

Rachael Zaluzec Transcript

Rachael 00:00:00 So putting this movement out there, this campaign out there was really intended to do just that: to remind people that there's a way that you can own the road. There's a way that you can own your own destiny, not just waiting on your phone for somebody else to come pick you up and take you along for the ride.

Matt 00:00:17 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*.

Today on *The Speed of Culture* podcast, we are thrilled to welcome Rachael Zaluzec, the Chief Marketing Officer and Senior Vice President of Customer Experience and Brand Marketing at Volkswagen of America. Rachael leads marketing and customer experience for one of the world's most iconic automotive brands with a focus on putting people, not just products, at the center of everything Volkswagen does. Rachael, so great to see you today!

Rachael 00:00:59 Thank you so much for having me, Matt.

Matt 00:01:00 Absolutely. We're gonna dive right in. The automotive space is so fascinating because it used to just be about the steel and tires, and the car used to just be about getting you from point A to point B. But now it's become so much more. In a lot of ways, the car is really becoming a platform. There's software platforms or media environments; there are data engines. So how do you see Volkswagen really redefining the product when the car is really increasingly AI-powered and personalized, and digital even?

Rachael 00:01:27 It's a great question. Well, let's start with—yes, automotive marketing has always been about the metal, unless you're Volkswagen. Volkswagen messaging has always been a little bit different, right? It's always been a little bit more storytelling, talking about the fact that we're a brand with a personality. We're a brand with emotion, and that is what has, historically, particularly in the US, drawn so many people to the Volkswagen brand and really makes us stand out and makes us a little different. But to get to your point, you're right. Vehicles are increasingly more complicated. It's no longer just the mechanical side of it. It's the technology. It's the software. It's the infotainment side of the vehicle. And that's where I think Volkswagen and, frankly, everybody else needs to lean in a little bit more to humanize it.

And maybe I'm biased because I've been with Volkswagen for so long, and Volkswagen is a driver's car. It's about experiencing it. So, making sure that as we continue to innovate the vehicles—just like everybody else needs to—you want to have the latest software, you wanna have the latest tech, you wanna have the latest AI, but you wanna have it with the same type of personality and touch and feel that you get from a brand. So an example of that—you know, some of the things that we're doing is we do have AI embedded into some of our products. For

example, in our electric vehicles, you can say, "Hey, Ida." The car responds back to you. You can ask the vehicle questions. You can give the vehicle commands. So you're almost talking to it like you have a relationship, which—I don't know about you—I know so many people, particularly Volkswagen drivers, name their vehicles. Right?

Matt 00:02:59 Right. They have for a long time.

Rachael 00:03:00 Exactly. So making sure the tech still has that level of personality, I think, is critical, particularly when you have a brand like the Volkswagen brand.

Matt 00:03:09 Yeah. I mean, it's interesting you say that because that's kinda where all of technology is going. Right? I mean, if you look at Gen Alpha, they're gonna be known as the AI generation, and they're never gonna know a world where you can't interact with technology like another person. You know? People are getting into relationships with their AI chatbot and conversing with them like they are humans. And to the extent that people have always called their Volkswagen vehicles, like, human names, I think that's where the world is headed overall, and I think it's gonna evolve humans' relationship with technology.

Rachael 00:03:38 Exactly. And again, giving that vehicle a personality is just one more way—particularly to your point with the younger generation—to make them want to participate in a vehicle, make them want to drive, make them want to engage in ways that, to be kinda surprised, there's a lot of kids who generally are hesitating to get their first license, which blows my mind. Um, I mean, that's the first thing that, at least when I was that age, that's the first thing anybody wanted to do is get that freedom, get that license, and get out on the road. So enabling things like technology, like personalization, I think is gonna really help move that forward as well.

Matt 00:04:13 Yeah. I mean, if you look at ten, twenty, thirty years ago, there was no Uber. And we had this huge urbanization boom where many more people live in cities now when they're teenagers than they did in the past, where it used to be that the city was more for professionals. And when people had families, they would move out to the suburbs with the white picket fence. But now you find a lot of people who are 18, 19, 20 years old being in the city. In a lot of instances, even their parents never really had to drive, and they're taking Ubers, etcetera. We are seeing a reversal of that, I think, post-COVID, where you see secondary and tertiary markets where people are moving more to the suburbs, and I think that is driving a renewed interest in automobiles for younger consumers. Is that something that you're seeing? How are you looking at just broader consumer trends as it relates to more of the entry-level in the automotive industry?

Rachael 00:04:58 Well, I think what you described is absolutely tied into why we wanted to relaunch "Drivers Wanted" and relaunch that campaign—really, to recruit people back into not just the brand, but into that type of transportation, into that the fact that they're in charge of their life. They're in charge of their mobility.

Matt 00:05:15 Make it yours.

Rachael 00:05:16 Exactly. In terms of freedom. So putting this movement out there, this campaign out there, was really intended to do just that: to remind people that there's a way that you can own the road. There's a way that you can own your own destiny, not just waiting on your phone for somebody else to come pick you up and take you along for the ride.

Matt 00:05:33 Yeah. That's right. So one thing I'm sure you have to contend with as someone who's stewarding the Volkswagen brand forward is just kind of this balance between winning into the heritage and trust that's associated with Volkswagen, but at the same time, contemporizing it for tomorrow's driver. And just in terms of the brand itself and the brand equity pillars and how you look at driving that along—no pun intended—how do you look at that balancing act?

Rachael 00:05:57 Well, and it was a particular tightrope, I would say, with this campaign as well because you don't wanna just be nostalgia. You don't just wanna be rinse-and-repeat something that, quite frankly, was brilliant the first time around. And I've been with Volkswagen long enough to have been here the first time that "Drivers Wanted" came around.

Matt 00:06:14 Right. So you're talking about the revitalization—or the revival, I should say—of the "Drivers Wanted" campaign, which—let's maybe zoom out and tell us about, for those who don't know, the history of the "Drivers Wanted" campaign and why you think lineage and nostalgia makes sense right now.

Rachael 00:06:29 Absolutely. So, for those who aren't as familiar, so "Drivers Wanted" was originally the campaign in the US between about '95 and 2005. And it really was on the heels of that campaign, with, of course, some pretty revolutionary product like the new Beetle, that Volkswagen really had a big resurgence in the US. And when you think about what that campaign was about, it was about targeting a slightly younger generation. It was about a mindset. Right?

Matt 00:06:55 It was very Apple-esque, the way that you guys brought that product back.

Rachael 00:06:58 Yes. Absolutely. So, again, look at the environment today. Look at culture today. We needed that shakeup for all of the reasons that we were just talking about. There are people who are living a life that's really programmed, that's living a life that somebody else is—be it AI, be it an Uber driver, be it whomever is making decisions for us—is really laying that groundwork. So when we talk about reviving it—yes, there's a little bit of nostalgia there, but it's more than nostalgia because it's reclaiming what we stand for and not just recreating the past, but transitioning that spirit into today's world and transitioning that invitation into today's world.

Matt 00:07:38 I like that. I think we are in a world right now where we feel like the human is being lost in all of this, in a world that's increasingly automated, and we're hearing about AI and

robotics everywhere. And, you know, the feeling of being a driver and being in control—both in the realistic sense of driving a car, but also kind of the analogy of charting your own course—I think, in some ways, it's more relevant today than it even was back then.

Rachael 00:08:01 Exactly. So that's why I really think it's gonna resonate not only with those who aren't as familiar with the Volkswagen brand—right, the younger generation who's looking for something to own—but that is also gonna resonate with those of us who, quite frankly, do remember the first time around and think, "You know what? Yeah. I liked it back then. I was motivated then. I had that ownership back then,"—to really span the generations with this message.

Matt 00:08:25 It's not lost to me, though, that when you look at a title like "Drivers Wanted," we are entering an era of autonomous vehicles. And while it hasn't hit mainstream here in the US, you know, it's coming. And just curious—like, what are your thoughts about the future of autonomous vehicles, and what is Volkswagen's published roadmap in that area?

Rachael 00:08:44 I would say it's obviously coming—autonomous driving—for so many reasons. And I think the piece about that that is a great benefit not only to the industry but to everyone is the safety element that comes from it. Because at the end of the day, in the driver's seat, you've got a human, but anytime you can enhance that with additional safety features, I think there's a benefit to it. When you talk about some of the autonomous driving that you see out there on the road today where, literally, you'll have people hands-off—in some cases, in other products, you're reading books, not paying attention—in my mind, that's not what being in a car should be.

That's not what being a driver should be. I'm all for all of the added safety features that ADAS systems, as we call them, they'll bring to a vehicle. But beyond that—for me personally, and particularly being in the suburbs of Detroit, being in a place where driving is an experience and not just being a passenger—it's something that I think we should use to enhance the experience, not take over the experience.

Matt 00:09:40 For now, at least. Right? And who knows where the technology is gonna go and where culture is gonna go. But, yeah, for today, I do believe driving's a big part of culture and society and really the rite of passage and the experience of growing up and charting your own course.

Rachael 00:09:53 With that said, you did ask about: what is the Volkswagen roadmap in that regard? And there is a considerable amount of work that our organization is doing, specifically when you talk about autonomous driving with the ID. Buzz. Um, because in that space, autonomous driving does offer accessibility to individuals who may not otherwise be able to either have a vehicle or drive a vehicle. So, again, it's the enhanced safety features, but it's also the freedom and accessibility it gives to individuals who may not be able to completely take the driver's seat on their own. And that's where a lot of the research and the development, and work that Volkswagen is doing today can really be seen.

Matt 00:10:33 We'll be right back with *The Speed of Culture* after a few words from our sponsors.

So, back to the "Drivers Wanted" campaign: we are now on the eve of the upcoming Super Bowl, which is taking place in Santa Clara, and your brand has made the decision to take advantage of the big-game moment and activate this campaign around the Super Bowl. Just curious: what gives you conviction to make such a big investment? And talk to us about the process of creating a campaign around it and how you're feeling leading into a big game.

Rachael 00:11:03 Yeah. Absolutely. I will. Because it's never a small decision to go to a platform like that. And I'll be honest, the campaign was something that we always had in mind. We've been working on it for several months—about really talking about who Volkswagen is, positioning the brand in the market, positioning us for a different audience—and that was outside of the Super Bowl. And this year was planned to be the year of this whole new messaging platform that we had.

Then I saw the work, and I said, "There is nowhere else that we can possibly relaunch the brand than in that moment." I said it in 2024 when we went to the Super Bowl for the last time, you only take a step like that if you've got something to say and something critical to say.

Matt 00:11:45 Right. Go big or go home for the Super Bowl. Right?

Rachael 00:11:47 Exactly. And—not since a significant time since the last time we had a big meaningful moment like this from a brand perspective, not just a product perspective, but truly a brand message, and there's nowhere else to launch it. So when the work was done, then we actually made the decision to go to the Super Bowl. It wasn't the other way around. And we were fortunate enough, and we were let know that there was a spot available in something that was previously already sold out. So I think that's the universe telling us that this is the place for the spot to air.

Matt 00:12:17 So it's like—it was an idea finding the Super Bowl, not the Super Bowl finding that an idea, which a lot of times is what brands do. They say, "We're buying a spot; figure out what to place there." But what you're saying is: as soon as you saw the concept and the creative, you knew that this needed to be on the biggest stage.

Rachael 00:12:32 In fact, the creative was already done. And so 100%, you're right. It was too good not to get the eyes, to get the attention, to get the message across—not only for all of America, let's face it, but it's also really important for our dealer network, for our employees, you know—for something this big to really have the gravity to it as well.

Matt 00:12:51 Now, of course, the Super Bowl is never just about the Super Bowl game itself when you're talking about advertising. There's so much that goes into the pre-promotion and the digital extensions, social media, etcetera. How are you looking at this as kind of like a more integrated experience as you roll it out?

Rachael 00:13:07 Fantastic question. Because just like I mentioned, this was a three-sixty campaign before the Super Bowl was ever even an option. So the teams had already been building out a very social-first approach, and not just in linear, in our social channels, in streaming, in podcasts, but also out-of-home. So you will see this full campaign—and not just in this moment, for frankly, throughout the whole rest of 2026.

And one thing that I'm super excited about this one is the thirty seconds in the Super Bowl is intended as a moment to get attention and drive everybody to all of the rest of those mediums, of those channels, because then you get the full experience of all of the different ways that we're activating it. For example, we've got some social guerrilla-type tactics that are gonna be talking about: what does Volkswagen stand for? They'll be provocative enough to say, "Okay. That's interesting enough for me to follow." And we'll have messaging with different creators, different individuals who are already friends of the brand, who already are drivers, basically saying, "Look. I'm here. I'm already part of the club. Come join us as well." So, again, it's a movement. It's a message. It's not just a commercial. It's an invitation for everybody to engage with us in all of the different areas that we'll be.

Matt 00:14:26 Very cool. I can't wait to see this all unfold. I'm glad you mentioned creators because, obviously, the Super Bowl is arguably the last bastion of live television at scale. Every year, 90-plus out of the top 100 watched live programs are NFL games, and, obviously, the Super Bowl, you know, is the penultimate moment of that entire trend. And outside of that, you really do have to rely on capturing consumers' eyeballs in a lot of different ways.

And as you look at Gen Z, which this year, by the way, for the first time ever, a first-time mother, the average age of first-time mother in the US is Gen Z, and Gen Z is the iPhone generation. If you wanna reach consumers, you need to reach them on their device and on their mobile device. And when you reach them on a mobile device, it's generally through creators. So just curious—like, how you're looking at the importance of creators, and are we at the point where they are driving more influence over car consideration in a lot of the traditional channels? And just how is that evolution occurring in your mind from at the seat of a CMO?

Rachael 00:15:31 Absolutely. Creators and content in that format is becoming bigger and bigger and bigger. And particularly, again, when we're talking Volkswagen brand, when we're talking about a message like this, it's the human element of the message. So delivered with authenticity from somebody who's speaking from their own experience means so much more than your typical metal commercial on the road. Yes. We do still need to have feature-first automotive work because a vehicle is a substantial investment. People wanna know what is the equipment.

Matt 00:16:03 Zero to 60.

Rachael 00:16:03 Exactly. All of those facts matter, but what also matters just as much is somebody validating it and somebody that the person on the other end of the screen trusts to actually be speaking genuinely about it. So that's why you will see with this campaign—not

only just the look and feel of the linear work itself, but all of the extensions are just that: they are actual drivers speaking about what is either their vehicle mean to them or what is the concept of being a driver mean to them—the concept of creativity, of freedom, the concepts of confidence that we really wanna convey throughout the message. It's less about a demographic, and it's more about a value. And that's what I think is gonna really resonate.

Matt 00:16:47 Absolutely. So you'd mentioned earlier, the Super Bowl is not just for your consumer audience, but it's also for your entire ecosystem, including the dealers. And just want to double-click a little bit on the dealership experience because, obviously, as time passes, consumers are gonna increasingly expect, like, Amazon-level simplicity when it comes to buying cars, but it still remains somewhat complex. And just curious—like, how do you think the dealership experience is gonna evolve over time? I mean, everyone that works in the auto industry knows how important dealers are to their success in your dealer network. But in terms of the consumer experience, how do you see, like, elements like AI evolving that?

Rachael 00:17:25 Where I think AI can help most is in the education process. Because you mentioned it: buying a car is complicated, and it's next to buying a home in terms of the degree of investment, but also, you've got financing. You've got insurance. You've got all of those other components beyond just the metal itself. So as much as dealerships or OEM supporting the dealerships can help demystify and decomplicate that process for consumers who—you're right—they're used to transacting on things quick and fast with a button.

That's not necessarily the way 100% that this shopping journey should be, because you need to be comfortable. You need to feel safe. You need to understand how the product works. So helping streamline the technology, helping streamline the explanation of the process, helping streamline the application process—I think that is where the user experience—that's where the journey can really optimize. But what I will say is—in my honest opinion—there's nothing more important than truly having trust and confidence in the person that is handing that vehicle over to you.

And that's where dealerships 100% are so very critical and are so essential to the Volkswagen brand because—in many cases, like I said—it's a major investment. You might be moving your family in that investment. You may not turn a wrench on your own, so you wanna know that there's some place to go to make sure that that product is taken care of. And that's where—in my opinion—AI's never gonna step in to have that handshake, that trust element that is so critical.

Matt 00:19:01 Absolutely. So you've been at Volkswagen in various different roles for nearly or perhaps over twenty-five years. I was doing the math quickly, looking at your LinkedIn, but you've been at the company for a long time, and we've talked about in some ways how things have changed, but at the same time stayed the same. But when you look at your role as a CMO, what do you think is still true about what would have been a CMO role maybe ten to fifteen years from now, or ago rather? And what is completely different? And what's gonna continue

to change about the job? Because it's increasingly complex. Right? It used to be about having a big checkbook and buying radio spots on the few radio stations that controlled the airways, and same with broadcast TV. And now it is so fragmented. It is so data-driven, so technologically infused. What does that mean for the role of the CMO?

Rachael 00:19:49 It means you have to stay on top of everything.

Matt 00:19:51 So how do you do that? You listen to The Speed of Culture podcast.

Rachael 00:19:55 Exactly. Let's first talk about what's the same, and then let's talk about what—what you need to do differently. I think the things that are the same are—one, marketing is, it's about storytelling. But it is about storytelling in the right medium with the right message to the right person. And so that, I don't think, has changed. Now the platforms have changed. The audience ability to target has changed. And, frankly, to your point, the shopping experience has changed.

But the other thing that is critical, and I think for every CMO to remember, is we're not just here to tell stories. We're not just here to give moving messages, because those moving messages, those stories need to compel people to take an action. We're here to support the business in ways that are critical. So that also is no different, and the pressure to make sure that you're demonstrating the results is also—in my opinion—no different than it's been.

But the things—to your point—that make it easier and harder at the same time are the technology advancements that we have. We understand so much more from a data perspective of what works and what doesn't work. We can use information to better understand our audience, to better understand what they want to see and where they wanna see it, and how they're interacting with those messages. But, again—to your point—that also means you've got all of these different options of channels, all of these different options in media. How do you decide? How do you decide where to show up? How do you measure all of those?

And how do you explain it all to individuals in different boardrooms who aren't familiar with marketing and think, "Wait a minute. You just put a commercial on. Where's the immediate result?" So it's made—in my opinion—the role of the CMO has had to be a data architect. You've had to be an IT person in terms of understanding the pipes and the channels and how everything connects. Also, have to do a good amount of sales and not selling literally the product, selling the reason for invest, selling the ROI of the work that we do because—again—it changes so dramatically and so frequently that those who are not in this space, in this discipline, there's no way they would normally keep up.

Matt 00:22:02 Absolutely. I know another big part of your role is leading a team. And as the world changes so much, just curious, I know you've also spent some time in HR throughout your journey at Volkswagen. Just curious because we have a lot of younger listeners here on the podcast. What is some advice that you have for junior-level people entering their career in

terms of the areas that you think they should focus on to remain relevant in the marketing space as the world changes so fast?

Rachael 00:22:30 It's a great question. And I will say it—and you saw it on my LinkedIn—I have pretty non-traditional path to get to where I am, and I think that has only benefited me. So I think I've got two pieces of advice that I would generally give. One is diversify yourself. You mentioned it. I started in human resources. After human resources, I went to customer experience. I did some time in digital. I did some time supporting other functions around the organization, so that while I may not absolutely have touched every area, I know enough about the business to be able to use those different tools to make decisions.

So, just somebody who only sticks within a direct line in the marketing space may not necessarily have the context that the other business units have to make decisions. So, really going sideways before going up—I absolutely think is essential for career growth, particularly today, because resources are constantly gonna get more constrained. So you can rely on those different tools in problem-solving that you wouldn't necessarily otherwise.

Matt 00:23:35 It's interesting because—like—so many people in this Instagram-driven generation just—I think, especially younger people—seem to be losing patience for the journey. And they just want it all right now because they're looking at everyone else's highlight reels, or mistakenly, they think everyone else has it now. And that kind of goes against the path that you're talking about, which is: go sideways, get different types of experience. You can be a little bit more of a generalist because things are emerging together, and I think it's an important lesson that you shared.

Rachael 00:24:03 Exactly. And then the second piece of advice is: do hard stuff, and that's what I think so many people are afraid of. They're afraid to make mistakes, or they're afraid of big, scary problems. But in those big scary problems are where, honestly, some of the biggest lessons that I personally have learned, that I've seen others learn as well. And not being afraid to run towards a challenge has really helped me get exposed to so many different things, get exposed to so many different people, because it's in those pressure moments, it's in those intense moments that you have some major breakthroughs. So I think those are two things that I encourage my team to do, that I encourage my daughter to do, that I encourage anybody who's really looking to expand and grow their career.

Matt 00:24:45 That's fantastic advice. To wrap up here and—again—this has been such an amazing conversation, and so thankful that you took time to have it during such a busy pre-Super-Bowl week. But just curious: when you look back at your career journey, what was maybe the thing that you think you focused on that helped you the most in putting yourself in the CMO seat where you are today?

Rachael 00:25:06 That's a great question. And particularly being in marketing now versus being exclusively in customer experience and now pulling them together—making sure that we understand—or that I understood—what was legitimately happening in our customer base. Be

our customer base—those who are driving our vehicles—or our dealer network themselves as a customer on the team.

Matt 00:25:28 Like, ears to the ground, not being disconnected from it.

Rachael 00:25:30 Exactly. And it's so easy for somebody to sit in an ivory tower at an OEM and come up with big ideas and have no idea if it's credible or if it's relevant or if it's gonna completely fall on deaf ears because it's disconnected from what the actual experience that customers are having are. And one thing that I often say is I wanna make sure that any message that we put out there for somebody who's currently driving a Volkswagen—they've got that badge in their driveway.

I'm speaking to them just as much, if not more, than speaking to somebody that we wanna bring into the brand because—again—they've got our logo. They've invested the money. They are showing up if they're at barbecues, at work, at stoplights, representing us. So making sure we're thinking about the existing customer as much as the new customer—I think that's what's impacted me directly.

Matt 00:26:20 I love that. So, the wrap-up here, we always ask our guests if there's a saying or mantra that comes to mind when they think about their professional journey to date. So what do you got for us, Rachael?

Rachael 00:26:30 I think I already told it to you: Don't be afraid of hard stuff.

Matt 00:26:32 Right on. Yep. And, you know, that is the whole thing where, like, everything you want is on the other side of the fear. And what's the worst that can happen? And I think people often don't bet on themselves, and I think ultimately betting on yourselves is what it's all about if you really wanna optimize your potential.

Rachael 00:26:48 I couldn't agree more.

Matt 00:26:50 Yep. Well, wishing you nothing but the best of luck with Super Bowl Sunday and the new revitalized campaign, and continue to be a fan from afar of you and the Volkswagen brand, and can't wait to see what's down the road for you. So, thanks so much for joining, Rachael.

Rachael 00:27:03 Thank you so much, Matt. This has been great.

Matt 00:27:05 Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and AdWeek team, thank you again to Rachael Zaluzec, the Chief Marketing Officer and Senior Vice President of Customer Experience and Brand Marketing at Volkswagen of America, 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. Bye-bye.

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