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The Digital Disruptor

Fi Bendall is the CEO's secret weapon—delivering the business acumen to drive positive results in a disruptive digital economy.

Images by Scott Ehler

The first thing you notice about Fi Bendall is how switched on to the entire world she is. Observant, with a quick mind, it's obvious that she knows exactly what she is talking about. In a world filled with those who talk a lot about digital economy but rarely do anything, every word Fi speaks comes from a place of experience and knowledge. She is personable and friendly, and you can't help but be drawn into listening to her talk and be convinced by her big ideas for the future of business.

Fi started her career in her native England, originally in advertising. Her first job was with a consumer electronics publication, meaning that understanding technology has been her job since day one. Progressing to become group marketing director of the publishing house, from here Fi's career took her to opening her own businesses. Business one came with her first child, business two with baby two as she worked across London and New York consulting for companies including Sony, Virgin, and the BBC. After deciding on a sea change because

she was sick of trains running late and the damp and wet of London, Fi moved to Australia, settling in sunny Sydney. It was here that Fi had baby three and founded Bendalls Group 11 years ago, and has been CEO of the company ever since.

Bendalls was created by Fi to combine her experience with business analytics, marketing, digital, social media, and strategy. She saw a real space in the market for consultants who understand the digital space to offer strategic, overarching advice to companies. "We have three core areas to our business: we are strategic, we work in advocacy, and we work in mobile," Fi explains. "We don't deviate from that; that's what we are really, really good at. We happen to be very good in certain segments, which is women, small business, and youth—hard-to-win segments.

"We do other things like social media, but we do not work on people's social posts or social media advertising. We look in a far more strategic social business sense of how to build a recommendation economy around a business as opposed to 'let's set up a Twitter account' or 'do this

Facebook promotion' and so on. Certainly we can support marketing teams to execute on our findings. We support marketing teams by identifying customer advocates on business's databases using scientific behavioural research techniques. Using these techniques, we can also support HR teams by identifying and working with staff advocates. That to us is social media—building a recommendation economy, not Facebook likes.

"We're not a digital agency, we're not an advertising agency, we're not an SEO company. We actually happen by default to be quite good at PR, but we are not a PR agency. Where we are also incredibly strong is we have a network internationally of smart, experienced people. Recently, we had a client who was looking at their whole search spend and we were able to call on the guy that runs the biggest search budget in the world, from Marriott Hotels, to give advice. That's really valuable. The power of our own network and how we can open the doors to those specialists to clients is hugely powerful. We have never sat in an agency world; we are very outside-of-the-box thinkers." >

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BENDALLS

G R O U P



Bendalls Group has worked with a huge number of blue-chip companies on their digital strategy, including ANZ, St George, Origin, MTV, Primo Smallgoods, and Coles, to name a few. What Fi and her company do is act as the CEO's secret weapon, looking at the business as a whole, advising what questions need to be asked, and identifying the requirements to ensure they stay ahead of the game in the digital world. The biggest impact Fi can have on a business is to take the role of the chief digital officer to a CEO to assist in creating and shaping the role of digital as a hybrid across the whole organisation and demonstrate to the board the commercial reality of why this is essential in every company moving forward in a digital economy.

"Where our success has been is definitely with CEOs in the boardroom, helping them fill this gap that has emerged—what I would describe as the CDO. You are seeing that role happen in the United States, and it puts noses out of joint because the CMO and the CIO roles do not cover or have the expertise to create a digital business strategy led and directed

from the top. The CDO is effectively the 2IC to the CEO because he has to move his business from an analogue model to a digital model. A digital business doesn't just encompass marketing or CRM systems; a digital business encompasses a whole-business way of thinking.

"Technology has collided with society. You're seeing human engineering redesigned by the likes of Steve Jobs in a way we haven't seen since the Victorian era. That has had a massive impact, and that's what Bendalls' stock and trade is. We work with CEOs to help them and help their business go through that. That can be discrete pieces of work around crisis management, to economic modelling around what is a disruptive model, to looking at the whole business, to looking at marketing too. It's quite a broad suite. But people wouldn't come to us for marketing, for example, in a traditional sense; they would come to us because they are looking for outside-of-the-box, something completely different. They want to either utilise technology or just think differently in that world, or both."

While not many companies currently employ a CDO—Fi estimates fewer than 10 per cent—she passionately believes that within the next decade, any company that wants to survive will be employing one. It's the CEO's job, according to Fi, to be taking this step forward and employing a CDO. The problem is that many CEOs and boards don't know where to begin; they are just acknowledging that they need to do something. That's where Fi and her team come in. "I am firmly of the opinion it's the role of the CEO to lead the business in a strategy around adopting technology, digital thinking, the digital native, and the digital employee," Fi says.

"It's the CEO's role to guide and to strategically drive that through an organisation with board support. I think the truth is that in a lot of boardrooms, the marketing directors, the IT directors, the CEOs, the chairpeople, they don't know what questions to ask. So they could run off and form a role called the chief digital officer, but they kind of need more understanding before they get there. To have someone who can

help them navigate that in a way where there isn't a vested interest or agenda, I think, is really important. The work that I do with CEOs is about being able to work with those organisations in an autonomous, effective way.

"I hope that the work we are doing in the next two to three years will see the role of the CDO emerging firmly in boardrooms. But I think there is some work to do in the meantime, and I think that that's where we are very effective in fulfilling that kind of role in business strategy and thinking. That's where I personally am the CEO's secret weapon: I am that person who can legitimately help guide and help that CEO to ask the right questions. I can help with that thinking and actually apply that across the organisation and bring the people with the CEO on that journey of transforming and moving from analogue to digital. Thinking in a digital way, getting away from a historical mindset, I think that's the key and the crux to the secret weapon I offer."

Finding the right person for that newly created CDO role, however, can be a large challenge in itself. Because the concept is so new, there is a limited amount of talent in the world who can do the role well. For CEOs or boards with limited experience in digital, Fi advises not to be fooled by jargon or blue-sky thinking; the key to a good CDO is to explain digital and digital impact in plain English and to execute in a commercial and realistic way. "Finding the right talent for a role such as the chief digital officer is a real challenge; there are so few people internationally who understand the application. It's not just the big thinking but the actual application in context of digital in a business. Every business really should be looking for that talent and should work with the external specialists like our business and our associates to seek to restructure their business from analogue models to digital models now, and they should be looking at how they can submerge that talent into their organisation.

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"You shouldn't be getting blown away or blinded by some guy coming in and throwing a load of technology and jargon words at you. You shouldn't be blinded by these people who are very ethereal when they talk about social media and a social business model that is, quite frankly, not going to land in the real world in a real way—because you can't just rip businesses up either; it's more of an adaptive process, not a rip-it-up process. We're very passionate about the principle of advocacy being absolutely the cornerstone of what we offer as an organisation and what we really believe in. It's a bit ironic because advocacy is very people and psychology based; it's the people that make digital business and the social media channel go boom—in a good boom way!"

This principle of applying what people respond to into digital is part of what Fi does. Bendalls is very passionate about advocacy in the digital space, and she believes this is one of the key principles any business should embrace. It's a scientific approach, and Fi has based her approach to advocacy

off research that psychologists in the United Kingdom have been conducting since the 1990s. "It's about advocacy. These networks that are now powerful media channels, that's where business customers are, that's where their staff are, and that's also where the media opportunity is. But you can't just walk into it. The principle that we have worked on around advocacy is that if you can identify personality traits, if you can understand those characteristics, you can pinpoint advocates internally and in an organisation and in your customers externally.

"You can apply this in a call centre. Just by identifying advocates and treating them in a different way will change the whole culture of the call centre, and therefore the performance and the bottom-line profitability. You can apply this on a consumer side. We use scientific techniques and theory to identify huge numbers of characteristics that make up an advocate. There is never more than 6- to- 10 per cent on any customer database of any brand that are advocates. You identify them. And because of social media and technology, you >





activate those people and you treat those customers in advocate groups in a different way, and they will create a powerful recommendation economy that will drive sales in your business. This is social media. It's not the channels and doing promos through them; it's the people who make recommendations that make your reputation and will drive your sales."

These concepts of online advocacy, chief digital officers, and technological changes seem to scare a lot of CEOs and companies. Big business and governments are getting very worked up about digital disruption and losing their market share to start-ups and innovators. Instead of complaining about the Ubers and Airbnbs of the world, Fi says, companies need to act and look at how digital can help their business, or they will ultimately perish.

"The model of disruption is not new; it has been around for a long time. It's just that people are running around like headless chickens at the moment about digital disruption. All technology has done is shine a light on it. Sure, you have to behave differently as an organisation; sure, you can use technology to change and reduce cost centres; sure, you can use technology to replace jobs; sure, you will see a different form of jobs in the front line of your organisation going forward. But we have always been evolving. As soon as you take away the fear and you look at the opportunity, disruption becomes a word that's opportunistic and exciting."

The scorn poured upon Gen Y, Fi says, is also unjustified. The next generation simply work differently from the way previous generations have, and the key is understanding that and harnessing their ideas. "The truth is that the generation that is coming through now would rather work for Uber than they would like to work for, say, one of the top four banks, for example," Fi says. "Unfortunately, that's the truth. And when we went to work in the 80s and 90s, we were only ever told if we did something

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wrong. We worked hard, but as a generation our expectations were different. Young people go to work and they want more; they want recognition and happiness, and with that happiness they want work-life balance.

"I have seen a couple of young people recently who have got up to very heady heights in a big bank in their 30s, and now they've reduced the days they are working in the bank. They effectively asked to be demoted because they want to do their own thing and they want to be happy. You know, it's a concept of happiness, working for yourself, that didn't exist before. That brings change, and technology has enabled that change. They question more, they know more, they are more connected than we have ever been, plus they can build their own businesses online easily. Harnessing the people and the way the technology has impacted on our behaviour and our society is a core challenge."

Some industries, Fi says, are catching on to these changes and the way the next generation is thinking. "I think out of all the sectors out there, traditional financial service companies have

been like sponges absorbing and looking for things that are different, to differentiate. They know their market is changing; they know young customers are turning off completely—they would rather bank with Apple than with CBA, for example."

The key message that Fi has for CEOs is to embrace the digital business model or your company will fail. Think big picture, use resources that can provide a CDO in your boardroom, and move into the future. "You need to open your mind to digital rather than holding onto what you believe has always worked; just because it always worked doesn't mean it's always going to work. Be really open and embrace different ideas, different people, people you never thought you would employ. Try it, try different things, open your doors and mind to these 'weird' people who invented this real thing called the internet and see what happens—you might be amazed.

"Don't get caught with asking how the technology works. You don't know how TV works; why do you need to know how Google works? You don't. You just need to know what the benefit is for your business." ●