up barriers in the form of a system of apps, the Apple stores, great timing, cool design, incredible marketing, Jobs and the Apple brand. It is a tough assignment. But their huge business footprint leaves openings.

I would look for niches. Approach the market from below. Are there users that do not need all the Apple features and would prefer a simpler, less costly version? Position with respect to a feature or an application. Are there features that could be added or refined that could become a "must-have" for a segment? Start there and build. Exploit channels. Are there strong retail channels that have been left behind by the Apple store? Can we partner with them in product design and marketing to take on Apple together? ☺

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Rock On

In 1975, a man named Gary Dahl became a millionaire in just six short months when he implemented an idea that many would consider absolutely ridiculous: Dahl developed the “Pet Rock.”

The rocks were packaged in small cardboard boxes, complete with ventilation holes and straw bedding, and even an instruction manual on how to care for “your new pet.” The rocks were a sensation, sweeping the country and leaving happy pet owners in their wake.

Sometimes there’s something to the seemingly “worst” ideas. It’s all about implementation. Even the silliest concepts can flourish under the right conditions. Tweak. Edit. Correct. Redo. There is a way to take bad ideas and mold them into compelling solutions.

Now you try.

1. State a key issue that you’re working on.
Example: Our company needs new and innovative approaches to new product introduction.
2. Now think of the worst idea to meet your objective.
Example: Do product launches at amusement parks.
3. Now identify the positive aspects of your bad idea and try to reinvent it as a good one.
Example: Take potential buyers to entertaining venues subject to the client’s personality, from a baseball game to a grand opening at a zoo. A memorable experience will ensure a fresh take on the product and increase the buyer’s engagement.



Understanding and Delivering Customer Experiences That Count

“Customers don’t always know what they want. The decline in coffee drinking was due to the fact that most of the coffee people bought was stale and they weren’t enjoying it. Once they tasted ours and experienced what we call ‘the third place’—a gathering place between home and work where they were treated with respect—they found we were filling a need they didn’t know they had.”
— Howard Schultz, CEO, Starbucks

“Customer experience” is one of those amorphous terms that is increasingly in the public consciousness nowadays.

It’s amorphous because it tends to be under-defined, its meaning shifts according to your perspective. Often, it’s viewed with merely an operational or product lens rather than an understanding of the nuances of the experience as the sum total of customer interactions and the emotions they evoke.

Its increasingly front-and-centre role has been largely a result of the explosion in channels with the digital revolution, which has created many more opportunities to influence, engage, and actually mold and shape what the experience looks and feels like.

For all that, the ability to create and manage the customer experience is something more businesses would like to get right. For every Starbucks, Virgin Atlantic, Zappos, Starwood, or Apple—a handful among the many that do get the nuances and make the most of them—hundreds more only wish they could come close to the bar that’s been set.

It is an attainable goal. All it takes is the mindset combined with consistent and thoughtful deployment of various tools that allow the experiences being provided to be monitored and optimised.

Understanding Its Scope and Importance

Prophet views customer experience through a very wide-angle lens. It’s all about making an emotional connection with people—making them “stickier” to you—as a powerful means of shaping behaviours, advocacy, and tightening their relationship with your brand.

It’s not just about interactions between customers and the people who power your brand, like sales staff or customer service representatives. It’s about interactions between the environment and the customer; between communications materials and customers. And with the product itself—how the car feels when it drives, what it sounds like when it starts up or accelerates, or what it smells like right off the showroom floor.

It all combines to create a feeling in the customer that is integral to how they build their impressions, loyalty, and emotional connection to the brand.

The quality of the customer experience has the potential to hugely impact the business, as several studies in recent years have

shown.

One surveyed over 800 executives in companies around the globe that had increased their investment in customer experience management in the prior three years. All reported higher customer referral rates and customer satisfaction. Another surveyed 450 large organisations in Europe on their practices and outcomes. It found that improved performance in the four key business areas of market share, retention, profitability, and customer satisfaction was directly related to their success at managing the customer experience.

Walk In the Customer’s Shoes

Tony Hsieh of Zappos realised that to get people to buy his shoes, he and everyone who worked for him would have to always walk in their shoes first. He understood that a key customer touchpoint for any retailer was at the point of sale and point of return. Any breakdown either way would compromise the customer experience and had the potential to damage the relationship. Zappos’ resulting practice of free shipping, both ways, and a 365-day return policy has created an unheard of 75 percent rate of repeat business and explosive growth.

Having a visionary leader like Hsieh who established the importance of customer-centricity as a key facet of the organisation’s culture is a hallmark of businesses that have evolved the customer experience to almost an art form.

Walking in the customer’s shoes is a good starting point, and having a visionary leader like Hsieh helps. But it’s also important to ensure that mindset is constantly reinforced so it becomes a seamless aspect of the culture.

At the award-winning resort, The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas, for example, the dedication to creating memorable customer experiences goes way beyond the casino floor. It’s evidenced everywhere, from the unexpected wall murals in the parking garage by renowned graffiti artists like Shepard Fairey to Droog, a functional art gallery where mainly hands-on is okay. But employees are coached in keeping it real and fresh. A handbook reminds them of ways to think to ensure they’re living this brand promise every day: Have I put myself in my customers’ place? Have I looked outside my world for inspiration, pushed myself out of my comfort zone, taken a risk, and considered the impractical? Have I considered the organisation as a whole?

Research Provides Insights For Innovation

No matter who’s setting the direction or how extensively it becomes absorbed in the business’ culture, orienting around the customer experience is extremely challenging. Even in a simpler time of fewer and more direct customer touchpoints, they have never had equal influence and so should not be treated equally. By prioritising, then leveraging, individual or groups of touchpoints that matter most to target audiences, businesses will not only do

a better job of creating an experience that matters, but gain the best returns on investment.

Getting there requires deploying the right tools that help create a deeper understanding of what resonates with customers in creating an experience that either works or doesn't.

Different forms of research, undertaken consistently, are very important in their ability to render insights that spur the most innovative customer experiences. A.G. Lafley of Procter & Gamble, for example, famously demonstrated the power of ethnographic research by personally going into consumers' homes to observe how they went about their household cleaning chores. The ubiquitous Swiffer, which removed the mess from mopping, was one of the outcomes.

Basic tools of customer satisfaction tracking are also important to grow a deep understanding of people's behaviours and impressions as a means of improving the customer experience. The upshot can be insights into revealing moments of truth that occur at the important customer touchpoints in the product or service environment.

Research by the Starwood hotel group has told them that a key moment of truth occurs within the first ten minutes of arrival, defining the entire experience. Thus, the lobby environment has become a key touchpoint throughout its properties. Most recently, the latest evolution of this focus was introduced—Le Meridien Hub—at its Barcelona hotel. The multi-faceted concept includes an entryway with high-impact arrival art and an "interaction zone" with coffeehouse-style seating and attitude, with a collection of books on local cultural highlights and cultural events planned.

Customer Experience—Deconstructed

As the Zappos, The Cosmopolitan, and Starwood experiences exemplify, there is no such thing as a singular customer experience. It's really comprised of many interactions, moments of truth, and touchpoints. And the experience is one that is likely to change over time. That makes the task of evaluating all the elements that feed into it a daunting task.

It has led Prophet to develop techniques to better understand the customer experience, apply elements of what the brand strategy should be at different points of interaction, and innovate around them in ways that will engage customers more meaningfully and profitably. We call it Experience Attribute Mapping (EXAMsm), a means to deconstruct, evaluate, and change the very complex customer journey in a manner that is a lot more manageable.

There are various ways to go about this. Typically, it involves the people in the organisation who are actually involved in delivering the experience as they know where the bottlenecks are. Applying EXAMsm along the path to purchase, for example, we would work together in identifying the key touchpoints of the customer's

experience, highlighting their most important elements, and defining their specific objectives (brand or business). Then we find ways to measure how well the experience is being delivered. Click-throughs on a website, for example, would show how well people are engaged to go to the next level of the transaction.

This is the approach we took to help Emart, South Korea's largest retailer, reinvent the customer experience in three distinct store formats. One, for electronics, had been set up almost like a manufacturer's showroom or a mom-and-pop outlet. Observation showed it created a less-than-optimal experience where customers could basically see but not touch or interact with products at hand. To better deliver, the stores were redesigned to deliver a more tactile experience—fixtures that were more welcoming, products out for more hands-on experimentation, and knowledgeable employees focused on one-on-one information sharing.

The Experience Is the Thing

Creating and delivering a customer experience that wins hearts and minds can be a huge and profitable differentiator. But at a time when touchpoints are proliferating and resources are limited, identifying those that matter most and can best be leveraged for maximum impact is the challenge. Understanding the nuances takes a blend of insights and creativity and focus. And those that get it and act accordingly will be the biggest winners. ☺

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Our Work

We help our clients win
by delivering inspired and
actionable ideas.

Prophet is a strategic brand and marketing consultancy with offices in Berlin, Chicago, London, Madrid, New York, Richmond, San Francisco, and Zürich.

We are increasingly considered a preferred partner to senior management that demands its investments work harder—and smarter. What counts: Our collaborative approach. Our powerful blend of strategy, creativity, and analytics. Our ability to balance short-term business needs against longer-term growth goals. Our thought leadership in brand, marketing, and beyond. It's led to successful outcomes for such preeminent clients as BMW, Cartier, Cisco, Diageo, Emaar, Friesland Campina, GE, Johnson & Johnson, Kellogg's, McDonald's, Postbank, and Zurich Financial.

Our Services

Prophet offers
a wide array of
brand, marketing,
design, and
innovation
services.

We collaborate with our clients to devise strategies and programmes that create positive, material impact for their businesses—from developing new platforms for sustainable growth, to enhanced global brand management capabilities, to more effective allocation of investments, to more compelling branded experiences.

To learn more, read on, visit prophet.com, or contact any of our offices.

BRAND

Differentiation is no longer enough. That's why the goal of any brand strategy should be to establish market leadership. We can help you define what your brand should stand for over time—and determine what it's going to take to get there. Our experts can work with you to drive brand relevance among stakeholders in complex ecosystems, gauge how your brand impacts customer behaviour in a given category, manage and monitor its equity over time, identify opportunities to extend it into new markets and segments, establish the ideal roles and relationships among brands in a portfolio, and more.

MARKETING

Given today's business pressures, no one can wait years for expensive campaigns to pay off or to waste resources on here-today-forgotten-tomorrow tactical programmes. Smart marketing efficiently and effectively generates immediate returns and positions you to reap long-term rewards. Prophet elevates marketing to a sustainable advantage. We help marketing leaders create actionable strategies that foster business growth and inspired plans that drive results. We ensure that the momentum is sustained by providing tools for greater accountability as well as enhancing competencies of the marketing organisation.

INNOVATION

New ideas are the lifeblood of every successful business. We help you fuel their healthy development by leading you to new and unexpected sources of inspiration. The aim is to disrupt assumptions. Enrich perspectives. Explode contexts. And ultimately, discover hidden opportunities to gain competitive advantage and business growth. We get there by engaging your employees in a new view of innovation, one grounded in courage, passion, sense-making, and collaboration. The results will not only delight customers, but show you how creativity can become a critical business discipline, integral to your culture and foundational to your success.

DESIGN

At its best, design can inspire the observer or user to think and feel differently about a product, service, or experience. And when designers are faced with the task of creating such moments, they also need to be inspired in ways that lead them to imagine a new way, a new thing, or a new approach to putting the parts together. The Prophet design team makes inspiration an essential element in how we work with each other and with our clients. We are also inspired by strategic approaches to solving our clients' business problems. We have made it our life's work to provide the bridge from solid strategic rationale to the communications and experiences that drive impression, emotion, and behaviour.

INSIGHTS & ANALYTICS

Prophet helps you ground your most important initiatives in robust empirical evidence built on breakthrough customer insights and analytics. We combine our expertise in understanding your business issues with deep technical capabilities in market research and analytics to create tailored approaches, deliverables, and insights you can act upon. After your marketing strategy is implemented, our analytics team can help you track performance on key metrics to ensure you are optimising your return on marketing investment.

Our Leadership Team



DAVID AAKER, Vice Chairman | David is one of the world's most respected thought leaders on the subject of brand and consults exclusively for Prophet's clients. David is creator of the Aaker Model™ and has published more than 100 articles and 15 books.

MICHAEL DUNN, Chairman and CEO | Michael oversees development of the firm's people, practices, and thought leadership and also serves as a strategic advisor on client engagements. He is co-author of *Building the Brand-Driven Business* and author of *The Marketing Accountability Imperative*.

RUNE GUSTAFSON, President of EMEA Operations | Rune is based in Prophet's London office. Leveraging his extensive experience of managing international brands, he focuses on bringing clarity into a strategic framework and the processes needed to affect change throughout an organisation. His work has covered the spectrum of brand and marketing specialties and spanned over 30 countries.



JAMES WALKER, Senior Partner | James leads Prophet's analytics practice and brings over 20 years of experience in brand research and analytics, brand equity modeling, marketing mix modeling, segmentation, econometrics, and sales and marketing process improvement, among others. He splits his time between our London and New York offices. His background includes leadership roles at big ad and media agencies, as well as consultancies and entrepreneurial ventures. He's led consulting projects in more than 40 countries and for a diverse range of clients, including Johnson & Johnson, Coca Cola, Honda, Barclays, AT&T, Fosters, Intel, and Dell.

PHILIP OTLEY, Senior Partner | Philip is based in London and Zürich and brings nearly 20 years of experience in strategic consulting in addition to industry experience with IBM and Telstra in Australia. He has worked with clients across a broad array of industries, with extensive experience in media, high tech, and telecommunications sectors. Philip's specialty lies in helping clients identify growth opportunities, transform their operating model, and drive revenue and profit uplift.



JOSEPH GELMAN, Partner | Joseph heads Prophet's Madrid office, and has worked with leading clients in Spain, UAE, Kenya, Switzerland, and Denmark. Joseph has worked with iconic FMCG brands and has conducted projects in industrial products, telecommunications, education, hospitality, and financial services.

JAY MILLIKEN, Partner | Jay is based in Prophet's London office. He has assisted many global companies with the development and execution of customer-driven growth strategies with specific emphasis on leveraging customer relationships, strategic brand assets, and a deep understanding of customer behaviour.

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