

# THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE EIGHTY-FIVE  
PEOPLE, CULTURE,  
ENGAGEMENT, &  
EXPERIENCE**

**HOST: SHAWN NASON  
GUEST: CHERYL WHITING-KISH**

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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, Cheryl Whiting-Kish is chief people officer at HOA Brands, which operates or franchises close to 400 Hooters restaurants in 38 states and around the globe. She actually began her career as one of the brand's familiar Hooters Girls rising through the ranks to become the company's first female vice president in the 90s and returned to the company in October, 2019. In between, she served as an in-house or external consultant to organizations in academia, rent-to-own, government, technology, transportation, healthcare and other industries. Through it all, she is focused on identifying talent and giving employees a platform to shine, grow, and become whoever they want to be wherever their path leads them. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Cheryl.

**Cheryl (01:44):**

Thank you for having me. It's an honor. I'm excited.

**Shawn (01:47):**

Absolutely. I am so excited to have you on here and I love that last part of your bio where you talk about letting people become whomever they wanna be, wherever their path leads them and so people don't know it as HOA, right? Brands, they know it as Hooters. So you were a Hooters Girl and I think people have some stigmas around that. But in the brand's early years and now on your second stint as an executive at the company, can you tell what it's like to return to the company that gave you your start and helped you launch your life and career?

**Cheryl (02:23):**

Absolutely. I'm honored to be back. I am just thrilled at this stage of my life and my career and I've had a really amazing career that I'm very proud of to be back with a brand that really helped to launch who I am today and what I ended up doing throughout my career, and so now to be back and to be able to mentor and share and help develop others to find their path, it's a big deal to me. I'm excited.

**Shawn (02:55):**

To me it's a beautiful story, to circle back there and it, it's so important for people to understand that. So I'm glad you're having a great time and impacting so many lives with that. And so let's talk about guest experience, customer experience. I don't know how you guys call it their at HOA, but it's a huge part of success and hospitality and I was fortunate enough, I worked for the Disney company, so I understand that. And actually my first job, I was 14 and I was a waiter and my parents owned restaurants too, a restaurant early on in my life. But I think you would agree that other parts of this Experience Ecosystem™, including the employee experience, are critically important too. And we talked about it as an Experience Ecosystem™. You can't have just one or the other, you have to have it all together. So we've all heard about the staffing challenges very recently and the hospitality industry coming out of COVID here. So what do restaurants need to do to improve the employee experience and keep that retention rate for restaurants?

**Cheryl (04:03):**

Yeah. Well first I wanna say, I think all of us that started as teenagers or young adults in the hospitality industry, we have a leg up, don't we, when it comes to understanding how important experiences, both guest experience and our employee experience. But I think what we need to always remember, and I remember being very young in my career and realizing in my professional career and realizing there's so much effort that's put into marketing, the external piece, marketing, branding, creating amazing experiences for external customers. And I remember I was in charge of the training department, I came into the corporate office and I said to our marketing leader at the time, well, we need to do the same thing and put just as much money and effort into what the employee experience is gonna be like. If you want to get the results that you're going for externally, then we have to make it just as much fun, just as appealing, just as exciting

as we would to the external customer. So that's the first step. And then really realizing in order to get to business results, you have to create experiences first because experiences drive beliefs and beliefs drive behaviors. And so if company X says, I want my ROI to be this, or I want my traffic to be this, then we've gotta create experiences for our employees that will drive their beliefs that will then drive their behaviors to ensure that those results are met. So hopefully that answered your question, but I felt very passionately about that.

**Shawn (05:43):**

I don't remember ever hearing an executive in your type of role as a chief people officer that talks about it that way. And I love that you said experience drives beliefs, beliefs drive behavior. So can you actually give us a story about when designing that type of experience for employees made someone's life better?

**Cheryl (06:08):**

Yeah, there's a couple examples. I'll go to one that's outside of Hooters organization cause I've, there's a big one that has to do with Hooters branding when we transitioned the same hotel in Las Vegas to a Hooters casino hotel and what that experience was like. But I'm gonna go with what we did at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium. And so we're talking about prior to the stadium opening a year out, really designing how we were gonna inculcate the values of Arthur Blank and his executive team into those 7,000, most of them transit, temporary employees. And so creating amazing experiences during the onboarding actually resulted in the voice of the fan sharing that the guest experience exceeded expectations. So I have it in my mind's eye. You've gotta create this fun and this energy. You've gotta ensure that values aren't something on a wall that they're inculcated. And so now all of a sudden you have the lives of 7,000 people who might be selling tickets or selling beer or sweeping the sidewalk or whatever they're doing and they're jumping up and down and they're part of something bigger than themselves. And I think that that's what really drives us as human beings is knowing that we're part of something bigger than ourselves. So that's one example that I have.

**Shawn (07:31):**

So I have to ask though, the second example, and let me tell you why. It's a personal reason. I come from a family who appreciates gambling, both terms. And one of my appreciations and family's appreciation later on in my parents' life was the San Remo Hotel.

**Cheryl (07:52):**

No, get out. Get out.

**Shawn (07:55):**

I've spent many nights sleeping at the San Remo Hotel. Was no longer that because it came the Hooters Hotel. Tell us about that experience. I have to know this.

**Cheryl (08:08):**

Okay, so thank you for letting me talk about it cos it's one of the great experiences of my life. So this is after I had left the brand, but I was brought in as a consultant and this was a year prior to the San Remo actually transitioning to Hooters Casino Hotel. And my role was to ensure that again, that the culture that Hooters was known for and Hooters wanted to bring was there. That all of the employees were able to live and breathe that culture. And so you're taking it, I'm sorry, I know your parents loved it, but it was a tired, sleepy, old hotel, the San Remo.

**Shawn (08:48):**

Well, they were tired, sleepy, old people.

**Cheryl (08:53):**

And it's, okay, and then you have this brand, right? Hooters, Hooters Girls, high energy. And I'll share with you, one goal we had was that this was a non-unionized property. We wanted to make sure that it stayed non-unionized, right? And one way to do that is to ensure that you're taking care of people and that you're creating beliefs that they're working for a super great company and that there's employee value proposition and all of that. So very purposefully we said we are going to give every single existing San Remo team member, employee, the opportunity to transition over if they can show that they can live and breathe and demonstrate what we defined as the wow factors. And so

there was a lot of work that went in to all of this working with the board, defining the vision, defining the behaviors that demonstrated these 10 wow factors, super exciting onboarding and all of that.

And then there was a follow up mechanism to ensure that they were being demonstrated all the way from the executive team down. And we were very, very successful in that first year. I think it was number one in customer service in Las Vegas when it opened. I mean this was back in around 2005, 2006. So it was a great experience, really fun. It was also a challenge because you were taking behaviors that weren't the norm and helping people to adopt new behaviors that were super customer centric. And in the meantime they got excited about it. They're working for a fun place.

**Shawn (10:25):**

I had to know the story and I love it. I mean it's great, I am still a frequenter of Vegas.

**Cheryl (10:32):**

I'll go there in a week. I'm going for the NASCAR. So Chase Elliott is our driver and he is doing extremely well. I think it's the last race of the season, so I'll be in Vegas.

**Shawn (10:41):**

Awesome. So everybody who I know, every executive in experience has done some very different career paths. And so you spent a lot of time in HR early in your career. And now today, is there a moment when you had that a-ha where that light went off when you said this is more than just about pay and benefits? Cause I still think HR struggles with that.

**Cheryl (11:05):**

I worked with the CEO when we designed the chief people officer role here at HOA for Hooters. We very purposefully designed it to be a partner to HR but not traditional HR. So my role is focused very much on people, culture, engagement, experience, all of that, some talent management, that sort of thing. I think that my a-ha came before I was even in the HR side of the business. I come from operations. So I too worked as a teenager, worked in my early college years in restaurants and waitress and bartender. And I remember I was a new manager with a brand early in my career and it was about,

I can see it right now, Shawn, there was a dishwasher, I believe he was from Haiti. And I remember conversing with him and realizing how important the way he felt about being in this country and about working for our company and just that paying attention to who individuals are as individuals, it's like a light bulb went off in him and all of a sudden you saw him see that he had opportunity and was a part again of something bigger than himself. So I don't think it came in the time of HR, I think it came in my time of working in operations and just being really connected to the people that make things happen. In this case it was in our restaurants and hotels.

**Shawn (12:39):**

And I love that your role is connected but separate, right? And that you're really focusing on those things that make those things build the foundation to make all of those things successful. So I love that. So we talk a lot about at MOFI that we are maverick-minded and human-obsessed. And so it's great to hear that you are definitely human-obsessed and I'm learning, very maverick-minded as well in your thinking and being. So how might you, as an executive, encourage people to be willing to step out of the box and think a little bit more like mavericks and think differently, especially in that type of role that you're in at national brands where consistency is such a major selling point and a factor operationally?

**Cheryl (13:27):**

And I think about this for myself all the time. How do we push ahead? Where are we five years from now, 10 years from now? Hooters celebrated its 39th anniversary, we're going into 40 years, but we have to be thinking about the future. So one recommendation is really reading and staying on top of what are futurists saying about where we're going on this planet? Where is Gen Z gonna be? Where is your future customer coming from, your future employee coming from? What's gonna be important to them? And build those into your programs now. One of the exercises I'm gonna go through very shortly here with a coach and mentor of mine is we're gonna be actually going through an exercise and looking at future scenarios, future state scenarios, sort of those what ifs. Okay, what if this happened, what's the worst case? What's the best case? What are we gonna do as an organization if ABC happens? But really thinking out based on what futurists are saying. So I think it's also not ever becoming complacent with who you are. I mean, we as a brand, we're very iconic. We have a

hundred percent brand recognition. Doesn't mean a hundred percent people have come in or wanna come in, but you say Hooters and people know, what are we gonna need to do to ensure that we're attracting. And that's what I would say to others is how are you gonna attract the employee that wants to work for you, doesn't have to work for you? Cos they don't have to work for anybody and one size does not fit all. And so a lot of things we're doing, I don't wanna go on too long about it, but it's pushing the team to really be future state focused. Do a lot of visioning exercises and those future scenario exercises that I mentioned.

**Shawn (15:12):**

I think it's powerful, wish more companies would think in that future state and not be so much into the day-to-day because let's be real about it, a lot of executives are very stuck into the day-to-day and it's really hard for them to think into the future. But that's what's gonna keep us a company successful and moving forward. So I guess I'll ask you this cause I want to break a stigma that I think people have around Hooters and you're a prime example. What would you say to people in the world and to our listeners who really still think when they hear Hooters, they think of the Hooters Girls, they think of the outfits, they think of, is it demeaning to females for that? What would you say to them today in the role you're in and as where the company is? Cause I think people really need to understand it's much like what the Miss America Foundation has gone through, right? It's not just a beauty pageant. People need to understand it's more than that. What would you say to the world around the Hooters girl and the Hooters brand that has been, has some stigma around it?

**Cheryl (16:20):**

So the first thing I'd say is, we're going on 40 years and over 400,000 women have dawned the orange shorts. So you don't have to ask me, ask them because they'll tell you, and with no hesitation, what it means to them or meant to them to be able to, by choice, go to work for a brand where they had fun, formed a sisterhood and lifelong friends, were able to leverage working for the brand as a platform so that while they wore the orange shorts, they were preparing for life beyond the orange shorts. So what I would say is go talk to some of them like our current Deputy Secretary of Cyber Security for the Commonwealth of Virginia, also a Marine and a former Hooters girl. Or go talk to

the entrepreneur that has a hugely successful digital company and social media company who's Hooters girl alum or the vice president over at Focus Brands or the CEO of whatever. So one of the, and as I think you're aware is one of my focuses as chief people officer is to shine a light on her story and help to shatter that stigma. It is her choice, it is her story. And she will be the first one to tell you that empowerment is about choice. And she is her own agency and she chose for a period of time, whether it was take advantage of tuition reimbursement or make money to feed her children or whatever it is, to work for a brand that took care of her and takes care of her. And all of our, we call them team members, not employees.

**Shawn (18:02):**

I love it.

**Cheryl (18:03):**

So yeah, I could go on and on, but we're collecting, we call them 'I am a Hooters girl' stories and the first video you may have saw a week or little docu-series together, we're about to do the second one.

**Shawn (18:17):**

And you were already going to be on the podcast when I saw that come out. And even for me was an a-ha for me. And I was kind of wanted to slap myself because my family had been involved in the Miss America pageant for years and my brother ran, helped run a couple states and coached and I did some coaching there. They chose to put on the orange shorts, they choose to be in that pageant. Not any different than our business partner Michael with the Dallas Cowboys fan. Cheerleaders want to wear that Dallas Cowboys cheerleader outfit. But you also hear them talk about it was a launching platform for them to go be bigger and better things. And I love the fact, 400,000 hundred girls and you're shining a light in a very different way.

**Cheryl (19:05):**

Well I love it. And you know what I said recently at our conference in June, no more being on the defense, no more. We're going on offense with this. Over 40% of our operations managers are female. Most of them came up through the ranks. 75% of our

marketing department are female, of our corporate marketing department. All former Hooters girls. So in 66% of our overall management team for the field and here, male or female came up through the ranks. So we're very focused on helping to better one's life. So you can tell I get really passionate.

**Shawn (19:39):**

Oh no, I love it. And that's why I wanted you on here. We met over LinkedIn and just watching you share stories. I'm like, I want to talk with her and I am so glad we have and I'm gonna give it one last question before we do our last thing here that we do on every episode. What's the best advice you've ever received about leadership?

**Cheryl (20:00):**

Know thyself, I've had a lot of coaches and I've done a lot of coaching. All of our leadership programs are grounded in neuroscience, the neuroscience of leadership. And I would say start there. We all are leaders of self. Even if we don't have team members that we're leading, we're leaders in our life. We're leaders in our families, we're leaders in our communities, we're leaders here at work and we cannot lead if we don't first start with self. So that's the best advice I've ever gotten and that's the advice I give.

**Shawn (20:30):**

So let me ask you this question. What, is that the same piece of advice that you would've given Cheryl the first time she put on the orange shorts? As a Hooters girl?

**Cheryl (20:40):**

I think I would've told that girl, you are amazing cos I didn't have all of the confidence that I have now. So I think putting on the orange shorts and being allowed to be me and encouraged to grow, gotten me to where I am today. But back then I was not sure where I was gonna end up or where I was gonna go. I thought I was gonna be a journalist, Shawn. So I would just say have confidence, trust yourself. You are amazing.

**Shawn (21:06):**

So I hope our listeners heard those last two pieces of advice though, know thyself and you are amazing. And you truly are amazing, Cheryl, and I, it's been an honor to have you here on The Combustion Chronicles. We close every episode out the same way and they are three, they're called The Combustion Questions, three randomly selected questions from our human algorithm. They were just handed to me and so I'm gonna read them for the first time as I read them to you. So are you ready for your Combustion Questions?

**Cheryl (21:35):**

I'm nervous.

**Shawn (21:38):**

So number one, if you could fly anywhere in the world for dinner, where would it be?

**Cheryl (21:45):**

I have not been to Italy and I have this vision of an Italian villa on the mountain side overlooking the sea. So I would love that for dinner.

**Shawn (21:57):**

Well, did everyone hear that? We need to make that possible now, for sure. We're gonna put it out the universe and that's gonna happen for you. I love it. Number two, which animal are you most afraid of?

**Cheryl (22:11):**

Oh my goodness. That's a great one. You've gotten me off guard here. What am I most afraid, I would not wanna deal with a rat. Is a rat an animal? I don't wanna deal with that.

**Shawn (22:27):**

All right, now this one you're gonna have to think about. Number three, what do you think about scones?

**Cheryl (22:35):**

I think scones are good. You can't eat it without dipping it in your coffee. So it's only as good as the coffee you're gonna dip it in.

**Shawn (22:41):**

Beautiful. I love that answer. Well again, Cheryl, thank you so much. You can find Cheryl on LinkedIn just like I did. We became friends that way. Thank you so much for being on here. I'm really excited to have more conversations with you.

**Cheryl (22:56):**

Me too, Shawn, I'm so glad that you reached out. Thank you.

**Shawn (23:01):**

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](http://mofi.co) where you'll find ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution, or go to [experienceevangelist.com](http://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.