

[00:00:00] Ibrahim Khan: I think as a marketing community, we need to get through the hangover of the TV era. 20, 30 years ago, you could build 99% of the opinion of a brand making one thing and it was called a 30 second TVC. Frankly speaking, I think it made us a little bit lazy as an industry.

[00:00:24] Matt Britton: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder of Suzy. Join me, 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 Ibrahim Khan, the Global Vice President of Marketing at Fanta. Ibrahim brings nearly two decades of marketing experience across some of the world's biggest beverage brands, including Coca Cola, Sprite and Fanta across global markets. He now leads global strategy for Fanta, an \$18 billion retail value brand that's going beyond advertising that creates own entertainment.

So great to see you this morning and thanks for joining the podcast.

[00:01:10] Ibrahim Khan: Thank you for having me, Matt. Great to be here.

[00:01:12] Matt Britton: Absolutely. In looking at your background, I've seen that you've sort of built your career across a pretty wide global spectrum, including markets like Pakistan, Thailand and Southeast Asia. And now on the global stage. If you look at your sort of career journey, what's one principle that's really held true everywhere on a global level, and one that you've had to kind of completely rethink when you've gone to a new market?

[00:01:35] Ibrahim Khan: Yeah. Well, Matt, let me start by saying it's quite a privilege to have the opportunity to work across markets that wide, diverse and now on a global scale and on a handful of brands in the world that give you that opportunity. So that's great. I think going from small single markets to big giant markets, multi market roles, and now in a global role, the biggest thing I reflect on is how the fundamentals of a brand or a business rarely change when you go from one market to another or even at a global scale. If people buy your brand because it tastes good, that's probably why they're gonna buy it anywhere in the world. You know, unless a brand has a very distinct and different history in terms of how people grew up with it in a market that rarely changes, I think what does change when you travel around the world and work in different markets, and now from a global perspective, I see a lot of those differences is how people experience a brand. The channels change, a consumer's day changes, language certainly changes, together with which market you're in, language does make a bigger difference than we think it does. And so, in other words, the fundamentals don't change, but how you can express or execute those fundamentals can change depending on the market.

[00:02:56] Matt Britton: Right. And when you look at the Fanta brand, specifically the brand you're working on now, how do you define Fanta's competition? Is it around sort of the product category or the consumption occasion, or even the consumer mindset? How do you frame that in a market that's really evolving so quickly?

[00:03:11] Ibrahim Khan: Look, for me, I'm a very big product purist, Matt, and when I say the fundamentals of a brand don't change, a lot of that stems from what the product is designed to do. And Fanta at its very simplest, a very tasty refreshment, and a very fun brand. And that is my competition. And so the most adjacent product categories would be soft drinks. But you go a little bit wider than that and you start to see other beverage categories come into play. But if you go a little bit wider than that, like take the context of Halloween, which is where we're live right now, are we competing with confectionery? If you look at the marketing we're doing, are we competing with other sources of entertainment on Halloween? And so really, it depends on how you slice the market, but it also depends a lot on what the very basic truths about your product and your brand are.

[00:04:01] Matt Britton: Yeah, of course those basic truths remain. But when you go into all these incredible new diverse markets, I would imagine there is some notion of being culturally relevant, making sure you're sort of landing the plane to the local culture. What is your take on cultural relevance and how you actually scale that across all the markets?

[00:04:20] Ibrahim Khan: I think it makes all the difference, Matt. And having worked across so many different markets, you do see cultures, and how assumptions can be almost your worst enemy in doing global marketing across those markets. I can give you a couple of examples. Like in the soft drink category, consumption with food is a very big occasion for us. But you see habits around consumption with food so dramatically different between Eastern and Western markets, just because of how those habits were built or how those cultures consume liquids with their food and how they don't. And so that really dramatically changes how your brand and your business strategy come to life in a market. For example, in Asia, soft drink consumption with food is not as developed as it is in the west, and therefore we have to lean in a lot more on what I call the leisure occasion for Fanta in Asia, but a lot more on food occasions here in the West. And that's a big difference if you think about how we invest our resources in marketing and building our business.

[00:05:22] Matt Britton: And what about packaging? Because as a CPG marketer, obviously we've seen post Covid the way that people purchase your product changes. Obviously we have the explosion of platforms like Instacart, which changes the way that people buy. How is packaging evolved for Fanta? Whether it's the packaging form factor, size, or even the way that you merchandise it at retail.

[00:05:45] Ibrahim Khan: Yeah. I'll bring two thoughts together. One is your packaging needs to reflect more and more with simplicity and purity, what your brand stands for. Like, there's just a lot more that you have to cut through.

[00:05:58] Matt Britton: Yeah. So much more noise, right?

[00:05:59] Ibrahim Khan: Yeah, exactly. If 20 or 30 years ago you had to cut through a shelf with maybe an assortment of 20 brands, now you have to cut through a virtually infinite shelf where you can buy anything on demand, you know, and now with LLMs and AI is like, it's even fast, it's even expanding every day. So you have to be very, very clear what signals your brand. And there's a few formats more important than packaging in terms of how you give that signal.

But I'll also touch a bit on what you said earlier around cultural differences. When I was in Asia and in that market, when you would go into the store and you'd walk across the aisles and you'd see the packaging and you'd see the merchandising and you'd see the point of sale communication, it was very overwhelming at first. It almost felt like an attack on my senses, like my mind could not process the amount of information that I was being given in the store. And my instinct as a global marketer or marketer that was at least trained more on Western marketing principles, my instinct was to simplify. And it took me a couple of years to understand that, for whatever the reasons, and I never got quite to the bottom of it, that that was the norm in those markets and consumers did expect that. And if you didn't go that route in terms of aesthetic, in terms of information, in terms of what you're providing to the consumer, you would get left behind. And that was something that then, you know, when I moved back into other markets, I realized that it's just one of those distinctions which somehow stems from culture, and you have to lean into them. And so packaging then also becomes very important in that, in terms of how you express it in one culture versus how you express it in another culture.

[00:07:40] Matt Britton: Right. And I would imagine things like serving sizes as well. You talk about the occasions that people drink around the world. Well, I would think the serving sizes matter. So when you go to Europe, you see the cans smaller. So that's part of the overall picture as well.

[00:07:54] Ibrahim Khan: Absolutely, absolutely.

[00:07:56] Matt Britton: So you mentioned Halloween as a big moment for the brand. What is the connection between Fanta and Halloween? Why did you think this was the right moment to really lean into? Because I want to dive into something big that you're working on right now around the Halloween occasion.

[00:08:10] Ibrahim Khan: Well, I mean, to start off with, not every festivity needs a brand, and not every brand needs a festivity. So you only do it if it makes sense. And I think the connection

between Halloween and Fanta is pretty straightforward. Halloween is a festival of trick or treat. It's the one time of the year where you get permission to indulge a little bit in delicious food and drink, and having a bit of fun. And Fanta is nothing if it's not delicious and fun. That's really what this brand stands for. And having said that, I am very disciplined, and we are very disciplined about making sure that our product has a genuine, authentic role in the occasion and the festivity that we're activating. You know, very often you start seeing brands and marketing to passion points or to occasions or to trends where frankly, the product has no business being and it becomes a very inauthentic effort. And so Fanta and soft drinks in general play a very big role in Halloween. Soda consumption is quite high during the occasion, and therefore it also makes sense for us to be there.

[00:09:13] Matt Britton: And of course, this year around Halloween, the brand's taking a real creative leap with Haunted Universe, which is a big initiative that you're doing with the AI powered entertainment studio GRAiL. Would love to hear more about that initiative and really dig deep into how you look at AI's role in the creative process.

[00:09:34] Ibrahim Khan: Yeah, I mean, look, let me start off by saying we've been doing Halloween on Fanta for the better part of the last 10 years. We've been doing it in smaller, more fragmented ways across different markets. It was really just three years ago we started to scale this into a global, repeatable platform for the brand. In 2024, we had our first effort. The results were incredible. That was a IP collaboration with Warner Brothers. Last year, we did what we thought was even bigger. We went with Universal and we did this whole crossover collaboration into the horror genre. And what we started seeing was not just incredible results, but fans of the genre, fans of the festive of the brand asking, now, not whether Fanta will do Halloween next year, but what will Fanta do for Halloween next year? And so it showed us the potential for this to become, for Fanta what Christmas all that time ago had become for Coke. That required us to move a little bit, Matt, from this mindset of year-on-year collaborations into something that we could build for many, many decades to come.

[00:10:41] Matt Britton: More of a platform.

[00:10:43] Ibrahim Khan: Yeah, exactly. A platform that we could invest in and build and give consumers a consistent but fresh experience every year. Something that, you know, the brand manager on Fanta 20 years would look back and say, who did that? Who thought this was. I mean, so that's kind of what we're building towards. And this felt like the right time.

Also, from a technology perspective, we felt like we could do things that we perhaps would have been unable to do 10 or 20 years ago. We're not the first brand to try leaning into entertainment and building our own entertainment IP, and we certainly won't be the last. It's not an easy thing to do, but we've been at this now for more than a year. It was somewhere last year that we made the decision to sort of build our own universe of characters and of stories and of lore, and of experiences and this space-

You know, the one thing with Halloween that really took me by surprise is how giant horror fandom is, and how passionate they are about it and how Halloween, really, horror is one way, such one effective way to get into Halloween. And so it's not something you want to step into with your eyes closed. You want to get in there, really, having done your homework, having done your research, thinking through, making sure it's relatable, making sure there's something fresh, because a lot of things have been tried and tested. And so we've been working on this, Matt, for more than a year, we've been researching archetypes from pop culture. We've been researching archetypes from different cultures around the world. Because horror exists everywhere. We've been figuring out what is the best way to start and what is our roadmap going forward. So we have a bit in the pipeline as well, researching histories, cultures, lore, sensitivities, fandoms, building our own story. So, you know, the campaign that went live, every character has a backstory that we are going to reveal bit by bit. Everything has some interconnection that we'll reveal bit by bit. This was just a first dipping our toes in the water, if you will.

And GRAiL, which is our entertainment studio partner in all of this, has been invaluable because they come from the entertainment world, they come from the production world, and they've really been helping us do a lot of what we have done. Technology has enabled it, Matt. Like I often share with the team, back in the 80s, before computer graphics were a thing, everything was hand drawn. It's hard to imagine any of the entertainment properties that my generation or generations following mine grew up with would have existed if people were still hand drawing everything. So I just don't think it would have happened. And so we're just at that next evolution of technology where now we can create even bigger worlds, bigger experiences. And that's really the role that technology plays in this.

[00:13:35] Matt Britton: Yeah, it's so interesting because I speak to a lot of CMOs, marketing leaders on the podcast around AI's role in the creative process. And the overwhelming takeaway I get is that brands are sort of fearful that consumers are really gonna push back. And it kind of, like, touches a nerve. But to your point, if you look at animation, like ever since we're kids, we look at animation and Disney, if you look at electronic dance music, which is so popular, which is music that's made by computers, I just don't think we're going backwards. And I think ultimately it's about how this makes the consumer feel, and if it actually drives the entertainment value, I think the way it's produced is secondary. Now, obviously, I believe there needs to be disclosure if you're using AI for creative. If it's not a real person, you obviously have to disclose it. But just curious, like, do you find that in the marketing community that there is this fear? What's your take on it overall?

[00:14:33] Ibrahim Khan: Look, I think there are some genuinely important conversations that need to be had around this particular technology, and what it implies for not just our industry, but for us as people. And there's a lot of those conversations online and some very smart

people having them. So I don't want to dismiss or minimize any of that. I think those are important.

I think, look, when it comes to marketing, a great deal of marketing is art. And art is something that, at least for now, I believe is inherently human. You know, things around taste. And for example, would I want to outsource ethical decision making to a computer? Absolutely not. You know, I don't think it can be creative the way that a human being can be creative. And I don't think it has the taste that a human being can have. And so all of those things, even now in the effort that we've done around Halloween, there are so many people, so many passionate people who have put their blood, sweat and tears into this program over the last year.

And so is the fear there? Yes. Are there important conversations to have around it? Absolutely. But I think we can also do much better in helping people understand how we're using it, and where humans are still playing the bigger role in all of this, which is the case in what we have done around Halloween.

[00:15:55] Matt Britton: We'll be right back with the Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors.

When you think about, obviously this is a huge content initiative, you're not going to be successful in driving ROI from a content initiative unless you capture the consumer's attention. And the same way that attention is so much harder to capture on shelf, as you explained earlier, it's also equally as hard just to capture attention in the world when they're being bombarded with messages from every medium constantly. How do you look at gaining attention, making sure that some of these initiatives, like Haunted Universe, actually gets in front of the consumer and captures eyeballs?

[00:16:32] Ibrahim Khan: I mean, look, there's a few things to think about in all of this. One is, you know, it's a little bit easier when you're working on a brand the size and scale of Fanta. I will say that. I mean, there's a lot that comes with that that I certainly won't take credit for. It has seven years of history and people much better than myself that have built that salience, equity and the distribution that comes with. And so that definitely helps. But I think making sure that you're authentic to what you're trying to connect with. As I said, we could have been very lazy in terms of how we did this universe and the character building and the storytelling, but we weren't. We did a lot of homework and research and testing and feedback from consumers to understand and make sure that we're getting things right. And I think a little bit of that people haven't even seen yet. It's to come. And so it may be hard to see how deep we've gone and trying to be authentic as that.

I think you want to be familiar and relatable. That goes without saying. So we could have invented characters and stories, or we chose to go with something that people can still relate to, and find familiar to some degree in the context and in the season. And then you also want to

be fresh. And that's really where the challenge comes. I was reading some comments. Every morning I wake up, I start reading comments on social media, on the stuff that we're putting out there.

[00:17:53] Matt Britton: Is that healthy?

[00:17:56] Ibrahim Khan: It certainly keeps you honest, I tell you that. But someone used this 'word fresh consistency', which I love, and I think that's really what we're trying to do here. So we want to be consistent, but we also want to be fresh. And so, look, for example, we decided that we don't want to close the door on collaborations. We want to find a way of bringing popular IPs and partners into this universe, which, as you saw this year, we did with Ghostface. And that works both for the IP owner and for us, because it was something surprising, it was something fresh, and no one expected it. And so that could be one way of making sure that we're cutting through, and people take notice, and over time, we start building what we're trying to build. So, yeah, you have to think through these things, for sure.

[00:18:41] Matt Britton: Absolutely. So, shifting gears as we wrap up here, nearly 16 years ago, you started your Coca Cola journey as a junior brand manager in Pakistan, Afghanistan region and sort of, like, worked your way up the chain. Here you are in Atlanta as a Global Vice President of Marketing, which is just an amazing story. When you look back at your career journey, especially during your Coca Cola tenure, what are some of the things that you think you did right along the way to put yourself in the position to where you are today, where so many others, 99% of others that would start in a more remote market would never end up in this position?

[00:20:46] Ibrahim Khan: I think there's more stories like mine, Matt, than you would imagine, or maybe I see them more often just because it's like what you've seen is what you see around you. And I think that's just one of those wonderful things about companies like Coke that give opportunities to people from anywhere in the world with any background and any- If you have value to add to the company and to the business, you will get the opportunity in a company like Coke. I think that's really my biggest reflection on that.

[00:21:16] Matt Britton: But you're taking yourself out of it respectfully, like, obviously, there's something that you've done right to put yourself in this position. What would that be?

[00:21:24] Ibrahim Khan: Yeah, for myself, look, what I've always believed in, Matt, is being curious. A bit of it is just part of the personality, but also a lot of encouragement and opportunity. You get to be curious. You get to experiment on some really big brands with some really significant investments. You learn from that, you grow from there. You're encouraged to take risks. You should take risks early on in your career, whether it is career risk or whether it is risk with the work that you're putting in the market. I believe, and it's something that I try to build in the teams that I lead as well, Matt, in something called this sense of adventure. I feel

like people need to wake up in the morning and look forward to what they're doing. It needs to be exciting. It needs to be fun, even if it's a little bit risky.

And it needs to have, sort of, this shared experience. I think as a marketer, one of my biggest learnings or mantras is that it is a team sport. It is a bit of a peeve when I hear people say I was the one behind such and such idea or such and such a campaign. There's many people, you know, who have been in the room and then who later on go to take credit for big things. I just don't think that's our profession or that's our industry or that's the sport we're in. It's a team sport. It's impossible to trace any one big thought back to any one single person, as is the case with anything big in the world, man. Not just marketing, but anything is rarely just one person behind it. And that mindset, honestly, has helped generate more luck for me than I think I would have had I been of the mindset that it's me and just me. So knowing sort of where you're getting your help and your launching pads and the people who take bets on you and the teams that you work with, they help you go much farther than if you think you're doing it all by yourself.

[00:23:10] Matt Britton: And to the next marketing leader, to somebody who, starting right now in a remote office, and wants to one day move up the chain themselves, what's some advice that you have to people starting off on their journey, in terms of areas that they should focus on, and really key attributes of what you think will make the next marketing leader?

[00:23:29] Ibrahim Khan: Look, I'll give you a answer specific to our field on that one, which I'm particularly passionate about right now, and that is that I think as a marketing community, we need to get through the hangover of the TV era. If I may be very blunt on that, okay. Look, 20, 30 years ago, you could build 99% of the opinion of a brand making one thing, and it was called a 30 second TVC. You had a captive audience and the role that the TV played in a consumer's life was enormous. Your news, your friends, your family, your discovery, everything was centered around that. And that's why it was such a powerful tool for us as marketers. And frankly speaking, I think it made us a little bit lazy as an industry.

And I think the more we can push ourselves out of that, and I think marketing has come full circle back to the product, and using the product as your most important channel to get people to talk about you. That will be my biggest advice in terms of skill set and thinking to the marketer of tomorrow. I think consumers hold the mic now, Matt. We don't hold the mic. If they're not talking about what we're doing, nobody cares. Taglines, copy, TV, hey, it has a place, man, but it's just not as central as it used to be 20, 30 years ago. We need to think, now, four Ps. We need to think about the entire bundle. We need to think beyond just the communication that we do. And it's become way more important, now, and will continue to be. With the advent of AI and with the advent of agentic shopping, being clear about the full bundle that your brand offers, and your product offers is the marketer's job, not just the communication.

[00:25:19] Matt Britton: That's well put. And I think really accepting the end of this sort of TV industrial complex, it's kind of time we're there. Right. You look at younger people, Gen Z, the average age of a first time mother in the US this year is Gen Z. She grew up with the iPhone in the household, not with the TV, right? So like this is no longer your alternative, younger consumers, your core consumer that is not revolving their life around the television.

[00:25:43] Ibrahim Khan: Absolutely. And you'd be surprised, not just the young consumers, Matt. I get to meet consumers around the world. We go in their homes, we see an old TV set catching dust somewhere in the corner of the room. And even grandma now gets her news from YouTube and TikTok. And it's just a different world. And not to vilify TV or TV advertising, it has its role, it's just not the same role that it had 30 years ago.

[00:26:08] Matt Britton: Well, the form factor of TV is still there, but people are also time shifting and streaming. So you know, I think obviously that's why the NFL commands such power because it's the last bastion of live entertainment that you can really drive that traditional 30 second spot model over.

[00:26:23] Ibrahim Khan: Exactly. And if I may, you know, at Coke, like we're very forward thinking about this, you know, so we start from the product experience, then we think about the retail experience, then we think about the live experience, and then we think about the paid experience of which TV is one part. And that's why we've been able to endure for as long as we have across our brands, you know, because it's just constantly evolving with the times.

[00:26:48] Matt Britton: So to wrap up here, and it's been such a great discussion, I would love to hear from you. We always ask our guests if there's a saying or mantra that helps, sort of, encapsulate their professional journey to date. Just wondering what comes to mind for you.

[00:27:00] Ibrahim Khan: I have different ones for different situations. I try to avoid it. Sometimes I feel very pretentious when people quote themselves or other people. But I would just say, like, to the point around marketing is a team sport. I think if you want to go far in this industry, you have to take people along for the ride and for the journey. And there's a lot of quotes around that. But for me that's probably the most important thing in our industry.

[00:27:24] Matt Britton: Yeah, greatness is in the agency of others, as they say. So certainly the case with marketing and saying that Coca Cola has proven over the years. Well, thank you so much for joining. It's been such a great discussion. It's been awesome to hear about your journey and wishing you best of luck with this Halloween season, and everything that you and Fanta have ahead.

[00:27:42] Ibrahim Khan: Thank you so much, Matt. Appreciate it.

[00:27:44] Matt Britton: Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and Adweek team, thanks again to Ibrahim Khan, the Global Vice President of Marketing at Fanta for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate and review the Speed of Culture Podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Til next time, bye bye. See you soon everyone. Take care.

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