



Marcel Corstjens

AUTHOR

The largest consumer goods companies spend over a billion dollars annually on product innovation and see no measurable sales return. When retailers grow more powerful and private label erodes margins, the strategies that built a brand's market position stop defending it. Knowing where to invest and how to negotiate the manufacturer-retailer relationship from strength has become the defining commercial challenge for FMCG leadership.

When brand investment fails to grow sales and retail expansion erodes margins, Marcel Corstjens, Unilever Chaired Professor of Marketing Emeritus at INSEAD, gives consumer goods and pharmaceutical companies the evidence and frameworks to rebuild their commercial strategy from the ground up.

Marcel Corstjens's 2026 Biography

Why organisations work with Marcel Corstjens

- His research in *MIT Sloan Management Review* demonstrated that the largest FMCG companies (i.e. those spending over a billion dollars annually on R&D) see no appreciable sales return from that investment; only marketing spend correlates with revenue. This directly challenges how most consumer goods leadership teams allocate their growth budgets.
- The Mindspace and Shelfspace framework from *Store Wars* gives manufacturers and retailers a shared, precise language for the power dynamics that determine who controls the end consumer: still the most widely adopted conceptual map of that relationship, translated into five languages.
- His *Harvard Business Review* research showed that retail internationalisation does not reliably improve revenue or profit margins, and that home market strength is the primary driver of commercial performance: a finding that reshapes how boards evaluate international expansion decisions.
- His "Newtonian versus Lorenzian" innovation typology distinguishing companies that invest heavily in broad R&D from those that make small, targeted bets, gives commercial leaders a practical diagnostic for where innovation spending is being wasted at scale.
- He has consulted directly for Unilever, Heineken, Novartis, Roche, PepsiCo, and Cadbury Schweppes, giving him practical fluency across both FMCG and pharmaceutical commercial strategy that few academics can match.

AVAILABLE FOR

- Speaking

MARCEL'S SPEAKING THEMES

- Business Strategy & Growth
- Customer Experience & Marketing
- Innovation & Disruption
- Marketing & Branding

LANGUAGES: English

Biography highlights

- Emeritus Professor of Marketing and the Unilever Chaired Professor of Marketing, Emeritus, at INSEAD; visiting professor at Cornell and Stanford universities
- PhD, University of California, Berkeley; doctoral dissertation awarded first prize by the American Marketing Association
- Author of *Store Wars: The Battle for Mindspace and Shelfspace* (J. Wiley & Sons, 1995; second edition 1999; translated into French, Japanese, Russian, Portuguese, and Spanish)
- Co-author of "Retail Doesn't Cross Borders" (*Harvard Business Review*, 2012) and "The Promise of Targeted Innovation" (*MIT Sloan Management Review*, 2019)
- Research published in *Marketing Science*, *Management Science*, *Journal of Marketing*, and *Journal of Marketing Research*; featured in *The Economist*
- Creator and director of the INSEAD Storewars senior executive programme for the consumer goods industries

Biography

The commercial relationship between consumer goods manufacturers and retailers is contested, high-stakes, and widely misread. Marcel Corstjens, Unilever Chaired Professor of Marketing Emeritus at INSEAD, has spent four decades researching where that contest is actually won and lost, and his findings consistently challenge what companies believe about their own growth strategies.

His book *Store Wars: The Battle for Mindspace and Shelfspace*, co-authored with Judith Corstjens and published by J. Wiley & Sons, introduced the Mindspace and Shelfspace framework: the idea that the strategic contest between manufacturers and retailers is a battle for control of two distinct assets, these being the consumer's mental availability and the product's physical presence in store. Translated into five languages and taught through the INSEAD Storewars senior executive programme he created and directed, the framework became the most widely adopted analytical tool for understanding manufacturer-retailer power dynamics in FMCG.

His research has repeatedly overturned the conventional logic of large consumer goods companies. Work published in *MIT Sloan Management Review* with Gregory Carpenter of Kellogg and Tushmit Hasan of UT Austin showed that the biggest FMCG brands (i.e. those investing more than a billion dollars annually in R&D) see no measurable sales return from that outlay. Research published in *Harvard Business Review* with Rajiv Lal of Harvard Business School demonstrated that retail internationalisation does not reliably improve revenue or profit margins; home market performance is the primary driver. Both findings run counter to assumptions embedded in how most FMCG leadership teams set strategy.

Corstjens holds a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, where his doctoral dissertation received first prize from the American Marketing Association. He has been a visiting professor at Cornell and Stanford, and has consulted for Unilever, Heineken, Novartis, Roche, PepsiCo, and Cadbury Schweppes, among others. His research has appeared in *Marketing Science*, *Management Science*, *Journal of Marketing*, and *Journal of Marketing Research*, and has been featured in *The Economist*.

Key speaking topics

- Manufacturer-Retailer Power Dynamics
- Marketing Strategy in FMCG
- Innovation Investment and Commercial Return
- Brand Strategy and Private Label Competition
- Retail Internationalisation and Global Growth
- Marketing Resource Allocation
- Marketing Strategy in the Pharmaceutical Industry

Ideal for

- Chief Marketing Officers and commercial strategy leaders in consumer goods companies
- Senior executive teams in FMCG and pharmaceutical businesses facing stalled revenue growth
- Retail leadership teams navigating the competitive dynamics of private label and supplier relationships
- Executive education programmes for senior FMCG, retail, or pharmaceutical audiences

Audience outcomes

- A clear analytical framework under both Mindspace and Shelfspace for diagnosing where control of the manufacturer-retailer relationship is being lost and what to do about it
- Evidence-based reappraisal of whether current R&D and innovation investment is actually driving revenue, or consuming capital without commercial return
- Practical criteria for assessing whether a retail internationalisation strategy is likely to deliver or destroy shareholder value
- Sharper understanding of how private label competition is reshaping the power balance between retailers and brand manufacturers, and what manufacturers can do to respond
- A working distinction between “Newtonian” and “Lorenzian” approaches to innovation investment, and which is appropriate at which scale