

Laura Desmond Transcript

[00:00:01] Laura: Look. The world doesn't necessarily need more ads. It needs smarter ones. It needs more intelligent ones. It needs smarter advertising, or what Smartly calls intelligent creative. That's always on, that's always learning, that is adaptive, and is able to run at the pace and speed of consumers and the algorithms that allow them to like and share content and creative all day long.

[00:00:32] Matt: 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. Up today on the speed of culture podcast, we're thrilled to be joined by my good friend Laura Desmond, the CEO of Smartly, the company redefining how brands automate and optimize digital advertising. Prior to Smartly, Laura has led some of the world's biggest agencies and now drives innovation at the intersection of creativity and technology. Laura, I'm so looking forward to this. Great to see you.

[00:01:12] Laura: Great to see you, Matt. Thanks so much for having me. This is gonna be a lot of fun.

[00:01:17] Matt: It sure is. So, Laura, we go way back. You have the esteemed title of being really the only boss I've ever had. So I always started my own companies, and my company, MRY, was acquired by Publicis Groupe. I ended up reporting to you for several years, and I learned so much from you. And I think working for you has made me a better leader. I just wanted to say that. And I say that to everyone who brings up your name. What do you think makes somebody a good leader, and what are some of the attributes you think that you have that has made you so successful in that regard?

[00:01:50] Laura: Well, Matt, thank you. I appreciate those kind words, and it was a blast working with you. We were on the cutting edge of social when we worked together, and who knew it would lead us fifteen years later to do what we're doing today together, your successful career, me from Starcom to Smartly. Leadership has been something I've been extremely focused on for many, many years. I was lucky enough to be a young leader at Starcom. I was a CEO when I was 35, and I'm now still CEO. I've learned a lot twenty-five years later. And in the end, you have to want to love leadership in order to be a good leader. And the thing that I always say to myself when I'm leading a team, a group, a company at scale in a small way is you have to create meaning, and you have to bet on some things. First, you have to bet on you as a leader. Will you be able to inspire, motivate, and create clarity for the team? Two, you have to be able to bet on a team. Do you trust your ability to pick the right people, not just for the bus, but for the race, for the journey? Do they have the ability to grow? Can you help them grow? And then lastly, you have to pick the right mission. And the right mission is the thing that will inspire you, inspire the team. But the mission can often change. And so you have

to, as a leader, be able to say, where are we right now? What is the reality we're in? And are we chasing the right thing? Are we heading in the right direction? And if we are or we are not, that's okay. Because half the time, leadership is just about defining reality and then helping the team get to where they need to go.

[00:03:47] Matt: So you mentioned, like, leaning into certain people. And one hallmark, I think, of your leadership is so many people who have worked for you have gone on to do great things, and I'm sure it's incredibly rewarding for you as a leader. The other thing I've noticed about your leadership style in your teams is people stick with you, and you really have a unique way of lighting a fire in someone instead of under them. Like, when I worked for you, I worked hard because I didn't wanna let you down, not because I was scared. I just didn't wanna let you down, and you have to earn that in someone. But, obviously, you only have so much time, and you do a good job at identifying talent and picking people that you're gonna invest time in and boost their careers. How do you know when someone has those attributes that make it someone that you wanna invest in and make part of your core team?

[00:04:36] Laura: I think there are only two things that really matter. I think desire and ability. There are some people who have incredible ability, but not the desire to win. There are some people who have the desire to win, but not natural ability. I will take someone with desire over ability every day because you know they will push and they will work hard to be great, and they stand for excellence. The real winning combination is to have people around you who have both attributes. They wanna win, and they will do whatever it takes to win, but not tearing the team down and not winning as a competition versus the other parts of the company or the team, but to win together. And that, when you can put those things together, is the secret sauce, the magic. I've been super lucky. I've worked in cultures and companies from Leo Burnett to Starcom, from DoubleVerify now to Smartly that has invested in people and invested in culture. It's really the only way I know how to lead companies. So I've been lucky. The other thing that I try to do is just lead with excellence, and I do not ask anyone to do anything that I will not do. And I will help them in as much of a support role as I can, but also to create an environment and a culture where they want to be their best. I think the last thing I've learned about leadership, and this has really come into focus the last few years leading Smartly, is you have to know when it's time to help the next generation and to be purposeful about that. I'm at Smartly for two reasons. One, I really do believe our end-to-end platform, what we're doing by integrating media and creative, and intelligence together to make advertising more memorable and more personal, and more relevant so that it performs. I believe we have a unique chance to do it. I believe we have the tech stack to do it. And I believe if we do do it, we will make the industry a little bit better because the industry thrives when consumers are engaged with brands and advertising, and brands grow when consumers want to lean in and understand more. That's the first reason. The second reason I am leading Smartly is because I get a chance to work with the next generation of leadership, and I've done that by purpose and design. It's a millennial company. I've learned you have to communicate more. You have to build trust more, especially in the front end, and you have to be willing to be vulnerable. And those three things are not things that I was always super comfortable with when I first became a CEO of Starcom and

especially Starcom globally, but I've learned that they can really help inspire and motivate people. And I thrive on the chance to lead this next generation, and they will be leaders one day. I'm confident about that. And I think to some extent, that fills my coffee cup every morning.

[00:07:42] Matt: Yeah. For sure. So let's talk about your work at Smartly and the digital media space overall. When we worked together in the twenty tens, early to mid twenty tens, social media was still emerging. Many brands were still focused on the traditional linear media channels. And now fast forward here to 2025, and we are in a completely different world. But I'm sure as much as things have changed, they've also stayed the same, some of which that you've touched on. So, as you think back on the evolution of digital media, what has changed in terms of your role of being a leader in this space, and what are some of the core tenets that still exist today that existed back then?

[00:08:18] Laura: That's a great question, Matt. I mean, my career has spanned four big tectonic shifts in the last twenty years. The Internet era of the early two thousands, digital transformation. I remember sitting in a room with Larry and Sergey and separately in Menlo with Mark Zuckerberg when Meta, then Facebook, and Google came on the scene, the mobile transformation era when suddenly we were confronted with the idea that people could get all the information they needed on a small screen in front of them, and that led to really the social era and the commerce era that we live in today, and now the era of AI. I think of the four, AI by far is the most disruptive. And that says a lot because we have lived through those eras together at Publicis's, as well as you going on to found a new company. AI is transformational because it will give people the power to create, to enhance, and it will speed the culture. It will speed people's consumption of information, and it will change the way we work. From an advertising standpoint, I think AI is gonna change how brands build relationships with consumers. And back to speed, which is the theme of your podcast, consumers will be able to go at the pace of algorithms faster and faster with AI. Consumers will be able to be creators themselves, and they will be able to interact and engage as deeply as they want to from a creative standpoint. And I think, ultimately, what you'll see is brands that thrive during this era will need to create way more engaging creative that delights, that gives people the chance to shop, click, and buy, and gives people the chance to be entertained, whether it be short form or long form. It's a new model now that marketing will have to embrace. And I'm not a 100% sure Fortune 500 companies or any companies that have been building their brand marketing efforts over the last fifteen to one hundred and fifty years are ready for it. It will be as disruptive for them to learn how to use AI to drive creative performance and to drive creative power as it has been for them to figure out how to advertise with mobile advertising digital transformation, even the beginning of TV in the nineteen fifties. We've got our work out ahead of us in the industry. We have our work at Smartly out ahead of us, but I do believe our technology stack and the value that we provide full funnel and cross channel for marketers will help ease that burden, will help them incorporate AI tools much more easily, and will help them with more intelligent creative and be able to drive performance, brand growth, as well as loyalty and love.

[00:11:25] Matt: We'll be right back with the speed of culture after a few words from our sponsors. I wanna get into some of the kinda Smartly product attributes. One area that I'm sure fits into your overall road map is the area of hyper-personalization. So I think one area AI is gonna unlock is sort of, one, a new expectation from consumers that we've talked about personalization for so long, as you know, but now it actually can be delivered at scale, where what you see, what you experience, should be based upon what you care about. And I think so many brands have tried to execute it but couldn't. How do you feel about personalization? I guess my second point is, what role can AI play kinda facilitating that, and how does that play into, I guess, your future vision at Smartly?

[00:12:10] Laura: Look. The world doesn't necessarily need more ads. It needs smarter ones. It needs more intelligent ones. It needs smarter advertising, or what Smartly calls intelligent creative that's always on, that's always learning, that is adaptive, and is able to run at the pace and speed of consumers and the algorithms that allow them to like and share content and creative all day long. It is not possible to do that with hands alone anymore. You need a technology stack. You need an end-to-end platform that can go from idea to ad to orchestrating a campaign in seconds. And that's what Smartly is, and that's what we've built. In terms of AI, I think there's a left-brain component to it and a right-brain component to it. From a marketer standpoint, AI will unleash productivity. We have built into our platform today the ability to do background refresh, text pricing, real-time pricing if you're a e-commerce company or you are pricing on a dynamic basis every second, every hour.

[00:13:24] Matt: What you're seeing more and more of right now.

[00:13:25] Laura: Very much so. And many of these types of clients are working with us because we're able to dynamically build that into the feed so that it just happens, fed by algorithms in real-time. You need to have that type of AI at your fingertips, and that is something that we invested in, began testing a little bit more than a year ago, and is now just part of our feature set inside the platform. We're also working on advanced AI techniques around video assembly. Our belief is that more and more consumers will spend time not just with video, but short-form and long-form video that spans across social and commerce, and CTV. And so as we've expanded from a core social company, which was what Smartly was thirteen years ago, to now include commerce as well as now CTV integrations, we believe the ability to, on the fly in real-time, edit video, assemble video, publish video, take a seven second TikTok and know what works there and be able to turn it into a thirty second ad and a thirty second ad and understand what's working there and be able to turn it into a shorts, a reels, and a TikTok simultaneously, that will be enormously enabling the marketers. That will increase productivity. That will cut down on workload, and that will allow their talents, their strategic minds, to free up and spend time working on the big idea, working on the next campaign, and more strategic pursuit which drives growth. So that's the IQ of it all. That's the side of the brain that really gets to the productivity. AI is also gonna unleash exponential ability to create, to enhance human creativity, for humans and people to use machines to give them a different starting point, to allow them to generate lots of different options and revise their work quickly.

But it won't replace human touch. It won't replace human creativity. It just enhances it and accelerates it. That's super exciting because we know from our research that consumers want two things from brands. One, 76% want brands to give them personalized experience, to know them. They expect it now. And over two-thirds expect the brands respect their privacy. So you have this twin tower, if you will, of expectation. A consumer wants a brand to know me. They want a brand to respect me. And that means more engaging, more personal, more memorable creative that doesn't cross the line on privacy or frequency, but learns from what people are engaging with, what they're discovering, what they're shopping with, what they're buying with. And that type of intelligent creative, that is gonna set the standard for the next decade of how brands need to go at the pace of culture, the pace of people, the pace that is possible with the volume and velocity of content that they expect and they want. This is like the renaissance of the advertising industry now. We should be embracing AI to facilitate and enhance. We shouldn't be worried about it replacing. You know, the calculator did not replace the accountant. The telescope did not replace the astronomer. We are used to taking new devices and new tools and new technology, incorporating them into our work and our lives, and then making us better. That's how Smartly is thinking about AI. It will unleash productivity. It will unleash performance because it will make creative so much better and personal, and it will give tools to creators and marketers to make their work operate at the pace of culture that people expect and the personalized experiences that they expect.

[00:17:32] Matt: Of course, a huge driver of all this, especially in terms of brands looking to differentiate, is data. You throughout your career have done so much in the area of data in terms of it being unleashed to help brands really unlock their ultimate potential within their media spend. How are you looking at data and its importance in the AI era, and what role does it play within the Smartly platform?

[00:17:55] Laura: Well, you can't have good AI without good models, and you can't have good models without data. It's the fuel. Smartly's platform is privacy-compliant, built for the GDPR or the California Privacy Act world. We do not control data. We do not store it. We do not resell it. So we are privacy-first. But we see 92 billion creative signals a day on our platform across the world because we're extensible everywhere, and we sit at the center of all the major platforms from Meta to Google to TikTok to the CTV companies to Amazon. That signal is incredibly valuable to train models. We have proprietary media models. We use a combination of private or proprietary and public creative models. And that intelligence, that data stream, and that layer that can be matched to the audience activation, it can be matched to the creative personalization, is incredibly important. But with that comes responsibility. One of the first things we did when we invested in AI across the platform almost two years ago is we said from the start we would only use publicly sourced models that protected the rights of creators. We would not be part of any scraping of the Internet in terms of model creation, and we would operate according to ethical and governance rules that were at the standard of some of the leading companies like a Google, like an Adobe, and we've held firm to that. The other thing that I think is important is that we have established inside the company a couple really important foundational principles that we are gonna live by, which is in order to be an AI

company, you have to build AI first. So we have made the decision that we no longer build, thinking we can transform. We build AI first with machine learning, with AI, and the models that I just outlined. And secondly, we must be AI every day. So we've introduced a series of learning programs and talent development programs across the entire company. We're giving them not just enterprise accounts with ChatGPT and Gemini, but we are developing an entire curriculum around what it means to be an AI everyday company and an AI everyday individual to suit the bar differently. How can you walk in and talk to clients about using AI to drive intelligent creative if you're not AI proficient, if you're not living AI every day? We've challenged our talent team to figure out how to use AI to aggregate performance reviews. Huge time savings. We've challenged our marketing team to think about using AI in a different way to produce, assemble videos the way that we were talking about it. So we're quite serious about this, and we hope that by in being serious, we're gonna attract a different type of talent and a different type of client who wants to work with a company that wants to be on the leading edge.

[00:21:12] Matt: In terms of a different type of client, I mean, how do you see the role of the CMO changing as a result of all of this? What are some skill sets that you think CMOs are gonna have to develop? Because, as you know, that's a job that's constantly in the hot seat. And, obviously, brands now more never or boards, I should say, are dissecting your spend and looking at their marketing spend and making sure it's efficient and driving business results. So how do you see the CMO lean to evolve?

[00:21:38] Laura: I think the CMO role and the role of marketing will evolve significantly. I was reading a BCG report that came out over the last couple months that boards think that marketing will be the number one transform functional area across the enterprise, and I believe that will be true. But it won't be just to enhance productivity. It will be to drive growth. We're working with a number of our clients like Uber, like Spotify, like Nike, like Disney, not to just make things more efficient, more productive, cut down workflow and time. We're working on projects around how do you take an advertising campaign that is extensible to 50 markets today and make it extensible to a 100 markets with all the expectations around personalized creative for the same overall level of time investment, staff investment. How do you make it possible to put the same number of hours into orchestrating a campaign for the year as you do now for a 100,000 steps to orchestrate a campaign for one quarter or one month? These are the things that we're doing. If you can use AI to unleash productivity or to unleash the ability to build campaigns better, differently, and in more markets around the world, you're gonna drive growth. And that is what a CMO has to make paramount for themselves and for the team. It's not a cost. It's not even an investment. Marketing dollars with AI power can drive growth and untapped business potential and untapped sales, and untapped consumer loyalty. If you can get creative engagement right, if you can move to an always-on, always learning, always testing approach, and if you can be more agile with your marketing and creative because you're more real-time. You don't have to take so much time or steps just to get the same number of campaigns out. You can exponentially drive that.

[00:23:51] Matt: So speaking of customers and customer relationships, recording this in early September, and it's on the eve of a big event that I believe you've had going on for a couple years called Advance. Many big SaaS companies and Adobe, which you're on the border and obviously familiar on, and other companies like Qualtrics and Salesforce, have long held these customer events. And my assumption is they do it because it works, and that's probably why you're running your customer event. Tell me about Advance, what the impetus is behind, and why you think it's been so successful.

[00:24:22] Laura: Well, thank you, Matt. Last year was our inaugural year. We are back this year on September 17 out of Brooklyn. We're at the, uh, refinery in Domino. You can find out more at advancesmartly.com. But we convened Advance last year, and we're back this year after the enormous success in year one because we really believe that advertising needs to change. It needs to move forward. Storytelling, creativity, technology are all coming together today and pointing a way to the future that cannot be satisfied by the conversation, by the tools, or by the models of the past. We're at an inflection point, and our view was bringing together or convening this forum around these big topics where you can have Meta, Google, TikTok, Pinterest, Amazon on stage altogether discussing how they improve safety, brand safety and trust and how they use AI responsibly, where we can have creators and storytellers talking about what brands need to do now in order to stay relevant with consumers because the old restrictions or requirements of branded entertainment are no longer true today, and brands have to change. And we will be doing that with the founder of Madison Wells, with the founder of Laminata, and it will be a really interesting conversation, as well as the CEO of Sundance. We're gonna be talking about the next generation of marketing going at the speed of people and culture with Essie Eggleston at Unilever, and she is terrific. Isn't she? We're just thrilled to have her. And we'll be bringing it all together, talking about how we can rewire and rethink models and systems so that advertising can delight and engage consumers and help drive brand love and business growth for brands. So we're back even bigger this year. We're back not just to talk about Smartly. We're back to convene a forum of big ideas and a forum where some of the most important people can come and challenge the status quo. In this regard, some people are talking to us as if advances the new Davos of advertising, and that's very flattering. I love it in so many ways. It's very cool. On the other hand, it also makes me realize that when you convene a forum, when you bring people together, when you want to talk about ideas with the leaders that shape the industry, you have to deliver. You know, we plan to have a bigger and better advance next week on Wednesday, but we also know our responsibility to bring this group of people and leaders together and make sure that we give them a voice and allow them to challenge everything. And that's what we're gonna do, and we're looking forward to it.

[00:27:36] Matt: Very cool. Sounds fantastic. So to wrap up, you are, and this is as expected, been an incredible conversation that could go on all day, but I know you got a lot going on. When you look back on your career, and we talked about leadership, so we can put that aside for a second. But what are some of the other things that you think you've done well consistently that's, first of all, put you in a position you are today, but also gives you the energy and the conviction to keep going and running essentially a start up at this stage in your career

when you could very easily just sit on boards and consult, but you're in it, and it's so great to see. You don't do that unless you're successful and you love what you do. What are some of the elements that you think have put yourself in this position at this stage in your career?

[00:28:18] Laura: It's a great question. I think from the earliest days when I decided I wanted to pursue advertising, I had to know why. And as I think about today, why am I at Smartly? Why am I doing this? It's also about knowing my why. And so I think a very important element to my journey has been always being clear and knowing why I wanted to do something. Once I decide I'm very much a commit and do person. Once I decide, I'm all in, and I'm not competitive. I'm really not competitive. I know people might laugh here, saying, Oh, Desmond's not competitive. It's not as much being competitive as I am driven. I'm driven to win. I'm driven for excellence. I'm driven to do what hasn't been done before. And you can only take that journey, which tends to be a journey of uncertainty. It is a journey. You never know if you're gonna make it. I mean, one of the reasons I think we had such a nice relationship, and the founders of the two companies that Smartly has acquired over the last couple years are still with Smartly. We still have a great relationship is because I think I've always been able to tap into that founder energy. I'm a little bit like a founder, except I think I'm a bit more of a founder at scale. I like living in a world where I can organize and I can achieve and I can think about big missions and big goals and transform, but I love the actual journey too, and that's around why. It's why I got into advertising, because I believed advertising for good was not just about making people's lives better, but it was the underpinning of capitalism in so many ways. Advertising and free markets and brands and people, they need to thrive in order for a society to be free. And I wrote a paper about it when I was a freshman in college, and I think so much of that approach still stands today, as I'm very proud to run Smartly. So advertising is cool and it's good, and I think mostly I've just figured out, and I'm lucky, how to know my why.

[00:30:37] Matt: Yeah. So, to wrap up here, Laura, we ask our guests on the podcast always if there's a saying or mantra that's kind of encapsulated their career journey today. Just wanna know, sure you have no shortage of them, as many I've heard with you at a dinner over time, but would love to hear what comes to mind right now.

[00:30:54] Laura: I'm gonna go with get shit done because so much of the world talks about things, but the real leaders and the real folks who make it happen are the ones who just get shit done. Don't be afraid to try. Be fearless in your pursuit of your goal, of your dream. Take a step forward every day. Just get shit done. That's my mantra.

[00:31:21] Matt: I love that. And especially in the world living right now, where, as you said many times today, things are moving so fast, if you don't get shit done, the world's gonna pass you by, and you're gonna have a shoebox of ideas, but not a lot to show for it.

[00:31:34] Laura: A 100%.

[00:31:35] Matt: Absolutely. Well, Laura, this has been a fantastic discussion. I'm so appreciative of you taking the time, and, really, I'm appreciative for everything that you've done for me over

my career. You continue to be an inspiration even to this day, and wishing you nothing but the best of success and luck with your upcoming event and everything you have going on.

[00:31:51] Laura: Thank you, Matt. I really appreciate it. Hope to see you next week at Advance on Wednesday, September 17th in Brooklyn. And if not, I definitely will see you along the way. You've been an inspiration, too. Thanks so much.

[00:32:03] Matt: Thanks so much, Laura. On behalf of Suzy and Adweek team, thanks again to the great Laura Desmond, CEO of Smartly, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review to the Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Till next time, see you soon, 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, subscribe to all Adweek's podcast by visiting adweek.com/podcast. To find out more about Suzy, head to suzy.com. And make sure to search for the speed of culture in 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.