

Kristen Lauria Transcript

Kristen - 00:00:01: The Delta partnership, that is, I think, really the breakthrough in private aviation, really understanding how can we connect private aviation to commercial aviation and what opportunities does that bring together.

Matt - 00:00:13: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape. Brands must move in an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to The Speed of Culture. We're live here at CES in Las Vegas, and today we're thrilled to be joined by Kristen Lauria, the Chief Customer Marketing Officer for Wheels Up. With a career spanning transformative leadership roles at IBM, Cigna, and now Wheels Up, Kristen is redefining private aviation through innovation, accessibility, and customer-centric solutions. Kristen, so great to see you today.

Kristen - 00:00:51: You as well. I'm glad to be here.

Matt - 00:00:53: Absolutely. So Wheels Up is such an interesting business because the world has changed so much in terms of travel that would have been unimaginable maybe two decades ago for consumers that are fortunate enough to be able to fly private. How are you able to communicate this offering to consumers, many of which probably don't fully understand what Wheels Up offering is?

Kristen - 00:01:15: Yeah. So I agree with you. First off, I think 20 years ago, I'm not sure it was a topic of conversation. Now you see that maybe it's the experience economy, right? But private aviation comes up over and over. I think the way we communicate it is simple in terms of really journeys, experiences. Where are you going? How are you getting there? What's the most convenient way to get there? The mediums through which we communicate are the same mediums we communicate everywhere else, from social media, through the press, and really in event-based type organizations. So yeah, I think it's the same as every other industry. And I think the experience generation is really just driving the need for it more and more.

Matt - 00:01:51: And in terms of the audience that you're going after, how would you describe your target audience for Wheels Up?

Kristen - 00:01:56: Yeah. High net worth individuals, both on the corporate and the leisure side. But I think the target that we're going after is a target that's slightly different. It's people who really want to understand the best way end-to-end on a journey. So these are customers that might fly commercial sometimes, might fly private, want to get to destinations that they may not have been able to get to before, and really care about the end-to-end experience.

Matt - 00:02:20: And of course, time is...

Kristen - 00:02:22: Time is of the essence.

Matt - 00:02:23: And that's ultimately what you're offering people, right?

Kristen - 00:02:24: Yeah. And on the corporate side, that's always been the case. So the reason you fly private is because you can't get to your meeting any other way, right? And you need to save the time. But I think that's more and more the case on the individual side as well.

Matt - 00:02:36: Yeah. We talk a lot about, at Suzy, about the barbell economy, how there is a rising opportunity both on the value side of the population, especially in the U.S., and on the luxury side.

Kristen - 00:02:45: Yeah.

Matt - 00:02:45: And there's been a boom in luxury businesses that have performed so well, even post-pandemic. And do you see there being continued rise in demand with the high net worth individual and luxury set that's driving growth in the business?

Kristen - 00:03:00: I do think the demand is going to continue to drive higher and higher with the high net worth individual. But the more we make it accessible, it expands that much.

Matt - 00:03:08: What does that mean, accessible?

Kristen - 00:03:09: So people didn't understand the ability in the past to fly Delta over to London. And then a quick flight, a private flight over to Ibiza. And if you balance that out across a group of people, it's not necessarily inaccessible, right? And so oftentimes people just didn't even know that was possible. Taking a group of people from New York to Nantucket, one of my favorite things that we talked about this summer is leaf peeping, going to Lake Canandaigua, a quick hour trip from White Plains, New York, with your friends, spend the day at the Finger Lakes, and go back. And when you distribute that across a group of people, that's more accessible.

Matt - 00:03:44: Yeah, I think that's more what I was getting at the onset, is that for some people, they think of private aviation and flying private jets is kind of out of reach to them. And when you say accessible, it means that you don't have to be a billionaire to fly.

Kristen - 00:03:56: You don't. And our offering span, you can fly on-demand charter, or you could do a membership. But this is not about putting several million dollars down and buying a timeshare on a particular aircraft. You can put a couple hundred thousand dollars down and you have the ability to use that across commercial and private aviation. And that's a pretty low point of entry. Right. But you also can fly on-demand charter with us and then earn rewards back.

Matt - 00:04:18: Which is great.

Kristen - 00:04:18: So that's much more accessible than in the past.

Matt - 00:04:20: So in building the wheels off brand, what have been some of the effective tactics that you've undertaken to make sure that obviously you're doing a consideration set for consumers, it's not an in-bulk purchase, has to come at the right time for them. What's been effective for you at bringing new customers into the fold?

Kristen - 00:04:34: This is a conversation that happens at places where our customers are. On the B2B side, it's very much going into companies and talking through the value proposition with procurement. But on the leisure side, it is really about accessing those customers where they are. So, for example, next week we're going to be at the Cayman Cookout and we'll be with them for a week and we'll be able to talk to them about some solutions. Some people are already flying there on Delta, and we'll be able to intercept that process right there. So a lot of events and really going to where the customers are and experiencing those events with them.

Matt - 00:05:08: I know the Super Bowl is a big place.

Kristen - 00:05:09: Super Bowl was a big place. We'll be there. We're not going to do as much as we did in the past this year, but we are expanding. And then we're going to create some signature events too, to do things that places that they may have not gone to in the past. Maybe around Davos, around Wimbledon. We're trying to think about the places where our customers would want to go.

Matt - 00:05:26: Yeah, we just had Mark Weinstein, the CMO of Hilton. And one of the things we were talking about is that leisure travel has very much been driven in recent years by kind of these passion points, like the Taylor Swift Tour or NFL games or tailgating. And yeah, so people will use that event as sort of like the staple for a weekend trip. And I would have to imagine for your customers, that's a great occasion to get out, use your services.

Kristen - 00:05:52: It's a great occasion, and they're willing to fly it. If we could create all of the experience end-to-end and get them there and get them back in that same day, that is a great way to start flying. They can do that on demand, and then they do it a couple of times, and then they join us as members.

Matt - 00:06:07: So your role as CMO, obviously, probably has a lot of different parts to it. How are you focused on the business in terms of splitting up your day and your time? My day and my time. To make sure you're contributing to drive the growth of the company.

Kristen - 00:06:18: Well, the day is 24 by 7.

Matt - 00:06:19: Yeah, I'm sure.

Kristen - 00:06:20: We fly all day long. Most of my day is really talking to the market and to the customers and really thinking through the journey and the experience, whether it's through member services and or the experiences that we're going to create. So, yeah, I think most of the day is around listening to the customers, listening to the stakeholders, and working across the organization to make sure everything comes together.

Matt - 00:06:41: And in terms of loyalty and making sure you keep customers, I'm sure a big part of it is also making sure that you're actually communicating with them, different opportunities to use your services, and obviously different attributions of the Wheels Up product.

Kristen - 00:06:53: Yeah.

Matt - 00:06:53: Yeah, over time. So you're here at CES. Why are you here? And what do you hope to accomplish during your time here?

Kristen - 00:06:59: Well, we always want to interact with customers. There's many corporate customers here, but we're also here in partnership with Delta.

Matt - 00:07:05: Okay. So, tell me about the Delta partnership.

Kristen - 00:07:06: Yeah. So the Delta partnership, that is, I think, really the breakthrough in private aviation, really understanding how can we connect private aviation to commercial aviation and what opportunities does that bring together. So about a year ago, Delta is our lead investor and we work daily to come up with really different opportunities, things that haven't been thought about before. We look at technology. How do we bring those two markets together? How do we bring the loyalty programs together? So just a really unique opportunity. And so we're here to support them.

Matt - 00:07:35: So, how does the partnership unfold? So I'm a Delta diamond flyer. How will I be able to use that, I guess, status on Delta to connect with the Wheels Up?

Kristen - 00:07:45: Yeah. So if you're a member and you put a fund down, there's ways that the status is something that you have with us. Your fund itself can be used across Delta. It could also be, so you use the fund for a Delta flight and for our own flight. And so there's so many different ways. At the Super Bowl, for example, when we did a breakfast with Brady, and we invited our Delta 360 customers to join us at those events. So there's a lot of crossover between their membership base and private flying. And we think through all sorts of opportunities for the customers.

Matt - 00:08:15: We'll be right back with The Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors. So moving forward, are there new destinations, new, I guess, airline or airplanes that you're putting into market, or different things that are going to be driving?

Kristen - 00:08:26: Yeah. So over the last year, we've been really focused on operational excellence. And when our new CEO joined us a year ago, we talked about being the best-run aviation company in the industry, private aviation company. And yes, that's about our operational metrics and on-time metrics. But we also just, NBAA, just here a few months ago, we put out our new fleet modernization strategy. And we've invested in Phenom 300s and Challenger 300s. And across those two fleets, we really feel we could serve most of the missions. And then we supplement that with our on-demand charter business. It's called Air Partner. And we have access to any other aircraft if those two fleets don't suffice the mission. So we've been doing the fleet modernization strategy, and that really helps with the efficiency and just puts us at the forefront of operational effectiveness.

Matt - 00:09:10: Very cool. Moving forward, I mean, I know in the past there's been discussion, not with Wheels Up, but in general, about inner city travel and taking drone-based helicopters from one building to the next so you didn't have to sit in traffic in major cities. You love those markets. Do you see a world where...

Kristen - 00:09:25: Yeah, I know that Delta's thinking about a lot of that as well.

Matt - 00:09:27: They are, sure, yeah.

Kristen - 00:09:27: But also just the helicopter transports between getting over to JFK from New York. So that is a big part of it. We're doing some of that work now and making that whole experience seamless.

Matt - 00:09:38: Right.

Kristen - 00:09:39: Especially if you do take Delta overseas, and then you need to get over to an FBO to take a private flight. How do you get there? So all of that, I think, is part of our solution. And that's what we've been working on, what we call global aviation solutions. Because the solution is not just the flight itself, it's the connection points between, and making sure the experience from the commercial experience to the private experience and everything in between, is really what's important. And so that's going to depend on different partnerships and different forms of travel.

Matt - 00:10:06: Absolutely. So, what are some of the things that you're doing in 2025 to stay fresh, understand maybe some new tactics and trends so you can continue to drive growth for the business?

Kristen - 00:10:16: Actives and Trends from a marketing perspective, really, we're leaning heavily into experience ourselves. So there's the whole customer experience and how do we make sure that every touch point, whether it's our digital integration, whether it's member services, whether it's on the ground, in flight, how do we really create seamlessness? We've talked about omnichannel experiences, I think, back in 2008.

Matt - 00:10:38: Of course, yeah.

Kristen - 00:10:38: But really, bringing that to fruition is a lot harder, and it hasn't quite been done. So, doing that for us is really that's top of mind for me every single day. On top of it, the experience economy, we're creating our own experiences, whether it's experiences that are unique to the individual and to the customer or whether it's participating in a curated experience that already exists. How do we make that happen and leverage our services in the middle of it and use that to market our services? That's something that we're thinking about day in and day out.

Matt - 00:11:09: Yeah, I mean, it makes sense to have that seamless experience because ultimately, if your offerings that save consumer time, then you don't want them fumbling around when they're trying to book a flight or when they're trying to change a flight. You need to make that all-time-saving and seamless for them-

Kristen - 00:11:23: Right, and like with any consumer, whether it's high net worth or not high net worth, sometimes you're doing something digitally and sometimes you're doing something in person. You're on the phone and you want all of that to work. But the idea of the experience itself, like we don't want our customers to have to go somewhere where they're not to learn about our products and our services. So we want to create those experiences around what they're already doing and what they're interested in doing. And that's how we want to market. So it's not something that they have to step out of their daily activities to do. It's something that they're going to learn about and something that they wanted to do anyway.

Matt - 00:11:52: Makes sense. So shifting gears, we wrap up here. I'd love to hear a little bit about your career journey, how you ended up at Wheels Up, kind of where you were prior, and what excited you about this opportunity.

Kristen - 00:12:02: Yeah. So for me, it's logical, even though you look at my background and you'll say, How do you go from point A to point B? Every single opportunity I've taken is about pivoting a brand. And when I say pivoting, I don't take those opportunities where you're going up an S curve, if you will. I take those opportunities where you're transforming. And if I look back over my career, every time it's been something that somebody has told me, don't do that.

Matt - 00:12:24: Right.

Kristen - 00:12:24: Whether it was from Lotus, as they were competing with Outlook and Google Mail back in the day.

Matt - 00:12:29: I remember Lotus.

Kristen - 00:12:30: Yeah. I saw it as a way for us to shift an IBM from collaboration to social business. Gosh, I'm going to go all the way back to the 90s. Xerox was in competition with Canon, and I heard somebody speak about distributed applications in 1993, and that the value of the Xerox printer was that they had a printer on every floor, networked in every building around the world. Forget about the toner. And I said, Oh, that's interesting. And so I jumped in there. And so I go to Cigna from health plans to health services in the middle of the pandemic, right? People said, What are you doing? Right. And here, Wheels Up, we have some challenges, but it's a market under transformation. And what I saw in this business was a community that was in place and that was intact, and they wanted this business to survive. And so I do think that the industry is shifting. So again, it's a pivot. It's a strong brand, strong community. And how do we pivot from private aviation to global aviation solutions? That's just like every other opportunity I've done.

Matt - 00:13:25: Yeah. And I mean, what gives you the conviction to make that leap and dive into these new opportunities? Like, how do you know it's right?

Kristen - 00:13:30: You know it's right when you see an opportunity and when the stakeholders are still in it. Right?

Matt - 00:13:35: Right.

Kristen - 00:13:35: I look at that very carefully, and I did spend some time with the customer base before I jumped on board. Yeah, there's a lot of naysayers, but you talk to the stakeholders, not just the customers. And when there's passion about a brand and when there's depth in a brand and there's history, you have conviction and you're re-forward and you know you can transform it.

Matt - 00:13:53: Yeah. And it's a super interesting space and obviously one that I think is when we continue to grow again, given the demographic shifts, given people are continually pressed for time, trying to be in so many places at once. I can see why the demand continues.

Kristen - 00:14:06: Absolutely.

Matt - 00:14:06: Awesome. So, to wrap things up here, is there a quote or mantra that we always ask our guests that guides you professionally?

Kristen - 00:14:12: I know you do. And you know, I'm not going to give you one that everybody would know because it's from my father.

Matt - 00:14:16: Good. Let's hear it.

Kristen - 00:14:17: And my father, as he passed, he said, there's a lot of people that drive success based on what they take from the world. And I hope that you'll spend your life figuring out how you give back. And so every role I take, it really is about what you give back. And that might be in terms of your teams, and it might be in terms of customers. But for me, its success is about what you give back.

Matt - 00:14:36: I love that. And I think for me personally, one of the most rewarding parts of my career is seeing people who have worked for me that go off and do great things. I think that's a great example of giving back and seeing the impact of your work and brought away.

Kristen - 00:14:48: And so I think about that every day.

Matt - 00:14:49: It's awesome.

Kristen - 00:14:49: How do you give back?

Matt - 00:14:50: Well, thanks so much for taking your time out of your busy schedule here at CES, and you got to the Delta partnership and where the business is going and all the success at Wheels Up.

Kristen - 00:14:58: Thank you.

Matt - 00:14:58: Absolutely.

Kristen - 00:14:59: Thanks for having me.

Matt - 00:14:59: Likewise. On behalf of Suzy and Adweek team, thanks again to Kristen Lauria, Chief Marketing and Customer Officer of Wheels Up for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, review to The Speed of Culture Podcast and your favorite podcast platform. Till next time. See you everyone. Take care. The Speed of Culture is brought to you by Suzy as part of the Adweek Podcast Network and Acast Creator Network. You can listen and subscribe to all Adweek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcasts. To find out more about Suzy, head to suzy.com. And make sure to search for The Speed of Culture at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or anywhere else podcasts are found. Click follow so you don't miss out on any future episodes. On behalf of the team here at Suzy, thanks for listening.