

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

EPISODE SEVENTY-EIGHT FINDING THE "WHY" BEHIND CX

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Shawn (00:01):

Welcome to the seventh season of The Combustion Chronicles podcast, where bold leaders combine with big ideas to make life better for all of us. I'm your host, Shawn Nason, CEO, and founder of MOFI. As a maverick-minded, human obsessed, experienced evangelist, I believe the only way to build a sustainable and thriving business is to put people first. Throughout this season, we'll be connecting you, the listener, with cutting edge leaders in the experience world who are challenging old ways of thinking with bold, new ideas and a commitment to human-centric design. Experience matters, people matter and revenue matters. That's why it's time to ignite a people-first experience revolution.

My guest today, Gene Lee, is vice president of experience design at Autodesk, where he leads a multidisciplinary team responsible for delivering a seamless end-to-end customer experience across the entire digital customer lifecycle. Before Autodesk, he served as chief experience officer at Mailchimp, leading customer experience across brand and product. He's also headed up user experience, branding, advertising, and design efforts at such major brands as Sony PlayStation, Nickelodeon, Scholastic, Landor, and Y&R. Gene is customer-obsessed data- and outcomes-driven, systems-oriented, and focused on the various touch points across the CX journey, both internally and externally. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Gene.

Gene (01:41):

Oh gosh. Thank you, Shawn. Thanks for having me.

Shawn (01:43):

Well, it is so good to have you and, um, so excited to talk about your journey along the Experience Ecosystem™, your philosophies. I wanna start with a, real easy question here, because I know Autodesk employs a ton of engineers, programmers, IT experts, and a lot of left brain people. So how do you, Gene, explain CX to an engineer? Is it too right-brained of a concept for some of them or do they really get it?

Gene (02:13):

Oh gosh, if that's an easy question, I don't know if it's gonna get any easier or harder. You know, I would say is, um, not even an engineer, but in general, if people don't understand the value of CX and what CX is, my tendency is not to go into the technicalities of it, but really tell the "why" story and make it personal. And so for anybody, including an engineer who may say, hey, I don't get CX, again, tell the "why", big picture, why we

need CX and make it personal for them. So, you know, I've always enjoyed kind of going down that rabbit hole and asking them, hey, what do you like to do? You know, what brands do you like? And then you get to the point where there's choice and you go, well, why do you choose one over the other? And then you get to the point where it's like, oh, because ultimately, it comes down to experience or this or that. And I'm like, well, see, and it was personal, and it was a "why" story. And then you bring it back to the company. There's that classic example that I think the industry uses around coffee shops. If you went to two coffee shops, same coffee, same price, why would you choose one or the other? And it's the same story of the why, if I go down that rabbit hole, I really then loop back to mapping it to the company. So, like I said, for engineer or anybody else, uh, you have to make it personal and have sort of the buy-in of the "why".

Shawn (03:24):

We've talked a lot about the, you and I, Gene, and I think that really plays into your story and your success in the industry, because you're not afraid to talk about the "why". And I think it's becoming more and more relevant after the pandemic of why we need to discuss the "why". And so, you know, your bio talks about so many various touchpoints across the CX journey and the ecosystem that we talk about. And so you talk a lot about working with your peers and other areas of the organization. And, you know, we've talked about that as tearing down the silos, how do we tear down the silos, like marketing product and strategy to make the CX journey better. So what tips do you have for CX professionals, people starting in the CX to help them get buy-in from people throughout the organization. I know it's the why, but can you give some other tips on that?

Gene (04:19):

That's a great question. And it's, I will say it's at the heart of CX. If you really think about customer experience, there was always that phrase of like, customer experience, everybody needs be part of customer experience. No one owns customer experience, we all do. It's a great statement, but it confuses people. You're like, wait, hold on, hold on, everybody owns it. Who owns it? It goes back and forth. And it's interesting that we're buy-in because if you think about buy-in, it not only requires the "why", like we talked about just now of, um, you know, why, what's in it for them, but it's also about trust. And I think that's a number one theme that I've seen across the board of all the sort of experience that I had, all the mistakes that I've made, is that once you get past the "why" and buy-in, it then becomes about trust.

Do your peers trust you that you get trust sideways, up and down? And I think that's key. And once you have that trust, the who, when and how, it becomes a lot easier. And so one tip I would say is don't come into an organization with the big head to be like, I know all this stuff, you don't know it. Let me tell you how it's done, right? Wrong. It's like, how do you then create empathy for your peers, truly understand what their goals are, what the company's goals are, what we're all trying to do, and, and sort of understand the culture, how decisions made and all that. And then you gotta build your trust with your peers and all the sort of stakeholders and partners. And, and you have to go into it with a mindset of how do I create a 'how can I help' culture versus 'how can I own', 'how can I get credit', 'how can I command and control', uh, mindset. And if you have that mindset, it really goes a long way to having that patience in building again, like the trust. You know, in design we always say, we need, we need empathy for our customers and really understand what they're going through. Well, if you have that mindset, you can also apply it to your company and your culture and your peers, but that's probably my #1 tip, cos you know this, Shawn, CX is about, um, how you influence and inspire versus own and control. Cos CX is not owned by one group. So I think that's the key is you have to start building that trust.

Shawn (06:20):

Yeah. And we, we all have stories around this, right? So I, what I'm gonna ask you, Gene is can you give us a story of where maybe something went wrong, but it ended up turning right? Because I think we all wanna always talk about our great successes, but sometimes we need to talk about our mistakes and failures and how we use those to turn into something right.

Gene (06:41):

Yeah. It's, it's a good question. And by the way, there's a lot of the, uh, mistakes that I've made, but I'll say one of them, if, if you think about CX, sort of the nature of coming in and representing CX in and of itself is hard and it will create, um, walls. It will create all this sort of friction because they're going, wait a minute, I understand design, I understand engineering, I understand product, but what CX were you again? And what are you trying to do? You're getting into my, uh, business and, and all that. So I think just a lot of those moments where you have to come into it with the sort of the open mind and trust building, all those things. So the story, I mean, I had was a lot around that, just coming into a culture and going, let me explain to the value of if we connect everything, that customer experiences, you know, overused the word delightful. Then we all value

from the business and customers and they're going great, but who does that?

And so that's where you get to the technicalities, you know, like any practitioner of CX, we all have tools in methodology. And um, one of the things that I've, um, kind of, uh, found is that a lot of times we'll go into organizations and try to convince them of a tool or methodology. Historically designers are classically known to be like, let me tell you about design thinking, let me convince you about design thinking. At the end of the day, what I told the team was like, that is a methodology and a tool. Don't fall in love with the tool and try to convince the organization, use it and show them the value of it. Don't just try to convince them of the tool methodology. And so a story that I have is, um, early days at a company, I started talking about journey mapping and journey mapping and journey, I, we showed frameworks, methodologies and all that. And I realize like that's where I go back to my principle of show, don't tell. I was like, wait a minute, they're getting it conceptually. But there there's no adoption. And that's the key, adoption, not just the, the understanding of the concepts. And so we got a few people together with research and design and we had, um, mapped out this, uh, journey board on a plotter. I mean, literally it was like 60 tall. We plastered the whole meeting room, four walls, it was like wallpaper. Um, and we brought in stakeholders and just went through it. We had said, the one thing that I made different, sort of tweak on is that I wanted to put, uh, visual artifacts or what a customer actually saw and experienced on top. And then each slice went into their data, the emotional state, the metric and all that.

And just walk through a customer's journey, current state, and you wouldn't believe how many eyes opened up, be like, gosh, we never knew of the friction. We never knew of this kind of complication. Cause a lot of times, um, every functions is working within their sort of, uh, area. And so when they saw that, it was like, wow, it was a really good education moment, an awareness moment, but guess what? No adoption, right? It's like, huh. So then time went by and I did it again, but I did it again mapping to one of the top big bets for the company and had revenue attached to it. So then when I did it that way with the team, that's where real adoption happened, because there's value in the business. It wasn't just theoretical. It wasn't like this concept for the customers, but it actually had monitor impact.

And that was a sort of a journey that, you know, led to a lot of like, why are we doing this? Uh, you're wasting paper, but by the time we did that one, it really clicked. And uh, a lot of the organizations like, okay, I get it, I get it. There's um, attribution to money and growth and revenue. And so soon thereafter, I thought, um, what, what was cool is that instead of the, the, the sort of the push from top down leadership, we started seeing the

poll from the, the teams, cross functional teams and they started printing their own journey maps out across all these little areas of the, the company. And I was like, wow, that's really cool to see when you get the adoption and all this was pre-COVID. So then we all digitized it and put it in Mirror, in Figma, all that. So it was cool. But in the beginning it was really hard because people were like, you're wasting time, why are we doing this. And I think at the end of the day, I had that a-ha moment where it's a good tool, like I said at methodology, but you gotta map it back to value for the business and for the customer. And that's, I think where I saw the a-ha.

Shawn (10:45):

Well, that are like some amazing nuggets that you just gave the listeners, um, don't fall in love with the tool and you say, and don't fall in love with the wrong problem, fall in love with the right problem, right? It's the same concept. Um, and the methodology, right? Like methodologies are great. And I worked within an organization where we didn't even talk about the methodologies, we just did. And that adoption, right? I remember my very first job outside of Disney was with the healthcare company. And, um, I remember going to a senior leader and asking her, I basically put my job the line. I said, if this process work, doesn't work, fire me. Um, well thankfully it worked and it was adopted and then we had so much work. I love it, that's great. So let's talk about your experience, Gene. Like you have a deep CX experience, right? And I see you all the time, we first met at a conference. Um, you're speaking, you're a thought leader for the industry, as we talked about being maverick-minded and human-obsessed, I think you are very maverick-minded and human-obsessed, but I know you didn't really start out in CX. So how were your previous experiences throughout your career, how did those help you navigate into your current role today and your, your roles in CX? Um, because I think people wanna understand the journey to get into this and there's not one journey. So can you share a story and a little bit about that?

Gene (12:12):

Unlike your classical disciplines like design and engineering, those pathways are somewhat clear, but when it comes to customer experience or even design operations, what I find is that, that pathway is unique. I don't know if there's a, these days there's a schooling for customer experience or sort of a program in college, I think everybody has a unique story and, and I love kind of unpacking that with people. So with that said, for me, um, you know, I, I never start off with a desire for, for CX or any of the things that I'm doing now. I was just a designer. I, I still, to this day, love design and I consider my

self a, a creative, a designer, right? Uh, I might design organizations or, uh, ops or whatever, but I'm still a designer, it's still design. And, uh, I've always been sort of that, that, that kid and a guy who loved, uh, design illustrations.

And so that's, my background is, uh, sort of the foundations in craft, right? Graphic design, illustration. And then from there, I really, at the time of nineties, sort of mid nineties, I'm a bit dating myself. Um, we were getting into digital a lot and in the digital process, I was like, but what about branding? You know, so I was like, brand matters, right? And so I saw an opportunity and I wanted to really learn about branding and brand and I loved identity work. And so I applied to a job in New York, uh, for Landor. And they're the ones who moved me from Atlanta to New York. And I took an opportunity there and it was just, I was there going, why am I here? I'm surrounded by super talented people working on like most major brands like FedEx or Delta, or, you know, all these brands.

I was like, what am I doing here? And so it was just an awesome, um, experience that I had there. And then from there, I was really interested in, um, advertising, uh, sort of the top of funnel, like I saw ads and copy, and I was like, that's so like, awesome. And it drives my emotional state of like, you know, sort of spirited brands and sort of that mission state, all that level of, of campaign advertising. And I, I joined a digital company doing that. So had some stints in, um, agency experience on advertising campaigns and then through it all, there's a through line across all my career, which is at the end of the day, there's still digital components across all that. I was never a pure play in print or, you know, a campaign. It was just, it was part of my digital journey.

And then sometime, sort of in that career point, I had a kid and that whole typical story of 112-hour work week. And I was like, I can't sustain this. So Dick Robinson, who's the CEO of Scholastic, um, sort of team gave me an opportunity to come over to Scholastic and go what they call in-house. And I remember that time was, it was interesting cos all my peers, that time was like, Gene don't do this, you're committing suicide. Like you're gonna get bored because this like one brand and, and all these things. And, and I was like, but guys, like in agency world, it's like, we have all these fun projects that we hand-off and we never get to like, see it like through and through and through. It's just like good, good luck. I hope, hope you, my baby. So I decided to go client side to Scholastic and take one brand and really go deep and, and see it through.

But what was interesting there was, that was when I was like, oh, this is culture. This is how you navigate this relationship building. This is how you get things done. And it was different than the agency world. And so that's when I started going, huh, this is just different. But, but I enjoyed it because it was, it was a deeper relationship with the brand.

Um, I had accountability for delivering things and it was just fun. And so that was my crossover to client side or in-house. And then from there I went to Nickelodeon, uh, and PlayStation and those are all three major enterprise brands. And through and through, I was like, wait a minute. So marketing, you guys aren't really connecting a lot with product? And, but you guys aren't talking to customer success and entering that data and wait a minute, you guys aren't, and I was like on and I was like, wow, this is a theme across all these kind of larger enterprises. It wasn't called CX by the way, it was just a, it was like something I was like, huh, scratch your head going. You look at the website for instance. And you're like, 50 groups are on it. And it was like literally shipping the org, and I was like, huh. So, you know, I love these companies by the way, they're they're awesome brands. And then I thought I was gonna be at places for a while. And then, um, Mailchimp called out of the blue one day and I was in San Francisco. And so I went over there, I met with Ben and the team and I was just blown away by the culture. And that's really what it takes to get CX done is you had to have the right culture.

And that was why I joined Mailchimp. And then in four and a half years, incredible journey of moving that CX mountain. And so I remember when I was at Mailchimp, I was like, huh, what is the next three to five years look like for me? And I was thinking to myself, if I can actually, um, navigate, implement that needle and move it towards CX at Mailchimp, I don't know, 1500 person company. I wonder if I could take my learnings and do the same thing at an enterprise and lo and behold, like none of this planned, but now I'm at Autodesk, this same kind of story, same theme, and I'm like, this is fun, but I've seen it all, right? So it's a new brand. I love the brand, incredible mission and vision and the global impact it has, healthy business, leadership buy-in for seamless experience being part of the strategy. Culture's great, scope is just right.

So it's kind of the same theme. So that's where I'm at now. But again, that journey to me was interesting because I never forecast it or wanted to do this when I started out, I just love design and I love sort of what design could do to businesses and to consumers and people, right? So that's my kind of, sort of journey, but what's interesting is in that journey, I hit across all these different points in that customer life cycle. Not plan, it just happened to be. So I think that, that value of understanding product and brand and campaigns and full funnel kind of helped shape the understanding of, of leading CX.

Shawn (18:04):

I think that's the beauty of, uh, of your career and the beauty of what you do. And, you know, we talk about this Experience Ecosystem™ at MOFI and, and how that plays in

that it's, you know, the web of, you know, people, touchpoints, processes, like all of that coming together. Um, and you've worked through that. So you really understand that, but I still love, you said it, you said the right culture is what has to happen to get CX done. And I don't think people really understand that completely. It's so simple to some of us, you know, my first career job was at the Walt Disney company, right? And then I went, my next job was a company that was wanting to move to that. So it sounds so simple, but as you know, Gene, as I know, we both have the battle wings and scars, you know, that it's not always simple and trying to get that mind shift, particularly for C-suites sometimes, can be the, the really hard piece.

I remember you and I sitting the first time we met at lunch together and having a very healthy conversation with some people at the table and you were doing great as the, uh, moderator in the middle because, uh, there was some healthy tension there and really it, it's around how do we put the humans back into this industry? And, and that conversation actually went around. Why do we call it CX? It's so much more than that. So to you going back to some of our methodology, um, how might we create more human obsession within the tech industry where you're sitting today or with industry, in your opinion, how might we create more human obsession?

Gene (19:46):

Gosh, that's a great question. You know, the first thing that comes to mind is, is I feel like, um, I know this is gonna sound generic, but empathy. And here's what I mean by that. I think every, when you say tech industry, there's a lot of companies under that umbrella of tech industry. You know, whether it be a service or a product and whatnot, I think everybody comes to it with their own frameworks and methodologies. Like I've seen this and all that, but I wonder, and I ask how many of the employees actually use the products and services that the company provides? Because I've seen a lot of times, even including myself, where I was leading process and change, but I never deeply used our products and services to really understand what customers going through. And it wasn't until we started doing them now, I was like, oh, I get it now.

You know? And I think same thing for when you get to leadership positions, we're so busy in our day to day, we understand everything through PowerPoints metrics, data, right? Revenue goals, user goals, NPS, but we actually have not experienced using our own product and services. So you talk about empathy. Like I would encourage everybody to use that. And then you start understanding like sort of the pain points or what customers go through. That's number one, uh, number two, human-obsessed. I would

say generally get close to the customer. I know that has been said, but there's a lot of tips and methodologies there. It could be co-creating with your customers. That's I always love that. Right? Bring the customer in as you concept, and co-create, there's always this sort of testing cadence that you could do with customers. There's, um, things that we've implemented called customer advisory boards, where you're bringing them monthly to look at things, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, be closer to the customer.

And then the other thing is, you know, when, when people are busy, there's research teams and, and others who create videos and quotes and qual-and-quant data and bring that and service it up to, uh, leaders. And that always helps. I'll give you the story, there's a point where we were so frustrated at the time of onboarding. We saw the data and all these things, but someone from research actually took a video of someone going through an onboarding experience. So along with data and quotes and just package it up and present to leadership and man, it's awesome when you see these shock, like you, you see that and you see leadership and there's a couple of emotional things they go through versus shock, how could it be that bad? Second thing is embarrassment. Wow. I never knew our brand. It was like that for customers. And then anger sometimes like, how could we let this happen? And those are all good, emotional reactions. When you get to like customer experience, views like that. And sometimes those trigger and put fire against like, oh, we need to do something about this. So many ways to create more sort of human obsession in the tech industry. But I think those are kind of the, the nuggets of, uh, some tips.

Shawn (22:23):

Well, it, it's funny in those situations, we've both been in those, Gene, where I have to tell senior leaders, you have to put your cellphones down and shut your computers because you want to immediately fix that fire or fix something and that's not solving for the right problem, but we gotta get to the root, right? But you know what that's like when they get the emotions working up, they're like, no, we gotta fix it right now. And I'm like, no, no, no, hold the horses. Let's get through the process.

Gene (22:56):

It's funny you said that, cos we literally went through the same tone and conversation just this week. And what's cool is that there's buy-in, that's that word buy-in and like leaders, like we need to do something about this, but there's the danger of, uh, of moving quickly without the data and understanding the root problem. And so it kind of goes back to like, you have to go slow to move fast and really understand the problem and

understand what areas of experience that we can move the needle versus like let's talk, let's tackle everything.

Shawn (23:22):

We talk about it at MOFI, and I talk about it when I work with leaders to say, listen, the best thing is not always to go after low hanging fruit. Sometimes you need to leave that low hanging fruit to get to the right problem and solve. And then you'll get that low hanging fruit. But that's hard because especially if you're in, in the business side, you know the value of it, how can we fix it right now? Well, Gene you've given us so many things to talk about today, but I wanna wrap up with one last question. And the question is this for you, what advice would you give Gene when he first started out in this role and in this journey of CX, what advice would you give him today as he was starting out?

Gene (24:05):

Oh, that's a great question. I've always loved that question. And I always follow up with like how much time do we have? Lots of things I would put myself not to do. I think a lot of it comes down to what I just talked about earlier, which is you gotta start with trust. You know, there's a lot of times where I came in with like the methodologies, you know, getting CCX certified, you have all these, uh, frameworks and tools and maturity models and they're all great, but they are tools in methodology. Going by the culture, you've gotta start with the trust and build the relationships. And I think that's the biggest thing I'll tell myself is like, don't go into an organization with a lot of heat around, you have to do all these things. You, you gotta be patient and you have to learn, you have to understand all those things that leaders know like, you know, the first 90 days just do a listening tour. We've heard all those things, but personally there's a person side for me, which is, um, urgency, you know, I'm bias sort action. I want urgency, urgency. And so sometimes I struggle with that, with patience and sort of, um, sort of that longer trajectory. So, um, I think that's the number one thing I would tell myself amongst many of those.

Shawn (25:07):

Amazing. Amazing. Well, it's come to that point, Gene, when we have to start to wrap up and we do this thing called The Combustion Questions, which are three randomly selected questions that I use a human algorithm for and they were just handed to me. So I am just reading them for the first time. Um, so Gene, are you ready for your Combustion Questions?

Gene (25:28):

Yeah. I'm, I'm excited and scared. This is gonna like blow it up.

Shawn (25:32):

So question number one, if you could win a year's supply of any one thing, what would it be?

Gene (25:42):

Oh gosh, I'd say free espresso, free coffee. I'm like a big coffee drinker. Expressive drinker.

Shawn (25:48):

Free espresso and free coffee.

Gene (25:50):

Yeah. If it was like, I don't know, some of my favorites out there, uh, brewed, butter coffee or anything, it was like a year's worth of that flowing in my office, I'd have a tube connected directly to my arm.

Shawn (26:03):

I don't know that your wife and children would enjoy. Cause you already have such a great personality. I can't imagine how fast you would be going with stuff. All right. Well, to tag along with the coffee, food theme, question number two. What's your favorite flavor of popcorn?

Gene (26:22):

Oh gosh. I'm gonna go fancy schmancy, maybe hyper up, but I love truffle flavored popcorn, um.

Shawn (26:29):

Truffle flavor. From where?

Gene (26:31):

I, I don't know where I've had it, but I, I might have been at some, uh, fancy restaurant or somewhere, I don't, I forget. And they had served, um, this truffle flavored something popcorn. It was awesome.

Shawn (26:43):

Truffle flavored popcorn. I'm now gonna have to go out and look for that. Cause now you've got me interested in trying to get it. All right. Combustion question number three. What do you think about Broadway musicals?

Gene (26:56):

Oh man. Well, I am not a musical, Broadway kind of guy. My wife is though, she loves musicals. I would say I'd rather lean toward museums than musicals is my, my taste, but my wife loves musicals. So maybe I can, uh, ask her and throw her into this conversation.

Shawn (27:17):

Well, thank you for all of that. And again, Gene, thank you for giving us your time today, giving us, um, this wealth of knowledge as with any of our guests, listeners, you can connect with Gene Lee on LinkedIn. If you can't find him, connect with me, I'll make sure that you get connected to Gene and our community that we're building there on LinkedIn. But again, Gene, thanks so much for being here today and um, stay safe and be well.

Gene (27:42):

Thanks, Shawn. It was, uh, super fun.

Shawn (27:45):

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