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A View From the Top

Career Insight From Prophet Senior Partner Scott Davis

by William Arruda, March 14, 2006

This article is part of a series of interviews with top marketing executives who offer you insights to help further your career: You will learn what makes these executives successful and what they value most in those who work for them.

The following is based on a transcript of a conversation between William Arruda, MarketingProfs Senior Contributor, and Scott Davis, Senior Partner at branding consultancy Prophet. Davis is also the author of two widely acclaimed books on branding, *Brand Asset Management* and —with Michael Dunn, Prophet President and CEO— *Building the Brand-Driven Business*. This transcript has been edited for clarity and readability. The interview is also available in audio for our Annual Premium members.*

William Arruda: Tell us about the journey you took over 15 years to become a Senior Partner at Prophet.

Scott Davis: I always knew I was going to be in marketing. I grew up in a family with origins in marketing and sales, and I knew that was my destiny. I also knew that to be credible in any field, I would have to learn from the best. So that's why

working at Procter & Gamble early in my career provided the key foundation for learning basic marketing skills. Then I went to Kellogg in 1989 to get my MBA in marketing. Earning my degree, coupled with my previous experience, was fundamental to my success.

I could have gone back into industry, but I went down the consulting path because it was important to me to get as diverse an array of experiences as possible—looking at a number of different problems across different categories and industries, with different leaders would continue to add to my arsenal.

I had assumed around year 10 that I would make a choice: go back into industry with all that good knowledge or stay on the consulting track. And around 1994, I started to discover the topic of brand. It was really under-leveraged in the field—it wasn't talked about a lot and was misunderstood. So it was back in 1994 that I started on the journey through a very simple dialogue with 10 executives and the state of brand within their company.

I parlayed that into a study which led into a series of articles, and then from there led

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into keynoting several conferences. That started to open up the door to various projects around the topic of brand in the mid to late '90s. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy—understanding the topic and writing and speaking about it. I was fortunate to meet many brand leaders and had the opportunity to work on multiple high-profile brand cases that provided the fodder for my first book, *Brand Asset Management*. The book explores what brand really means within an organization, and how it's truly an asset—next to your people, it's the most important asset that you have.

Next, I co-authored another book, called *Building the Brand-Driven Business*. It discusses how every single employee needs to understand the brand promise as well as understand their role in bringing it to life if it is to have any external credibility.

So it started early on with a focus knowing I wanted to be in marketing, but also knowing I wanted to have a niche that I could call my own—one that was interesting to me, was untapped, and that eventually I could build credibility in.

William Arruda: How can marketers decide how best to grow their career?

Scott Davis: For me, it was the idea of having diversity across categories, industries, and executives. Those who work at Procter & Gamble for a number

of years actually get that, because there's a lot of movement within the organization and a lot of exposure to some of the best marketing lines in the world. But I knew that for where I wanted to go, consumer packaged goods was going to be a little too limiting for me. I needed to get exposure to other industries such as services, B2B, and industrial sectors.

Consultants who can tap into line experience are very credible in front of clients, because they can tap into their own experience. For a client to hear that you sat in their chair at one point and you wore their shoes at one point and had a P&L at one point gives you a lot of credibility and a lot of room to have broader, more strategic discussions.

The question you have to ask is, "Do you want to learn about other industries through consulting exclusively, or do you want to have that combo of real practical experience first?" It's an individual choice; the climb to credibility is a little steeper if you are a lifelong consultant.

William Arruda: What makes you give a resume more than a 10-second look?

Scott Davis: At Prophet we are looking for a combination of a few things. First, it's again this idea of operating experience and understanding the types of roles that somebody has played in other companies before—and, more importantly, the

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responsibilities and the decisions that they were in charge of making at the end of the day. I have to understand what they were accountable for.

Next, do they have a combination of line experience and consulting experience? We don't always have the luxury of providing a six-month training program prior to a consultant's first project. Oftentimes, new candidates—especially for smaller boutique firms like ours—have to be ready to jump on a project almost on day one. So the other area we are looking for is client/project readiness and how well we think this person will show up on day one of an assignment.

William Arruda: What can a candidate do during an interview to impress you?

Scott Davis: First of all, I look for a personal connection, or six degrees of separation. Candidates should definitely use their contacts, because when somebody in your organization has worked closely with a candidate, that always helps.

Second, I want to know how much candidates have studied our firm. I can't tell you the number of prospects who have come in and had not done their homework. I am not asking them to read all of David Aaker's books and my books or even our entire Web site, but they should be familiar enough to ask intelligent

questions and engage in a dialogue.

Finally, candidates should try to understand a little bit about where the interviewer is coming from. Use the recruiter to understand this person, his/her background, and what kinds of projects he/she manages—so you can have a more personalized, customized discussion with each individual you are interviewing with. Show some interest, show sympathy, and show a little passion.

And then just make sure you have your stories down—the stories of how you made a difference in your previous job. I think a lot of candidates come with a lot of sound bites and a lot of things that they want to say, but they are not very organized in the way they present. Two to three good stories well told stick, as opposed to 15 different sound bites.

William Arruda: How can marketers use technology to be leaders and innovators?

Scott Davis: The convergence of marketing and technology is not a fad. Marketers must understand the power of technology and information and own all of the information that has to do with the customer. Marketing must leverage technology to own the customer dialogue and the customer experience. It's really a massive change from how marketing was defined 10–20 years ago.

I think in the old days it was a lot about

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marcom, sales support, and traditional advertising vehicles. Today it's much more about how do I understand, own, and anticipate future needs of the customer, and how do I bring that to life for every functional area or business unit within my organization, using information as my weapon. Marketers, and CMOs in particular, who have understood the need to bridge the gap between marketing and IT are the ones who are going to succeed in the long run. I have seen a lot of CMOs and senior VPs of marketing who are not yet equipped to deal with this new reality.

William Arruda: Is there anything specifically happening in branding and technology?

Scott Davis: Understanding the arsenal of opportunities and the ability to touch your customer in the way that they want to experience you is just very different, and I think you just need to appreciate that although before it was 90/10 traditional/untraditional—it's probably getting closer to 70/30 or 60/40.

William Arruda: Do you have any advice for those who are looking to build a career in branding?

Scott Davis: I think truly understanding what brand building is, in the broadest sense, and having an appreciation that brand building is not a marketing function. Truly, it is a company-wide effort or lifeline

to your customers, and every interaction that you have with your customers either makes or breaks whatever that promise is that you are trying to communicate.

So, first of all, understand at the broadest level what branding is and try to keep that broad perspective. Second, understand what the winners are doing out there. Track the Starbucks, FedExes, and Home Depots of the world ... and really understand what the leading edge companies are doing to build their brands and how they are trying to do it.

Third—and obviously this is the big one—decide what path is going to get you the richest experience. One of the models we use in consulting and brand building is the idea that you have a current image of what you and your brand stand for; five years from now, you might have an aspiration for a different type of brand identity and a different type of brand essence. I think it's imperative that folks take a look at where they are today, clearly understand where they want to be in five years, and then figure out how they want to bridge the gap.

I know there are a lot of different paths to go down if you are serious about brands. Obviously, trying to work or be associated with some top brands either through consulting or line-function is going to be really critical. But understand that is only a

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stepping stone. Once you get clear on your objectives, the path becomes a lot clearer and the kind of the milestones that you need to check off become a lot clearer, too.

William Arruda: Do you have any stories that stand out from your interviewing over the years?

Scott Davis: I have one gentleman who works with me now who interviewed with me three different times over the course of five years across two companies. Everytime I talked to him, I said, "You need these three things." And he came back for round number two, and I said, "You still need this one thing." And he went back out and he got four years of experience. He came back to me and he said, "I have everything you asked for, are we ready to do business?" I mean he literally went and he took a job at Coke, he took a job at Unilever, he took a job in consulting and he had a goal in mind of working at Prophet eventually. He persevered and kept pushing, and we call him a "rock star" within our organization right now.

William Arruda: What one piece of advice could you offer that might help recent grads accelerate their career?

Scott Davis: The folks that we've hired recently are out of undergrad and are those who actually had a real fire in their belly. It seems odd to say that for a 21- or 22-year-old, but a lot of these candidates are very

focused and determined. When you are looking at a job, make sure you know you are going to be able to put everything that you have into that job for as long as you plan on staying.

Try not to get too focused on your next career move or going back to graduate school early, because that becomes fairly transparent. Go heads down and deliver the goods in your first few years in the industry. That gives you the license to make decisions that will help direct your career—whether it is pursuing an MBA, taking another job, or figuring out a new position within your current company. Without that first couple of years under your belt where you really hit it out of the park, you are a little bit trapped.

Based on a transcript that originally appeared on MarketingProfs, March 2006.