

“Every Person has gifts to share —
it’s just a matter of making the right connections.”

Written by [M.O.](#)



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For nearly 30 years, [Doug Austin](#) has been studying the “art of observation” and filtering out the human truths. Whether digging for key customer/consumer insights or preparing the next national retail promotion, it’s all about the ability to “hear and see” what others may not and asking the hard questions that get us to the possibilities. Whether through traditional advertising, brand and product innovation, or repositioning/refreshing a brand, it’s all been with the understanding that “we humans” are not complicated; we seek connection in a way we can relate to. Austin is the VP of business development and in charge of growth and innovation for The [Marlin Network](#).

MO: Tell us about The Marlin Network. How does the network itself support the agencies that are a part of the network?

Doug: We approach our role at the network level from a simple perspective. We spend our time working ON the business so our affiliate associates can work IN the business. What that means is we take care of handling all the details of running a business such as insurance, human resources, billing, collecting, payroll, IT, furniture and property, leases, legal, and even new business.

Beyond taking care of all the details it takes to run an agency business day to day, we have our eyes on the future and make sure we are helping to identify what our clients will want and need a year or two down the road. We also keep our fingers on the pulse of what makes the economy tick and how consumers are acting and reacting to cultural drivers and triggers. We believe it’s our job to be the prognosticators and visionaries for our agency affiliates so they are better informed about where to bulk up their service offerings and knowledge bases.

Lastly, business development is a key part of what we do. As a network of affiliate agencies and companies inside an ESOP organization, it’s our job to grow shareholder value. A big part of continuing to grow that value is expansion beyond our core competencies into relevant adjacencies

and complimentary services. We actively explore acquisitions, expansion, affiliations, and joint working relationships (including global), which will increase the network value for all our shareholders.

MO: What types of industries does The Marlin Network focus on?

Doug: Our core focus today is food and beverage in both B2B and B2C. This is what we've built the company on in the past 28 years, but it is certainly not the only area we consider ourselves valuable in. Inside the food and beverage category, it is in B2B foodservice that we are considered a dominant agency network; it's where we've built our reputation and are regarded as experts in the field. We engage in everything from corporate business strategy consulting to brand strategy and even product development for our global food manufacturers. Advertising is only part of what we do.

MO: What trends do you see specifically in the shopper marketing, ingredients, and agriculture industries that will be emerging in the next year or two?

Doug: When it comes to macro trends that will affect each of these different categories, I'd say there are a couple that drive the need to shift the way we approach communications and product development.

a. First up is the unmet consumer need for "better" food options. Better is subjective and in the eyes of the beholder (and always will be). However, we as growers, manufacturers, and retailers of food and beverage products must understand that consumers are holding us all accountable for their "lack of better" food options. Right, wrong, or indifferent, it just IS — which leads to an entirely separate conversation about the lack of personal accountability we as Americans are willing to accept. As part of this need for "better," we must be prepared to do things differently. That goes for how we grow, manufacture, and communicate, as well as what we grow, manufacture, and communicate. Consumers want to know we are taking action and responsibility to do the right things as it relates to creating these "better" options — and not just what makes money, increases stock values, or satisfies some CFO somewhere who does not care about them. The days of "profit at any cost" are over, and the consumers will not support that type of corporate mentality. Equally as concerning for existing and established corporations and companies should be the newcomers to their industry. These young, new, idealistic entrepreneurs have the passion and ability to start their companies on the right footing and beat the Goliaths at their own game. For a great example of this, just check out Sight Glass Coffee Bar and Roastery or The Plant Café, both located in San Francisco, Calif.

b. The second macro trend I see affecting these categories is the emerging shift in what we consider important in our daily grind as we move through the day. With the ability to tweet, post, block, decipher, tune in, tune out, etc., many consumers feel like they are experts and authors. Reality TV has indeed affected what reality should feel like, and some generations are pushing back on this while others are living in it. All this said, the impact on communications and how we accept and digest a message has forever changed. Marketing at its very core has shifted to a more conversational art rather than a deliberate strategy and tactic cocktail. I believe it's our job as marketers and advertisers to help shepherd our clients through this transition time. Conventional marketing wisdom does not play into this yet. Newcomers and successful brands/business are seeing proof in precisely why we must adopt this approach. Let

consumers willingly choose you, and they'll be your marketing voice. Force them to accept what you have to say, and they'll shut you out (and tell everyone they know you are disingenuous).

MO: How does the Marlin Network differentiate themselves from other networks and agencies?

Doug: The simple and easy answer is we are much smaller and employee-owned, so we answer to ourselves, and we all know each other — which keeps us all honest and accountable. The larger multinational holding companies in the advertising arena such as WPP, Omnicom, or Interpublic have different motivations than we do. Our goal is to create a safe and secure environment so our associates are free to share their gifts. We believe all people have gifts to share, and part of our job is to help pair the right folks to the right company inside Marlin Network and the right clients to the right agencies based on their needs and the gifts of the affiliates. Now I'm not saying the big holding companies don't attempt to do the same thing, it just seems it would be much harder when you have 80,000 associates to know and understand each person's true gifts.

MO: At the core of The Marlin Network approach is consumption-based marketing. Talk to us a little bit about what that means and why it's at the very center of your organization.

Doug: At the end of the day, growers, manufactures, restaurants, and retailers need to move rail cars, boxes, or plates to make the cash register ring. Branding and marketing are important, and no one knows that more than us. The difference is we've witnessed many agencies through our careers that did not understand the real reason we do what we do. Everything we do must, in some way, tether back to moving cases, velocity, volume, etc. Without that, it's all academic and theory — nice for cocktail party talk, but not very practical. I suppose part of our belief in consumption-based marketing has to do with our Midwest roots and approach to the way we do business ourselves. Simply stated, we talk to people like human beings. We break things down to the real and relevant core — the truth if you will — and build back up from there. Smoke and mirror marketing does not sit well with us, and we refuse to do it. We believe there are simple human truths everyone subscribes to and, given the opportunity, consumers and customers receiving the message we put out for our clients will see that and act accordingly. A saying I like to use around this topic is, "Find and communicate the truth, and the volume will come."

MO: Included in the Marlin Network are Deep, Marlin, The Alchemedia Project, Food IQ, Star Awards, and Marlin Network Consulting Group. What differentiates each?

Doug: First and foremost, each of our affiliates has their own personality and a slightly different approach to the business. This is exactly what we talked about earlier regarding every person has gifts to share — it's just a matter of making the right connections. Think of the three advertising agencies ([deep](#), [Marlin](#) and [The Alchemedia Project](#)) as brothers and sisters of the same parents ([Marlin Network](#)). Their core is the same for each. We call it our WHY, meaning *why* we get up every day and come to work, which is "to honor the worth of people." Very simple and in fact easy to do when you trust and respect each other and the gifts they have to share. The reality is there are more than 6,600 marketing/advertising type agencies in the U.S. today, and many do the exact same things: write creative briefs, create concepts, develop campaigns, execute flawlessly, measure, and report back. The differences come in the people that do the work, areas of expertise, and manner in which they work with their clients. We believe there will always be a need for creative thinking in business, (which is what we were founded on in 1985 when Dennis Marlin opened up shop), and it's

our responsibility to make sure we are staying relevant and real in our approach to delivering that for our clients. This is why we believe there is room in the marketplace for multiple ways of having the conversation and thus multiple affiliates inside one company.

MO: What are a few significant accomplishments and awards The Marlin Network has been fortunate to win?

Doug: For the past three years, The Marlin Network has made the Inc 500/5000 list of fastest growing companies in the U.S. (we are in the top 400 advertising and marketing agency category). This is significant for a company that's been in business since 1985. Each affiliate has also been recognized for certain creative and strategic efforts by the industry as well as by our clients. For example, [The Alchemedia Project](#) has been awarded three Procter & Gamble coveted CATALYST awards for their work on PGP websites, and Food IQ was named Supplier of the Year in 2011 for their client Checkers/Rally's Hamburgers, just to name a few.