

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES



EPISODE EIGHTY STITCHING TOGETHER RELATIONSHIP-CENTERED EXPERIENCES

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GUEST: FRED GERANTABEE

OCTOBER 12, 2022

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, Fred Gerantabee is the CXO of FGX International, which is part of eyewear giant, EssilorLuxottica. He's an award-winning technologist, author and executive whose career has spanned the client, platform and agency worlds across a variety of verticals. Fred started his career in early retail e-commerce, eventually transitioning to product and team development from Microsoft and Adobe. Along the way, he authored several books related to both platforms. During stints at Walt Disney Internet Group, WPP and FGX, Fred has focused intensely on leveraging digital platforms, product development, and brand to create amazing first-touch experiences for consumers. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Fred.

Fred (01:37):

Thanks, Shawn. Good to be here.

Shawn (01:39):

Yeah, there's a whole lot of stuff in there, man. Your bio, doing some amazing things and, and what we call the Experience Ecosystem™. And I love the fact that you and your career, Fred, you span so many different verticals. What excites you in your day-to-day diving into a new industry?

Fred (02:00):

I would say it is application of the common things that ground me in a new vertical, for example, and I've worked across a number, I mean agency world in particular, depending on the client that you're working with, in my case is various clients. You do get the

opportunity to touch a lot of different verticals. Could be cars, it could be pharma, it could be hospitality, CPG, whatever it is. And for me, the exciting part was how do I take this toolkit of things that I've built on but also am excited about putting out to the market and figure out how they apply best for that industry? And for me, I've always been grounded. You know, I started early on in like, you know, technology, web development, and then focused a lot on digital product development. So I always look at those sort of as the foundation for anything that I do, whether it's embarking on something with a new client, new industry, or in a new company.

So it always gets me excited to think about, okay, all of these things that I know to be core components of great digital products, great online experience, great CX in general, how do I now take this and get running with it in this particular industry? And that usually, you know, just learning the industry itself, I think it's very exciting for me. So when I sit down, for example, you know, I've worked in a number of industries in this case when I sat down and looked at eyewear, something I'm passionate about as a consumer and had to of course learn it from an industry standpoint, from the inside out, that learning process is always really exciting in terms of like, how does an industry work? What do the consumers look like? What does the consumer behavior that's unique to this particular vertical? How do I assimilate all these things and start to figure out what the roadmap is for the things that I want to do?

Shawn (03:42):

So what's cool about what you're saying there, and I loved it, Fred, is you take your foundational toolkit, you've got that, and that you take that into different verticals, different industries, and then you learn about that. But you still use that same toolkit. And I think that's really valuable for people to hear that you don't have to reinvent when you go across verticals. If you've got a good solid toolkit, you can use that. And for people that don't know completely, FGX International is one of the leading designers and marketers of non-prescription eyewear. So let's talk a little bit about that. What was it like coming in to that industry that you had not worked in before? And maybe give us like the dirt on like what's a challenge that we would not even think about as you're in that role?

Fred (04:32):

Well, I mean if you think about FGX as forte in particular, obviously it's the home of Foster Grant Readers sunglasses and a bunch of other well known brands, very much, you know, you see these brands in mass settings. So a Walgreens or CVS or Target, places like that. You think about, you know, how does this, how do you get people into a category? For example, I think reading glasses is interesting because it's not, sunglasses tend to be a bit more universal, but even so, you have the challenge of getting people either into a category or into a brand. Unfortunately, Foster Grant has a really strong brand legacy. So there is familiarity there. But again, every new generation of consumers that crops up, you have to think about how to speak to them specifically in that context. And you, you don't make assumptions that they may know or say, oh yes, a tried and true brand.

You do have to be very much forward facing with consumers because you always have to assume that for every consumer that knows the brand, has a certain amount of familiarity, may fall into a certain age group, there's a new generation of consumers entering the category or being exposed to the brand for the first time. And that's why we talk a lot about that first exposure to the brand being really important, right? Because it's not just about, okay, here's a thing, buy it. It is about, here's a thing, here's why you need it, here's why it is worth, or there is value from a product versus price point perspective, and then it's the trust factor. So I think the complexity really lies in any category where you have to create all of those things at once, that sort of first touch, for example. Because you're trying to make a number of points at once.

And if you falter at any of those points, you know, you take the risk that you're not going to bring that consumer into the fold. And you know, one of the things that my team and my colleagues and I have always looked at and I try and use as sort of a foundation as really sort of, you know, the right product, for example, the right message, the right experience, and all three of those things from creating a product that people want, which very often can and should be informed by data that you are constantly assimilating and absorbing as an organization. The second part is how do you message that? From a value perspective, from a trust perspective, from a category perspective. If it is something where you are bringing consumers into a new category, how do you convince them that it's the right time to enter and it's the right product to meet and need?

And then the third aspect is the right experience, which is connecting all of those things. If you're, if you're looking at eyewear, how do you try it on? How do you, you know, how do you get the right content, the right visuals to see, okay, yeah, I can see the value in the product, I like the design. And so you have to really, it's these three pillars that you have to focus on at any given point. And it's sort of like circling the wagons around that moment where you're trying to address a customer and, and get all of these things conveyed at once. And that is always a challenge because, I mean, the first thing is you have to understand what is the environment in which you're working, right? And I think you will see that, you know, one thing that does change drastically across categories and sometimes within the category, definitely true for eyewear is then you're in price point, right?

So if you're selling, you know, Luxottica is the owner and seller of many, you know the biggest brands on the planet, right? Ray-Ban, Oakley. And so the settings in which that eyewear is sold and market is going to be different, for example, that a more, like mass product like, you know, mid-price sunglasses for example. So you really have to think about a term I use a lot as environmental bias, which is what is the context in which somebody is shopping? If you sell the same piece of eyewear in three places, even if they're technically in the same sort of store category, but three different store environments. You know, that's a challenge because you have to think about, you know, not just your customer, but that particular store's customer as well. You know, how does a drug store shopper different from a big box store shopper versus a department store shopper. So all of this context is important and it creates, I think, multi-dimensional sort of, you know, complex ball of things that you have to decode. And so I think that's probably the big challenge, right?

Shawn (08:43):

You talked about three points, create what people want, how do you message that value, right? I loved what you said, creating the right experience. So I would love to hear your opinion in some of your experience and stories around this of who really owns the right experience within an organization? Because we, at MOFI, we work across different verticals, we work with different people, and I think being who really owns the experience, so you're, you're the Chief Experience Officer and I know a lot of Chief Experience Officers in our country who have no teams, really have no decision rights.

What they have is influential rights. In your world, when you talk about right experience, does that mean that you own the touch points from beginning to end for that customer? Or what does that look like for you?

Fred (09:33):

I would say it's actually a little bit of both. So you had mentioned having a team versus not. I, I do have a team, but that team is multidisciplinary and I think that the success of what I've set out to do and the success of things that I look to bring to the market are not solely mine. It would be arrogant for me to presume that I could, you know, even at a, regardless of your seniority level, whatever, like you said, you're an influencing factor. But the thing is you do have to depend on, and you do have to work closely with your colleagues who own different channels, right? So in context of what I'm doing today, working closely with the heads of marketing, working closely to product development, our commercial teams that bring the product to the shelf and to the floor. It really is a group effort because you can't, you know, you need people to understand and bring that point of expertise.

And if you go back to the three pillars I mentioned, right? The right product, you know, when you have a great R&D team or product development team or research team, you need to make sure that those people are engaged and part of the process. Same when it comes to marketing, developing your brand, developing the messaging is something that great marketing leaders and teams do. So it really does need to be a collective effort. I see the CXO role as being very much a connector, as understanding from a high level, what are the components that need to be true? How do you map the behaviors, you know, to be true to the things that you are trying to convey in the market? And also how do you then bring that all full circle? Meaning how do you learn from that and continuously iterate on it?

And I know a lot of people, you know, data, agile iteration, these are heavily used, you know, \$10 terms, right? Maybe \$20 terms. But um, the point is, is that they are, they're a real thing. So I think depending on your role, and in my case being somebody who is a digital native and who has relied heavily on data both upfront and as well as learned data to make informed decisions, it's my job to connect those things. So I think that to come back to your original question, my job is to stitch it together, to use my knowledge

to stitch it together. And then because I'm a digital native, I understand how digital platforms have data, all of these core components of a strong digital ecosystem make that possible. But I don't claim to be, you know, a brand building expert. I don't claim to be a product development expert, at least not in physical product.

And I don't claim to be a, you know, commercial expert. It's for me to work with my colleagues and create those relationships that we embark on together to say, to achieve these things, we need to do all of this together congruently. And so that is really what it is. And I look at a CXO as being really that connector in any organization. And I know that, you know, the CXO title varies from company to companies, sometimes it's very heavily based on, you know, post purchase customer service, things like that. And that wasn't part of the remit because the post purchase side is very important as well. So having either ownership or influence on how customers are spoken with, handled and managed post-purchase, whether it's positive or negative interactions is part of it. I do see very often that companies will go in and they get, they go all hot and heavy up front. They're like, drive the sale, drive the sale, then it's amnesia after that. I think for a real cyclical, you know, understanding of what's going on, you have to make sure those three things up front are delivering on the back half. And what that means is that if that person purchased the product, entered the brand, entered the category, what was their experience after that? When they take home the product, what's their experience? When they have a question about the product, how did it go? If something breaks or goes wrong or there's a misunderstanding of what they purchased or ordered, how do you handle that? And how do you handle that post purchase is just as important.

Shawn (13:30):

Well, and yeah, I mean there's a whole lot of discussion and I have a pretty strong opinion on, we have CX roles and then you have customer success roles. And many times within organizations, as you know, Fred, they don't even talk to each other. And I think that leads into talking about your journey because you and I have a commonality, we both worked for Disney at one point in our lives and, and two very different fields at Disney. But as I hear you talk and how I talk, what I love about it is those things from Disney are ingrained across all parts of that organization.

Fred (14:06):

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Shawn (14:07):

And what you were talking about there, so what I would love to hear is your story on how did you actually go from tech to being a CXO? Because I, I get asked that when I became a Chief Experience Officer, you know, how did you do it? Like, well, what's the career path? And there's not a career path, but it'd be great for people to hear, like, how did you make that transition?

Fred (14:29):

Well, I flunked my bar exam, so, no, I'm kidding. I never took the bar, but it would be interesting. But, um, you know, essentially, you know, I got heavily invested in tech early on. I actually, you know, I grew up thinking I was gonna be a professional musician. I studied music, I went to school for music, left college a bit early, but that's,

Shawn (14:51):

That's a common, just so you know, that's a commonality between you and I. I did too.

Fred (14:56):

Yeah, but now it goes, right? And I think for me, I wasn't really clear on what my direction was gonna be there. And also, you know, having to leave school early, you know, back then it was like, it was much harder to stay in school, get financing, all those things. And I think just generally, like education has taken on, you know, this sort of attention on focus, keeping people focused in career paths. And at the time it was kind of like going in the wind, right? And when I left school, I was like, okay, well what am I gonna do? What am I good at? My father was a designer, he was sort of at the forefront. I mean, even though he was a traditional packaging, brand designer and identity expert, really his, he got heavily into computer graphics early on. So I was always exposed to computer graphics, you know, early max, things like that.

And so it was just something I did mostly for fun. And then I was like, okay, I know the computer graphics part, but I don't know any of the programming part. And you're talking about like late 90s-ish when the first tech boom, you know, started to, started to emerge. So, you know, at the time, the skill sets were really thin in this area. And I was

like, okay, well let me see what I can do with this. And it really wasn't like, okay, I'm gonna make money, I'm gonna do, it's like, it was strictly, I mean, for, for my amusement. So I, you know, I picked up a book, started learning programming, HTML scripting languages, things like that. And eventually a couple of server side languages. And what I realized is the amount of power there is in being able to build this kind of environment, because you think about it, if you're someone who has designed stores historically, structures, it's an amazing set of skills and it's extremely complicated.

So if you say, okay, I'm gonna open a store, you don't just flip the switch and you know, there are so many people and complexities and there's a lot of money involved. I was fascinated by the idea that you could create this sort of, you know, non-tangible environment to do very tangible things. So that's kind of where I started. I started early commerce, kind of as, you know, what they called a webmaster back then, which is like, it's such an old title. That was, that was back when everybody did everything. Yeah, design, I build, you know, I manage content, all these things because organizations hadn't really dimensionalized their own departments yet. But it was great cause it gave me a lot of experience in a lot of areas at once. So I evolved through that and eventually got, you know, I had mentioned that I had done work writing and sort of becoming a subject matter expert in a lot of programming languages and tools.

And so I was working with a company at the time that was writing content books and also was an alpha and beta tester and developer for a lot of early Adobe and then Microsoft products. So I got brought into the fold with the owners of the company at the time who were already authoring books on desktop publishing and wanted to extend that to programming and web development tools. If you think about like when Creative Suites started to include things like Dreamweaver, when Microsoft started putting out tools to dimensionalize visual studio, at the time it was Silver Lights and there's so many of these, there was such a race for web development tools because they realized they could empower people to do a lot. And so I got really immersed in that world and I got fascinated with the aspect of product development, which is not just building things, but building, you know, being a part of seeing software evolve, right?

And I realized, you know, it's not different. A website, a web application, mobile application is software. So the processes are very similar, right? You know, if you're releasing a

desktop product, the venue is different, but the concept should be the same. And I think at the time, web development wasn't quite as structured. Agile methodology was more, I would say confined within a much smaller group and generally focused on either manufacturing or in very early days of hardcore software development. So I started to, I became really fascinated with this because I'm like, wow, like how do you learn from what people are doing in a broader technical, you know, architecture and design sense and apply that to sort of the wild west of what was the web at the time. And now those things have become, I think, a lot more standard than the way people were.

But you see entire departments or people dedicated to digital product development. So that was really where I got very interested in that aspect. And as I moved through agency world, I found that I could apply that same mindset within creative teams, sitting down with clients. It was really less about, okay, you know, at least we tried to make it less balance. Just build your website, sometimes was a little more straightforward, but sometimes it was about, you know, we ventured outside the web world, we went into experiential tech, we went into point of sale, we went into, you know, physical displays, whether it be in stores or hotels, didn't matter. But the concept was the same. But it, it enabled me to see technology outside of a box. And I don't mean outside the box, but a box meaning a specific thing. Now you were seeing web-like experiences or app-like experiences in the real world.

You were seeing them deployed through VR and AR, you were seeing them deployed to kiosk. So I got really excited about that. And then of course their, you know, the rise of IOT, the internet of things, read a whole new mindset across verticals. People got excited, hotels got excited about doing cool stuff with physical objects. And I had gotten immersed in that as well. And you know, brushed up pretty hard on my electronic engineering and fabrication and things like that. So it was really exciting. But for me, the common thread was really the product development side. But also at the same time as you grow as professional, you start to do two things, which is you start to really define yourself either as a hardcore SME or as a generalist. In my case, I tried to straddle both. And the generalist side was, look, all the components I used to do my job are really core components of the digital ecosystem.

It's not just I am a programmer or I am a database administrator, or I am a designer. It

was, I understand and know a number of these components, but more broadly understand the right people to bring in. So that eventually evolved into capability development at different companies, agencies as well. It eventually evolved into overseeing disciplines such as not just development, but user experience design, things like that. And also working really closely with business teams because business teams would go out particularly in agents and they were selling capabilities, right? So sitting alongside people in new business client and, and account management, creative teams and being able to say like, look, part of your, the evolution of your brand is not just about yet another campaign or another stunt. It is about creating coolest shit product that you can put out in a number of channels in the market.

If you're a hotel, you have the venue to do it with little restriction, right? If you are a car brand or a CPG, there are really ways to bring the products into the market beyond just online, but online's a big part of it, right? So, so sort of this simultaneous path of being creative with the technology side and using it really as a catalyst in business development as well as brand growth. And at the same time, as a manager, building teams that could do and deliver this stuff. So, you know, by the time I got later into my career, I had become a Chief Digital Officer. I had led creative technology disciplines as well as innovation disciplines. For me, my prior, one of my prior companies, as I was a global VP of digital innovation, that was really exciting because it focused hardcore on beating the adoption curve. That was what we tried to do. Right? How do you, how do you look at trends in technology and make it useful? So I think that lo and behold, all of these things are huge catalysts and contributors to consumer experience. You create a great virtual try-on experience, whether it be for eyewear, apparel, cosmetics, that is experience, that is what gets people excited about buying something. And more importantly, it gets people excited about, you know, there's a magic to it, you know, obviously, you know, companies, you know, unless you're a nod for profit, your job is to go out and sell stuff. But you know, you can do it in a sort of, you know, blunt object sort of way. Or in a cold sort of, where you could go out and get people excited. Let them have fun, let them play. That's what people remember.

People don't sit there and go, wow, that was the most exciting thing I ever put in my basket. People remember, oh wow, this is the cool thing I was exposed to when I was

looking at this product. And even if you don't clinch that on the first purchase that people will remember, those people will remember and come back. And if you do a really good job and you're working across channels at once, at some point they'll be reconnected with your brand or product in another venue. Maybe they'll see it online, try something on online, then see it in a physical store and it's like, oh, okay, the pieces line up. For me, becoming a CXO was really the culmination of all of the things that I had done in my career. And I think to be a CXO, you have to be, definitely a generalist in many senses. You have to understand how the different pieces come together. As I mentioned earlier, you also have to appreciate and understand the importance of other disciplines of sales and commercial teams, marketing teams, product teams. And that's something really that can only be gained over time and with experience and with making mistakes and having wins, right? And the other part is really developing capabilities at the same time to make sure that those things either connect or that you're filling gaps that you need to put it together. So really to me, getting into this aspect and real, you know, for me, I didn't look at it as, well, this is a whole new thing. I looked as, this is the apex of what I've been working toward most of my career, right?

Shawn (24:39):

I love it. And I love, I think the big thing is people have to realize, there's not a general path to this. And I love the fact that you've talked about ecosystems. You know, we talked at MOFI about the Experience Ecosystem™ and the co-design and co-collaborating. So last question here, what advice would you give someone who had just started in experience design? Like what's the first nugget you would give them that says, here's my best advice to you?

Fred (25:10):

Think about what you would wanna see as a shopper. People get wrapped up in their worlds being professionals. So designers, programmers, marketing executives, We all are in danger of getting trapped in our career. So we go, oh, well this is good from a marketing perspective, or this makes total sense from a commercial perspective, or this is great from a experience design perspective or whatever, or technology perspective. At the end of the day, none of it matters unless it makes sense from a consumer perspective. And I'm amazed at, and this is not all the time, I'm amazed at how many

professionals I still run into in various parts of organizations who, they're so biased toward what they understand from an industry perspective. And then I've literally said to people like, look, you buy stuff, right? Like, you know, you don't just come to work, you don't just get released from a hibernation capsule into the office and back in at the end of the day, you go out, you buy stuff on the weekends, shop for yourself with your family. You buy food, you buy eyewear, you buy clothes. Like forget about what you do for a living. What do you do as a shopper? What gets you excited? If you stay true to that, it just makes life much easier. And you stay out of that trap because it's like grounding yourself. You always remember, what I am doing, regardless of what I'm getting paid to do, what it looks like on paper, what software I'm using, at the end of the day, it all culminates into this moment, this thing, this, this where you are trying to get a consumer excited and onboard with something, right? And that's the the thing always to remember.

Shawn (26:45):

Great advice, but it has now come to this time, Fred, where we come to our Combustion Questions, which as I mentioned to you are three randomly selected questions that I was just handed. So I'm reading them for the first time as I'm reading them to you. So Fred, are you ready for your Combustion Questions?

Fred (27:02):

Let's do it.

Shawn (27:03):

So Fred, if you and I were to go to Disney World this afternoon, which ride or attraction would you want us to go on first?

Fred (27:13):

Oh man. I would have to say it's either gonna be anything Star Wars at Galaxy's Edge, or it's gonna be the food festival at EPCOT. My two passions, eating and Star Wars.

Shawn (27:26):

Eating and Star Wars. I've been on that right a couple times, yes. And my wife would be joining with us as she's a Star Wars buff, completely. So, awesome. Question number

two, electric guitar or acoustic guitar.

Fred (27:40):

Oh man. How can you not have one without the other? I am an advocate of both. I own many instruments and I own many acoustics and many electrics. For me, I just love guitars and it's whatever I'm in the mood to play. I think there's something great about plugging in and turning up. I think there's also something equally great about sitting down with a good acoustic guitar and letting your fingers do the work. So I am, I will never advocate for one over the other. I am an equal opportunity guitarist.

Shawn (28:09):

That's great. That's great. All right, third question. What do you think about mountains?

Fred (28:16):

Ugh, depends. Real mountains? Mountains of paperwork?

Shawn (28:21):

Real mountain.

Fred (28:22):

I would say real mountains, glorious. I wish I had the bravery to climb one. I am envious and in admiration of people who climb mountains and could actually do that. But I love a great landscape. I love going anywhere in the world or even in the US where mountains make up that landscape. I think it's like one of those glorious of nature that you have to take in. And if you live in a particularly, overly metropolitan area or a particularly flat part of the country, get out and see some, you know, in terms of mountains of paperwork, one star, do not recommend.

Shawn (28:57):

Well, thank you so much Fred. And for those who are our listeners, you can connect with Fred on LinkedIn and follow all of his amazing content and thoughts. And if you can't find him there, you can follow me and I'll make sure that we get you connected with Fred. So Fred, thank you so much for being here on The Combustion Chronicles and stay safe and stay well.

Fred (29:18):

Thanks Shawn. Great time.

Shawn (29:20):

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of The Combustion Chronicles. If you've enjoyed this episode, please take a few minutes to subscribe, rate and review. Remember that I'm always looking to meet more big thinking mavericks. So let's keep the conversation going by connecting on LinkedIn. If you want to discover more about human obsessed, maverick-minded experience ecosystems, go to mofi.co where you'll find ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution, or go to experienceevangelist.com to learn more about my mission to challenge leaders, to blow up outdated siloed systems and rebuild them with an aligned human-first approach and as always stay safe, be well and keep blowing shit up.