

Dolores 00:00:00 Creators are a huge part of this campaign. We wanna make sure that we're involving people in our campaign versus just the brand speaking to our guys. Young guys don't want brands just speaking at them anymore; they wanna feel like they're part of the culture. They wanna feel like they're part of the conversation, and bringing creators in to help tell our story has already made a huge difference. And we're giving creators a lot of liberty with this campaign and letting them talk about potentially their experience in overdoing it. We're almost handing the reins to these creators to help tell the story. It's been resonating incredibly well. It makes the story just that much more authentic versus us telling guys directly about our new technology. It just creates a much more interesting story.

Matt 00:00:48 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.

Up today on the Speed of Culture podcast, we're thrilled to welcome Dolores Assalini, the head of Axe US. Dolores leads the brand behind one of the most iconic names in men's personal care, helping evolve Axe for a new generation—from redefining the body spray category it created to building culture-relevant campaigns like the "History of Overdoing It", she's shaping how the brand connects with young men today through innovation, humor, and authenticity. Dolores, so great to see you today. Thanks so much for joining.

Dolores 00:01:35 Hi, Matt. Thanks for having me.

Matt 00:01:37 Absolutely. So would love to hear from you sort of the evolution of the Axe brand over time and, more importantly, where it is today and what you're hoping to achieve with the brand moving forward.

Dolores 00:01:48 Yep. So Axe is a very big brand in the US. It actually originated in France in 1983, and it came to the US in 2003. And ever since it came into the US, it's been a cultural phenomenon. Almost one out of every two guys was using Axe in 2008. So it really is a brand that just made a huge cultural splash. So for me, it's really important to respect the legacy of this brand. It was such a cultural phenomenon at its launch, and I wanna make sure we continue to respect that and honor that past while also helping the brand guide it into its next chapter and into the future. So, figuring out how we can bring this brand into 2026 while still respecting its past.

Matt 00:02:33 So what does it mean to redefine a brand, especially in a category that—I mean, let's be honest—Axe kind of created, especially here in the US? What is it gonna take to redefine it? Does it have to do with product, packaging, messaging, all of the above? Love to hear from your standpoint and the seat you sit in how you're attacking this challenge.

Dolores 00:02:54 So we are attacking it from always. So as you said, this brand really created the body spray category. That is a category that did not exist before Axe came into it. So,

ensuring that we continue to evolve what that product looks like from an innovation standpoint. And you can see that clearly in the new technology that we launched this year in 2026 with the new spray technology.

The second piece is also evolving with guys in the way that they use personal care products. How guys think about grooming habits has really evolved over time. Guys today pay a lot more attention on how they look, the products they use, and they have become so much more sophisticated than they were when we first came onto the market in the US in the early 2000s. So, making sure that we evolve with our grooming and personal care habits is really important to us.

The third piece is how they consume media. So, making sure that we meet the guys where they are and where they're wanting to speak with brands, right? So it's a lot more social these days. They want to engage with brands versus just consume the content that they're creating. So those are really the three areas that we're looking at to ensure that we keep this brand relevant in today's times and with how guys are evolving.

Matt 00:04:07 And how about just the notion of distribution? Because, obviously, I know you've been at Unilever for a while, and one of the biggest changes we've seen, obviously coming out of COVID, is just a different way consumers are purchasing consumer packaged goods. Obviously, you have Instacart and so many other options. How does that impact the way that you look at building the brand and leaning into new types of packaging form factors, etcetera, to meet the needs of the new consumer today?

Dolores 00:04:33 So from a distribution standpoint, we really focus on Walmart, right? Walmart has been a huge strategic partner for us as they take this brand into the future, and we're looking at a brick-and-mortar standpoint traditionally, so making sure that the product stands out, looks visually beautiful, and is there to—we can showcase what the brand stands for through the packaging. So in-store is really important to us.

Secondly, we look at online as well, right? Guys, right now, want ease of purchase. They want to be able to find their product wherever they're looking for. And so making sure that everything is driving to purchase on ecommerce is really important to us. So if you look at everything we do from TikTok to YouTube to all of our other social channels, everything is driving to purchase on [Walmart.com](https://www.walmart.com). And we really try to make sure that our pages on walmart.com have the right level of information that our guys and their moms need to make that purchase, making sure that we have our claims on there, images, fragrance details, and everything that they need in order to help them make that purchase.

Matt 00:05:37 And, obviously, one of the huge benefits you get in partnering with Walmart the way you do is just huge distribution and the power of the retail media network and so many things that a platform like Walmart brings to the table. But at the same time, what you don't get versus other direct-to-consumer marketers is you don't get to collect all that first-party data. And just wondering here in 2026, as first-party data becomes so important—or increasingly

important, I should say—especially in the age of AI, how are you and the brand tackling the opportunities unlocked through first-party consumer data?

Dolores 00:06:12 Yep. So we always, as Unilever, we capture first-party data as consumers come into the brands. But, really, our focus is on delivering amazing content that will help our guys make that decision, right? So, very much around making sure that we can get the right level of coverage around what our product is giving our guys so that when they search for it, they have all the information they need to make that decision. So it's more about making sure that we're offering everything that they need up to them so that they can make the decision that they need to purchase our product. So, a lot of ensuring that our claims are out there, that we explain to them what our product gives to them both from a functional standpoint, from a fragrance standpoint, and from an emotional standpoint. So, making sure that all of that base is there so that they are able to come and make the right decision to purchase our product.

Matt 00:07:02 So let's talk about some of that first-party content. I mentioned during the onset an initiative you're doing called the "History of Overdoing It," which is obviously a content platform around the notion of humor, and would love to hear from you what that campaign or initiative is all about and why it was something that you thought was worthwhile to lean into.

Dolores 00:07:21 Yeah. So this campaign was a really fun and interesting one. It really intentionally leans into our legacy with humor and honesty in a way that we've never done before. So guys have always joked about guys overdoing it and doing too much, both from a dating standpoint and from really our product standpoint. So it's an area that we've never really explored in the way that we're doing it with this campaign.

Matt 00:07:46 You mean, like, applying too much body spray?

Dolores 00:07:48 Yes. Yes. Applying too much body spray and trying to do too much in dating as well. So the campaign really leans into how guys try to do too much when trying to date. And with our new product technology, we're helping them understand how to be a little bit more subtle—again, both in dating and then how they use our product.

So what this technology does is it delivers a more controlled spray that really removes what people call the "Axe cloud". Right? That product that just gets everywhere. I'm sure you've experienced it. If not, you can talk to any middle school teacher, and they'll tell you about the Axe cloud.

Matt 00:08:27 Right. Happens with cologne and perfume too, right?

Dolores 00:08:30 Yes. Exactly. But with the body spray in the past, our body spray really did have that bit of a cloud. So with this new technology, it delivers a more controlled, lighter spray to help guys be a little bit more subtle and help them not overuse our product, which has been

a real problem in the past. So we're really leaning into that in a way that we—we haven't done before.

Matt 00:08:52 It reminds me of what they have on the liquor bottles for bartenders to make sure they don't put too much alcohol in people's drinks. Same thing. Same general concept. So just, curiously, like, what came first? Was it the product innovation that led to the marketing insight? Was it the consumer insight that led to the product innovation, which then led to the content? Like, how does something like this come together at such a large organization like Unilever?

Dolores 00:09:18 Yeah. That's a great question. It really came together, right? The technology always comes first in terms of, as I mentioned in the beginning, always trying to improve our product and making sure that we're delivering our guys with the best technological advances to deliver the best product experience. And at the same time, we had always heard about this Axe cloud. We know it's there. We know it happens. We see it on social; we hear it from consumers that they just—anytime somebody sprays the product, it really goes beyond their body, and everybody in their vicinity is smelling it.

So it's really—it has been a joke in culture almost since the product launch, and we've always really ignored that piece of it. And in this campaign, as we brought this new technology to help fix that product problem, then we said, "Let's tackle our history head-on and let's talk about it. Let's put it out in the open in a way that we haven't done before." So that insight really got us excited because it was really a perfect combination to say, "Hey, you've been using our product too much, and now not only are we going to talk about it in a way that's really funny and hits on the social insight, but also it comes with an innovation that helps prevent that over-spraying". So that was really a winning combination for us for this campaign.

Matt 00:10:36 You're paying it off. Like, I think a lot of brands, they try to create content, and sometimes they lose the script—no pun intended—and they're creating content just to garner engagement and attention. But to the consumer, they end up not remembering what brand delivered that because it's not really connected to whatever the value proposition is from the brand or the product.

So what I like about this is it's pretty tightly knit together where it's pretty clear why Axe is doing it. It's obviously a very easy product insight to understand, and it seems like it's rich territory to provide a platform for social content that really uncovers... because how people interact, especially younger people on social media, on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, is they'll take videos and they'll forward them to somebody. They'll be like, "That's so you," or "That's so John," right? And I could see this being an insight that kind of—rather evokes that type of reaction.

Dolores 00:11:32 Yeah. Absolutely. And I think we're really trying to get this brand back into the cultural zeitgeist, and we're doing so by poking fun, one, at ourselves, and two, at guys' behavior in a way that feels fun and interesting and relatable. I think we all know a guy who has

posted a picture holding a fish, and you will see that reflected in our campaign where guys do love that, and it's a social insight, and girls make fun of it. And that's okay, I think, to just put it out in the open and say, "Hey, women don't want to see your fish," and make a campaign around that. It's really landed quite well.

Matt 00:12:12 We'll be right back with the Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors.

Given that this seems to be a social-first campaign and clearly a content-driven campaign versus a traditional advertising campaign—which is really the only way to go right now targeting Gen Z and increasingly Gen Alpha consumers—I would imagine creators play a big role in this because that's obviously how you gain that mass distribution, and it's proven to be increasingly powerful versus just paid media on social channels. So how are you looking at creators as a part of the overall mix of this initiative?

Dolores 00:12:45 Creators are a huge part of this campaign. We wanna make sure that we're involving people in our campaign versus just the brand speaking to our guys. Young guys don't want brands just speaking at them anymore; they wanna feel like they're part of the culture. They wanna feel like they're part of the conversation. And bringing creators in to help tell our story has already made a huge difference.

And we're giving creators a lot of liberty with this campaign and letting them talk about potentially their experience in overdoing it in dating or overdoing it with our product. Again, tackling the social insights straight on, both from the brand side and from the creator side. And we're letting guys tell authentic stories in a way that, again, we haven't done in the past. So that's been really fun to see because we're almost handing the reins to these creators to help tell the story. And it's been resonating incredibly well. So we're seeing that guys are really relating to that, and it makes the story just that much more authentic versus us telling guys directly about our new technology. It just creates a much more interesting story.

Matt 00:13:52 Right. I mean, the reality is that no one's going to TikTok to see content about body spray. And I think some brands kinda lose the—obviously, it doesn't mean you can't show the product, but people go to social media to laugh or cry or smile or share. You know, they wanna be moved emotionally, and it's content that does that.

And I believe one of the biggest shifts, especially that larger traditional CPG companies still haven't largely understood, is that we are moving away or have moved away from the advertising era—which is like, "What is my unique selling proposition? How can I buy a thirty-second spot and shove it down a consumer's throat, whether they like it or not?"—to a content-driven world, which is more about, "What does my consumer care about when they wake up in the morning? And where does my brand fit in?" And just, curiously, and you've been at Unilever working on a variety of brands. I know you spent some time working on Dove as well. Has that been a hard shift for you to be able to drive with your agency partners and even internally? You clearly get it, and it's reflective in our conversation we've had thus far. But has

that been a—a hard shift to kinda bring a brand through? Because I know a lot of CPG companies are so focused on those USPs that sometimes they can lose sight of what the consumer really cares about.

Dolores 00:15:10 I will say, well, the big culture shift going from Dove directly to Axe and speaking from moms to 13-year-old boys has been certainly a shift. But I think in terms of how we—we go to market and how we speak to these guys, it has been a really big shift. And I think even this brand, up until two years ago, we were still spending part of our media budget on linear TV. So when I came into this role a year and a half ago, I said, "This needs to be a social-first, digital-only plan".

And that's what we did. And not only is it social-first, because it's not about taking a thirty-second TV spot and putting it on TikTok. That doesn't work anymore. So what we needed to do is find a way to engage the community. That has been the biggest thing that has changed on Axe, which is that we're no longer shoving content down the throat. We're helping them be a part of the content creation. We're engaging them in every single post that we look at and we approve.

We talk about how are we engaging our community? How are we speaking to them? What are we saying to them and what do we want them to say back? What do we want them to do as we put this content out there? That needs to be more than just "consume the content, believe in our message, and go buy our product". That doesn't work anymore. That linear model is dead. So now what we need to think about is how do we engage the community, make them a part of our story authentically, and then that's what's gonna get them to want to buy our product because they feel like they're a part of our story and a part of our brand, and it's just as much theirs as it is ours.

Matt 00:16:41 That's right. So I think we've set a record here in 2026 because we've gone way more than half of the podcast along without mentioning AI. But I think now it's time in the episode that we do so, and—and I think it shows that you guys—you know, you're not kind of grabbing on to AI pixie dust. Like, this is a type of campaign that I think is rooted in, again, a real consumer insight and a social-first campaign. I'm just curious, given that, how does AI play a role, not only in this campaign but in your job on an everyday basis? How are you looking at deploying AI personally with your team, or what are some opportunities you think exist for the brand and the category at large?

Dolores 00:17:19 Yeah. It's a huge, huge question. And I—I don't think any of us really have all the answers. But I think what we're trying to think about is how do the tools help us tell our story in the most effective way? So we are seeing that these large language models are starting to influence how consumers search for and evaluate products. And I think the most important thing for us to think about is what messages are we putting out there that are going to be picked up by these language models.

Right? We're seeing people already refer to this as the "new buy box". So for us, it's really important to make sure that our messaging is clear enough to be picked up by these models. So we wanna make sure that we have the right messaging, the right channels, and, really, the credibility and authenticity to be picked up by that.

So I did do a little bit of a test a few days ago, and I asked one of the models what they thought about Axe in 2026. And I think our insight on this campaign has been so strong that what we got back was really the essence of the campaign. It's very much around, you know, the history of overdoing it and the product technology—everything, all the work that we put into the campaign is being picked up by the language model.

So that was really exciting to see because it tells me that we're doing something right. There's always more to do, and there's always more to think about with these models and how they'll evolve because they're evolving every single day. But I think that the most important thing that we did in this campaign is have a strong social insight, a clear answer to a problem, and that is being picked up already in what we're doing.

Matt 00:18:53 I think the important point there is it's not like a normal consumer is gonna ask that same question, but they will ask questions that will circle around your category. And if that large language model generally understands where the brand is, then contextually, it's gonna insert the brand in conversations in the way that you wanna insert it. And I think that's really what's important.

And I think you're right. Like, the—I think the biggest opportunity in 2026 is the internet now has a—or is increasingly having a—new front door. And I think for the last two and a half decades, it was find things on Google, and then maybe you're in the consideration layer on places like Instagram, Facebook, etcetera, and then you go to Amazon to buy.

And that seems to be increasingly collapsing where—you know—these large language models... obviously, Google has a tremendous large language model in their own right. In Gemini, they're doing everything. And I think consumers are gonna increasingly buy over these platforms as well. And it creates, obviously, a massive opportunity for marketers but also a big challenge, especially for those kind of incumbent brands that have spent the last two and a half decades establishing their brand, becoming the top-ranked brands in their category on Google. And now that's all being torn down, and you have to really think of things in a slightly different way.

Dolores 00:20:13 Yeah. I think that's right. And we also started with TikTok as well because I think that, traditionally, you would have a certain number of followers on Instagram, for example, or on Facebook, and you would put a post up there, and you would know that most of your two, three hundred thousand followers would see that post. That's not the way anymore. A creator that has one follower can get 5,000,000 views on a video.

Matt 00:20:37 Isn't that crazy?

Dolores 00:20:38 It's insane.

Matt 00:20:39 It's been democratized a lot, you know? It's like—uh—ultimately, it's—it's about the quality of the content versus how many followers you've amassed. I remember in the early years of social media, I remember, specifically, Mazda ran a Super Bowl spot, and their whole call to action was "Go to Facebook and like our page". Because back then, that is what got you distribution, and it shifted so much. And now it really is about how good is your content. And the quality of the content is not necessarily a correlation with how much money you spend on the content either. It needs to be content that's native to the platform, things that look like they're authentic versus things that are glossy and overproduced as well.

Dolores 00:21:18 100%. And I think it works for creators as well. We talked about creators a little bit earlier; that creator can have 10,000,000 followers, but if their content is not good, it's not going to get more than a thousand views. And so as we think about how we bring our message out there, then we need to make sure that it feels authentic and that it's great content. Because I can put paid behind bad content, but at the end of the day, that's not gonna resonate. And consumers are too smart for that these days. They don't care if your content hits on all the brand messages. If it's not entertaining, informing, interesting, funny, they're gonna just get right past that.

Matt 00:21:58 Absolutely. So let's shift gears as we wrap up here. You've been in associate brand manager or brand manager roles for the better part of the last fifteen years. And, of course, now in your role as head of Axe—which is almost like the Uber brand manager, if you will—and, obviously, sure, you have much broader responsibilities.

But in that regard, how does brand stewardship or how has it evolved over time? Because when you were at Avon in the early 2010s, it was at the dawn of Instagram and, really, the early years of the social media era. And now we've gone through—I don't wanna say the peak of social media—but when you look at a platform like Facebook having over 3,000,000,000 users, it's pretty much topped off in terms of its growth. And now, obviously, we're seeing this new AI era, and who knows what's gonna unlock.

But through it all and through all these changes, what has stayed the same about being a brand manager and a steward of a big brand in a company like Avon or Unilever? And what is completely different here in 2026?

Dolores 00:22:58 Well, first of all, you make me sound very old, blah blah blah, talking about my history.

Matt 00:23:02 More wise and seasoned.

Dolores 00:23:04 Yeah. Exactly. That sounds better. So everything is changing every day. This speed of change has truly accelerated so much that it's really important for me as the head of this brand to make sure that I stay on top of everything. Or at least that's what I tell my

husband when I scroll through TikTok ten hours a day. It's part of my job, but really making sure that we stay on top of what's happening to help understand.

And it really makes my job really interesting because it's not every year you brief a campaign, you get a thirty-second asset, you do a fifteen-second asset, you do your PR pitches. It's not that simple anymore. But I think that makes it really fun because every day, we try to think about new ways to reach our consumers, which leads me into what doesn't change.

What doesn't change is that people want to hear great stories. They want to hear about great brands. They want to know about your product and your innovation, but they wanna hear about it in a way that appeals to them and how they're consuming media and products today. So whereas before, they wanted to be entertained with a really funny TV asset in between the shows that they watch. Today, they want to hear about it through TikTok and talk about it in the comments section, talk about which of their friends has pictures holding a fish on their Tinder profile.

That's what they wanna hear about from brands. And that is still storytelling, authenticity, humor, entertainment. It's all the same things I was talking about when I was doing the Avon pamphlets in the 2010s, but it's just in a different medium today. And we have to continue to evolve how those media change, but at the end of the day, it's still the same.

Consumers want to know about great products. They want to see great advertising, whether it's a TikTok comment, a Reddit thread, or it's something that ChatGPT spit out for them—they want to hear about that. And that's what makes my job really fun, and that's what brought me into marketing in the first place. And that's what's gonna keep me in it, just telling great stories.

Matt 00:25:06 Absolutely. And for some of our younger listeners here on the podcast, what do you think are the most important skill sets for those just starting out in their career journey that they should really lean into to set themselves up for success?

Dolores 00:25:19 I'm gonna give you a slightly different answer rather than a skill set. I think it's find something that you're passionate about. So you find something that you enjoy, something that you love, then the skills will come because you'll want to learn and understand more about what it is that you're passionate about.

That's what it is for me. I'm passionate about telling great stories and it makes me want to understand how Claude works, and ChatGPT works, and Gemini works, and what's feeding into it because those are the vehicles for me getting to my consumer to tell great stories. So I think I would say just find something that you love, something that you're interested in, you're passionate about, and then the skills will come because you will want to learn how to make that happen.

Matt 00:26:01 Yeah. I think that's fantastic advice. And I think, obviously, we all can't work at brands as cool as Axe or do things that are so exciting, but I think you have to find something

within that role that you're passionate about and, you know, that makes you excited every day and lean into that. Because if you do, I think that's where you'll find a lot of success. So to wrap up here, Dolores, we always ask our guests as we finish the podcast if there's a saying or a mantra that's helped encapsulate their professional journey. So what do you got for us today?

Dolores 00:26:32 This might be a cliché one, but I think everybody knows the Seth Godin quote that marketing is no longer about the stuff that you make, but about the stories you tell. But that's, again, what brought me to marketing. I love telling cool stories and telling people about the products that we have. So I think continuously finding interesting and authentic ways to tell great stories, whether it's on Dove, on Avon, Vaseline, or Axe today. I think telling great stories is just a fascinating thing to do for work.

Matt 00:27:02 I love Seth Godin. In fact, his first book, *Permission Marketing*, came out right when I graduated college and actually was the book I read that got me into the marketing practice to begin with. So I love that you gave him a shout-out, and that was the answer you gave. So thanks for that.

Dolores 00:27:15 Of course.

Matt 00:27:16 Yeah. So this has been a great conversation. I can't wait for our audience to hear it. Huge fan of you and the Axe brand. I can't wait to see what you'll continue to do to drive this brand and reinvent the brand in the category along the way, and appreciate you taking the time today.

Dolores 00:27:29 Great. Thanks, Matt. It was lovely chatting with you.

Matt 00:27:31 Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and the Adweek team, thank you again to Dolores Assalini, the head of Axe US, 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. Bye-bye.

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