Ginny 00:00:00 We pioneered audio content for children at the heart of the product. It's about balancing and giving children that independence, that agency, which is so important to their development intellectually, emotionally, but at the same time, making parents feel comfortable that this is a trust-safe environment for their children.

Matt 00:00:23 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 Ginny McCormick, the Chief Experience Officer at Tonies. Ginny has spent her career building beloved consumer brands across companies like Zappos, Hasbro, Amazon, and Reebok. And today, she's helping lead one of the fastest screen-free entertainment platforms for kids at a time when families are rethinking the role technology plays in the household. Ginny, so great to see you today. Thanks so much for joining.

Ginny 00:01:07 Matt, great to be with you.

Matt 00:01:09 Absolutely. I'm a big fan of your brand. I actually have a Tonies in my house. I have for several years. My kids love it. We'll get into that, but I just wanted to say I'm a huge fan of the brand.

Ginny 00:01:18 Amazing. I can't tell you how much that means to us.

Matt 00:01:21 So before we dive into Tonies, which is a brand I think a lot of people still have to learn about just given how early the brand is as evolution, would love to talk about you for a little bit and your career journey and the road that took you to where you are today.

Ginny 00:01:36 Yeah. Well, I've been incredibly fortunate in my twenty-plus years now to work on a handful of true brands. I know, Matt, you share this view that there's amazing products in the world, but a brand is something different. And to me, that really is about solving a real customer need in a way that connects emotionally and responds to what's happening in people's lives. And that kind of has been the through-line through me from my time at Amazon and Zappos where, obviously, customer obsession is something they take a tremendous amount of pride in operationalizing at all different scales. At Hasbro, I spent a lot of time really understanding the power of stories and characters and fandoms and how much people really connect to these worlds and what that means to their identity and connection to community. And at Tonies, those are all coming together in a really unique way.

Matt 00:02:32 Yeah. I mean, it's such an interesting time to obviously be in the children's space because technology is obviously becoming so much more pervasive. We've all read the stories of Gen Z and their struggles with depression and addiction and all these things as a result of, obviously, not only COVID, which isolated them, but just the pervasiveness of social media in

their lives and all the mental health issues that kinda come about as a result of that. Obviously, Tonies targets a much younger audience. And I just wanna start off [with a] question for you that if you walked into the average American household, let's say, 6:00 PM, what would concern you most about how young children are spending your time?

Ginny 00:03:10 What an amazing question. I think I have a tremendous amount of empathy for that household. Right? 6:00 PM is mass chaos in this world because you have juggling kids and trying to have dinners and competing priorities and divided attention. So I think there's a lot of challenges for modern families. And to the conversation, at times, technology can really help and be a hero in those moments. But more and more, as you were seeing in the research, we know there's trade-offs and there's consequences, especially on younger minds that are developing. And to your point, Matt, I think for parenting, we're now at this tipping point. Right? Because now first-time parents are the ones who grew up with social media. They grew up with constant connectivity.

Matt 00:03:58 Yep. In fact, this year, the average age of a first-time mother in the US is not even millennial. It's Gen Z. So she grew up with the iPhone [and] social media, the average first-time mother in the US. So we are past the point of the Gen X parent who doesn't really understand it. And I think one of the downsides, I think you'll agree, is that Gen Z parent is on their phone themselves too much around their kids?

Ginny 00:04:20 A 100%. They are struggling with it, understanding how it changed and shaped who they were, and there was positive, but there was also a lot of negative consequences to that. And to your point, they're struggling with attention, focus, sleep dysregulation, emotional dysregulation that really now we know, based on the science, can be tied back to that screen usage. So they're thinking a lot about their own behaviors and struggles, what that's modeling now to their kids, and thinking also about, "How do I in any way navigate this?" because my children have more connectivity, more choices, more content. They can speak versus type. That used to be a big hurdle. Right? And so they are having to figure it out with a lot more pressure and optionality in their household.

Matt 00:05:10 Yeah. And there's also, like—the reality is there's more two-income households now, and families are staying in cities for longer because that's where the income opportunities are, so they have less space. There's less third spaces for kids, so to speak. There's homeschool, but the third places aren't like they used to be. Kids aren't playing outside as much, as we know. And I think a lot of parents would probably tell you that the reason that they gift their kids an iPad when they get home is that they just need a break. They need some time to themselves. And I guess: how would you respond to that and relative to just all the trends that we've been talking about?

Ginny 00:05:44 A 100%. We—we obviously listen a lot to parents and families around the world. This isn't just the US, by the way, that are struggling with this. And to your point, the technology has become a tool, but it's one they're not really comfortable with depending on

how much. They're thinking a lot more with intention about how frequently they give over that tablet, how long in the duration, and that's part of the reason we know families really love this product.

We pioneered audio content for children. And, really, at the heart of the product, it's about balancing and giving children that independence, that agency, which is so important, Matt, to their development intellectually, emotionally, but at the same time, making parents feel comfortable that this is a trust-safe environment for their children so they don't have that constant guilt and conflict at that 6:00 PM dinner table of, "Give me back the tablet. No, I—you can't. You hit your limit." Chaos breaks out, and everyone sours for the next hours.

Matt 00:06:47 There goes dinner. Right. So for those in the audience who aren't familiar with Tonies like I am, uh, it'd be great to maybe hear about the company, how long it's been around, and what the core product is and does.

Ginny 00:06:58 Yeah. At the heart of it, we are a listening platform that grows with your child. So it's a safe, screen-free, ad-free experience that was created over ten years ago by two fathers who met at their preschool in Germany and had a lot of thoughts about technology and its impact on their children, but also a love of audio. And I think, especially in some of the European cultures, there is a real reverence for how much audio can impact in different ways, especially at your youngest age, it can engage. So, basically, at the simplest level, Tonies has a magical box where children can put figurines that represent characters like Disney princesses, all kinds of entertainment that you may remember from your childhood, books and stories, and then the audio instantly entertains and educates them.

Matt 00:07:52 The same way a podcast with an adult, almost. Right?

Ginny 00:07:55 Absolutely. Except this is one where instead of handing over your phone, which we also know parents do and have challenges with, this is something they can independently operate. There's no instructions. It's very intuitive. Our Toniebox—it takes bumps, beatings, drops down the steps. It is incredibly durable because it really was designed by thinking about the child first and then incorporating the technology. There's lots of products that have technology that are adult-focused, and then they shrink them down for children. At Tonies, we do the exact opposite. And I think that really comes through and why this experience is so intuitive for children and something they stay with for years and years.

Matt 00:08:38 Yeah. I mean, it's this tiny little box that's padded around the outside. So even if it falls off a table in the playroom, it's not gonna hurt the kid. And the way they operate it is you just take the figurine, you drop it on top of the box, it starts playing the programming, and there's different tracks. Right? So there's music tracks and story tracks. And if the kids wanna change it, they will just slap the side of it, and it changes. So there's no little buttons or knobs or dials or anything. And I just think that's so intuitive because you're not trying to replicate the behavior of a tablet, and you don't want kids to start looking at screens. But you do wanna give

them some type of autonomy where you can pick what you wanna listen to, and even within that, what you wanna listen to. And I think that really makes kids so much more engaged.

Ginny 00:09:25 A 100%. And this is really child development at its core. That idea of agency, even at the earliest ages, of "I do something and there's a reaction and I can have that sense of empowerment, discovery, curiosity" is absolutely built into the product. And to your point, kids love it. It's not something that parents are saying, "Okay. Take this, and this is a better, healthier choice for you." It's something they are gravitating to multiple times a day is what we see in [Name Confirm: Bonnie's household?]. And at the same time, it gives parents that moment of stepping back and having that pride in that child independence and discovery while not having to choreograph the play to be at every step in point with them. So it's a really amazing balance.

Matt 00:10:12 And what's interesting is, like—adults, we have this thing where if, like, we're at the gym or cleaning the house, we wanna have something on in the background even though we're really focused on that. And what I found with my young children is when it starts playing, it's not like they're sitting there on the couch just listening to it. They'll take out the Legos or take out something else and do something, but they're also listening at the same time, it kinda gets their brain moving, and it kinda scratches that itch that they have some type of media-based entertainment, which almost then unlocks the ability for them to just do other stuff. Where if nothing was on, I feel like that they wouldn't necessarily get that initial spark to start playing with the way that you want kids to play.

Ginny 00:10:52 Good. I think you did some time, Matt, as, like, a childhood development expert, but it's very true. Right? We talk a lot about Tonies sparking this imagination, creativity—like hearing the music and the stories, which we take a lot of pride in in crafting for specific ages and how they can hear and hold and remember, then causes them to engage. It's not passive, and I think often as adults, we think about listening as this passive, but, really, for us, we believe it's a superpower. Every great thing that you want your child to have, whether it's a skill or an emotional capability, starts with listening. It is their first skill. And by really tapping in and allowing them to see the power of listening, to your point, we see how it spurs all this imaginative play and really growth as they're developing.

Matt 00:11:46 It's interesting because you're saying earlier about how the iPhone or the smartphone in general and social media had negatives and positives. And now we have a new generation coming in, which all your users are part of, which is Gen Alpha. Right? Age zero to 15. And they're gonna be defined as the AI generation. Right? So they're gonna be the first generation with AI in the household. And one thing, when I talk about AI on stage, Ginny, I talk about how instead of just reading always, like, the same books to my five-year-old daughter, I'll ask her to tell me a story of something that she experienced, and then I'll turn that experience into an audio story that I'll play for her.

And it kind of—the idea there is that reading and comprehending is important, but I believe in this new world, what's even more important is the ability to understand what to say, what to

write, how to storytell, how to communicate. And if you start with that, I think then your kids will be future-proofed in some way in this world moving forward. And just curious what your thoughts are on how AI is going to impact storytelling. Because, really, for the first time ever, kids and everyone have the ability to make whatever's in their head come to life, whether, if it's a video. And that really, I think, is gonna change humanity in, uh—certainly, the way that we look at entertainment.

Ginny 00:13:00 I mean, there's no way to underestimate the impact, I think, that AI is gonna have on our communities and our families. And to your point, I think of it as this paradox of storytelling has always been core. Like, you go back to the cave and the campfire, and this is what bonded us. So to your point, this will continue to, I think, be the absolute connective fabric tissue that communities rally around, and therefore, it's so critical. And I think enabling people to tell different stories, personalized stories, to have your child and other children hear stories that represent them in their unique perspective in the world is critically important. But we have Creative-Tonies, which is a product that allows you to create personalized voice messages and have that on a figurine.

Matt 00:13:51 Are you seeing a lot of adoption of that?

Ginny 00:13:52 We've been blown away in not only the adoption, but the variety, Matt.

Ginny 00:14:00 Yeah. And part of this gets into your question about AI. So we have an experience where parents can record a message, and then that gets uploaded on a figurine, and then their child can use that figurine to receive that message or updates as stories continue. For some parents, the idea of "record a story" sounds like a lot of work. Right? I have so many things going on. "Can you help me here?".

So we've created AI tools and templates to say, "Here's a great story starter. How do we incorporate your child's preferences and really customize that?". So there's families using them to, again, have dad's voice so he can do bedtime even though he may be traveling. There's families, like, to your point, we're more distributed than ever before. This is a tool for people to share language and culture with families that may live in all different parts of the world. Families are using them as almost audio pen pals and exchanging messages, and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Again, we have a really passionate creative community, and I'm always amazed at how personal these messages can get and the role they can play in kind of helping families. Again, going back to that utility, here's a tool that helps with dinner transitions, and here's the piece that engages you, especially at bedtimes, which we know are the most painful moments for rituals in houses today.

Matt 00:15:26 Yeah. And I'm sure you guys put a lot of thought into the fact that just using the product doesn't require a phone, because some might ask, "Well, why don't you just play a podcast for your kids or look something up on Spotify?". I think the second you pick up your

phone, all bets are off. The second a parent picks up the phone to look something up, they're gonna get a text from their boss or something pops up on Slack, and then they're gone for ten minutes, mentally gone. And I think just the notion that it starts with your kids' figurines and toys, it almost makes it like a throwback, even though you are, to your point just now, using some really new innovative technologies and approaches.

Ginny 00:16:02 You're right. I think for us, it's twofold. We wanna, one, allow children to drive this experience. We know it's super important that they don't have to navigate and work through them with that tension of whose phone, privacy concerns, texts popping up, "What did they just buy? Add to cart," all those kind of pieces that happen when you really enable a young child with a phone. So we wanted to make sure it was appropriate for them.

And then, also, the figurines are absolutely designed because, for you, to your point, this has been a play pattern for children for decades—collecting figurines, storytelling with them, having different characters to represent and identify with. So it really is a two-for-one as we think about the value that we give to families and that ability, again, for the child to have that independence and agency. We think a lot about that in our design choices at Tonies.

Matt 00:16:56 So let's talk a little bit about the Tonies business. So you obviously sell the speaker, the core product, and then you sell these figurines. Where are they sold, and how does the licensing business—which I'm sure is very critical to the success because a lot of people will look at a Peppa Pig figurine and say, "Oh, I want that," they'll know that brand more than the Tonies brand—so I'd imagine licensing plays a huge role also in sustained growth?

Ginny 00:17:24 Yeah. So to your question, we have our Toniebox, and we have a whole range of figurines, now plush products and extensions for it, and a line of audio gaming called Tonies Play as well. So we create those products in the US. You can find them at Target, Walmart, Amazon. We're widely distributed. We've been in the US now for just over five years and have a deeper history in Germany, France, and the UK.

Matt 00:18:08 And the shelf space that Tonies has at Target is—I mean, it's a dream for a CPG company. You literally have, like, half a full shelf in the toy section. So, obviously, they're selling. Obviously, it's taking off. Just seeing that I was there a couple weeks ago, I was blown away.

Ginny 00:18:08 We have an amazing partnership with Target. And to your point, they see really strong demand from their guests who are really looking at family life and balancing. So we've been growing the toy section across retailers both in the US and beyond because, again, there's such a need for this product in differentiation. So we're super proud of those partnerships. Similar, we work with over 200 licensed partners. So we have big partnerships with all the IPs that are new and developing for children, like Miss Rachel or some of Danny Go, people like that in the US, as well as the whole Disney portfolio, Paramount. Hasbro is a key partner for us. We've just announced Pokémon.

So we also have these nostalgia brands that are super important as well because, as you know, there's nothing probably more passionate for parents than sharing something they loved in childhood and felt great about and passing that along with creating new memories for your child. So those titles continue to be a core part of our portfolio. The way we work with the licensed partners is a bit unique because, really, we bring this expertise in audio that many of our partners would say this is a forum outside of what we do day in, day out. So we have an original studio full of storytellers, producers, musicians, etcetera, that take care to bring these stories to life. So, for example, with Pokémon, we're creating originals, new stories exclusively for Tonies that really bring the brand to life in a way that we're excited about for our listeners.

Matt 00:19:49 And moving forward, what does this all mean for the future of the Tonies brand? Where do you see it going, and what are some of the growth opportunities you see moving forward?

Ginny 00:19:56 Yes. Well, we've had some very successful years of continuous growth, and we, again, Matt, are at such early stages because this is a trend and a need from families. That's not a fad. It's now being entered into public policy in the US. There's a lot of change going around in the medical communities as we get more and more research. So we really think about: how can we serve more families?

We're incredibly ambitious about the households we have and how much we've been able to help them and be part of the daily routines. Like, unlike many products, some I've been experienced with before, Tonies is something that children and families play with every single day. It's amazing the engagement we see, whether that's to your point... We actually have a podcast called *Tonies Today* that many older children, six-plus, start their breakfast with, all the way through to bedtime. So that's something we're looking at: how do we serve more of their needs as children also grow and expand, and then expand beyond our current markets, which currently are in the US and in Europe, primarily.

Matt 00:21:04 Got it. So switching gears as we wrap up here, Ginny, and it's been such a great talk, and, again, such a big fan of the brand and all the great work you're doing. Would love to hear, when you look back on your career and all the prestigious brands that you've helped lead marketing for, what are some of the takeaways in terms of some of the things that you've done right personally along the way that put yourself in the position to continue to get and lead these great opportunities?

Ginny 00:21:28 I had a boss very aggressively yell at me one time, "You don't ask, you don't get." And it really stuck with me, Matt. So I am a big believer in ask. Ask the question if you don't know, you don't understand. Ask for the opportunity that you wanna participate on. Ask to challenge. And I think I love a good question, and that idea of really asking and advocating is something I am passionate about doing and mentor different team members to do as well.

Matt 00:22:03 Yeah. I think the whole "no she, no s"—we don't get what you don't ask for. It's so true. Like, your boss is not waking up every day saying, "How can I give Jennifer a raise? How

can I give her more things to do?". Your boss is worried about their own job and their own family and own opportunities, and it's up to you to figure out what you want from your life and your career and to go get it. And I think that's such a great piece of advice for people in terms of business.

And it sounds like—I think, especially for younger women in business, I think sometimes it's just not intuitive to them as a dad of, like, two daughters. Like, I think it can be hard sometimes to speak up for yourself. And just, like, what advice do you have specifically for a woman in the workplace? Because you think maybe it presents a particular challenge in that regard to be more aggressive?

Ginny 00:22:47 Yes. I think, like, to your point, there's so much that has conditioned women's voices to not be aggressive, to really kind of lean back. I'm a mother of three very empowered daughters. So my message to them, to your point, is to really, one, be clear about what you want. And, really, I think that self-awareness of "Why am I asking for this? Why is this important to me? What do I perceive this unlocks, especially in my career path?" and to really do some hard work there. And then to share that and say, come forward, whether it's to your boss or a specific opportunity. Because I think when I've had those conversations or been on the receiving end of them, if someone's really clear about their intention, why they think this is good for the company, why they think this is good for the team and for themselves, those are things that are undeniable to me.

Matt 00:23:41 Absolutely. So we always ask our guests when we wrap the podcast if there's a saying or mantra that's helped guide the professional journey, and just wondering what might come to mind for you.

Ginny 00:23:52 It ties very much to what we were just talking about. I am a big believer in that saying that your life is a reflection of the quality of questions you ask.

Matt 00:24:01 So interesting. And is that about curiosity? Is that about just making sure that people understand what you're thinking? Why did that come to mind for you?

Ginny 00:24:09 I think, especially in the work environment—I think maybe this resonates for some of your listeners. Every project I've been part of that didn't go to plan, that we would say is a mistake or was a miss, someone in the room already knew that. They knew it was gonna go off. They could kind of tell this wasn't gonna work, but they felt like it wasn't their place to stand up.

Matt 00:24:33 Or didn't trust their instincts, maybe.

Ginny 00:24:35 Yeah. Or, like, question each other. So that idea of really thinking about questions and being open to challenging yourself, to have others challenge that this is maybe not the right path—those are the kind of things that I think unlock big moments for teams. And so, really, I think a lot—time is very precious. We're all super aware of how limited it is. So how

can I ask the best questions for this team, for this environment, for this organization to unlock opportunity?

Matt 00:25:07 Absolutely. So to wrap up here, I think that there's some new developments in the Tonies business that you wanted to tell us about, specifically on the new Hasbro and Tonies Play launch. Would love to hear about what we can expect from the upcoming collection.

Ginny 00:25:19 Absolutely. So as we talked about, Tonies really grows with listeners. And as children develop and they're asking more questions, they're more interactive, we've created audio gaming as a way for them to play. And at the heart of all good games, this gives children the ability to make moves, to have control, to respond to different pieces. And we paired up with Hasbro, who has the ultimate portfolio of games, and we're launching three games on Tonies Play, which will be Monopoly, Guess Who?, and the Game of Life.

So this for me is super exciting. Obviously, I spent ten years at Hasbro. I am passionate about their portfolio, but also know how much the world loves these games and shared experiences. And as we talked a bit about that nostalgia of having these games that were, for parents, real memories and core family moments, now being able to play them with their children in a different way is a huge unlock. And a personal favorite for me is you can also have children play these games independently. So they can learn the Game of Life and then play independently and then also have a family moment as well.

Matt 00:26:38 Such a cool collaboration. I love the kinda gameplay overlay to a business that's already driving such high engagement from your consumer. So we'll look out for that and can't wait to see how successful that is and wishing you nothing but success in this new initiative and everything else you have going here in 2026. So thanks so much for joining today, Ginny.

Ginny 00:26:56 Great to be with you.

Matt 00:26:57 Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and Adweek, thanks again to Ginny McCormick, the Chief Experience Officer at Tonies, 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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