

Koen Burghouts Transcript

[00:00:01] Koen: You need to be humble. I mean, the external environment is changing so fast. You need to build on others. You need to learn from others and quickly distill what is relevant for you. So, having a certain openness for learning—and that's one side of the coin. The other side of the coin, the world out there, is too complex to fully understand always. So you need to work with convictions. You need to work with hypotheses, assumptions that you validate over time. Because if you're not doing that, you're losing speed, and you're behind.

[00:00:35] 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 welcomed by Koen Burghouts, the president of sweet snacking at Mondelēz International. With extensive experience in innovation, brand strategy, and consumer insights, Koen has played a pivotal role in shaping the future of snacking on a global scale. Koen, so excited to see you today.

[00:01:13] Koen: Thank you, Matt. Thank you. Happy to be here.

[00:01:16] Matt: I'm a big fan of your work and the Mondelēz company and its brands. I would love to hear from you as we get started here. What's the road that you took to ending up in the seat that you're in today? It's such an interesting role, and you're leading the Mondelēz brand at such a pivotal time. But what was the road that got you here?

[00:01:34] Koen: Yeah. So, actually, I did grow up in Europe, and I vividly remember with my parents traveling through Europe. And even in supermarkets in Europe, you see the same brands with different languages, different expressions. And as a kid, I always find that very fascinating. So that's how I started in food as soon as I concluded on my business administration education, and that's what eventually took me to the U.S. and to Mondelēz.

[00:02:04] Matt: Now I'm going way back here because we did our research as we always do. But your career, like so many people who we've had on the podcast, started at Procter and Gamble, where you actually spent five years. What were some of the benefits and learnings you had that you were able to extract from your time at P&G, which so many people said has been so critical at early stages in their career?

[00:02:24] Koen: Absolutely. And especially beginning there, I think it's like a second-level education. P&G is really well developed in defining the problems and having a standard template for all the solutions. So it's a great education, I would say. It gives you all the theory and all the tools to be successful as a manager.

[00:02:46] Matt: And then over time, you would move on to Danone, where you were there for ten years, still working in Europe. As you look back on your time there, I know it was a while ago now, but what is different about having a leadership role? And I guess then you're kind of on the up-and-coming portion of your career. But working in Europe versus the U.S., what are some of the differences that you remember being in Europe?

[00:03:08] Koen: Yeah. So I think Europe is a combination of a lot of different cultures, and every country is very different. So working in Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Czech Republic — they all had their specifics.

[00:03:21] Matt: Unique. That's the amazing thing about Europe, right? You can take a two-hour train. You're in a completely different world.

[00:03:27] Koen: Exactly. And you have people, like, educated differently. And so there's a host of differences. But I would say the big difference between the U.S. and Europe is just the speed of taking decisions, the speed of doing business, the speed of implementation, and also the ambition level, to be honest. I think the ambition in the U.S. is at a completely different level than in Europe, not only on the company level, but also on individual level, I would say.

[00:03:54] Matt: And then you would move on to U.S., where I agree. We do operate here at the speed of culture, and you spent ten years at PepsiCo. What were some of your key takeaways when you look back in your time — actually, more than ten years at PepsiCo — on your time now? And what were some of the things that you think helped shape you and the leader you are today the most?

[00:04:13] Koen: Yeah. So at Pepsi, I had most global roles, and I had very different roles. It was more business transformation, breakthrough innovation, but also leading brand portfolio that Pepsi called the more forward-looking brand portfolio with Sun Chips and PopCorners. So I really learned that to work future back, having a clear understanding what their future success should look like. And then how do you work that back to today, and what are the decisions you have to take? And what is the roadmap you need to develop to get there?

[00:04:48] Matt: That's interesting. You know, Amazon and Jeff Bezos famously has this - I don't know if this is exactly what you're referring to - this practice, where he writes a press release of what is the success will look like of a product launch or an initiative five, ten years from now. And then, basically, it's a workback schedule to say for that to be true seven years from now, what needs to be true a year from now. Is that kind of what you're referring to?

[00:05:09] Koen: Yeah. Exactly. We call it the North Star. So, right up over future state, not only from a consumer standpoint, but also from a technology standpoint, from a product

deliverable standpoint. So we really try to be more concrete than just a high-level consumer statement or a consumer job to be done, for example.

[00:05:30] Matt: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting because when you talk about how the U.S. moves so fast, I think what comes along with that, and I see it in a lot of companies we work with, is there's a lot of focus on what's urgent versus what's important. You know, it's like whatever the topic du jour is or the fire drill du jour, everyone kind of gravitates towards. And when you do that, you can kind of take your eye off the ball of the North Star. So I'd imagine as a leader, it's a balancing act versus hitting this quarter's numbers and taking advantage of the opportunities that are right in front of you, but at the same time, understand where you're going towards.

[00:06:00] Koen: That's right. So I think a quarter and the pressure in the quarter could potentially slow you down for good reasons, but it could never, to your point, you can never have the eyes of the ball. So I think that is always what I've been pushing for, that you might slow down in the quarter, but you still need to make progress. You still need to progress to your end state. And sometimes in a quarter, you can go faster than you anticipated, and sometimes you need to be slower because you have a different trade-off, short-term versus long-term. So that is a very life, life debate, I would say.

[00:06:33] Matt: Yeah. Absolutely. So, of course, now you're here at Mondelēz, where you've been nearly three years. And we'd love to hear about your current role as president overseeing U.S. brands and kind of where your areas of focus are heading into 2026.

[00:06:46] Koen: Yeah. So I'm heading what we call all our sweet snacking brands. So think about Oreo, Chips Ahoy, belVita, Tate's, to name a few. And the task is to get to the next level of growth. The brands and the portfolio and the company as a whole is very successful. If you look at what the historic results from a share perspective, from a revenue perspective, are super impressive, but now it's up to me and the full cross-functional team to get to the next level of growth.

[00:07:17] Matt: And, of course, a big commonality over the last several decades in your career has been you've been focused in the food and beverage space. What are some of the trends and changes in marketing food and beverage-based products, especially maybe some of the brands that you mentioned that you're focused on today, Oreo, Chips Ahoy! etcetera, that have changed over time in terms of just consumer taste and preferences, and, obviously, so many broader trends which we can get into.

[00:07:41] Koen: So if you take it from a consumer standpoint, especially also in the current economic context, there is always a need for a small treat, and people are still willing to pay for that. So we call that premium indulgence. That is a clear area for us to focus upon. Obviously, you have others, like on-the-go convenience, on-the-go, out-of-home consumption. We also

look at Better For You as a big trend that is shaping up snacking. So these are the three big themes we are looking at.

[00:08:11] Matt: And when you look at a trend like GLP-1s, do you see that impacting, I guess, the way that consumers shop in terms of packaging and positioning? And how much does a trend like that impact the way you look at building the brands in the future?

[00:08:24] Koen: Yeah. We are monitoring that. So, Better For You in this broader sense is changing. People are looking for snacks to deliver different benefits than maybe, like, ten years ago. But it's many things in Better For You. It's just not one thing for what is changing. So we look at, and that is, I think, why we are better suited than probably others, because we have a very diverse set of brands that can tap in those opportunities.

[00:08:53] Matt: And how about consumption habits in your category? Because, obviously, COVID brought on a whole new slew of ways that people purchase. Before COVID, a lot of people don't realize the whole notion of ordering groceries was kind of a unique, kind of foreign concept. Now everybody does, and you look at the success of companies like DoorDash and Instacart doing so well. How much of an impact does that have in terms of when you think about your product development pipeline and what innovation looks like for Mondelēz?

[00:09:21] Koen: It's more what we call the delivery system. And, definitely, your brand, if you take a brand of, like Oreo or Chips Ahoy, you need to show up in very different channels.

[00:09:31] Matt: On Amazon as well. There's no checkout aisle like there is at a 7-Eleven or Walmart, where you're in the aisle, and somebody might grab something that isn't really the same when you're buying online.

[00:09:40] Koen: That's right. So you're right in the sense that you have way more business models to be successful in. And every business model has its unique opportunity and unique way of doing business. So I think it is up to us as leaders to truly understand how those models work and how consumers behave, and what are the pain points. Because there are still enough pain points for our opportunities, depending on how you want to define it for us, to solve for through the lens of the brands. So I'm personally very excited about all these new models emerging because it's not always set in stone how to be successful.

[00:10:16] Matt: Especially in this day and age.

[00:10:17] Koen: Exactly. You need to have, like, uh, an experimental mindset to a certain degree to just to figure it out and try and test and learn and adapt.

[00:10:26] Matt: Yeah. Because if you look at so many of the big brands that exist right now, especially in the food and beverage space, so many of them were built during kind of the

golden age of television, when the brands had big checkbooks, and they could kind of run ads in heavy rotation towards consumers, and they became kind of the de facto brands in the category. And on one hand, it's made it harder for kind of new iconic brands to be built. But at the same time, since we're not nearly in the same TV-centric world as we were in the past, there are new opportunities for emerging brands. And we're seeing that happen, especially when you look at what's happened with brands like Olipop and Poppi, which we're sure you're familiar with, are coming out now. And we're seeing that happen in almost every category where you're having emerging brands that are built for a new consumer that don't have the barriers to entry that they used to have in terms of reaching people or with distribution. So in a lot of ways, I think the CPG leaders can't really rest on the laurels that they had in the past, of kind of defensibility, if you will. And that might be what you're referring to in terms of the innovation of just the way that brands are built.

[00:11:30] Koen: That's right. And I think, uh, one key element is how you show up in culture. And I think, honestly, Mondelēz, even before I came, is highly successful in doing so. And if you take a brand like Oreo — and that excites me a lot — it's not only how they show up in culture, but they actually shape culture.

[00:11:48] Matt: Like the famous "Dunk in the Dark" post that they did during the Super Bowl.

[00:11:51] Koen: Exactly. And Oreo has its very specific ritual. And people are playing with that and making their own version and racking up a lot of, uh, likes and post shares, but just behind how they interact with Oreo. That is one example. Another example is it's not about how we show up in culture, but how we drive culture. If you take partnerships like what we do with Post Malone, it's just not a high-level partnership, but it's a very intense partnership where we say, you know, let's look at the full marketing mix. Even the cookie needs to be the Post Malone sign-off cookie that he really believes in, and he really develops. So that becomes more than just a high-level brand partnership because it touches all the elements of the marketing mix.

[00:12:38] Matt: We'll be right back with *The Speed of Culture* after a few words from our sponsors.

I actually saw a post on Instagram yesterday. And in this day and age, you don't know if it's true or if it's AI, but it looked like there's a collaboration going on between Oreo and Reese's where it's kind of a joint product. Is that something that's coming to market?

[00:12:56] Koen: Yes. That's right.

[00:12:56] Matt: So, where does a concept like that come from, and how do you gain conviction to dive into a partnership like that? Reese's is a — is that a Mondelēz brand? It's a Hershey's brand, isn't it?

[00:13:06] Koen: That's a Hershey brand.

[00:13:07] Matt: Right. So that's kind of like coopetition, right? Which I think is really interesting. Is that a concept that is hard to kind of gain conviction for and dive into, and what's the process behind something like that?

[00:13:18] Koen: Yeah. So I think it starts with a strong conviction from both companies. What is the added value of your brand, and how is it positioned? What role is it playing for consumers, right? And if you then look at Oreo and you look at Reese's, then you could easily see that if you would, let's say, find a partnership, you can deliver a consumer experience that we individually, as brands, cannot deliver. And it's this highly multi-texture, cross-category, chocolate, cookie, or the whole mix makes it very interesting. And we see that in the marketplace that one plus one is more than two. And that is really a collective success, and we both see the success of this.

[00:14:04] Matt: Yeah. I mean, logistically... well, first and foremost, the fact I remembered in a world where, and obviously, I am interviewing you today, but I don't even think that was on my mind when I saw the post. It was just really well done. And I think that the headline was something like, "You spoke and we listened." And it kind of really spoke to kind of, like, consumer centricity, that you have your finger on the pulse of your customer, and that is where culture is built. The biggest change we've seen in the social media era is brands are no longer kind of developed from the boardrooms or developed from the sidewalks. And this is kind of a perfect example of that.

[00:14:36] Koen: Yeah. It is. And, obviously, I'm happy you say that because that is what we want to do more of. So we invest a lot in a company to be just close to culture, understand, and then having a conversation, how is this relevant for us? How can we make it relevant for us? And how do we execute against it? That is, I would say, 70 or 80% of the conversation I have with my teams to drive the business.

[00:15:01] Matt: Yeah. I mean, that probably wasn't the case fifty years ago. Somebody overseeing a snacks business probably wasn't thinking a lot about culture. They're probably thinking about more like the factories and the ability to distribute. But now that's become, while it's still important, you know, more commoditized. And, really, the differentiation is brand, and brand's differentiated by its ability to be central to culture and your consumers' lives.

[00:15:20] Koen: That's right. And I think the other side of that is you also need to have a nimble cross-functional structure to move with speed. So it is, on one hand, it's absolutely what you said, but it's also, let's say, the back office and making sure that the execution and the company works as one. Therefore, I come back to the concept of a North Star, and the concept of a North Star needs to be more than a consumer statement because it also needs to be valid

for R&D, and it also needs to be valid for supply chain, so that they understand the big objective we collectively work on.

[00:15:54] Matt: So this year, for the first time, the average age of a first-time mom in the U.S. is Gen Z, which means that now the average new mom has grown up with the iPhone in the household, consuming content, looking down their phone versus at TV, which means increasingly your buyer is going to be Gen Z. And increasingly, the way you're going to reach them is through the small screen. As we know, the way you reach consumers on the small screen isn't through traditional advertising. It is through content, and content is kind of part and parcel with culture. When you think about content and on a broader lens, storytelling, what is kind of the approach moving forward for storytelling with Mondelēz? And where do things like the creator economy as a distribution point fit in in that regard?

[00:16:38] Koen: So there are multiple angles to this, right? So I would say it is a bit of, uh, taking the Oreo playbook and taking a page and making sure that it becomes relevant for other brands. And a good example is what we do with Chips Ahoy and *Stranger Things*. *Stranger Things*, right, is the consumer insight behind *Stranger Things* is, like, knack to nostalgia. That's exactly where we play as a brand. It's really a childhood memory for a lot of people. And based on that, knowing that they came out with their fifth and last season, highly relevant with Gen Z, so we started early conversations with them. So, okay, if we both have the same brand values, we have the same focus on Gen Z, how can we take the page from the Oreo playbook and make it relevant for Chips Ahoy? And that's what the team has done successfully. But also touching the product, they made a unique product, unique packaging. Uh, if you do it, you need to go all the way. And I think that's what the team has done. But, you know, it's not only partnerships. You also need to build your own equity, and I'm very excited that if you look at what Mondelēz is doing with Gen AI and how we leverage Gen AI to make story or have, like, storytelling on a completely different level, we leverage AI to generate stories in real time for our characters. Take *Chip*. *Chip* is a character we are using for Chips Ahoy! That is one we bring to life in culture on a daily basis. And, yeah, you can find creators to make that even bigger together. But these are all avenues we are exploring. And sometimes, we scale it faster because it's an instant success, and sometimes, it's a more learning curve.

[00:18:24] Matt: And you kind of took the words out of my mouth in terms of my next said the question was around AI. How do you think it changes the creative process? How do you think it changes what it means to be successful in a large enterprise like Mondelēz, where a huge Band Aid is keeping the brand relevant in culture? Like, where does AI fit in the everyday job of somebody in this new day and age?

[00:18:47] Koen: Yeah. So it's a multiple angles, right? Yes. It is part of its efficiency and effectiveness. So you use it to reach people at the right moment and the right profile, personalization. So that is, uh, really more an efficiency-effectiveness game, and I think we are quite advanced in that as well. But the true unlock for me comes in, you know, that it starts to

drive content and starts to drive storytelling, to your earlier point. And that is where we already have good successes with Chip Ahoy!, for example, and we want to do more of that. And it's interesting because when we started to execute and work with Gen AI for Chips Ahoy!, we also found out that we had to be sharper on the brand positioning, sharper on the exact tone of voice. Because there's so much more nuance in Gen AI that they also need to be sharper on the brief than ever.

[00:19:43] Matt: Yeah. It's like garbage in, garbage out, right? So you really need to up the level. Like, the new brief is the prompt almost.

[00:19:48] Koen: Yes. That's a great way to put it. That's the prompt.

[00:19:51] Matt: So what do you think the future is if you were suddenly tomorrow thrust into a role where you're heading a large ad agency network? What would you do? Where would you focus in terms of rebuilding advertising agencies in this new age?

[00:20:06] Koen: Yeah. So I personally feel that creative horsepower triumphs everything. So whatever we think about Gen AI, it is about this brand idea that really travels across cohorts, travels across culture. So I would never compromise on the creative horsepower and make that your unique identity as an agency.

[00:20:32] Matt: I think it's great feedback. So switching gears as we wrap up here, obviously, greatness is in the agency of others, especially at a large company like Mondelēz. And I'm sure you have a great team, and you focus a lot on team building. What advice would you have for younger people that are entering the workforce that want to end up in the seat of president of a large company like Mondelēz one day? What are some of the areas you think they should focus on? And in that regard, what are some of the areas that you think your team excels at that enables your brands to perform so well over time?

[00:21:02] Koen: Yeah. So I think for most, and it started off also in our conversation, is you need to be humble. I mean, the external environment is changing so fast. You need to build on others. You need to learn from others and quickly distill what is relevant for you. So, having a certain openness for learning, and that's one side of the coin. The other side of the coin, the world out there, is too complex to fully understand always. So you need to work with convictions. You need to work with hypotheses, assumptions that you validate over time. Because if you're not doing that, you're losing speed, and you're behind. So it is this, let's say, balance between learning from others and driving your own convictions over assumptions that I believe is extremely helpful for younger people to start develop. And then if I look at the quality of our team, the quality of our brands, that is more or less exactly what we are trying to do. Move fast, work with assumptions, and make sure that there's a time to debate, but also a time to execute. And you need to really organize yourself around that.

[00:22:10] Matt: Yeah. I think young people sometimes struggle with gaining that conviction, just because many people are fearful. They don't want to lose their job. They don't want to take risks. So what they do is they kind of wait to be told what to do when they go into work every day. But I actually think those are the people that are at the most area of risk in the age of AI. I think it is, to your point, people who take initiative that lean in. Those are the people that I think are going to be the, they're going to be on the right side of all this change.

[00:22:36] Koen: That's right. And I think the beauty of Gen AI is that you can experiment with a low cost, a low barrier of entry.

[00:22:45] Matt: Without a lot of technical knowledge.

[00:22:47] Koen: Exactly. And fast. So make sure that you keep sharpening your hypothesis with the help of AI.

[00:22:53] Matt: Absolutely. Well, this has been such a great discussion. We always ask our guests to wrap up the podcast if there's a saying or mantra that's helped kind of encapsulate or package their career journey up to date. And, obviously, you've worked at so many great places and overseen so many incredible brands. Just really curious what comes to mind for you.

[00:23:10] Koen: Yeah. Mine is "never stop learning".

[00:23:13] Matt: So it's about curiosity and a willingness to continue to uncover new things, no matter where you are in your career.

[00:23:19] Koen: Exactly. And never feel that you have arrived.

[00:23:22] Matt: Yeah. I mean, I think that's so important. I think, you know, in this day and age, younger people are growing up with Instagram, and they're seeing everybody else who they think are killing it. And I think even though it's just their highlight reels, I think what that does is it takes away people's patience. And I think because of that, when you don't have patience, a lot of times, you don't have that curiosity. And I think that is kind of the challenge that many younger people in the workforce face is you need to be patient. You need to put in the work, and you need to be curious. And if you do that consistently over time, I think you're going to put yourself in the position to be successful.

[00:23:56] Koen: That's right. And underlying all of that needs to be passion. You need to be passionate about because otherwise, you will never go the extra mile to question yourself or question your environment.

[00:24:07] Matt: Absolutely. Well, it's clear that you're incredibly passionate and a leader who has conviction, not afraid to take risks. And congratulations on all your success, and wishing you a great 2026 at Mondelēz.

[00:24:18] Koen: You too, Matt. Thanks for the time.

[00:24:20] Matt: Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and Adweek team, thanks so much to Koen Burghouts, the president of sweet snacking at Mondelēz International, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review *The Speed of Culture* podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Till next time. See you soon, everyone. Take care.

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