

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

Episode 92

INSPIRING NEEDS, WANTS, AND A SENSE OF MEANING THROUGH STORYTELLING

Host **Shawn Nason**
Guest **Marisa Thalberg**

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Shawn (00:01):

Welcome to the eighth season of the Combustion Chronicles podcast, where bold leaders combined 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 experience 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 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, Marisa Thalberg, is a maestro of marketing. Forbes named her one of the 50 most influential chief marketing officers in the world. While Business Insider put her in the top 25, she's been named an Adweek brand genius and an industry dive marketing executive of the year. But what's just as impressive is that she's led brand and marketing efforts at three vastly different organizations. Estee Lauder, Taco Bell, and Lowe's. That means she knows something or makes a lot of things about building brands across a range of industries. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Marisa.

Marisa (01:30):

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Shawn (01:32):

Well, it is such an honor to get a hall of famer of marketing here on The Combustion Chronicles, and literally people like she is in the CMO Hall of Fame. So I know you've spent a lot of time thinking about your role and this, this important role you carry in the industry. If a random person walked up to you on the street and asked you to define what the CMO's role is, how would you describe that?

Marisa (02:02):

I think the CMO's role is to be able to deeply understand the consumer, translate it to the company, and be an engine of growth in terms of how to drive the connection between the company and the people who are for whom it's targeted. I'm saying company, but brand, product services, that that's really it. It's to be an engine of growth.

It's to figure out how to be a storyteller. It's to inspire needs, wants a sense of utility, a sense of meaning that some people already understand and others are first becoming aware of or didn't even know was an opportunity in their lives.

Shawn (02:43):

Well, and I wanna go back to that cause I think that's a powerful way to look at it, and I don't know that I've ever heard it put that way, but for you to deeply understand the consumer, bring it to the company, and then be an engine of growth, I think sometimes people will actually say, you know, the marketing role within a company isn't to necessarily bring revenue in and growth, it's to bring awareness.

Marisa (03:08):

Okay. That makes me crazy.

Shawn (03:10):

Let's take that, that stigma that I think is out there and let's talk about that. Why do you say no, it's an engine of growth because I love it and that's why I latched onto that right away. I'm like, let's talk about this. So what do you mean when you say an engine of growth from that marketing perspective?

Marisa (03:27):

Marketing is to drive growth. I mean, this is a commercial endeavor and you know, even if you were to extend marketing to, let's say the nonprofit sector, so we could say, all right, where are the cases in which maybe it's, it's a less commercial objective. It's still to drive growth, it's still to drive an audience, it's still to drive engagement. So whatever the business objectives are, because it truly is the intersection of art and commerce.

The second it becomes just art for art's sake. We're not respecting that this is a craft that's a field with a professional objective and orientation, and you're part of the leadership of a company that has goals. And unless the role is perceived with that level of insight, understanding, and credibility in terms of what it contributes to the business, then it's misunderstood. And it, it can be really misunderstood in that regard.

I mean, especially when you look at the cost of marketing as part of being a, just the cost center as opposed to, no, this is an investment in driving our growth.

And we could really kind of pick that one apart and start talking about all the things that make it really hard to be a CMO or a marketer today because of various factors that have both helped us and hurt us in the landscape in which we play today. But for me, it's really, really essential for colleagues, boards, CEO's to understand that any good marketer is indeed an engine of growth.

Shawn (05:01):

I love this love, love, love this Marisa. And I even loved your statement there about looking at it from turning it into a cost center into an investment. And you know what, mostly we do a ton of work in what we call the Experience Ecosystem™. You know, for my days at Disney, I think that also includes definitely marketing in there. And I love how you even were tagging that back to if you were in the nonprofit world, this is how you look at it. If you're here, this is how you look at it. It doesn't always have to be around a product. One of your biggest wins in your career at Taco Bell was turning it into a culture-centric lifestyle brand instead of just another fast food brand. So what could organizations, in your opinion, and from your experience, learn about how Taco Bell and the work you did made that transition?

Marisa (05:54):

I think what's important to understand is what drove that statement, because otherwise it just sounds like almost potentially an indulgent thing that, well, you know, who doesn't wanna be a culture-centric brand? And that sounds really cool. And the reality is, and this is very important, that was, has not been, and would not be the objective I've had for other businesses on which I've worked. I mean, playing in culture generally is a great idea for most brands of scale in some way, shape, or form. But that vision, if you will, was born out of the work I did to get underneath what I saw as the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats facing Taco Bell as not just a brand, but as a business when I first arrived. And in some ways, and I've spoken about this before, the gift of being someone who came completely new to the QSR quick service restaurant industry was, I, I mean, I was just absolutely diving in, trying to learn everything, but I had fresh eyes.

And those fresh eyes only last so long before you start becoming an insider yourself and you start knowing, oh, we tried that a few years ago, or no, this doesn't work.

Or this is how it's done. And you're willing to say things that people that once you've been doing it for a while, you just maybe don't talk about, like, I didn't find anyone was talking about. And this, you know, this goes back a few years now, and again, the industry has changed some more, but the pressure and the, I guess, uh, slight stigmatization, if you will, of being in fast food relative to how modern eating sensibilities were changing and legitimate questions around that. And so where did Taco Bell fit in that? I mean, you have to really look at the business and understand the numbers. The numbers were an industry that wasn't, the industry wasn't growing.

So you can't look at that and just say, okay, so what's my next ad that I'm gonna make? For me, the responsibility was to understand what challenges am I trying to address? What's gonna hinder our growth or where might be their ways to create new growth and what are the unique nuances and what would be the uniquely taco ball way to play this play? And so, you know, without going into too much more proprietary detail about it, that whole statement, which sounds like this kind of fun, lofty statement, it was really a manifestation of a lot of very thoughtful strategic work that, you know, of course as I came in, there were people who were ready to, you know, jump right on my bandwagon and others who were, you know, arms folded, skeptical, how is she gonna lead us? What's she gonna know about this business? But in doing that work, it was also a way of corroborating and verifying that I was understanding it. What did I get wrong? What's missing here? And that in turn allowed me to kind of create the alignment and say, okay, so if we all agree this is a problem and these are the opportunities, I think we should go here. And that was the beginning of creating a real roadmap and some really exciting work that followed.

Shawn (09:05):

There's some amazing work. What excites me more about this conversation, Marisa, is what I'm hearing from you is really about mindsets, you have to have a growth mindset. You have to have a mindset to fix it. And being open and humble around those mindsets. And I think that's what I love about everything you've shared with us so far is you went in to learn, you figured out what you needed to learn, you collaborated really well with people. And I think those are key nuggets that people can take away from our listeners around that mindset that you had. And so, something I really love, uh, about

doing a podcast is hearing about guests backstories and learning what fuels their passion. And I, my listeners know, I talk all the time, I'm in my fifth career, how I've gone from being a professional musician to now working in the experienced space and everything in between. Yeah. Um, you got your start at a couple of major ad agencies in the 1990s, so you must have been a child when you started working.

Marisa (10:16):

Thank you. Thank you for caveating it that way

Shawn (10:18):

You were like six or seven when you started working in the 1990s, major ad agencies. What led you to broaden your focus and think bigger about brand and stuff and not just sit in the agency world?

Marisa (10:35):

You know, it's so funny to rewind the clock I'm thinking about now. I mean, I've found, and, and I, I love hearing you say you feel like you're on your fifth career because I think that's really inspiring. You know, just makes everyone realize that it's all a journey and it's all about, uh, kind of the road twists and turns. And I think often it's only in the rear view mirror that then the narrative of

Makes sense. But when you're on it, it doesn't necessarily make sense. I wound up in advertising and in some ways I absolutely loved it and it was perfect. And those were fun times. And I think it might have been really the heyday of the classic agencies in terms of like, the level of strategic work I was doing at 23 was pretty incredible. And working late night, incredible training. Okay, all that was great. I, except I had a bit of an existential crisis with it, which is that I also was a creative person in my soul and in my orientation. And I found myself in a company, in an industry where there were other people literally called creative. So what did that mean? Everyone else was non-creative because I was on the, you know, the strategy side, the account management side, which I was good at, so it wasn't the wrong place for me. But I also was like but it didn't,

Shawn (11:56):

I wanna do this

Marisa (11:57):

But I also wanna do this. And it just wasn't set up for that. And I really struggled with that so much so that, you know, and I think that's been in some ways something I've struggled with for a long time. Like, I wound up singing cabaret a little bit in the evening, so I was like, all right, so my brand is corporate by day, agency by day, but singer at night I left advertising and I don't even have this in my, you know, LinkedIn in my mid twenties and became a TV producer for a little while, and then I went back. And so I think it's, it's kind of interesting as I, you know, talked to young people today and even reflect on, you know, of course now with age and experience, all that angst seemed unnecessary. And now I have bigger older-person angst. You just, you just trade up.

Shawn (12:46):

You just trade up.

Marisa (12:48):

But you know, now I have, you know, daughter that age and then her first job and it's crazy. I'm like, oh my gosh, how did this happen? At the end of the day, there was something at its essence that always has really been right for me, which is that I'm a communicator and I love this intersection. I really do love this intersection of human psychology and business and culture, speaking of culture before. And I do think that advertising, marketing, creative, I mean, it's just a, kind of depends on your role. All of it brings that together in ways that I find incessantly interesting. So it's really just then been my own twisty path of taking some big chances, not all of which paid off exactly the way I thought. And I think that's an important footnote to say the fine print on risks is they're risky. You know, we kind of glorify high risk, high reward, and we forget to remind people that sometimes risks are actually, they're risky for a reason.

The way we think. Yeah. Speaking of culture, you know, you just hear about the entrepreneur who lived out of their car and now is a millionaire and it's like, well, what, what about the ones that just never got out of their car? So, you know, it's just an interesting co these are the things age and experience they teach you and, and you just keep trying and you just keep experimenting and you, you keep throwing your passion at it and give your all when, once you're in it. And I think that's kind of what's defined my career. But I do think I have a unique talent for how to connect dots that people don't

see and lead teams and bring people together in this, you know, to be a creative storyteller. And I think my best work has been in those last three chapters of Estee Lauder, Taco Bell, and Lowe's.

Shawn (14:37):

It's 2023. There's a lot of talk around and a lot of hiring recently or in the past few years. When I say recently of chief experience officers. Um, and I actually attended an event last year where there was this talk around, do you see, and this is just the thought leader, this is asking Marissa for her opinion because I think you'll have a great perspective. Do you see the merging now of or in the future of chief marketing officers and chief experience officers becoming one person because so many organizations have separated it and they're two different people, but yet there's this talk around how are they really one person? I would love to hear your thoughts around that and what's happening in the industry in that space.

Marisa (15:32):

I dunno that I'm most knowledgeable to answer it cuz I've yet to work in a company that's had someone titled a Chief Experience Officer, and then have that be something that sits separately from the role I've had. I mean, I'll just say outright, like I'd be more than happy to have that title and I would see it similar to the way I see the role of chief brand and marketing officer. But you know, one of the real conundrums of this role and this title, and this is something I've talked quite a bit about, you know, at an industry level is, you know, a CFO is kind of a CFO, as a kind of a CFO in terms of what the job is and sure, public, private company, nature of industry, all that. But like there isn't a lot of internal debate about what the CFO does. And I think it is somewhat interesting, but also a problematic way. This role is so, has so much latitude for interpretation that you are even asking me this question. Like, why are we even, why do we even have to think about a different role for chief experience officer or CMO and then what does that mean for digital? I think digital's the kind of,

Shawn (16:42):

Yeah, and then you have Chief Digital Officer,

Marisa (16:44):

But then you also have a chief technology officer. So you put in, it's become a bit of a soup. And you know, what's really not great about that is it often becomes, uh, you kids fight it out in the sandbox and figure it out. And that often doesn't go well for the leaders or their teams underneath them. And this is where life is tricky in this, in this regard for players that have these vigorous, it's just different across every single industry friend peer that I know in terms of how the role is defined. So that's why there's no really great answer, but I personally do think that if you just break down what the word experience means, well, whose experience are we talking about? You're talking about the experience of people. And if you buy my original premise that that's our job is to really have those sort of human insights, I actually think it can extend to your employee population too, right? So Oh, absolutely. Sale business or a restaurant business. Like if you think about how those frontline associates are also the frontline of your brand, you wanna be thinking holistically about them too. It may fall under more the technical responsibility of a, a chief human resources of chief people officers. It doesn't matter. It's like when you're thinking about the experience that you want your customer have, I do believe that that could well be within the remit of the right chief marketing officer, chief brand officer.

Shawn (18:13):

Well, I want the title of Chief Human-Experience Officer. So I love that you went down that path. Right? Yeah. And I think there's a lot of talk around that. I've seen that even this year, a lot of conferences are talking about Human-experience and how does that happen? And I love it. So thank you for answering that at MOFI. And for me personally, I talk a lot about being maverick-minded and human-obsessed, and anyone that knows me, if you've not met me personally or just online, can kind of see that through how I talk. Um, and I really believe, uh, personally that you have to have a little bit of that in you today to be really successful in business. And you've been a huge advocate for women who are both mothers and business professionals. How can organizations create an environment where executive moms can be successful?

Marisa (19:11):

Well that's a loaded question, boy, it, it is a big divide between talking the talk and walking the walk.

Shawn (19:25):

And I love that.

Marisa (19:25):

Well, I mean, I don't think that's such a unique insight, but I've lived it. So I've seen it and I think that, listen, there are probably some women who worked for me as much as I'm a poster child for work life and, you know, working moms because, you know, when you're driving a transformation, people work really hard. And also, dear friend of mine said to me about having order in an organization, you know, like companies that are really like process, process, process. And you know, I've had teams say to me, well, we need more process. And it's like, well, but when you're trying new things, they're new. So if you think about that, how could there be a process for something that's never been done before? So you have to be willing to live in a little bit of the chaos of something new and the process comes later.

And all that probably means there is some inherent inefficiency in it. I find the joy in that. I do find the joy in that building and creating and shaping it does mean sometimes you're working a little extra hard and that, that is tough when a unique needs of working moms, which is something I've, you know, as you noted, I've been passionately advocating for through executive moms and just personally for over 20 years. So the reality is it just really does come down to culture and leadership and, um, empathy. I think that's really gonna be more the answer. I mean, at a more policy level, a national level, we could be a whole lot better. The United States, and I don't wanna overly pontificate here, but you know, there's a lot of countries in the world that are much more generous with, you know, paid maternity leave, paid family leave.

So unfortunately, the culture of our country tends to be a little bit hard driving, especially in the corporate world. I think the way I've I've come to look at it is I'm much more interested in someone's, you know, I, if I trust someone and they know they get it done, I want them to feel like they can be a whole person. I ab I would never want them to feel like it's always a trade off between, it shouldn't feel that way. I think there's daily trade-offs we make as parents and in on balance, you just have to come away feeling good about it. If you're examining it under the microscope every day, some days you're, you're gonna not feel good. Yeah. But if you pull back and be like, you know, it's working out okay and I'm professionally fulfilled and I'm paying the mortgage and my kids are

doing okay, then that was a lot of what I tried to also imbue with executive moms is just a lot more of pragmatism and sense of like, we're all doing this a little better than we think we're getting credit for. I think there's just a lot of loneliness when you're going through it. If you don't have others who are like, oh no, I'm dealing with that too.

Shawn (22:13):

Thank you for sharing that. I remember, um, both of my children are adopted. And at the time, the company my wife worked for, when we adopted our 14 year old, they didn't offer maternity leave for women who adopted a child. I was very fortunate working at Disney at the time that I actually got paid paternity leave even though our child was adopted. And I know industry was a forerunner in, in doing this for same sex couples, for men, for women. Right. Like, it was heartbreaking to understand that processes like that were in place, like even a differentiator because if my wife would've had a child, naturally she would've got it. But because we adopted, she didn't get it. I call bullshit on that. I hate to say it that way, but Right. And we're coming to some of the last questions here. Again. You've had a, you've had a career that spans much like I did, and I love the fact that you, um, were a cabaret singer. So I studied jazz piano So I'm like, okay, Marisa and I are gonna do like a cabaret show. what advice today would you give that 23 years old Marisa when she started her career?

Marisa (23:33):

I, you know, I think it's because I'm in a transition right now that, um, it, it's interesting how I can give the 23 years old advice in some ways, uh, so much more wisdom. And in some ways I'm still giving, trying to give myself the same advice of having patience and faith and accepting that the twists and turns are part of it. Like they're just part of your own unique journey and it's gonna be really fabulous and it's gonna have some moments like that are incredibly scary and painful and frustrating. But on balance, you're, you're, you're gonna have an exciting life where you're making an impact. And so which would you choose like, uh, you know, a boring, predictable life Or can you, can you stomach the fact that it's gonna be worth it, it's gonna be worth it to take the big swings and, and to, to trust that your heart and your integrity, that people see it and they know it. And it's okay to not let, to be the kind of person because you become a big personality and because you take big swings that get over the idea that every single

person is gonna like you, the people that know you and value, like the people that you should worry about valuing you, value you. And that's a hard one for me. That's still, I think something just being wired the way I am and as a woman and I think about it, but it's just so interesting to ask me this question now because I think whenever you're going through a form of transition, you're just kind of searching for all those new answers. And, and when I'm, you know, in other moments it's just super clear how to tell my younger self the answer to that, which is like, trust the journey that you're on a really cool journey and you're going to both surf some waves that come before you that you never would've thought you'd like, get up and surf.

But so some of it is, my, my use of that metaphor is to say sometimes you kind of go for it and sometimes you have to let opportunity kind of come up from under you and ride with it. And I think that my career has been the combination of those two things. Beautiful. And I, I dunno, I, I, I admire people that are so like, it's like this one thing on their vision board and they've just, or they built this company and they've always done that. That's just not been my experience. But, so you have to embrace your own and we all have different journeys and just embrace it and be proud of it and continue to find ways to create impact. And last but not least, be true to yourself.

Shawn (26:10):

Uh, beautifully said. I love every piece of that advice. No, it's much, you know, I, I had to get to the place of understanding not everyone's gonna like me.

Marisa (26:22):

Yeah.

Shawn (26:22):

And we even say at MOFI that we're not for everybody. We're not a boutique firm for everybody. And if you're not willing to ride the wave, if you're not willing to take the risks, if you're not willing to push the boundaries, we're not the agency for you. If you want the same old same o you know, or you have that single focus, that's not who we are. That's not who I am as a person. I would die if I had be that way. Yeah. Which is why I'm in my fifth career and my wife is like, can we not have a sixth career?

Marisa (26:50):

You do, and you do.

Shawn (26:52):

But I'm like, I can't say that honey. So, what's the best piece of leadership advice you've ever received?

Marisa (27:01):

Well, I actually don't know that it was handed to me as a singular piece of advice. I think it's just something that I've intuited and honed and realized with age and confidence, even if it's involved, you know, some trade-offs that it's really important for the people who are rising up after us to get to see different archetypes of leadership and then than we grew up with where it was a real, there was like one archetype and it was very male and it was very remote and, uh, almost parental and you didn't necessarily, you're not necessarily spoken to with transparency and trust. And just like our world of media's kind of changed our access to information. I think that that's also really shaped different expectations around leadership. And, and I feel like, I think that I, you know, I like to be led by people that I trust and therefore I like to lead by trying to be as honest and direct and, and forthcoming about, okay, well here's what's going on in the business and here's why, where you have to maybe make this change or do this and here's why this is, and I, you know, people, I don't, I think you can't really talk down to people and expect them to then rise up. Yeah. So maybe that's it in a nutshell. So, well, so many other, look, there's so many things you could say about leadership, but just to pick one for me, that's the one I'm really feeling from the recent years

Shawn (28:43):

And I love it. And I think it is a change in leadership styles. And I think we're seeing some struggles with that. I, I tell people, as a leader, you have to have a simple acronym. It's called Hit Honesty, integrity, transparency, and loyalty. I love it. And how as a leader do you show that to your people? And so thank you, thank you for all these nuggets today. Um, I've took lots of notes cuz I just a, a brilliant way of looking at it and a for me, a refreshing way to hear from such a powerful, um, and respected woman, executive leader who is advocating for such powerful things in and a role that can be so ambiguous, as we said, cuz you depend what organization you're in depends

what that is. So thank you for that. And it has come to this time in this episode where we do these things called the combustion questions and they're three randomly selected questions. I just received them from our human algorithm. So are you ready for your combustion questions, Marisa?

Marisa (29:46):

I don't know. Am I?

Shawn (29:50):

Well, let's see.

Marisa (29:51):

Let's see.

Shawn (29:52):

So combustion question number one, if you could open a brunch location, what would you call it?

Marisa (30:02):

Hmm, that's not fair because I feel like take some time, can I pass and come back to that?

Shawn (30:11):

We'll come back to it. Yes, we'll come back to one.

Marisa (30:14):

I mean, of course my name is, my head is swimming with lots of ideas and in the marketer. Yeah, I'm thinking that, that my husband's dream was always to open up a little diner that he called Dave's Diner. So I'm having a hard part time getting past, like, I felt him fulfill his dream before I would I knew my own brunch place.

Shawn (30:30):

Well you can say that. So Dave's Diner, but that would be helping fulfill your husband's dream.

Marisa (30:34):

Yes. I mean, the other thing is my, and then in the meantime my younger daughter is very indignant about the concept of brunch because she thinks it forces her to lose a meal. And that seems totally unreasonable to her. Like, why would you give up having both breakfast and lunch? And I'm like, but I love brunch. So these were the random thoughts going on in my head as I'm trying to quickly, for the sake of a podcast, answer your question about what made my brunch restaurant.

Shawn (30:59):

I, I love all that answer. So perfect. Question number two, do you prefer apples or oranges?

Marisa (31:07):

I prefer apples.

Shawn (31:08):

And why?

Marisa (31:10):

Hmm. For me, it's all about combinations of textures. So this, and I, I think there's probably a metaphor in this, but I love that you can get crunch and sweetness and a little tanginess and a little saltiness and life is more interesting when it's a little more complicated, I guess.

Shawn (31:31):

I love it. All right, question number three.

Marisa (31:34):

Okay, let's see if I do better on three than I did on one.

Shawn (31:37):

Oh, hey, what do you think about flamingos?

Marisa (31:41):

I really respect their color.

Shawn (31:45):

I'll leave that with that. I respect their color.

Marisa (31:48):

I mean, why would you choose to be, you know, bland when you could be bright pink in the world? So go flamingos.

Shawn (31:57):

Go flamingos. I love it. Well, Marisa, thank you so much for your time and I can't wait till we meet in person and cross paths again. But until then, stay safe and be well my friend.

Marisa (32:08):

Thank you.

Shawn (32:11):

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 <http://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. As always, stay safe, be well, and keep blowing shit up.