

# Marilyn Stewart

## Strong passions & beliefs

What sets her apart is not just a passion for direct marketing. She has a passion for perfection, learning and, as an author herself, a passion for reading business books. She's also a person with a presence that fills a room.

The first time I met Marilyn Stewart was in the mid '80s when I was working as an art director at Ogilvy & Mather and she ran Ogilvy Direct, the direct marketing arm of the agency.

I remember clearly how one day she came dashing into the agency. She was all excited about winning something but I couldn't hear exactly what it was. However her exhilaration piqued my curiosity and I came out of my room to see who this person was.

What struck me most the first time I saw her was that she was different. She was the kind of person whose presence filled the room. As I watched her speak that day, her love and passion for her craft of direct marketing was palpable and her enthusiasm was truly contagious.

After I left O&M, I got more and more involved with direct marketing and I would often hear about Marilyn, how she had picked up another big client here, or that she was head of another direct marketing committee at the Canadian Marketing Association (CMA) or the Direct Marketing Association of Toronto (DMAT), or how she had been honoured by the CMA.

Now, after so many years, I have once again had the pleasure of reconnecting with her and you know what? Marilyn still has the same passion and enthusiasm for the business and she can still fill a room with her sheer presence.

Was it only in my mind that I thought she was different? Well, I finally got my chance to find out now. But I will let you be the judge of that.

First, the majority of people I have interviewed have always mentioned the Internet as the most important aspect of DM in the future. Marilyn's answer was quite unusual.

"I believe the future of our business lies with the Strategist," she says. "That to me is the one talent that drives what permission-based data we collect about our customers is all about. It's about how best to use that information and what should drive the creative. This is vital.

"Sure, we have technology at our fingertips today. But it is the strategist who can best maximize that technology for the benefit of the customer."

As she talked about collecting data, she told me that her early days were made up of book clubs and record clubs—"the knowledge foundation of the business," she calls it.

"It's probably the best introduction anyone can get to direct marketing. I remember being employed by Canadian Book Club during a time when one of our goals was to convert the existing manual system to computers.

"It was painful and messy and in the end, it didn't happen. We didn't have the selection of hardware and software that we are spoiled with today.

"But one thing we did have was a great understanding about our customer. Granted the information was all on 5 x 9 cards in a filing cabinet, but we knew every book or trinket our customers had ever purchased from us. And although we weren't as sophisticated then in applying data mining techniques as we are today, we did manually track every purchase, allowing us to intelligently test the next product offering to those customers.

"We didn't need data analytics—we needed good solid marketing skills. I often think about this time as many companies struggle trying to get a better handle on their customer—we did it manually—and it worked," she recalls with a smile.

### Faithful supporter of direct marketing

And it is this solid marketing skill that really sets her apart as a proud direct marketer — as she calls herself. She is also quick to voice her resentment of those who demean this great profession.

"Many young professionals today don't even call themselves direct marketers. Perhaps they have been influenced by consultants and writers who coin the latest jargon: customer relationship management (CRM), loyalty marketing, ROI, data analytics, database marketing, ROE, ROR, so they adopt their titles to reflect these fancy new buzzwords.

"The fact that most of us have remained silent during this transition is also a disappointment

to me. My disappointment is that direct marketing is the foundation of our business and we're welcoming strangers whose only claim to fame is introducing fancy new names and not new ways of marketing.

"Have a passion about what I do and I believe every good direct marketer does too. It's time we sing the praises of direct marketing from the rooftops — otherwise we'll all go back to being mail order geeks. And that could be just as scary a thought as being a CRM expert who knows nothing about his customer," she observes.

Talking about customers, Marilyn is still very active in the business and runs her own consultancy. In fact, the day I met her, she had just returned from a business trip to St. Lucia and has worked with the same client for eight years.

"Direct marketing never stays the same—and I don't rest on my laurels. It evolves just as the customer evolves. I get up every morning with a new idea, that's what keeps me in this business and alive. If you are focused on the customer, your days will never be the same. The customer is in constant change. It's our job to stay ahead or we'll fall behind permanently."

### All in the family

But there is another business that she is involved with, a real all-in-the-family-affair with her two sisters. The business is called Everything Olive Inc. and is a Web-based business ([www.everythingolive.com](http://www.everythingolive.com)) that sells a lifestyle of entertaining and wellness through the introduction of olive oil and related products.

"All of course delivered right to your front door," she adds.

"Besides, it also gives me an opportunity to

*"Direct marketing never stays the same...It evolves just as the customer evolves." — Stewart*

recruit my best friends for their counsel and guidance. There's no better combination than a business that involves the entire family and extended family."

Her extended family includes the people she has worked with over the years. She is fiercely proud of the successes they have enjoyed together.

"It's great to look around the industry today and see presidents, vice-presidents and directors who were once associate account executives at Ogilvy and today are major contributors to the industry. It's exhilarating to see what they've done with their careers — the passion they've shown for the industry and the lessons they are teaching their staff.

"But most of the time, I look around the industry and wonder where the next big direct stars are. Every industry needs stars, that's one of the ways we get our voices heard. Where's the next generation of noisemakers?"

The answer really does lie very close to two things she loves so much — direct marketing and education.

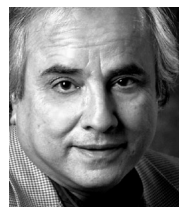
After she sold her business to Ogilvy & Mather, surprisingly, not because it was the highest bidder, but because she knew it would look after the direct marketing part of the business and make it grow. Both direct marketing and the department she had built were like children she had nurtured.

And she was right. Today OgilvyOne along with the interactive division is larger than the advertising side of the business.

She next started conducting seminars and workshops first for the CMA and then under her own banner of 'Direct Mail Unwrapped.'

"What a great gift to have a forum where I could tell stories about direct marketing so that people would learn the business first-hand. Oh yeah, I shared the formulas, the definitions and the do's and don'ts, but I know for a fact that what people cherished were the stories — stories that had direct marketing lessons tied to them.

"And I worked very hard at making every seminar better than the one before. Often friends would invite me out for dinner the night before.



# Direct & personal

with Billy Sharma

President and creative director of Designers Inc., Toronto.



*"For someone with my passion for perfection, writing those books was probably the most difficult initiative," — Stewart*



Marilyn Stewart resents those who demean direct marketing. She laments that many young professionals don't even call themselves direct marketers, preferring to take on titles with fancy buzzwords. She sees the industry welcoming strangers whose only claim to fame is introducing fancy new names and not new ways of marketing.

I thought, are they crazy? I couldn't possibly go out before a day-long seminar, I had to go over my notes, change a few things, bring articles that I had just read—and my biggest secret was that I was nervous (more like terrified)—what if my mind goes blank tomorrow?

"My associates thought it was a walk in the park because I'd done it so many times—but if you are like me, you drive yourself to bring something new to every seminar, even lose sleep the night before—wondering is it good enough?"

"Oh the list goes on and on. And yes that's certainly my personality."

But I think it's also because she genuinely cares about the next generation. She has written two books on direct marketing, although she openly admits it wasn't easy. Not because the subject matter was so hard but because of her own obsessive, compulsive behaviour.

"For someone with my passion for perfection, writing those books was probably the most difficult initiative I chose. Eventually the editor would say: Enough! You can't edit every sentence. Perfectionism has its drawbacks—some people think I'm a procrastinator, but it's just the drive to make it perfect—or make it better than what it was.

"I also personally have a thirst for learning and I am surprised when someone else doesn't. For me, a craving to learn and a curiosity about the world are two characteristics that I hold in high regard."

### Not all work and no play

She has a wicked sense of humour and is equally quick to laugh at herself as she told me the following story back in the days when she ran Ogilvy Direct.

"In one of our new business strategy sessions, we challenged ourselves to come up with ways to get new business prospects excited about this little envelope we were holding in our hands. But you could hardly see it from the back of the room so we wondered how anyone could get excited about it.

"There were plenty of suggestions. But the one we thought we'd test out on our next prospect, was to have the envelope blown up, you know, over-sized, so it would make an impact, even to those in the back of the room.

"So we tried it in our next new business presentation. It went extremely well, the adrenalin was flowing, we were just about to say thank you and goodbye when there was one more question from the back of the room: 'How much postage is required for mailing that package?' I thought he was joking, but he wasn't. He wanted his package to stand out in the recipient's mailbox and he wanted his mailing that size. He thought it was a great idea.

"We won the business!"

### Avid reader of business books

"I read all the time, both online and offline, but I must confess it's always business books. I love ideas. I love the way other people express their ideas.

When she is not reading, or when her restless mind is not focused on this exciting industry, she puts as much energy and passion into renovating her historical house in the colder months and being an apprentice gardener in the warmer months.

The little nurseries in her area love her as a customer because she is constantly planting and transplanting.

"But all year round you can find me listening to music — live and loud," she adds.

### Early desire to dance

Marilyn didn't really choose direct marketing as a career. She really longed to become a dancer growing up.

"The best damn dancer in the chorus line," she declares.

"Because of my shyness, I've always pushed myself to be centre stage — otherwise I would have fallen into being a wallflower and that certainly would not have made me happy nor would I have felt that I had accomplished anything much in life."

The only people who knew this were her close friends who worked with her at Ogilvy Direct. On the last day at her farewell party, they put up a giant poster of Tina Turner and had glued a picture of her face on it.

She is glad that she somehow got into direct marketing although she felt that her family never quite grasped what it was that she did for a living.

"They've had faith in me, never built me up so that I couldn't meet their expectations, but never, never put me down."

A very touching moment occurred when her father passed away. She found hundreds of *Reader's Digest* sweepstake entries in his desk drawer and felt he was secretly supporting her career.

"I am someone who lives in and for the moment. I don't dwell on the past and I certainly don't freeze in my tracks while planning my future.

"Anyone who knows me well knows there are two pet phrases in my vocabulary: *that's interesting* and *I'm disappointed*. Usually *that's interesting* refers to—*that's an interesting way to look at things*—which probably means I'm listening, but I doubt if I agree with you. And then there's the big phrase of *I'm disappointed* and if it's followed by *in you*, that's about as bad as it gets for you and for me.

I certainly hope that after reading this article, Marilyn will still talk to me, I will then know if this article is *interesting* or *disappointing*. ■

Billy Sharma is president and creative director of Designers Inc., Toronto. He can be reached at 416.203.9787.