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[00:00:22] Matt: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move in an ever increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to the speed of culture.

[00:00:46] Matt: Up today on the Speed of Culture Podcast, we're thrilled to welcome Alison Payne, the Chief Marketing Officer at Heineken USA. Alison has spent her career growing some of the world's most iconic brands from Guinness and Smirnoff to Lay's, Doritos, Special K, and now Heineken. Today, she leads marketing for one of the world's largest beer companies, helping shape the future of fan culture, exponential marketing, and the rapidly growing nonalcoholic beer category. Alison, so great to see you.

[00:01:08] Alison: Yeah. Hi, Matt. Great to be here.

[00:01:09] Matt: Absolutely. You've helped grow brands across beer and spirits and food and wellness in so many different categories. What would you say has consistently guided your approach to brand building over your career?

[00:01:21] Alison: The key thing for me, I think, in any category I've worked in is to sort of really be true to what the brand stands for. Consumer trends are changing, but if you try and sort of stretch a brand or wade into a cultural conversation that really is beyond where your brand should play, I think it's inauthentic. So it's about being moving with the times, but making sure you're very true to what the brand stands for, I think, is the key thing.

[00:01:44] Matt: Yeah. Of course, as times change, sometimes, I guess, you do have to look at, from time to time, the brand pillars to the extent they need to evolve. When do you know it's time to sort of evolve what a brand stands for based upon changes in culture and, of course, the the consumer and their preferences?

[00:02:01] Alison: Yeah. Look. I think if you look at our category in beer with the Heineken brand, for example, we're seeing ways that consumers are changing they're changing the way they socialize. Like, how I used to socialize back when I was a university student is very different from how my kids are socializing today. And I think that's how we've evolved. It's either via offering options, like nonalcoholic options, obviously, the degree to moderation for consumers is very important, or where we show up. Things like gaming have become a important part of socializing, and we've entered into that space with, say, Heineken 0.0 and

Player 0.0 and Max Verstappen and some of the activations we've done there. We still do really encourage socializing in real life, but I think it's how we show up is slightly different based on where consumers have moved to in the way they get together.

[00:02:56] Matt: Yeah. And, of course, socializing in real life is making a raging comeback right now. Like, there was a time during COVID when everyone was saying, oh, people are never gonna go to a sold out concert again. Obviously, that proved to be anything but the truth. And I know that Heineken's brand, for a very long time, has been synonymous with real life experiences. Talk to me about why that's so important. I understand what you're saying earlier about gaming, and, obviously, at the same extent, people are on their phones. They're playing games. But Heineken, I feel like it's so many great events I've been to. It's been there, and it's been there in a big way. Why is that so important to the brand?

[00:03:30] Alison: Yeah. Look, I mean, I think at our heart where if we go back to Freddy Heineken, the founder, he said, "We don't sell beer, we sell Good Times". And that is absolutely at the core of what Heineken stands for. So as we move forward, it's about how do you, you know, ensure that every, we call it a we believe in a refreshing social life that is enhanced by a cheers over a Heineken. So, yes, you will see us show up at events like Coachella, Formula one. We celebrate fandom. US Open is coming up in New York City in a couple of weeks. That's about getting fans together over the common love of tennis. Yeah. So it's critically important to us. And you're right. I think post COVID, everyone sort of hunkered down in their homes and got a little bit homebody like. I think we're seeing a real resurgence in wanting to get together. It's about quality time, though. It's not about when they go out, they wanna really wanna make it count and really wanna make it matter. And you'll just see, like, obviously, we're in the summer concert series as now. Like, there are more people going to more events in real life than ever before. And I think that's where we can be with the Heineken.

[00:04:33] Matt: Yeah. It's incredible. I mean, I just did an interview last week with NPR, and there was a stat that Gen Z, relative to their savings, spends way more than any other generation. It doesn't surprise me. I think one part of it is that these generations have grown up watching everyone else's highlight reels over Instagram. Obviously, the case we made for saving, and when you juxtapose that against baby boomers who grew up in the shadows of World War II and the Great Depression, this generation is not afraid to go out, not afraid to spend their money. And I think there's a case we made for that, obviously, in moderation just like anything else. But are you seeing just a lot of demand from this youth generation for experiences? And, obviously, I would imagine that provides a lot of air cover for the brand and everything you're doing there.

[00:05:18] Alison: Exactly right. But I think it's experiences in its broader sense. So, for example, like at Coachella, even if we're sponsors, it's moved beyond being what I call a badge sponsor. Slap your logo on.

[00:05:28] Matt: Put up your logo on a banner, and that's it. Call it a day.

[00:05:31] Alison: Exactly. And in the event you sort of have a presence. There's now the lead up, the social conversation before what people are wearing, who they're gonna see, the backstory on the artists or the sportsmen or sportswomen. That all part come part of the cultural conversation. Then there's the event itself, and then there's all the posting afterwards, like how it was. And that's where we sort of ride with our consumer along that sort of before, during, and after journey. US Open is a perfect example. We've got this competition right now where you can win a VIP event to come to the US Open if you've been a ticket collector holder from past tickets where Serena Williams— is our ambassador. She won the US Open six times, and people collect tickets. If you have an iconic ticket from the US Open, you have a chance to enter into draw and be attend a VIP event at the US Open. So it's that sort of thing. Competitions, fan engagement, a lot of conversation around who's kept tickets, like, you can see on our social media feeds. "Oh, wow. You know, I have tickets from way back."

[00:06:34] Matt: Yeah. I love that campaign. The campaign's Second Serve Tickets, and I think what's cool about that is that I think it really taps into a lot of key, I think, big drivers of the consumer zeitgeist right now. One of which is this notion of nostalgia, obviously, and collectibles. Uh, you know, there were a huge event called the National in Chicago that happened a couple weeks ago, and tens of thousands of people came in right before those fanatics fest in New York. Collectibles are huge. And so it plays into that and nostalgia collectibles and, obviously, fandom, which we'll talk about in a second, and you're hitting at the right time with the right athlete. And I think that's a good example of, I think, how a brand can really ride the wave, but still stay true to its brand equity pillars.

[00:07:16] Alison: Yeah. Exactly. You're so right about collectibles. I mean, we have another brand in our portfolio, Dos Equis, where we have the most interesting man. We brought him back. And we've got iconic bobbleheads that are out in stores and things. People love to steal them, collect them. But also at the US Open, we've got limited edition cans with each famous ticket from the six US Opens at Serena won, you know. And it's all those things that add like a memory. It's a bit like people scrapbooking their memories and things like that. So it is very important. And I think it is about that in real life moment is so important that people wanna capture it, remember it, share it with people, and that's how we sort of capture the whole thing.

[00:07:55] Matt: And, of course, the US Open itself is such an iconic event, and it happens right before the back to school season. It's in New York, and it's always like a gazillion degrees, but everybody's watching it. What goes behind the decision to invest in a property like the US Open relative to all the other options that you have?

[00:08:13] Alison: Yeah. Look. It's a combination where, as I said, we're been sponsors for close to thirty years, so it has been very much part of the Heineken brand in The US. New York is one of our biggest markets. Like, it's where it was the first imported beer after Prohibition,

landing on the docks in New York City. So Heineken's heartland is in New York. So it's sort of, in many ways, a match made in heaven there. And as we said, look, we really activate. We've taken over Grand Central Station with sampling for people who are heading to the US Open. And it really does dominate sort of New York social calendar for a whole three weeks. So yeah. And it's an important beer drinking occasion for us. People go there. They love a beer whilst watching the tennis. So it's sort of I guess, it ticks a lot of boxes for us.

[00:08:58] Matt: It really does. It's also during the time when a lot of people in America, at least, are they're not working as hard. They tend to take off. So they're more likely to be able to sit around with their family and watch the US Open than maybe some other sporting events that happen during the heart of a busy season professionally.

[00:09:15] Alison: Yes. Exactly. And a lot of the great games are in the late afternoon, so people go drop in after work. And so, really, it's such a great event.

[00:09:23] Matt: Another platform that you're getting behind relative to US Open is this Fans Have More Friends platform. And behind that's really about fandom, and we talked about collectibles and nostalgia and great athletes like Serena Williams. Talk to me about that campaign and why Heineken's so excited about it.

[00:09:38] Alison: Yeah. So look. It's right based off a very core insight, which is that people who are fans of something actually do statistically have more friends. And it's because you were following something.

[00:09:50] Matt: You're generally interesting. Right?

[00:09:52] Alison: You're generally interesting. And we've moved a lot as a family. My husband is a lifelong Arsenal supporter. And wherever we've moved, whatever country we've been, he's always found Arsenal supporters. And you can roll up to a bar, and if the Arsenal game's on and you don't know a soul, you can chat to the person next to you who's an Arsenal fan, and you're sort of, you're buddies by the end. Right? And so it's really based on that insight, which is you do have more friends, and getting together over a common interest and a beer is really what it's all about. And it's been very successful. We sort of launched it during the World Cup here in the US across all the major cities. We were not the official sponsor, but it enabled us to really get behind the fans. I mean, you saw what the fans did in the US, the fans of each country, you know, the ultimate like, with the Norwegians doing their rowing, the Dutch doing their left right, left right, left right.

[00:10:43] Matt: Did you see in Boston, apparently, there was no beer left in Boston when Norway was flying there?

[00:10:47] Alison: Exactly. Yeah. The Scots, the Tartan Army, drank Boston dry and sort of, we came to the rescue and delivered the Heineken kegs to to Boston. So, yeah, like, the fans of the country, because there's no more bigger fandom than your own country, right, really showed what I guess, really brought that insight to life for us, and we were able to sort of really jump in and participate in that and support the fans. It's not— more than anything.

[00:11:12] Matt: Yeah. Given the changes in media consumption across the core beer drinking audience, I guess every brand defines it differently. But for Heineken, how are you looking at your media mix? How are you looking at emerging trends like creators and making sure you're in the social feed and content versus tried and true traditional above the line advertising, which Heineken can obviously has leaned in to build such a globally recognized brand?

[00:11:35] Alison: Yeah. Look. I think you're right. There is a massive change in the media landscape. I think live sports is probably one of the few where you get the eyeballs on TV. But beyond that, yes, we do engage with creators. We try and build relationships with loyal influencers who can represent the brand. And this is where we have used the fandom platform, you know. So fans of the brand, fans of Formula One, for example, we engage with fans of US Open. So, yeah, we've definitely swung our media mix to more creator, influencer content.

[00:12:09] Matt: Yeah. And I think it's gonna be interesting to see in this world of AI content as it gets better and better, what happens to the creator economy. And I think I saw that I think it was Snapchat said that any what they call AI slop or any AI created content, they're just not even let on the platform at all. So, I mean, what's your take on AI as part of the creative process? Where is Heineken using it? Will Heineken ever use AI to actually create content? Or where is it used from, I guess, top to bottom within your organization when it comes to content?

[00:12:38] Alison: Yeah. It's fun. And actually we just literally had a discussion around this today because, yes, especially because AI has evolved dramatically. When I was looking at it maybe three years ago, even creating visual content, right, versus, like, summarizing word documents and things. You know, people had 15 digits and yeah. And all these sort of things. And you're like, well, this is never gonna work. But it has evolved significantly. We do have some guidelines around because we promote things in real life, you want things to be, it's real. You don't want a scenario of people cheersing over a beer, and they're like, they're not real. You know, we've manufactured these people through AI. But where it does play a role for us is actually getting to a creative idea or cracking a creative idea faster. We can simulate what the content may look like very quickly, show it in front of some consumers, get some very quick reads to then be go, look, you know what, this is worthwhile investing some build— real production money in. So we've sort of like our speed to content creation has got shorter to enable us actually to sweat the stuff that really matters. And as I said, do— it helps also the brand teams do all the busy work, summarizing brand performance. You know marketers, no joke, do a lot of stuff that isn't content creation and isn't a lot of marketing. It's a lot of

reporting on performance. It's a lot of budgeting. And if AI can help sort of do that busy work, it enables us to be actually much more creative and spend time on those things that really count. So that's how I see it evolving for us.

[00:14:06] Matt: And with that, I mean, obviously, Heineken has a world class team. So in order for you to find the next generation of leaders who will continue to propel your brand forward, what are some of the skill sets that you're looking for as CMO based upon the power of AI and all the innovations we've discussed that you think are incredibly important?

[00:14:25] Alison: Yeah. Look. The skill set for a marketer, I think, they have to be certainly agile. It's very strategic, but agile. And, actually, not afraid to take some calculated risks and test some things. We sort of have to throw ourselves into some of this stuff and say, hey, let's give it a go. I was just on, we have a in house creative agency, you know, we were just on talking about. We did a set of tests. "Hey, look, AI can be used from swapping out a bottle in this scenario, you know, into someone's hand, versus all the way to sort of pure video creation." Let's see, "hey, where should we go and what should we do?" So I think experimentation is gonna be quite important and evolving because things are changing so rapidly. Even just the media landscape, uh, platforms that we thought of a while obviously, it was all about TikTok. It was all about Instagram, Facebook. For example, Reddit has become a much bigger platform because consumers rely on peer to peer, I guess, reviews and that sort of and so you're like, oh, wow. We haven't thought as much about that platform and how we show up there. So I think you've gotta keep evolving. And there's gonna be another one. There's gonna be something beyond TikTok and beyond those things that we know today, where how you show up, how your content is digested from that platform is gonna be important. So, yeah, it's it's evolution, agility, making tests, moving on. If it doesn't work, move on. That's how I see the skill set. But also having the real core fundamentals of marketing, I still think of the four P's. You know, your positioning's so important. You've gotta have a great product. You can't let your quality slide. Those sort of things are still gonna play a big role. So have the basics, but be agile.

[00:15:59] Matt: We'll be right back with the speed of culture after a few words from our sponsors.

I don't know if this is one of the P's, but maybe it should in your category is packaging. We've seen in your category, packaging has been so important, especially when you look at, like, tequila brands, but I would imagine your categories are how do you look at packaging and some of the other intangibles as part of overall brand building, both off premise and on premise?

[00:16:23] Alison: It is a really important part because at the end of the day, that's what shows up on shelf. And sometimes, we call it the first moment of truth. Sometimes, they're the only thing your consumer will see. They might have not seen any of your wonderful US Open activations or anything. They're walking on their way home from work and stop in to a bodega in New York City, and boom, that's what they see. They see your pack on shelf. And if it's not

premium looking, if it's not shouting the key brand icons, they're not gonna pick it up. I do think also packaging, being very cognizant of packaging solutions for people. We're seeing, for example, a shift to smaller pack sizes with the sort of economic realities, inflation, people's wallets are squeezed right now. You know, smaller pack sizes, mini bottles, you know, are becoming a bigger part. So how do we make sure we evolve and meet consumer needs in different pack types? Then again, you've got sort of keg formats for people to buy for parties, through evolution. Um, you know, we've got mini kegs, which you can dispense at home. So I think all those things, slimline cans have become a big thing. You know, they used to be the sort of big, thick, squat cans. Slimline cans have brought in a lot of female consumers, uh, interestingly enough. I think they see them as more, they can hold them. Yeah. They give cues of sort of freshness and less calories, for example. So all those things are really important to keep track of. And we do audits to make sure that we're all like, our packaging is always seen as premium on shelf.

[00:17:47] Matt: Yeah. One of the big trends, obviously, and you mentioned this earlier, is nonalcoholic beer. And when I first heard of it, I just didn't understand it. But, obviously, the world has changed, and maybe I'm just getting old, Alison. But, obviously, your nonalcoholic brand has done incredibly well. I read it's up almost a 100% since you debuted it in 2023. What do you attribute this and you had said in an interview once this notion of zebra striping where, basically, you're alternating between alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks, which I didn't even know was a thing. So I'd love to hear your take on just that category overall and and what innovation looks like in that category.

[00:18:22] Alison: I think we launched Heineken 0.0 in The US in 2019, and I think some of our distributors, because we go through a three tier system, so we sell to distributors, we sell to retailers. I think they thought we were a bit crazy when we stood up on stage— we have a big sell-in meeting, like, “Hey, we’re gonna put a big bet behind Heineken 0.0.” And if you think about the category before then, dusty on the bottom shelf, seen as something really only like people who were sort of, you know, reformed alcoholics were, like, would go to. Very niche, very old fashioned, tasted terrible. And this, we literally shook up and revolutionized the category because we could see this sort of moderation trend coming. And I think the important thing is going back to the four P’s, the product was amazing. It tastes like Heineken just without alcohol. You know, as we say, it's Heineken without alcohol. And I think that was first and foremost, a lot of technology, many years of development behind it to crack that formulation. In the iconic packaging, it looks like a beer, smells like a beer, does everything like a beer. So you can stand with your friends at a barbecue, and it's like you're part of the crowd. Right? I think that's an important unlock as well, which is you can cheers with a beer like everybody else versus if you say, oh, I'm not drinking today, and I'll have a water. It just doesn't sort of have the same—

[00:19:37] Matt: Right. The conversation could direct to that.

[00:19:39] Alison: Exactly. Oh, then we do we'll just talk about the excuse. You then don't wanna be sort of the Spanish inquisition around, why aren't you drinking? You know? Like and so now that is happening less and less. Gen Z is actually quite acceptable to walk in and say, hey, I don't drink, may never drunk, actually, drunk alcohol. And this is where we see quite the presence of zebra striping coming in, where people will drink a beer and swap to a nonalcoholic option. So this is what's great, where you have Heineken 0.0, because you can drink Heineken and then swap to Heineken 0.0. And so we offer that sort of we call it the zebra striping, where you flip from one to the other. And we've noticed this idea of what we call social marathoning. People wanna be, stay in control. They know that they've got a long day. Like, if you're at a summer festival, you could be turning up at three and you gotta last till 3AM. That's a long time to keep going. And that's where it really has a role in this sort of social marathoning where you can stay in control, but still have a beer with your friends. And, yeah, we've seen some real success there. We actually did an activation at Pier 17 in New York City, where if you bought a Heineken original, you got a Heineken 0.0 and a zebra striped cup where you could, like, rip off and it it went to the other as a sample. So, yeah, it's a trend that we're leaning into for sure.

[00:20:52] Matt: And I know there's been some innovation in the category like cold pressed lime and nectarine juniper flavors, so flavor categories, as well as Heineken 0.0 Ultimate. So I would imagine still more room to run as the category grows through innovation in the category.

[00:21:07] Alison: Yeah. Totally. Because if you look at, like, nonalcoholic beverage options, we call them sort of adult nonalcoholic beverages. If you're sort of at a party and you're not running alcohol, some of your choices were water or soft drinks, carbonated soft drinks, which, you know, have very sweet. So actually offering something like cold pressed lime with slight beer notes gives you that sort of more, I guess, adult drinking experience, and it's been very, very popular. And then, obviously, Heineken Ultimate 0.0, which is a triple zero benefit, so zero calories, zero sugar, zero alcohol, really, again, unlocking a lot of, because people are like, well, if I'm not drinking, I don't really wanna drink a lot of calories. So, actually, it's a great alternative.

[00:21:48] Matt: Absolutely. So I wanna shift gears a little bit to you and your role at Heineken. So everyone talks about at every conference, whether it's Cannes Lions or CES, the CMO. The CMO, they've kind of been put on the pedestal, and you probably just say, oh, I wake up every day I'm doing my job. What does it take for someone to do business with Heineken? And more specifically, what does it take to get your attention as a CMO of Heineken? Someone who's listening that has a great idea or wants to work with Heineken, what do they need to do? And I would imagine it's not cold calling you or spamming you. What is it?

[00:22:20] Alison: No. Well, it is about a great idea. Obviously, I get millions of emails a day almost on various trying to sell me something. But someone can catch my attention with a great idea. If they've done the research on the brand and we're like, hey, we've got this thing that we think there's been a lot of response to the fandom. For example, Fans Have More Friends, and, obviously, because it's really tapped in on a real consumer insight. And so there's

some things that I've looked at and gone, yeah. Yeah. You know, this could be interesting. Let's have a conversation because, yeah, this is something that the brand could do because you're tapping into that insight. So yeah. Look. You know, whilst I probably don't get to every email, it's something that catches my eye around pivoting off our core insight, staying true to the brand positioning. You know, when we have a great agency network, we say agency network, Great ideas can come from anywhere. And so I think that I truly believe that. So that's sort of what captures my attention the most. Obviously, backed up by a little bit of data, that will help.

[00:23:13] Matt: And what does the pie chart of your week look like? Where are you spending your time on an everyday basis, and how has that evolved over time?

[00:23:19] Alison: Yeah. So I do hope with AI that I can spend less time on sort of the reading waves of reports and getting the key summaries. It's sort of like, you know, Copilot's great. It's like, hey, summarize my emails from last week and tell me what I should be. So you're less busywork. I do, obviously, being across so many functions, media planning, insights, trade marketing, I still love the creative process, the creative development process. So I always say to my teams, I wanna be there at the brief and there at the sort of key, you know, the book ends. That's a sort of really critical part for me. Out in trade, I do a lot of market visits because you really only see how the brand shows up when you're sitting in a bar or you're walking the supermarket aisle of a Publix or a Seven Eleven store, I think that's very, very important. And sometimes you can see we're not as good as competitors. Well, you know, our execution wasn't as great there and jumping on it. Because what you might approve on a computer laptop is not what it looks like when it gets into store.

[00:24:17] Matt: Right. There's a whole supply chain that where it ends up, and so many things can go wrong.

[00:24:21] Alison: Exactly. Yeah. Or oh, wow, you really can't see that logo from that distance. You know, those sort of things that go on. So, yeah, walking in store. Obviously, I spend a lot of time on marketing capability and create like, building the team. We have a fabulous marketing capability group over in Amsterdam, so I work very closely with them. Obviously, at Cannes, we won The Creative Brand of the Year. Those things don't happen with a lot of momentum on how to write the case studies, how to really champion creativity. So, yeah, I guess it's those elements. Creativity, building capability, and going and seeing it in store. And as I say, your strategy is only good as the execution that you're seeing on the floor.

[00:25:00] Matt: So true. So to wrap up here, and it's been an awesome conversation. Thanks again for taking the time to do it today. When you look back on your career journey to date, what are some of the things that you think you did right along the way, whether it's areas you leaned into or decisions you made that put yourself in the position to end up in the CMO seat?

[00:25:18] Alison: That's a good question. Look, the mantra and it was from one of my first bosses in marketing who said to me, strategy and indeed marketing is more about what you're not gonna do than what you are gonna do, because you can be asked to do a lot of things. And so having that sort of North Star is particular on the brand, because you can wade into a lot of things. Think, oh, yeah, we could do that, we could do that, we could do that, we should do that, we may maybe we should weigh in this cultural conversation. And so being very clear about what you're not gonna do is one critical one. And the other was, as I always say, killing things early. You can have a lot of pet projects that keep coming around and around that can waste a lot of people's time over years sometimes. And so being very clear around kill—the opportunity cost of procrastination or everyone knows this is a dead duck, but they're not gonna, like, kill it yet. And it so I think those two things. And then maybe the third would be championing the creative process through an organization. The bigger the organization, the bigger the teams, the easier it is to lose sight of creativity and kill by committee and those sort of things. So I play a big role, actually, in a quite a lot of upward stakeholder management. Hey, let this idea breathe a little. Don't kill it yet, or let's not dull it down by so many people's points of view. And I think that's very important as a leader to try and keep that alive through the process.

[00:26:39] Matt: Yeah. I love that. I mean, I think there's so many great insights of just the things that happen behind the scenes in order to get something across because everyone wants to put their 2¢ in. You also don't wanna dilute it to the extent that it looks like everything else, which is what tends to happen when you bring a creative concept to a committee or a big group, as you know.

[00:26:55] Alison: Yes. Exactly. And, you know, there is risk risk. Right? Cancel culture and all those things. What if you get it wrong? But we can't let it completely stifle creativity.

[00:27:03] Matt: That's right. Well, we're gonna leave it with that, Alison. This has been such a great discussion wishing you and the brand great luck during US Open, and I'll be looking out especially for your activations and and everything else you have coming up for you in 2026. So thanks for taking the time.

[00:27:16] Alison: Uh, awesome. So great to speak to you. Thanks, Matt.

[00:27:18] Matt: Likewise. On behalf of Suzy and the AdWeek team, thanks again to Alison Payne, Chief Marketing Officer at Heineken USA, 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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