

COLUMN: MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

# Riding the Learning Curve: “How Surfing Made me a Better Marketing Professional”

By Christine Larsen, CPSM, MBA

Manly, a suburb north of Sydney, Australia, is a surfer’s paradise. With wide beaches and consistent breaks, it’s easy to see why it hosted the world’s first surfing competition in 1964.

I arrived in Manly for a 5-month sabbatical and watched surfers glide across the waves during my morning walks. Like most feats of athleticism, it looked easy from afar.

Inspired, but with little surfing experience, I borrowed a board and hit the beach.

I won’t be entering a competition anytime soon, but learning to surf was a powerful experience. More than just a physical challenge, it was a study in resilience, humility, and the mindset required for growth – all characteristics that are crucial at work.

## The Freedom of Beginner’s Mindset

As soon as I tried surfing, I realized that it’s not easy and that middle age is not the ideal time to learn. After swallowing a gallon of salt water and getting spun around like laundry, I also swallowed my pride and booked a lesson.

We all construct stories about ourselves. One of mine was: *“I’m a capable and athletic adult who wears mascara.”* But there’s no way to be in control, or keep mascara intact, when you’re being rag-dolled by a wave.

Trying something new, failing, and persisting anyway takes courage. It’s uncomfortable and humbling, but it’s also freeing to abandon all hope of looking competent. It makes space for asking more questions and laughing more. Once I started telling surfers I was a beginner, they were keen to share tips and help me improve.

*Adopting a beginner’s mindset and letting go of ego opens new possibilities. Rejecting the confines of our own stories can be a path to innovation and growth.*

## Learning to Wait

The ocean has a schedule of its own. There’s nothing we mortals can do to change the rhythm of the wind, tide, or swell. Whether waiting for the right day or the right wave, surfing requires patience.

Connecting to the physical world is a proven way to spark mental clarity. For me, sitting on my board past the break, waiting for a wave, turned out to be one of the best parts of the surfing experience. With gulls gliding by, fish darting below the surface, and sunlight sparkling off the water, it was easy to be fully present in my body.

*In today’s ultra-connected digital world, it can feel risky to disconnect, but prioritizing time away from technology and immediate answers unlocks space for gratitude and creative thinking.*

## Be Selective

Relying on my arms to propel me forward was a new experience, and doing it against the force of the waves was exhausting. Usually, by the time I'd paddled out to the lineup of surfers, my arms were turning to spaghetti. The next step was paddling with enough velocity to catch a wave. "Paddle, paddle, paddle!" my instructor, Alicia, would yell. I'd pump my arms, trying and failing to catch wave after wave.

In addition to keeping me humble, surfing taught me to be more selective. I learned to watch from the beach before paddling out, wait for the most worthwhile waves, and time the sets to preserve energy. When the right wave eventually came my way, I had a better chance of catching it.

*With the variety of tasks marketers take on, burnout is a risk. Taking time to assess the full picture – whether of an industry, a sector, a firm's business goals, or marketing mix – leads to strategic decisions about where to focus resources.*

## Get Back Up

My surf lessons sometimes felt like losing a fist fight. The waves pounded me. Alicia taught me to make an arm helmet to protect my head when I was pitched off the board. I inhaled water through my nose, struggling to get my head above water, only to be slammed by another wave. I'd catch my breath, flip my board right side up, and try again.

I remember learning to ride a bike as a kid in one afternoon. As an adult, I'm both less flexible and more cautious. Learning to surf required more practice, plus willpower to continue even when it hurt. It was a reminder that success is born not just from intelligence or talent, but from the simple act of getting back up and trying again.

*Some marketing initiatives will be shot down or miss their mark. What matters is cultivating the positivity and resilience to start on the next one.*

## From the Seaside to the Office

Eventually, it happened; the right wave rolled in, I paddled with power, windmilling both arms at the same time, and was propelled by the ocean. I was exhilarated – not just by the speed, but by the satisfaction of accomplishing something that didn't come easily.

Surfing helped reframe how I think about patience and progress, on the board and in the boardroom. I'm not alone; a 2023 study in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that surfing reduces stress and boosts productivity, and researchers at San Diego State University have shown its potential to ease symptoms of PTSD.

I'll never be as confident in the sea as the Manly locals, but I'm grateful I seized the opportunity to surf out of my comfort zone. It offered unexpected clarity about how to grow as a marketing professional.

**Byline:** *Christine Larsen is an Associate Principal and Director of Marketing at Ballinger, an integrated design practice in Philadelphia. As a graphic designer and marketing leader, she has propelled Ballinger's brand strategy and helped secure prestigious architectural and engineering commissions throughout the United States. She is a committee member and former board director at the Community Design Collaborative, a Philadelphia non-profit that supports equitable and resilient neighborhoods.*

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