

Linda Bethea Transcript

[00:00:01] Linda: If you want to be a successful marketer, you have to be curious. Along with that, compassion. I'm not always the consumer of the product or brand I'm marketing, so I have to dig deep and really understand that consumer target and have compassion for them so I can deliver better products and messaging. And then, I think on the leadership side, the other two C's would be courage and conviction. You have to have courage, and you have to take risks. You're not always going to be successful, and that's okay.

[00:00:30] Matt: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at 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**.

On the Speed of Culture podcast, we're thrilled to be joined by Linda Bethea, the chief marketing officer at Danone North America, a leader in health-driven food and beverage innovation. With a career spanning PepsiCo, Diageo, and now Danone, Linda's built brands that don't just follow culture, they shape it. From driving nutrition for product innovation to launching social-first campaigns with real impact, she's helping consumers make better choices every day. Linda, so great to see you today. Thanks so much for joining.

[00:01:16] Linda: Hey, Matt. Great to be here.

[00:01:17] Matt: Absolutely. I'm a big fan of you and the brands that you've served throughout your career, and I'd love to just kind of dial back the clock, if you will, to your days at PepsiCo. You spent seven years at PepsiCo in a variety of different roles. How were some of your learnings at PepsiCo beneficial in kind of formulating your skill sets as the CMO today?

[00:01:38] Linda: PepsiCo's a great training ground for any business leader. I started my career at Frito-Lay, which operates a direct-sale delivery business, which really enabled me to understand sales and operations, which I think are fundamental to success as a marketer and a CMO. After several years there, I moved up to New York and worked across the beverage business, including a joint venture with Unilever on our iced tea portfolio. So, beyond PepsiCo, I also got to see how Unilever approaches brand building and managing joint ventures, which was also a fundamental business experience. So, really great training ground as a marketer as well as a broader business leader. They also have really great leadership development programs, which have helped me there and in every job since.

[00:02:24] Matt: And when you look at the evolution over the last 15 or so years in the food and beverage space, what's different today that was not the case maybe when you first started out in the sector?

[00:02:37] Linda: One of the reasons I love my job as a marketer and a CMO is there are fundamentals that haven't changed. The basics of brand building are just as true today as they were when I started my career, yet how we reach consumers, how we talk to consumers has changed drastically. So that keeps things really interesting, and it's my job to keep my finger on the pulse of those changes and make sure that my team is up to speed on the evolution of consumer engagement, of consumer insights, and really staying ahead of the curve so we can make sure that we're developing the right brands, the right products, and the right marketing campaigns to reach consumers in a modern world.

[00:03:18] Matt: Right. Now we have seen, obviously, the barriers to entry for new entrants in the food and beverage space become lower and lower. It's now easier than ever before, arguably, to start a company in the food and beverage sector. And a lot of the hallmark brands in the category built their brands and built their moat, so to speak, during a time of the TV industrial era where if you just had a checkbook, you could basically run your TV spots at high frequency, and everybody would know your brand. Now that's less of a tried-and-true strategy. So when you look at kind of defending territory and your positioning in the marketplace and ultimately your market share for some of the brands you oversee, how do you look at disruption from new entrants into the space?

[00:04:01] Linda: Yeah. I mean, you're seeing it in every category. Obviously, we just saw the big news of Pepsi acquiring Poppi, which launched, to your point, as more of that low-barrier-to-entry startup in the probiotic soda space. But what I think is really interesting is, again, the fundamentals of brand building haven't changed. Mental availability is still key. You need to drive that awareness and trial of your brand, but the way that you do that now has changed. To your point, it's no longer about a mass TV campaign. In fact, at Danone, we've shifted the majority of our media spend out of traditional channels into streaming, into digital, into social and influencer-first because that's the way to reach consumers credibly today. There are stats that show that consumers no longer want to see an ad. They want to have a conversation, and they're more likely to believe content from a trusted influencer than directly from the company itself.

[00:04:56] Matt: Yeah. I mean, that's interesting, and I think it's spot-on. I saw a stat recently that this year, for the first time, the average age of a first-time mother in the U.S. is actually Gen Z. So if you think about, and the big distinction with Gen Z is, right, they're the iPhone generation. So they grew up consuming content on their mobile device. And when they are consuming content on their mobile device, more often than not, it wasn't from traditional media platforms, but it was from other people. And I think a lot of CMOs are driving their planning process still like we are in a different age than we are today, where I think if you look at the champagne tower of media spending and prioritization, it should be through creators because the CFO of the household grew up knowing no other way. And I think change is hard. Old habits die hard, and we see that in the world that we play in. But just curious, your thoughts on just how important the creator economy is, and maybe what are some of the more specific activations that have been successful for your brands?

[00:05:53] Linda: Yeah. I mean, the creator economy is very real and very significant, particularly as we think about recruiting those younger consumers into our brands. And to your point, that's where they're consuming content, but it's also where they're discovering brands. If you think about how they leverage Amazon or TikTok as a search engine, that's often their first stop when they're looking for information. It's not just about content and entertainment. It's about information and discovery. And so we've had to build that into our marketing models to make sure that we're thinking through that in a way to recruit that younger generation. A great example would be the work we've done on our International Delight brand to recruit what we call that millennial consumer. We put a specific focus on TikTok as a place to put our dollars to drive not just product content but creator content, and then we took it one step further with pure entertainment content. We actually created a parody of a reality TV series that we call Kremhouse, where we've brought our most popular flavors to life as characters, and we've had multiple seasons of scripted content targeting that audience. But I do think there has to be a balance because there's still a large segment of consumers. We have a vastly large and aging population that are still consuming content in more traditional ways, so we can't ignore the full funnel in our marketing plans.

[00:07:14] Matt: That's right. And when you look at a concept like Kremhouse and you bring it to life, what is the creative process that you engage in with your agency partners that maybe you found to be tried-and-true over time to output winning ideas? Because, obviously, creativity is, in some ways, more abundant than ever before. But to really be truly differentiated, it's harder to come by because so many of the great ideas have already been done. So just curious as a CMO, how you look at the creative process for your brands.

[00:07:44] Linda: This is going to sound very basic, but I believe in the power of a tight brief. I think if you can be crystal clear on your objectives, and I think specifically not just your objectives but your KPIs, that really gives your partners the freedom to think more broadly within that framework. And so we partner with people that we trust. We have them get to know our brands, get to know our business, get to know our people, so they feel like extensions of our marketing team, not external vendors or agencies. And so when they're in it with us and they're given that freedom of a tight brief, they can unleash their creativity and come back with some pretty awesome ideas.

[00:08:22] Matt: So what does it take to earn Linda's trust?

[00:08:26] Linda: I think you need to have passion, and you need to have credibility. Do your homework. Understand our categories, understand our brands, understand our consumers. That consumer-first, that consumer-led insight is always going to win with me when it comes to creative execution.

[00:08:42] Matt: Yep. And, obviously, one of the big changes we've also seen in your category is a rise of GLP-1s like Ozempic, impacting consumption habits. Just curious in terms of, A, how

big of a change is this? Are you seeing it impact your business results, and how is it impacting your product development pipeline moving forward?

[00:09:02] Linda: It's a great question. I think the food industry is at a tipping point. Consumers are more aware of health and wellness than ever before, and specifically looking for healthier options from a food standpoint. They're actually prioritizing this as part of their health and wellness above things like sleep and exercise. They're reading nutrition labels. They're researching healthier options as part of their diets. And so it's had a significant impact on what they're purchasing and what they're consuming. And you mentioned GLP-1s. We know from data that one in four people in this country are on a weight-loss journey, and almost 10% have used a GLP-1 drug to help with that weight loss. And people on GLP-1s have very different nutritional needs. They're trying to consume less or eat less frequently throughout the day, which makes it really hard to get the nutrients they need in their diets. And what we've seen is that almost 20% of the weight lost on GLP-1s is muscle mass because they're struggling to get the right amount of protein they need to maintain that muscle mass.

[00:10:10] Matt: Which won't help you over time, especially as you age.

[00:10:12] Linda: Exactly. Right? So that's why we've seen this huge rise in protein. We've seen protein searches up 50%. People are looking to include more protein in their diets. And so we have Oikos, which is the number one protein yogurt brand in the category, and we're really looking to expand our portfolio to meet a broader set of consumer needs. And so I'm really excited to announce that we did just launch a first-of-its-kind cultured dairy drink under the Oikos brand called Oikos Fusion, which is specifically designed for people on GLP-1s to help them maintain that muscle mass on their weight loss journey.

[00:10:51] Matt: We'll be right back with The Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors. So, obviously, you're announcing it today, and here we are, like, late summer, unfortunately, of 2025. Summer flew by. How much goes into a product launch like that? Like, what are the earliest iterations of meetings and concepts that one day end up with a new product being on the shelf?

[00:11:13] Linda: It's a long process. And, again, it all starts with consumer insights and really understanding where the consumer is going. And so understanding where the consumer is going from a nutrition standpoint, understanding the data on their weight loss journey, and then also talking to consumers to understand what are the challenges they're experiencing on these journeys. And one of the key challenges is, one, finding credible sources of information. There's a ton of information out there, but they don't know who to trust, and they have a hard time finding specific information about what they should eat while on a GLP-1 drug, for example. And so we really feel like as a leader in nutrition-backed science with one of the most nutrient-dense portfolios in the market today, we are uniquely positioned to help meet that consumer need. We can be that credible source of information. We've launched a GLP-1 nutrition hub on our website in partnership with registered dietitians and health care

professionals that provide the information people are looking for, and it also helps them understand across our existing portfolio where they can lean into protein, fiber, hydration to meet those nutrient needs. And now we're leaning in even more with the launch of this new innovation designed specifically for GLP-1 users.

[00:12:30] Matt: And that really speaks to the evolving role, I think, of brands where, essentially, you're also now a publisher. You want to be a trusted source. You want to have that information. You have the products to pay it off. Whereas in the past, there's a bifurcation between the brand that was on the shelves and where people got their information. But now I think those walls are caving in.

[00:12:49] Linda: Yeah. I mean, they have access to so much more information than they ever did before, but it's really hard to cut through that clutter. And so we believe, again, our mission is to deliver health through food to as many people as possible. And if we can help them cut through that clutter and be that source of credible, science-backed nutrition information and make it easier for them to include healthy choices in their diets, then we've done our job.

[00:13:15] Matt: Yeah. And I think in the space you play, especially as you look at the health and wellness area as a natural extension for you to lean into given all the consumer trends we talked about, obviously, simplifying the complex when it comes to language, I would think is incredibly important because just because you and your team understand these complex words and phrases, most consumers don't. And they're making a quick-second decision on the aisles on what product to grab. So how do you look at language and even its impact on packaging as a driver of growth?

[00:13:48] Linda: It's a great question and one that I would say is actually a challenge. Again, we have a science-backed portfolio of products, which are packed with nutrients and benefits, and so it's easy to default to a laundry list of those on the packages. But we need to make sure that we're focusing on the ones that, one, consumers will understand, and two, will drive the most purchase interest in our products. So we do a lot of work in consumer testing to understand what is going to have the most impact. Again, we partner with our health care professionals, our registered dietitians, our scientists to make sure that it's credible sources of information and credible ways to talk about it, but then bringing it to life to the consumer in the right way. And that goes beyond just packaging. Obviously, packaging is important, but we want to make sure that we're reaching consumers along every step of their journey. So reaching them with the right message in the right place at the right time. So, for example, we've invested a lot of our media over the past few years into retail media, but most recently, we've added on some new retail media partners like PatientPoint, which is actually the largest digital screen provider in healthcare providers' offices. So imagine you're somebody who's curious about starting a weight loss journey, considering a GLP-1 drug. You make an appointment with your doctor, and you're sitting in the waiting room, and you're actually served up information that's relevant and credible around the types of foods you need to eat while on a GLP-1 drug. So that's definitely opened up new ways for us to interact with

consumers, cut through that clutter, and deliver credible information in a simple, easy-to-digest way.

[00:15:23] Matt: Yeah. It's a really creative activation. So in terms of the consumption patterns of your audience, obviously, we saw during COVID just a huge increase of adoption in people ordering groceries online because they were left with no other choice, and we saw the boom of platforms like Instacart. Just curious from an overall share-of-wallet standpoint, how much growth are you seeing with consumers buying food online versus in-store, and what are some of the nuances behind that?

[00:15:51] Linda: Yeah. That's still a huge growth engine in the grocery category. We see growth of online channels outpacing growth of traditional brick-and-mortar, and so we've built up significant capabilities in that space to make sure we're showing up on the digital shelf just as well as we're showing up on the traditional shelf. And it's a different muscle. On the traditional shelf, it's mostly just packaging. Sometimes you have in-store activation or merchandising, but the digital shelf gives you so much more. We can actually deliver content in addition to just a pretty picture of a package. And I think consumers really like that because they can go deeper. We talked earlier about they're more interested in health and wellness. They're reading nutrition labels. They can learn more through that online shopping experience than they can sometimes in a traditional retail environment.

[00:16:37] Matt: Yeah. And I think it also speaks to just more broadly the dichotomy. I would imagine that someone like you has to plan every day with making sure you're building the brand and building trust, and you have a lot of legacy and established brands, at the same time being performance-oriented, and as you're saying, the channels that are moving volume. And do you find that as a hard balance? A lot of CMOs I talk to say it's one continual journey, and they never want to choose between performance and brand. But, obviously, on a day-to-day basis, I would imagine that you're kind of modulating up and down the funnel, so to speak.

[00:17:08] Linda: Yeah. I mean, we operate in an omnichannel world, so we have to make sure we're building omnichannel plans and reaching the consumer wherever they may be shopping for our products. But I think it's also important as we think about that funnel to set the right KPIs and measure success. At Danone, we believe you should measure what you treasure, and that really helps us when we're having conversations with finance or the brand teams about where to put their dollars. And there are some categories that are more developed online, and therefore, we should shift more dollars there because we're seeing the return. So it's really important that you have the data and the numbers behind the decisions.

[00:17:44] Matt: Absolutely. So, obviously, you can't spend a minute right now in our industry without talking about AI, and I know it has varying impacts on different industries. I'm just curious where your company is and you personally are on the AI journey, and what do you think some of the opportunities are heading into the back half of this year and into 2026 relative to leveraging AI?

[00:18:06] Linda: Yeah. I mean, AI obviously was the big buzzword of the last 18 months, but I do think it will have a significant impact on our industry and our profession. We at Danone view it as an enabler. We actually have a partnership with Microsoft, and we use Copilot exclusively internally to help make everyday tasks more efficient and effective. And then from a marketing standpoint, we've absolutely built AI into our creative development process. We use it for storyboards and mood boards early in the creative or design development journey to drive those efficiencies. We're using it for creative testing so we can get results much quicker and enable us to be more nimble and agile in optimizing our campaigns. So we've seen it as a huge benefit in the ways we've been using it to date.

[00:18:50] Matt: As a CMO, are you more likely to go to a platform like ChatGPT or Claude to get information or uncover insights, or are you more likely to be on social media and looking at influencers? Like, where are you getting your inspiration from so you can bring fresh new ideas and strategies into the office every day?

[00:19:10] Linda: I think it's important to cast a wide net. I employ a variety of more traditional and more modern sources of inspiration. So I'll give you an example in the more traditional space. My team does a monthly or quarterly culture trek planned by a member of the team, where we'll go out into the world to find sources of inspiration. So in the past, we've done a culture trek to a local farm-to-table restaurant and seen how they grow their own vegetables that go into the dishes the chef makes. We've gone to a pop-up art exhibit, which is to inspire our design team. So, more traditional things like that. And then we obviously spend a lot of time scrolling on social media. We have a new social listening tool capability and team that we've stood up that's really mining for trends and sharing those with the team in real time. We have a Slack channel that's a source of daily inspiration and ideas, people bouncing things off each other. So lots of different ways that we keep our finger on the pulse of what's happening in culture.

[00:20:03] Matt: Yeah. I think one thing people probably underestimate is not only AI's impact on how we work every day, but it's going to change the consumer. It's going to change how the consumer spends their time and spends their money based on this incredible new tool that we're putting in everyone's hands.

[00:20:18] Linda: I mean, think about a consumer using AI to create their grocery list and making sure, are we equipped? Are our products going to be the ones that show up on that grocery list? Do we understand?

[00:20:28] Matt: Like, I'm hosting 18 people. Three people are allergic to peanuts. I want it to be Mexican-themed. Give me a recipe and ingredient list. And then if you trust it, it's like, how do you make sure your brand is part of that conversation for sure?

[00:20:41] Linda: Exactly. And that's happening right now.

[00:20:43] Matt: It sure is. So, shifting gears a little bit to you and kind of your leadership approach. You mentioned your team. And if you were speaking to a younger listener, which we have many here on the podcast, in terms of the areas that they should focus on so they can one day perhaps end up in the CMO seat, what are some of those areas, and how do you think maybe some of those areas have impacted your development and your career journey?

[00:21:06] Linda: So the advice I always give is to focus on what I call the four C's. I think first and foremost, curiosity. If you want to be a successful marketer, you have to be curious. Again, we've talked about how this industry has evolved, how the food industry is at a tipping point. You have to constantly be learning and evolving. And so, being really curious about consumer behavior, consumer insights will make you more successful in this space. Along with that, compassion. I'm not always the consumer of the product or brand I'm marketing, so I have to dig deep and really understand that consumer target and have compassion for them so that I can deliver better products and messaging. And then, I think on the leadership side, the other two C's would be courage and conviction. You have to have courage, and you have to take risks. You're not always going to be successful, and that's okay. We have here what we call our wall of shame and our wall of fame. And you can learn just as much from your failures that may have been shameful as you can from the times you were successful. And so putting equal emphasis on those, I think, is really important to building a culture where people feel like they can take risks in a courageous way, but then back it up with conviction. You have to have conviction in what you're proposing that we do so that the team gets behind you. And so have that confidence, have that conviction, and back it up with facts.

[00:22:25] Matt: And I think building a culture where failure is accepted and in some ways sounds like even celebrated, that's easier said than done because we live in a world where we all want to be accountable for our decisions. And, obviously, you run a very high-stakes organization that has lots of money behind it and lots of stakeholders. So, how are you able to get your team to actually believe it's okay to fail? I guess, I mean, the wall of shame is a really interesting concept that I have never thought of in terms of a positive application.

[00:22:55] Linda: I think you have to role-model it. I will be the first one to share my failures. I'm not perfect. I'm learning every day, and I've had some massive ones in my career. But I'm still learning every day, and I'm still pushing for better. And I am where I am, so don't be afraid to take those risks and learn from them if they don't work out.

[00:23:14] Matt: Absolutely. So in terms of you and your journey, and obviously, you've accomplished so much in your career, and it looks like in many ways, you're just getting started. When you look at your continual journey as a leader, an executive, as a marketer moving forward, what are some of the areas that you want to continue to build upon so you can continue to drive differentiated value for the organizations that you serve?

[00:23:33] Linda: Yeah. I mean, I'm most fulfilled and engaged when I'm challenged. So, again, one of the reasons I love marketing is it is a continual challenge to stay on top of everything,

stay on top of the evolving consumer trends, evolving technology. So I look forward to continuing to lean into AI and other technologies. And then I also love team building. I would not be where I am today without my team. I talk about it all the time, but I truly have the dream team. I think they're the best experts in their fields, and they are passionate and excited to come to work every day to dig in and drive our brands to new heights. So that's what really gets me excited and motivated is to come roll up my sleeves and work with them every day.

[00:24:15] Matt: That's fantastic. So to wrap up here, Linda, we always ask our guests if there's a saying or a mantra to help sort of encapsulate their career during the day. Just wondering what comes to mind for you.

[00:24:26] Linda: It doesn't get easier, but you get stronger.

[00:24:29] Matt: Okay. And why did that come to mind for you as the first thing to say?

[00:24:31] Linda: I think people think as you move up the ladder that things get easier. When you're young and you're hustling, it seems so hard. It's not true. I mean, the more senior you get, the bigger the problems. And so it gets harder, but you get stronger because you learn from your experiences, and you become, I think, a stronger leader in that way.

[00:24:49] Matt: Yeah. And I love how one of your C's was conviction. I think if you have conviction, you're able to believe in whatever your stance is, your idea is, then I think a lot of people in this world of constant change just want somebody to take them by the hand and say, "No. Go this way" because there's so much swirl. And I think the conviction part really stood out to me. And I think whether you fail, whether you succeed, if you have conviction, you believe it, and you've done the work, then you have nothing to regret when all is said and done.

[00:25:15] Linda: Yeah. I've seen a lot of leaders fail because they failed to make decisions. If you're indecisive, you're not going to be a good leader. People do want that direction, and you need to bring people along with you. But at the end of the day, you need to make clear decisions and move forward.

[00:25:28] Matt: That's right. Well, we're going to leave it at that. I'm very thankful I made the clear decision to bring you on the podcast today. It was a great conversation. I can't wait for our audience to hear it.

[00:25:36] Linda: Thanks so much for having me.

[00:25:38] Matt: Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and the Adweek team, thanks again to Linda Bethea, chief marketing officer at Danone North America 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 and subscribe to all Adweek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcast. To find out more about

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