

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

EPIISODE SEVENTY-NINE WEAVING, DISRUPTION, AND PURPOSE

HOST: SHAWN NASON
GUEST: ANTONIA HOCK

OCTOBER 5, 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, Antonia Hock, is a trailblazer and acclaimed futurist in the world of organizational transformation, leadership excellence, and building experience-based brands. Her career is rooted in building cultures of customer centricity, implementing game changing leadership strategy, and innovating customer experiences, all with an emphasis on tangible results and lasting impact. Before launching Antonia Hock & Associates as a global consulting firm focused on transformational leadership and innovation, Antonia spent six years as the Global Head of the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center. Her future forward program is a practical and actionable approach focused on leadership development, the future of consumer behavior, and how to navigate disruption. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Antonia.

Antonia (01:43):

Thank you Shawn. It's an absolute pleasure to be here.

Shawn (01:45):

Well, first off, anyone that puts navigating disruption is like my soul sister. Um, and soul being because we've talked so much even here on The Combustion Chronicles around disruption and what it means to be a disrupter. And you know what, we owe you a huge congratulations because literally, this Fall, you have launched your new business, Antonia Hock & Associates, and I know that it's an exciting place to be. So congratulations to you on that as well.

Antonia (02:15):

Thank you.

Shawn (02:17):

Yeah. So you're probably telling as many people as possible about your new venture. Can you give us that quick elevator pitch on what you're doing there?

Antonia (02:26):

Absolutely. So, you know, my passion for this space really led me to found this firm and we're a firm dedicated to the future of leadership. Really thinking about what is required to lead going forward. COVID was such a disruptor in so many ways, right? So leadership is going, in my view, through a revolution right now led really for the first time in a while by this employee revolution. So that's a big part of what we're doing. We're also really focused on the future of consumer behavior. I really see a lot of people that are focused on the here and now. How do we handle the next three months, six months, nine months? This is about how do you forecast where human behavior is going and pull that into your entire brand architecture. And then the last one, which you know, when you said Combustion Chronicles, I was like, if there's combustion involved, I'm in. So the last, the the last thing you're really focused on is navigating disruption, right? You hear the statement all the time, you're either disrupting or being disrupted. And businesses that don't understand which one of those categories they're in, that's a problem because you're one or the other, as you well know. So the whole firm is centered around that. Keynotes, workshops and consulting.

Shawn (03:48):

Powerful. Great. It's so true and I love that you even say that a business has to fall in one of those categories. Cause I've heard a business just to say, well, we're neither one, but yeah, you are. You're either disrupting or disrupted or, you're, right? And you and I share this huge passion around trends. I love to do trend watching. I actually downloaded like three reports yesterday from a group that just put some out. What trends are you and your team closely following these days, especially from that global perspective? And I know we're gonna get into consumer behaviors, but let's talk about some trends on that global perspective that you're looking at right now that would be great for people to think about in their Experience Ecosystems™.

Antonia (04:35):

So I think one of the big things we've seen, it requires a tremendous amount of discipline for companies to actually get to this space. But this concept of having a signature identity and building your entire brand around it is something that, that I think we're really seeing the succeeding firms, businesses globally that have centered in a disciplined way around a signature identity are the ones that are leading their market. And it's tough to do for a lot of companies because there's this temptation to be all things to all people, right? You don't want to eliminate a portion of a market when you're thinking about being revenue led. But ironically, those businesses that have gotten laser-focused about who they are, what they stand for, and who they serve are really leading the market. So I think that's a big global trend where, back to how you let out, right? You're seeing the disruptors and the disrupted and knowing who you are and being able to say no to things that don't fit who you are is a major feature I think across that entire ecosystem right now, unfortunately we're not seeing a lot of businesses with the discipline to do it.

Shawn (05:47):

So let's talk about that more because even within your bio as we were reading it, you talk about building experience-based brands and I'm on this kick right now and gonna probably not give it up for a while on how do you move from doing experience as a program or as a check the box to experience as a strategy? So when you're building an experience-based brand, you have to do experience as a strategy. What are your thoughts around that space?

Antonia (06:19):

So this is great. I love this question. I bite my tongue sometimes when it comes to this exact conversation because I think it's really at the epicenter of a lot of things that are experience-driven. Customer, with the point that you're doing customer experience as a program, you're going to lose, period. If it's not at the top and it's not being woven into operations, marketing, the way you price, the way you think about your philanthropy, if it's not every part of your business, top to bottom, you'll never be successful with it. I watch, I listened to a LinkedIn thread unfold the other day and it was all about how to convince a C-level leader that they need to invest in customer experience. That's nails on the chalkboard for me cos you will never, quote-unquote, convince a C-level leader

to invest in customer experience. It's either unbelievably a part of the fabric of the business or it's not. And so when you think about an experience-based brand, that is a leadership team that is thinking about the consumer first and building it into everything they do, top to bottom, start to finish.

Shawn (07:36):

That's like a drop the mic moment there. You know, like, okay, we're done. But I love it, I love the power of that and it aligns with me and MOFI and you know, my hashtag as you know, Antonia, on LinkedIn is #ExperienceEvangelist. And you're preaching what I am preaching and I love it. So I wanna go then to, if you have an experience-based brand, you obviously have to know consumers' behaviors and let's talk about that some. Can you tell us about the future of consumer behavior and what that means for businesses and even where are companies being misguided today and what are companies that are doing it well?

Antonia (08:20):

So consumers today, you know, we've seen such an epic shift and I guess I would start out with this question by saying, you know, there's been a lot of conversation around COVID for obvious reasons and, and in my view, sort of the macro message for me around COVID is the disruption of connection. COVID didn't really change our landscape so much. There were concepts and things that were happening in the world before COVID. COVID just came in, gave us all a blank sheet of paper because it just blew up every connection, whether that's on a personal level or corporate level, and has allowed us to reimagine connections. So we're seeing a lot of trends that are coming off of that with consumer behavior. And I think a couple of those consumers are really demanding transparency. And how does a company line up? Like I just got yesterday in the mail, my Bombas slippers, right?

People that know that brand, right? They make socks and slippers and all kinds of other things. So I just got this, you know, very cool pair of knitted slippers in the mail yesterday and I love the transparency of that brand and I actually love the card that came with my slippers with their famous, of course, for always donating a like item for every item

that you buy and they back it up. So it's that transparency of business model. Consumers are demanding more and more of that in terms of behavior and companies that are winning are comfortable that their practices hold up to that transparency. So that's a really important trend I also think we're seeing, so that's another, that's a great brand example of purpose. More and more businesses are exploring this concept of purpose. That's another great consumer behavior trend. I don't think it's going away anytime soon. In fact, I would say it's gonna get magnified as we move through kind of generational cohorts. Gen Z's deeply intolerant of this kind of old school Wolf of Wall Street style business. They're not gonna do business with you, period. So if you're not making that shift and you aren't thinking about that as a macro level, you need to, and that doesn't mean in a fake way.

Shawn (10:35):

Yeah, I think you and I are reading some of the similar feeds on LinkedIn because I actually was on a feed yesterday and watched it unfold talking about is this purpose driven business leadership stuff a fad and going away? And what actually blew me away is at that time it was a, they did a poll along with that, is 70% of the people that answered that question at that moment had said, yes, the purpose is going away. And I was just shaking my head like, holy cow, you guys are really freaking missing this.

Antonia (11:09):

Yeah, I just go back to like an innate, yeah, I think you, when it comes down to human behavior, you usually fall into one or two camps. You think people have sort of an innate good or an innate bad and you know, I don't wanna over generalize, but I do think there's a, an element of behavior study that says you're kind of, you, you have a point of view that's pessimistic or optimistic, and if you're optimistic you wanna connect capitalism, revenue, all these things to some kind of greater good impact in the world and brands that are doing it, doing it well, whether they're connecting to joy, whether they're connecting to giving back whatever they're connecting to, that's just a core fundamental human concept that we live with. Hopefully you live it in your family and then you wanna see that extend to your business relationships.

Shawn (12:02):

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I love that you're going, talking about, you know, the family and, and engaging on your personal journey to this, right? Like, so a lot of people don't know, Antonia, that you started your career in business intelligence, then you spent a bunch of time in the tech world and moved into hospitality, kind of sounds like my world, you know, I did all kinds of different things. I tell people I'm in my fifth career now, so, but was there a single moment in your journey when your emphasis on this customer centricity came into focus? Or did it really evolve over time for you?

Antonia (12:42):

I had a, I'd always been maniacally focused on customer success, you know, coming up through the tech world, particularly in the side of it that I was in and starting out actually in business intelligence. And while you did your homework you start out with seeking kind of trends and analysis. So you naturally kind of go that way. But over time, I'd say really the critical moments for me occurred at Microsoft and they occurred as I was watching this giant tech company and participating in some really big global transformations where you would have companies and organizations that would be going from, you know, a baseline to accelerating their business model and all of their goals through technology and watching that happen and the company transform and the customers they serve, benefit, it's like I had that light bulb moment. I thought these big transformations, with these big visions that have big impact on the company and the consumer, and the consumer's family and the multiplier effect, wow. Like that should be what the journey everybody's on. And that it changed my, really changed my perspective.

Shawn (13:55):

That's awesome to hear. And it's awesome to hear that it happened through, you know, a lot of people say can't happen in big companies, um, but you know, Microsoft's a pretty big company the last time I checked and I tell people my first corporate job was for the Walt Disney Company. There's good things, bad things about that because you get spoiled and you think every company should work that way, right? So, Antonia, at MOFI, our elevator pitch starts that we are maverick-minded and human-obsessed, and you and I have known each other long enough and we've never met in person, but through LinkedIn. And if you're not a big LinkedIn networker, get there because that's how I met

this amazing person. I have no doubt to say that you are maverick-minded and human obsessed. So when you think of maverick leaders, a lot of people think of that as people as where you started in the tech world. Is there a place for mavericks in C-suites of established companies today?

Antonia (14:55):

I want to say yes to this question because I believe that just because you're a big company, just as I, as we talked about in the last question with Microsoft, I believe that big companies with the right culture and the right leader infrastructure can be incredible market makers and forces and they need thought diversity, challengers, dissenters, and they need them in the boardroom. So I want to say yes, mavericks need homes in big C-suite parts of companies, right? However, my caveat here, is the culture has to be embracing of that kind of a leader. They have to be ready for that leader because I think we see it all the time, right? You just talked about LinkedIn and networking and, and what a powerful tool it is and, and I'm so grateful for LinkedIn because otherwise, as you said, we never would've met. It's such a cool connector platform. But I watch all the time these amazing thinkers, innovators who flame out of big companies in 12 months. And when I see that happen, I always look at the company culture as like they thought this was a great thing, but they were so ill-prepared to absorb and embrace this person. And so it really comes down to culture. If you're going to embrace a maverick, you have to be ready for what they're bringing in their toolkit.

Shawn (16:24):

Yeah. You know, Antonia, we work with the, a gentleman who love him dearly, his name is Sean Slovenski, we've experienced that a couple times where the company says, oh we want you, and he's definitely maverick-minded, but then you get in there and they're like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. That's not what we wanted. And you're like, but you just said you wanted that, you were hiring for that. And I think that is a great tool. It seems so simple, but I don't think people truly understand how much culture embraces that type of thinking and even what we're talking about throughout the whole thing, right? That culture is so deeply embedded in that. So how or what's the piece of advice that you would give leaders within an organization to create better experiences all around,

not just for employees but for customers, even for their boards, what is that level of advice that you would give to someone right out of the gate?

Antonia (17:27):

You know, oh that's a big question, right? That's, you covered a lot of ground there Shawn, like we didn't, you didn't pull any punches like board, employees, leaders, like I love it, swim for the fences. You know, I'll start, I'll really start with employees because this is something I'm incredibly passionate about, driven by my own career and that, and you know, was interesting because I was just looking at the PWC study that just came out a few days ago around what C-suite leaders think are some of their biggest risks. And the number one big risk right now is employee development. And if I were gonna say to boards, leaders and employees right now, one of the biggest areas is really investing in career development and employee development. And I don't mean old school here, like I don't mean death by PowerPoint or trotting out yet another big corporate webcast training program that's gonna benefit the company.

I mean truly investing in the employee and skill sets that will help them advance their careers, their earning potential, the way they perform on the job tools that are portable. And I know companies never wanna invest here because they don't want employees to leave, but then it's incumbent on you as the employee to provide the opportunity. I mean as the company to provide the opportunity so the employee doesn't leave, but that investment and it has to start at the board level, the leader level and investing in leaders. Leaders are so burned out right now helping them cross the chasm and think about enriching their own skills, employees investing in employees and at the board level really thinking about how do you weave, find advice for boards right now, how do you weave together purpose and capitalism? How do you put those two things together because that will that that down trickle effect to leaders and employees and consumers is something that you know will really, really serve you for the long term if you can crack that nut. So I'd say invest in great skill development and in portable things that make your employees more productive and leaders more productive. As well as thinking about purpose and how to weave it all the way through top to bottom.

Shawn (19:35):

And I love that terminology you're using and I've written it down, purpose versus capitalism. Because to me that's more, capitalism is more than just revenue, it's the whole picture. And I don't think that as an industry, that we do a really good job of talking about it that way. So I love that. I hope the listeners are grabbing that, you know, purpose versus capitalism because I think that is gonna have to be right up there in C-suite strategies going forward in my opinion and obviously in your opinion as well. So you've just started your new business and again, congratulations on that and can't wait to see those successes. So as we start to wrap up the episode, I wanna ask you a question. So without stealing any secrets from your future forward workshops, what's one thing that every leader should do to build a thriving team?

Antonia (20:32):

So it's great because you actually just teed it up really, really well, Shawn, I'm not surprised based on just what I know, you always have the perfect segue. So leading with the purpose behind the work gets at the root of a lot of things that teams are really looking for right now. And I'll make this very tactical and actionable for people because I think purpose can be that way. I love the idea of looking at the projects, looking at the meetings, looking at, at how people spend their time through a purpose lens. And that doesn't necessarily mean you have to be talking about saving the world, right? It's just what is the actual purpose of what we're doing? Why are we doing this? What is the goal? Why are we on the phone? Why are we on Zoom? Why are we doing this project? What, like, a questioning mindset that is tied to purpose. Because the amount of noise that you can cut out of a business, a team, a person's day to day function, if you can get disciplined around that, is life-changing. Because I think over COVID, we've just gotten this mindset of execution, execution, survival, execution. And we haven't had a real moment of pause in a long time where people have stepped back and said, why am I on this meeting? Why are we having this meeting and why are we doing this project? Let's get disciplined around those kinds of questions and that kind of critical thought because that leads to so many other sort of domino impacts on the team.

Shawn (22:14):

Well, and I'm not for sure if you know her and if you don't, I'll make the introduction for sure Antonia, but we had a guest a couple season ago, Emily Chang, who is the CEO of the McCann Worldwide Group in China, and she gave a piece of advice that I think goes right along with this. She said, pull up your calendar and look at your calendar and you can see what your priorities are. And I think that ties back to this, especially as leaders. I've always said this, that if you're in the C-suite, you need to be out of the day-to-day of the business because you need to be directing the business and guiding the business into the, to the future, like your future forward concept. But I just love that, you know, leading with the purpose behind the work. I love, you know, as Emily said, look at where your priorities are. I think for leaders it's a really a time and business right now where we need to just stop and do a gut check, is what I would call it. So I love your advice.

Antonia (23:14):

I couldn't agree more. And Emily, she is a powerhouse of a leader. I actually had the privilege of spending some time with her at another, at an event, uh, virtual event last year and we stayed in touch. So back to like, it's, it's like the six degrees of separation, right? Kevin Bacon here, you've got so many people in the network and it's amazing how like-minded people find each other.

Shawn (23:37):

I love it. Yeah, well we could keep going for sure on this, but it has come to that point where we need to start wrapping up and we, we do this segment called The Combustion Questions, Antonia, and they're three randomly selected questions that I call from my human algorithm and they were just handed to me so I have not seen them. Are you ready for your combustion questions?

Antonia (24:00):

I am so ready.

Shawn (24:02):

If you were required to have a bird as a pet, what kind of bird would it be?

Antonia (24:10):

Ooh, I would definitely have a falcon. I love, so, you know, I think everyone has kind of a style and I'm sure this is where this question's going, like your bird matches your style a little bit. I think falcons are, you know, having spent some time in the, in the Middle East, incredibly beautiful birds and they're fast, they're precise, they are epic hunters, they're super engaged, they're very alert and they really challenge you. And that fits right with my style.

Shawn (24:40):

Awesome, awesome, awesome. Okay, question number two. What's your second favorite color?

Antonia (24:49):

Oh my god, my second favorite color, white.

Shawn (24:52):

And why?

Antonia (24:53):

So I love color theory. So one of the things, you know, if I were to scroll way back, way, way back in the archives, I did a lot of studio art and a lot of painting. And so color theory really factors into a lot of graphic design and a lot of art. And white is one of those colors that is just, you know, an incredible accent and incredible part of creating space in a lot of design. And so I love the concept of white space, so,

Shawn (25:27):

Great. Great. Okay, last question. What do you think about snow globes?

Antonia (25:35):

You know, I always thought those were really creepy. I was never a snow globe person. When I was little, I thought they were like equal parts interesting, but very creepy. This idea of like, and maybe it's because my grandmother just had too many in her home in Wisconsin, she used to collect them. but you get too many snow globes on the top of a shelf and it's like too many little micro worlds staring you in the face as a young person. It's just, yeah, too creepy for me.

Shawn (26:04):

Yeah, that's a good one. And I think I have a lot of people around me that agree with you on that. Um, we're actually in a restaurant yesterday with Michael or my other, uh, right hand here and we were looking at snow globes and there were some creepy snow globes. So yes. Well thank you so much, Antonia. As I tell all of our listeners, you can find her on LinkedIn, go follow her. Go follow, I'm not for sure, do you have a company page now on LinkedIn, Antonia?

Antonia (26:33):

We do. Yes, we do. We do.

Shawn (26:34):

Go follow, go get that followed. I'll make sure we're following it now that it's up. But thank you for being here and I'm so excited to see what the future holds for you.

Antonia (26:43):

Thank you Shawn. And I am equally thrilled with all of the energy that you put out in the world every day being maverick-minded, human-obsessed, and really like carrying that torch forward. I love it. We need so much more of it and it's just a pleasure to be on the podcast today.

Shawn (27:01):

Thank you.

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.