

Melissa Harrison Transcript

Melissa 00:00:01 I think what we're seeing this year in 2026, what is gonna be the giant leap forward—and this is just from what I'm seeing and what I've seen on the floor. This is the actual... we went from theoretical to practical. You're going to see AI. You're going to see physical AI. You're going to see digital twins. You're gonna see all the humanoids. Right? Like, I feel like this is the year that we take that giant leap forward, where you start to see all the things that we've been talking about in theory.

Matt 00:00:28 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 are live in Vegas here at the CES show, and today, we are thrilled to welcome Melissa Harrison, the Vice President of Marketing Communications at the Consumer Technology Association. Melissa is a seasoned communications and marketing leader with deep experience shaping narratives at the intersection of technology, culture, and public policy. Melissa, thanks so much for joining today.

Melissa 00:01:07 Oh my gosh. It's such a privilege to be here. Thank you for having me.

Matt 00:01:10 Absolutely. So we are here, CES Week...

Melissa 00:01:12 We made it.

Matt 00:01:13 Las Vegas 2026, and you were kind enough to lend us some of your time in what I'm sure is a very busy week for you. Tell me about the road you took in your career to lead you to your current role as VP of Marketing at CTA.

Melissa 00:01:25 We could talk for hours about that, but I'll try to keep it as simple as possible. I think if you looked at my resume, you would probably say that doesn't make a lot of sense, but I spent some time in my early career working in public policy and really at the intersection of politics and policy. And what I've realized is that turnout for voters is just like getting people to show up at a trade show in January. Right? Someday I'm gonna write about this, but there's a real intersection between just politics and policy and the work that I'm doing now, which I find very interesting. But yeah. So I spent some time there. I worked in the Obama administration at US EPA, dealt with a number of fun issues while there, and then had the opportunity to go to Ogilvy and really understand how brands are made.

Matt 00:02:08 It's a great place to cut your teeth, isn't it?

Melissa 00:02:10 I jokingly said to them, "If you're crazy enough to hire me, I'm crazy enough to actually say yes". Because most people start their careers at an agency and then work the other way. I sort of did the opposite. I came out of the Obama administration and was really interested in: what don't I know? What do I wanna do next in my career? What can I learn? And that is really where I just started to understand the intersection between marketing communications in a really fundamental way, and started working more across the corporate sector. And so when CTA called, there was no way I was gonna say no. I've known about CES my whole career. CTA is well known in the Washington area for the policy and advocacy work that they do for the industry. It's a really great place to work with really great people, and so I had the opportunity, and I jumped at it.

Matt 00:02:51 So, how much of your role is spending time on all the other stuff? Because—and maybe we could talk about those other things that CTA does—it's more than just a show.

Melissa 00:02:59 That's right. Most people don't know that there's about a 160 staff at CTA that do all of the things I'm gonna say and the show on top of it. So we actually have a full government affairs team. So we're a huge policy advocacy organization working on behalf of the tech industry, not only in Washington, but across the States and across the globe. On top of that, we have a full research team. So we put out a ton of research, really setting the standards for the industry and helping people understand what's happening. And then on top of that, we also have a fully ANSI-accredited standards team. Every time you turn on airplane mode, CTA made that. So it's just a gentle reminder that...

Matt 00:03:39 Things are just coming out of nowhere. Right?

Melissa 00:03:41 That's right. They don't come from nowhere. You know, we recently—the standards team and the policy team—worked together for over-the-counter hearing aids to make them more accessible for people. And so none of this happens overnight, but that's all happening at the same time that we're getting ready to put on the world's best tech show.

Matt 00:03:55 Yeah. And we're gonna get into that. I've actually worked with CTA for now nearly twenty-five years. I worked with them when they were CEA. And my former agency, MRY, created something called the TKO "Thunderdorm" Tour, which basically...

Melissa 00:04:21 Love it.

Matt 00:04:22 It was like a technology-infused dorm room. And we actually built it on the showroom floor to show what the future dorm room would be. Yeah. It's crazy because companies like NVIDIA... I worked with through CEA back then, and they were just making Xbox accessories. Who knew it would be where it was? And over the last twenty-five years, as I've continued to come back to the show, it's just expanded. Right? And it used to just be about physical electronics.

Melissa 00:04:35 Right.

Matt 00:04:35 And then you start to... right. And then you start to see some of the broadcasters and media companies come. Now you have Procter & Gamble here and PepsiCo, and these companies. So why has it expanded, and why has this become really a tentpole in business across media, entertainment, technology, marketing, etcetera?

Melissa 00:04:52 It is. It's super interesting because when I started, I was going through the history of the show, and there was a period of time where everybody wrote about the show, and it was the "gadget show". Right? And now we'd go out to do media interviews and they say, "You haven't talked about any gadgets. Are the TVs still gonna be there?" And I'm like, there's still gonna be Amazing TVs.

Matt 00:05:06. Big TVs.

Melissa 00:05:08 Huge, amazing TVs. But the evolution of technology... I think we thought about them in individual devices, and now we're wearing them. Our car is a device. Everything that we touch... we always say that every company is a technology company, and that is proven true across CES because we touch every sector, every category, anything you can think about. It's really here. And I think this is where business gets done, and people wanna kick off their year. They wanna be together, the partnerships. When you walk the show floor, you may be not in the mobility sector, but you walk through West Hall. You can be inspired by anything that you see there, and that can ignite another idea of how to parlay that into something else or to move it from, "Hey, this works really well in the car. What if we moved it to this?" And I think people want that excitement and that feeling at the beginning of the year. Everything's fresh and new. Let's get to the show. It sort of feels like a family reunion. People are hugging, saying hello to one another. But I do think that, ultimately, we are a B2B show, and you've just seen that grow over the years. The enterprise sector continues to grow. So much of what ends up being consumer technology really does start across the enterprise. And so you can't walk the show floor and not be inspired, and I think people wanna be here for that.

Matt 00:06:27 Yeah. So what goes into putting on a show like this? I think I read that it's over a 150,000 people.

Melissa 00:06:33 So last year, we had a 143,000 people. I can never tell you how many people are gonna come. We... we can probably get into this.

Matt 00:06:39 Because for those who have been at CES, there's a whole ecosystem around CES. Obviously, the convention center is sort of like ground zero, so to speak, for the show, but then there's all these sort of pop-up and satellite events, and it's sort of, like, it creates this huge happening.

Melissa 00:06:52 So we have 13 total venues across Las Vegas. So people often ask us, "Why Las Vegas? Why January?"

Matt 00:07:03 Right.

Melissa 00:07:04 So I'm gonna give you that inside scoop. Why January? We start building the show in the middle of December. There's only one period of time across Las Vegas and the convention center that there is enough downtime to build out a show of our size. So it has to be that period.

Matt 00:07:14 So you start... everything loads in... December. It takes two, three weeks to put everything together.

Melissa 00:07:19 Yes. The second is that we are always in Las Vegas, because there is no other place in the world that has enough floor space or hotel rooms.

Matt 00:07:27 In the world.

Melissa 00:07:28 Correct.

Matt 00:07:28 Wow.

Melissa 00:07:28 Correct. And Las Vegas has a 150,000 hotel rooms, which we need.

Matt 00:07:33 Yeah. I mean, Las Vegas can really digest CES.

Melissa 00:07:35 That's right. That's right.

Matt 00:07:36 It's crowded, but it doesn't seem chaotic.

Melissa 00:07:38 Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, we do our best. Our operations team, who's phenomenal, does a lot to make sure that it doesn't feel overwhelming from the shuttles to everything else that we do to try to help people get around the town, but it's pretty incredible. So you asked, really, how do we do it? There's a core leadership team across all of the priority issues that you're thinking about. So we have marketing communications. We have operations. We have sales. We have anything you can think of. There's someone who needs to be a lead for that.

Matt 00:08:03 Yeah.

Melissa 00:08:03 What I love to think about is my first day here, I just take a moment to sort of look around. It takes millions of pieces to put the show together, and we have a finite amount of people who do it. And it's just nice to take that moment, take a deep breath, and say we made it.

Matt 00:08:18 And that's one of the great things about being in the event business, because if you're in a business that we create digital products, you can't really touch and feel it that way. The physicality, the enormity of walking to the show and knowing that you play the role...

Melissa 00:08:31 Right.

Matt 00:08:31 ...bring this to life.

Melissa 00:08:32 Right. Especially so last year when we did a wholesale brand change. So new look, new feel. And to show up and see it for the first time in a very tangible way. The website looks great. Our business cards look great. Right? All of the things that us as marketers look at to make sure that everything's right. But to actually see coming up the escalator in the Venetian Expo and seeing the entire logo of 12-foot letters...

Matt 00:08:59 Yeah.

Melissa 00:08:59 Right? There's really nothing better than that.

Matt 00:09:01 Totally. So, obviously, your role is marketing the show. What does that look like? Who are you marketing it to? What tactics are you using to make sure that it continues to be—because you can't take it for granted, right? There's other conferences. There's other places. You're at the top, but you don't wanna lose that up.

Melissa 00:09:18 We never rest on our laurels, and we make pretty audacious goals for ourselves. We like to bring new things to the table all the time.

Matt 00:09:26 And a global audience too. Right?

Melissa 00:09:28 Exactly. And so we have to not only look at who's our core audience... that's who's been here before. We look at our, basically, the last three years of, like, who's been here, how are we talking to them. But we also have to go out and grow. That's on top of everything we're doing, and we have to do that across not just the US, but globally. This year has been particularly interesting from a marketing perspective globally, right, where we've been dealing with geopolitical issues. We've been dealing with tariffs. Right? There's... also, you're a trade association. And many times in other countries, there's no separation between the government and a trade association. And so having to establish ourselves as: we are a separate organization, this is what we stand for, this is who we are. We've been very, very vocal in her opposition to the tariffs. But all of that, as you know, starts to sort of commingle, and you have to work through all of those nuances, which I will just say, I think it really comes down to personalization. And this is something that AI has just accelerated for us. For us to be able to talk to hundreds of thousands of people to get to that number of the 143,000 who actually show up on-site, we've really broken it down. We have to know our audience so well because we can't go and talk to you about mobility if that's not what you're actually interested in. It's not going to drive you to take any action. And so we've worked really hard on our audience personas, really thinking through how does this speak to our customer, and what's going to drive them to make the decision to come to Las Vegas.

Matt 00:10:53 And your customer is a two-sided marketplace, so it's the attendee and the exhibitor. Right?

Melissa 00:10:57 That's exactly right. So we don't just get the privilege of looking at the attendee, right, as a marketing communications team. We're also talking to the exhibitors. We're also thinking about who's going to be keynoting and what that's gonna be looking like, and how do we weave that into what we're talking about. There's just so many layers.

Matt 00:11:12 The media too is massively up.

Melissa 00:11:14 So we had over 6,500 media and content creators on the ground last year. I think we're gonna be bursting at the seams again this year.

Matt 00:11:21 Especially now with the creator economy. I have so many YouTubers coming in that cover this stuff. I mean, my 18-year-old son is here, and he's...

Melissa 00:11:28 I love it.

Matt 00:11:28 He's a YouTuber, and he's [on] the showroom floor right now covering different things, right, for all of his friends and his followers. And I think that's a very cool, new wrinkle in all of it.

Melissa 00:11:37 So I will say, I think one of the things that, historically, we sort of always did was lump them into media. Just assuming that they would sort of want the same services, the same, like, touch points. And we really took some time to step back and say, that's actually not how creators want to show up.

Matt 00:11:54 No.

Melissa 00:11:55 And we did some very deep dives and conversations with creators to say, "What is it that you want?" Right? Let's, like, listen to what they actually want. They don't wanna be in a media lounge. They wanna be on the show floor. Right? They wanna be in the middle of action and then watching the rate at which they are able to turn over content.

Matt 00:12:13 That's crazy. And if you think about the...

Melissa 00:12:15 It's mind-boggling...

Matt 00:12:16 Well, it used to be, you had somebody there doing videography, photography. There's a different writer. There's an editor. The creator all-in-one with the phone doing it. Sometimes live.

Melissa 00:12:25 So this, in 2025, we built the creator space for the first time, and I kind of joked. I was like, "If we build it, will they come?"

Matt 00:12:32 Right.

Melissa 00:12:32 You dip your toe in the water, and we got feedback as we were building it. We really tried to work with the creators that we work with to just really get insights of, like, if we put a lounge, does that make sense to you? If there's a stage where you come and listen to other people, like, is that something that the community wants? And what we saw was that it was... it went gangbusters. And so, actually, we had it in the central lobby, and the feedback we got was, "It was so great, but can you put it on the floor?" Because we wanna be able to pop in and hear someone speaking for a couple of minutes, and then we wanna be able to get back out on the floor and produce content. And so we were like, "We can absolutely do that". So we moved it into Central Hall this year. And the other thing is that we had it limited to just media badges so that the creators could get in. But then we were hearing from brands that they also wanted to be in there because they wanted to have conversations, and other attendees...

Matt 00:13:21 And publishers, too.

Melissa 00:13:22 Absolutely. And so we said, "You know what? This needs to be an open space for dialogue". We wanna be a true thought leader where we are a convener, where we allow people to have these conversations.

Matt 00:13:31 And that's how the media landscape has evolved. It used to be there's a select few that controlled the narrative, and there are big media companies. Now we're all creators. We're all publishers. Right? We all have this device that allows us to capture anything at any moment.

Melissa 00:13:43 That's right. And it's really been interesting because we've also started to learn just the creator economy around our exhibitors as well, and better understanding who they're bringing to the show and who they're working with. And then also for us, creators are like, "It's great that we're coming to the show. We're having a lot of fun. We love putting out the content, but this is also our business".

Matt 00:14:01 Right.

Melissa 00:14:02 "How do we get to know the exhibitors?" And so for us to better understand what's the role that we should play in that conversation—maybe a little bit of matchmaking and a little magic there. But it's been really interesting and really evolving, and it's been something that it has been a little, for me, outside of what I typically have done. And so I've loved getting to learn and understand and really listening to provide a product that they want.

Matt 00:14:24 We'll be right back with *The Speed of Culture* after a few words from our sponsors.

So as I mentioned, I've been coming for twenty-five years, and every couple years is a new big theme. And I remember when it was the iPhone, and then there were all these iPhone accessory

companies and app companies. And then you had the whole world of digital media and streaming, and then you had a lot of the broadcast networks coming. I remember one point, one of the years was, like, 3D technology—3D printing, 3D TVs, all those things. And now this is the year, along with last year, but definitely this year is the year of AI at CES. How big is AI of the CES story, and how do you see AI transforming the show itself?

Melissa 00:15:03 I think what's really interesting is that if you look over the course of the last few years, coming out of the pandemic, AI has clearly been a part of the conversation.

Matt 00:15:12 Would you guys cancel one year because of the pandemic, or did you run?

Melissa 00:15:15 We actually did a digital show. That was right before I start.

Matt 00:15:18 '20 or 2021?

Melissa 00:15:19 '21. Right. So '22 was the first year back. Yeah. The conversation was happening, but it felt like the gasoline got poured on the fire after ChatGPT.

Matt 00:15:27 Yeah.

Melissa 00:15:28 Right? So that became a word that even my mom in Ohio was like, "What's this?"

Matt 00:15:32 It's the AOL of the AI generation. AOL got everybody online. ChatGPT. Right?

Melissa 00:15:37 And then it just felt like it ignited a larger conversation, and we kind of laughed because we're like, "Well, AI has actually been a part of the show for many, many years".

Matt 00:15:46 Yeah.

Melissa 00:15:46 If you used an Uber to get here, if you flew on a plane... right? AI has been a part of all of this, but I think it started once it kind of crossed over into that vernacular with, like, the normal, like, Joe on the street. Yeah. It really took off. I think over the last two years, what you've seen is a lot of talk about it, and everybody felt like it was, like, "I need to have AI and whatever I'm talking about".

Matt 00:16:06 To figure it out. Right?

Melissa 00:16:07 Right. I think what we're seeing this year in 2026, which is gonna be the giant leap forward—and this is just from what I'm seeing and what I've seen on the floor. This is the actual... we went from theoretical to practical. You're going to see AI. You're going to see physical AI. You're going to see digital twins. You're gonna see all the humanoids. Right? Like, I feel like this is the year that we take that giant leap forward, where you start to see all the things that we've been talking about in theory.

Matt 00:16:33 And we're at the bleeding edge of it. Right? Like, companies that are making these breakthroughs.

Melissa 00:16:37 Right.

Matt 00:16:38 Right? And they're saying, "Wow. This technology could really do interesting things with our product or service people never dreamed of".

Melissa 00:16:44 Right.

Matt 00:16:44 The first place they're gonna bring to the public is here.

Melissa 00:16:46 That's right. And it is a privilege for us that they choose to do that. We love that people come here to make news. It's an incredible ecosystem between our exhibitors making news and the media wanting to be here gobbling it up. So it's really great that they wanna start the year off here, and we've already had such incredible news. I mean, I just saw on my way here... I was literally scrolling through, and Waymo had just gotten their approvals to start testing autonomous driving in Las Vegas. Right? Zoox is already here.

Matt 00:17:12 Yeah.

Melissa 00:17:12 They're both on the show floor in West Hall. I mean, it's... we've talked about these things, and now they're really hot.

Matt 00:17:18 The future's here, so to speak.

Melissa 00:17:19 That's right. And I think this is the window into tomorrow, today. And so I think it's fun to be here and see all of these things and to also have seen the things over the last few years and say, "I don't know if that's ever gonna action. It's never gonna really happen." And then you're like, "Nope. It's here".

Matt 00:17:34 Goes from concept to reality.

Melissa 00:17:34 That's right. That's right.

Matt 00:17:36 So it's interesting because you brought up the pandemic. And, obviously, one thing the pandemic brought to society—and especially the business world—is this whole remote culture. A lot of companies are remote. A lot of people are using Zoom to communicate. But there is still such power in human connection and convening. And I would just love to hear your thoughts on why you think this is a business and an event that will stand the test of time, based upon that.

Melissa 00:18:00 Thank you for saying that. I will tell you that for all of the running across halls that I've seen people doing when they see their friend that they haven't seen all year—but this

is the one place where they see them—or their or their business partner, etcetera, you cannot replace the serendipity of bumping into someone on the show floor and having a conversation.

Matt 00:18:20 Or even the conversation you and I are having now. Like, we do a lot of these podcasts over Zoom, but...

Melissa 00:18:22 Absolutely.

Matt 00:18:23 You have a connection to the interview is better, but you get... you really feel like you know somebody.

Melissa 00:18:28 That's right. Yeah. I mean, you're looking at 29 meetings on average that our exhibitors are having. Right? When you think about what it would take to fly all over the world to do all of those meetings, or all the time it would take on Zoom... Zoom is great. It's also a tiny little box. If you're trying to make a business deal, it's hard to tell emotion. It's hard to understand as though the person's still here. Is the dog barking? You know, has the mailman come? What's happening? I just think you can't replace that human-to-human interaction, and CES brings all of that together, and we've really tried to build community. So we're here at C Space. Right? That's a community. But we also have the different categories across the show floor, and people are able... you know, our digital health community continues to grow and grow. And you come here, and it's your one chance to catch up with the other doctor who lives across the country.

Matt 00:19:17 Right.

Melissa 00:19:17 Right? It's just you can't... You just can't replace that in-person.

Matt 00:19:20 Yeah. And, hey, what you meant... I'm glad you brought up digital health because the power of AI is it's gonna seep its way into every industry, every sector, which then brings those sectors in.

Melissa 00:19:28 Right.

Matt 00:19:28 So we actually... it's construction. It doesn't really matter what it is. Right?

Melissa 00:19:31 So we made a strategic decision last year. We moved our whole health category to the Venetian because that's where the smart home category is.

Matt 00:19:39 Right.

Melissa 00:19:40 And there is a direct connection between digital health and monitoring and keeping people in the home longer.

Matt 00:19:45 Interesting.

Melissa 00:19:46 And being in your home and remote monitoring to ensure that after you get out of the hospital, they can monitor you at home so that you don't have to stay in the hospital or go to some type of recovery center. And, hopefully, you stay well. And if they notice anything that's wrong, they can catch it before you have to go back to the hospital. So there's just this direct connection between those. And so we were seeing that happening in real time in the industry, and we said, "Okay. These need to be together. These two groups, they need to know each other and have conversations".

Matt 00:20:11 That's fantastic. So I would imagine that planning for 2027 CES ends the day coming 2026.

Melissa 00:20:19 I wish it were that easy. I was joking that half of my brain is 2026—one... but when I get here—and the other half is 2027.

Matt 00:20:27 So can we expect to see as the show evolves... You know, let's say, we're near 2030, what is CES going to be like? Do you see the show being in other venues as well globally? I know you have sort of, like, these pop-up side events that happen during the year, but... What's the future in terms of the expansion of the show itself?

Melissa 00:20:44 I think it's so interesting. I'm so bad at guessing the future, but I'm so proud of the work that our team does to ensure that the show is really great, that the show floor is really great, that we put a wonderful product forward for everyone who wants to be a part of CES. I'm excited because we just expanded to CES Foundry, so we're gonna be at Fontainebleau this year. That's gonna be on days two and three. That's all AI and quantum.

Matt 00:21:12 Wow. I gotta check that out.

Melissa 00:21:13 You gotta go see it. I mean, there's gonna be actual quantum demos, and I would love to tell you that I can explain to you how quantum works. I cannot. That's why I do marketing and communications. But we're always looking at what's coming next, what categories should we be talking about, how do we put that forward in a meaningful way, and how do we go to market with it? Not only to attendees, but exhibitors. And so we're excited that we continue to find new ways to expand and grow in Las Vegas. And I don't know. I think the future's really bright, so who knows where you're gonna see it.

Matt 00:21:41 For sure. So, the wrap up here, we always ask our guests if there's a saying or mantra that comes to mind that defines their career journey, and I would love to know what comes to mind for you, yeah, for this busy week here in Vegas.

Melissa 00:21:52 Tell you, there are two things. So one, I wanna say: "say yes". And that has a lot to do with my career, but also CES. I think you have to be open to the possibility. Even if you don't think you're completely ready to step through that door, that the door has been opened, you need to say yes. Like, take the chance, make a new partnership, take the new job, do the things. Uh, that's something that...

Matt 00:22:15 Go to that event.

Melissa 00:22:16 Go to that event. Right? Like, even if you don't know anybody... I think that we've lost a little bit of that coming out of the pandemic. And so I just encourage everyone to say yes. The other is a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt. She said that the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. That's been a quote that I've kept near and dear to me my whole life, and I've really tried to impart upon the people that I work with that if you don't believe in the beauty of your dreams in the future, how do you make them happen? How do you really... like, you've gotta believe in yourself. You gotta believe in the excitement and the beauty that you're building. And so I've always tried to lean into that and then share that with the people that I work with.

Matt 00:22:46 It's amazing. Well, there's a lot of excitement and beauty in what we're seeing here at CES.

Melissa 00:22:49 That's right.

Matt 00:22:50 So thankful for you to take the time during this busy week to share the incredible story behind CES with all of us.

Melissa 00:22:56 Thank you so much for having me, and I hope you have a great show.

Matt 00:22:58 Oh, I will. Thanks so much. On behalf of Suzy and Adweek team, thank you again to Melissa Harrison, Vice President of Marketing and Communications at the Consumer Technology Association, producers of the CES show, which we're here in Las Vegas to check out. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review *The Speed of Culture* podcast on your favorite podcast platform. We'll see you soon. Take care, everyone. Bye-bye.

Matt 00:23:25

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