

Isabelle Sakai Transcript

Isabelle: 70% of the population is considering a damn lifestyle. So, it's not really about any alcohol, because it's still a lot of fun and pleasure and everything. But occasionally, looking for something that is a true alternative. So that's why we thought we had an opportunity. And we learned all of that from listening to consumers.

Matt: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to The Speed of Culture. Today, we're excited to welcome Isabelle, Sakai to the show. Isabelle is a global chief marketing officer for the Mark Anthony Group based in Zurich. She's in charge of marketing, planning, and strategy for the many brands they look after, including White Claw, a very popular brand. What you're here to talk about today, Isabelle, so great to see you. Thanks so much for joining.

Isabelle: Well, thanks for having me. I'm delighted to be here.

Matt: Absolutely. And where are you joining in from today?

Isabelle: Actually in Dublin, Ireland, where Mark Anthony Group has its international headquarters.

Matt: Gotcha. And do you travel often around the world for your role? Because it seems like a very international company with many different locations.

Isabelle: It is. You are right. So I'm located in Zurich, Switzerland. That's my home base. I'm very often here in Dublin to be with my team, my global team. But I travel a lot around the world, in particular in North America. So Chicago is our home office for the US. And then we have Toronto and Vancouver. We are a Canadian company. Originally, our founder, Anthony von Mandl, was Canadian.

Matt: Gotcha. And just to kind of wind back the clock a little bit, you started your career at P&G, where you worked for nearly 20 years. I say this all the time, but it is such a common theme at the podcast that so many people who end up in the CMO seat started their career at P&G. What is it about P&G that makes it such a special place to work? And what were some of your core takeaways from your time there?

Isabelle: P&G is truly a remarkable company. Extremely grateful for having joined that company at the very start of my career, because it's truly a learning ground. So you are extremely well trained in everything that can make you successful as a marketer, but also as a leader. So I think that explains why you have so many CMOs that are coming from P&G. You are trained in obviously brand building, advertising development, consumer and market understanding, data analysis, and more. You have a very regular program of training courses, but they also invest a lot in you as a leader and as someone who understands how to build organizations. So it makes us very, very complete. We have a very broad profile after working at P&G. And then, of course, you have a diversity of the company in terms of the number of categories, the beautiful brands.

Marketing is also the lead function. So obviously, you're entrusted with a lot of responsibilities very early on. But fantastic company.

Matt: Yeah. On top of that, I also see that you worked in many different markets during your stint at P&G. What impact do you think working globally and being a true international executive has had, especially starting on that path early in your career?

Isabelle: I recommend warmly to anyone to try to relocate and to work internationally because it's been such a growth experience for me, Matt. When you go to a different market and you leave there, you go to a different country, you're discovering a new culture, new food, a new language. You work with very different people. You're also rediscovering your own country because you look at it differently with an external lens. You learn to be more adaptable, and more flexible. You broaden your perspective. So it's an incredible experience to do that.

Matt: Yeah, I think often, especially here in America, we kind of get the misperception that the way it is here in America is the way it is everywhere. And the cultural norms exist everywhere. And that's anything but the case, as you know better than anyone. So I think being worldly and having that large worldview just helps you understand different perspectives and the way that people live around the world. And they'll just make you a better professional. I think also earlier in your career, you're probably less likely to have a family or have things that are holding you down. So you do have that opportunity.

Isabelle: Agree with everything you said and more.

Matt: So you made the decision after being at P&G for nearly 20 years to join Mondelez, another fantastic global CPG brand. What goes behind the decision to leave a company like P&G? You're working your way up the chain there and working with new categories. And then one day you wake up and you decide you're leaving. What goes behind a decision like that?

Isabelle: It's not a light decision to take. And frankly, I've loved every single day of work at P&G. So I think what is important when you're changing companies, is not to run away from something, it's actually to run towards something else. Because there comes a point in time where, I don't want to say you've seen it all, but you are in your comfort zone. After 17 years at P&G, I feel I've seen so many different categories in so many different markets. And I've worked in local regional and global marketing. I worked also corporate on the P&G brand and I've done a lot of things. But at the end of the day, especially because the culture is so strong, it's always the same way of working. It's the same code. It's the same approach. So if you want to develop again and stretch yourself, changing the environment is a good idea. And this is what happened to me. It coincided really with me passing the 15-year mark. You start to say, okay, it's been a while. It's been a long time. And then Mondelez knocked at my door. So it was the combination. Again, I was excited by Mondelez, discovering the world of food. As you said, an amazing company, with great products, great brands, and great people. So I wanted to go and discover a different world.

Matt: Yeah, and I think you're right. What you're talking about is complacency and people get used to the way that things are and why change it. But I think sometimes growth comes by embracing the discomfort and going to something new which allows you to grow as a professional. And then you spent some time working in other organizations in the marketing

function. And then in 2023, last year, you joined as global CMO at the Mark Anthony Group. For those who don't know about that organization, tell us a little bit about the Mark Anthony Group.

Isabelle: So Mark Anthony is a founder-led business. So our founder is Anthony von Mandl. After 50 years, he's as excited enthusiastic, and passionate about the company as on his first day. A visionary leader, someone that we all look up to, is someone passionate about wine. So, owns a lot of prestigious wineries in British Columbia in Canada. And he's the one who invented the flavored mouth business or category with Mike's Hard Lemonade. I'm sure you know this brand. 25 years this year. And then, of course, I launched White Claw, the creator, the OG of Hard Seltzer. And so difficult to create brands or launch brands that are creating a new segment for consumers. And Anthony did it twice. So a lot of respect.

Matt: Yeah, for sure. I mean, to create a new category in such a competitive industry is nearly impossible to do because it almost feels like at a certain point, everything's already been done. And I had no idea before you just told me just now that they also were behind the Hard Lemonade category, which was another huge hit. So I guess what goes behind that process? And you probably know a little bit more about the White Claw brand because it's more recent. What goes behind the R&D and innovation process to have the conviction to essentially create a new category?

Isabelle: Matt, it all starts with really understanding the consumers, and what they are missing. So whether they know it or not, by the way. So it's truly understanding what are those unmet needs and what is the gap in the market. So if I take the example of White Claw, there's a need for products that are very sessionable, that you can drink a lot of. And typically beer was meeting that need. Except that when you think about it, it's not the best product when you want to drink a lot of something over a long period, because it's quite heavy and it leaves you a little bit bloated and it's high in calories. And Anthony saw that and said, okay, we need a product that is going to be much lighter, 500 calories and some nice airy bubbles, but something that is also full of flavors, beautiful flavors, because when you're drinking a lot of something, the flavor is making it much more enjoyable and gluten-free, because he saw that this was a little bit of a concern as well, surfacing with well-being becoming a rising obsession. So he saw the opportunity, said, yeah, I'm going to get out there. I'm going to carve out my space with a very session-able product that is going to answer better the needs that consumers have. And it worked.

Matt: And one thing I noticed personally about White Claw, I don't know what the data shows, but females gravitated towards White Claw because there wasn't something that spoke to them that was kind of in the same form factor. So there's wine, but wine is not in the same form factor and it's not as easily accessible. And then there's beer. But this is sort of something that, filled the need of being easily accessible that had the form factor of beer. But to your point, it was much lighter and had better taste. And I think those are probably core drivers. Is White Claw today a brand that's focused more on the female demographic? And how does it break down in terms of usage?

Isabelle: It's pretty much 50-50, which is remarkable in this category.

Matt: To come up with a new category, and it starts with, I get identifying the consumer need, but your category has all these other key elements of making it successful. First and foremost is distribution. I would imagine given the fact that Mark Anthony had other brands in their

portfolio, made it easier to get distributors to carry it and to gain adoption. But I guess what sorts of hurdles does a brand have in a new category gaining distribution?

Isabelle: I think it's really about being able to explain to customers or actually through our distributors, as you know, the structure of the alcohol category in the US, to explain that it's going to come incremental. So everything that I just explained about you coming in and carving out your own space, better answering consumers' needs is critical. Because then they see, ah, okay, so really we're going to be able to grow again because we're going to provide a product consumers are looking for without really knowing it. And it's going to create a new volume for the US. This is what is critical to be listed. And then it's all about driving velocity because consumers are picking on it. And as you know, we exploded in 2019 and became that huge phenomenon everyone was talking about. Everyone tried to copy us, by the way. And it's still hard. So that's what it takes. You need to first explain, well, why you're going to come incremental to the category and create value. And then you need consumers to embrace it fast. So it's so much in demand that people were asking for it. We ran out of stock, as you know, at the beginning because we could not meet the demand.

Matt: I remember that in 2019. And I guess when something takes off so fast, especially in this category, it always runs the risk of being a fad that people look back at and say, oh, do you remember what light call everyone was drinking it this summer? And now the other big competitors have come in and they almost become sort of Trojan Horse in the category, but ultimately, they go away. And White Claw has had staying power. What does it need to do to continue to have staying power in a category that, again, is highly competitive and is going to continue to have new entrants into the space?

Isabelle: One of the reasons why we're still there, actually stronger than ever, with 63% of the segment, is because we never compromise on product quality. So when there was this, what we call the gold rush, everyone, every single competitor out there said, ah! We want our fair share of the part-houser category. They don't sell many different products. And frankly, we were not differentiated. And the product was not always of a great quality. We stayed the course on having a superior product. We continued investing in the brand, even though we were under attack everywhere. And we are now really entering what we call the consolidation phase. We are the clear leader. We believe one or two brands will stay and all the rest will disappear. That is what is happening typically when you are a true market disruptor. So we're staying the course.

Matt: We'll be right back with the speed of culture after a few words from our sponsors. And obviously, an important product is the other big piece in terms of the consumer's brand and building the brand with that. You recently announced the launch of a new campaign from White Claw called Grab Life By The Claws. That's a whole new brand platform. Tell us about that.

Isabelle: It's a beautiful brand platform. And you said it correctly. It's so much more than a one-off campaign. It is a true platform. It was born out of consumer understanding again, really listening to consumers. And what they told us is they have never felt more isolated. The pandemic didn't help. But in this hyper-connected world, what they are telling us is they feel lonely. I was listening to the news this morning and heard about it, I don't know if you heard that, but Korean consumers have what they call a pet rock. It's something that we used to have in the US, because they are so desperate for having someone to talk to, sadly enough. So it's a

true human need. We know that strong personal interaction and social connection are the first drivers of happiness. That's what makes a human being fulfilled. Everything. So you need contact with other people. So when we heard that, we said, wow, this is us. This is what we do. White Claw is all about that. Consumers talk about having a White Claw moment. So when they just want to socialize with their friends, swap stories around a White Claw, something impromptu, fun, lighthearted. And this is the way that the role we play in their life. So that was really what was the origin of the Grab Life by the Claw campaign. It's all about celebrating togetherness and having a great moment of shared fun.

Matt: Yeah. And obviously, we had this big rush of the experience economy where it was all about experiences and not things. And then the pandemic hit. And then everyone retreated and ran up their Amazon bills and bought TVs for every room in a house. And then we had post-pandemic, we had sort of like this rage travel era where everyone was kind of going out. And now we sort of settled into, I think, where we were before. But I think with that, you're right. People are scarred from going through the pandemic. We also have now people talking to AI. And there's all these new technologies. And the more people rely on technology, in a lot of cases, the less they rely on human interaction. So I guess in some ways, it is counterculture and it is driving that human connection. And I guess you see your brand as a big part of that human connection.

Isabelle: Absolutely, yes. We are committed to helping people reconnect with their old friends, meet new friends, and be part of that to make their lives a little bit better.

Matt: Makes sense. When you look at channels, media channels, or then get your message across and connect with consumers, where are some areas that you're focused on here in 2024, given the consumer segment you're trying to target?

Isabelle: I'm going to surprise you by telling you we invest a lot in social media. This is where a lot of things happen those days, not new. But something that might be a little bit different than what other brands do is our commitment to meeting our consumers in real life. We are very invested in being present at festivals, in particular music festivals all around the country. And we have what we call the Shore Club, which is a platform, our bar, if you want, where we sell our product, but also invite them to have experience with White Claw.

Matt: Oh, within festivals, you're creating your in-view festival.

Isabelle: Absolutely. And we want to further develop that to foster that two-way conversation. That's really what we're committed to, very much in line with what we stand for, togetherness, bringing people together, refreshing social connections.

Matt: And does White Claw also play a lot in more traditional media, like linear television building its brand? Or has that not been a big part of your story since the launch?

Isabelle: He's not dead. Absolutely. I'm with you 200%. You need that for broad awareness and a little bit of prestige as well. So it won't surprise you.

Matt: Especially as a new brand, you need trust and loyalty because you're still such a relatively new brand compared to some of the other brands that play in your space. I would imagine that

that kind of gets you that gravitas that you need for consumers to trust the brand over the long term and make sure it isn't that bad.

Isabelle: Exactly. You said it very well. Absolutely.

Matt: So let's shift gears a little bit to you and your career because obviously, you're in a really important seat for a company that has a huge success on its hands. And it's your job to, A, not screw it up, which I know you won't, but you can find growth opportunities. How do you stay, I guess, in a growth mode as a professional? So you keep learning and growing because the marketing and media space changes so quickly. What do you do personally to make sure that you have your finger on the pulse of where the market is and where the consumer is?

Isabelle: So we do a lot of social listening, Matt. I think it's important. We do that very regularly and we learn a lot about what consumers say about our product, but also how they use our product, what they're missing in our product, and what they want to hear from us. They talk about everything. It's unbelievable. It's such a source of interesting data points. And it's particularly important for us when it comes to innovation, because obviously, we are aware that they love white clover hot salsa, but the drinking habits keep on evolving. So we've listened, we've seen, just as an example, that they are changing their drinking habits. They want more and more to experience with non-alcoholic. And that led us to launch our White Claw 0%. I mean, 70% of the population is considering a damp lifestyle. So not abandoning alcohol because it's still a lot of fun and pleasure and everything. But occasionally, looking for something that is a true alternative. When you think about it, there's not a lot of options out there. Frankly, you have just bland waters or you have a very sugary cocktail. You have non-alcoholic beer, which is the same taste as beer. So that's why we thought we had an opportunity. And we learned all of that from listening to consumers.

Matt: Wow. So talk to me about your efforts in a non-alcoholic space. I wasn't aware that you entered that category.

Isabelle: We launched actually in January, so it's very recent. But we saw an opportunity for us, the unlock, was to realize that when you want to have a non-alcoholic drink in a social setting, you are a little bit ostracized or at least you are a little bit ashamed. So I'm sure you've been in that situation where for whatever reason, you didn't want to have alcohol that day. And then people are looking at you like, why? Are you sick?

Matt: And if you have a bottle of water, it kind of like, it almost advertises that fact. If you're holding a bottle of beer in a bar. Like Liquid Death, I think they've had some great traction because it almost looks like a can of beer. So you could drink water at a bar and I think that's probably a key insight behind their entire go-to-market strategy.

Isabelle: That's correct. And when it comes to White Claw, we know we are bad. We're bad for consumers. So when you are having a can of white clothes you're presenting in your hand, it feels like an alc.

Matt: It blends in?

Isabelle: Exactly. So that avoids a little bit of the scrutiny and the interrogation and frankly, the judgment that you're facing. Plus it's delicious, so it doesn't hurt.

Matt: Yeah, and it almost feels like you're not asking consumers to change their habits or behaviors because they're used to buying the White Claw brand on-premise and they're still doing it. It just happens to be a different type or extension of the brand that doesn't have alcohol. But let's talk a little bit about your role as CMO of White Claw. So are you just focused on the White Claw brand? Are you focused on a larger part of the portfolio? And then secondly, what does the pie chart of your day look like as a CMO?

Isabelle: So I am responsible for everything which is RTD, so ready to drink. And we have four big brands. White Claw is the biggest, of course, but we have a nice Hard Lemonade, as I mentioned before. We have Cayman Jack, who is a new kid on the block that is doing extremely well, and Margaritas, etc. And then we have Mixed, which is a much smaller brand, but a brand that packs a punch. Fun, all about cocktails. So that's my world if you want. And I'm really in charge of everything related to brand building, communication, strategies. That's what I do. So that's my day job. My night job is also to be the CMO when it comes to building the function, the marketing function of Mark Anthony. So coordinating, and setting the bar higher. Engaging with our community, making sure that we are training ourselves and sharpening the soul on a day-to-day basis. So these are broadly my responsibilities.

Matt: And in terms of your team and who you're looking for when you look for young or emerging talent to broaden the skill set of your team, what do you look for? And what advice could maybe we impart as younger listeners here at the podcast in terms of areas they should be focused on?

Isabelle: So first, I believe in diversity, if I may. So I'm trying to build a team of different profiles, different experiences, and different personalities because I think that through diversity, you are getting better outcomes. So I want to say that in the first place. Obviously, in our case, we believe in recruiting people who are well-trained in marketing and who ideally understand the Albert category. But again, for the sake of diversity, we are opening up and not just looking for people who come from the industry. I'm an example of that. So it's important to have people coming from a different perspective. And then this being said, depending on junior or senior, we need, again, diversity. So sometimes people that we can completely mold and in other cases, we want people who can come and hit the ground running.

Matt: So when you look back at your career, Isabelle, and you look at all the choices, decisions that you made since being at P&G and maybe perhaps before then, what are some decisions that you think you made right that put you in a position where you are today, where you're CMO of an important, fun brand or a group of brands and enjoying what you do and working around the world?

Isabelle: I think early on in my career, I decided I would not stay in my comfort zone. So I did move actually after nine months. It was the first time I changed country and relocated from Paris to Brussels in Belgium. And I've done that several times. My career, we already talked about that. But I do believe that taking risks in changing the environment I was living in, changing categories, changing everything was a stretch, but helped me grow faster. So that's one of the things I did very early on, something else I committed to is really to enjoy what I was doing. So I was extremely fortunate at P&G. I enjoyed the journey. As I said, never a dull moment, always something to learn and to develop. But it was very, very important to me. I work far too many hours a day, to, not enjoy what I'm doing. So that's the other thing. I committed to do something that I love. And if I don't like it, then I need to challenge myself and

say, okay, maybe I'm not in the right place or I need to change. So I think that's probably the second biggest commitment, something that helped me further develop in my career.

Matt: I think you want to make sure that you love what you do. And I think a lot of people lose sight of that over time. And then it has a direct correlation to their performance and why they're not spending that extra hour or why don't they come up with that good idea because they just want to get away from work when they're done. And it's hard to be something if you're running away from it.

Isabelle: Absolutely. Something else I've seen is sometimes you get obsessed with being promoted or going faster on your career ladder and everything instead of just enjoying the moment and what you're doing. So it's really important to enjoy the journey, not be obsessed with the end goal always.

Matt: And with that, is there a quote or mantra that comes to mind that you like to live by that kind of defines your professional career?

Isabelle: A great question. This is something I do think a lot about. What is this compass that drives me? The mantra I have followed since my time at P&G is the consumer is boss. It's something that I find is critical, truly understanding the consumers, what they want, what they need, and doing everything you can to meet their demands and try to make their lives a little bit better. So the consumer is the boss.

Matt: I'm a big fan of that mantra and a big fan of you and your work on what you're doing for White Claw and the other brands you oversee. So thank you so much for taking the time to join us today. I can't wait for our audience to hear about your journey.

Isabelle: Thank you so much, Matt. It was a pleasure to talk with you.

Matt: Likewise. On behalf of Suzy, the Adweek team, thanks again to Isabelle Sakai, the global CMO of Mark Anthony Group, and one of my favorite brands, White Claw, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review The Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Until next time, see you soon, everyone. Take care. The Speed of Culture is brought to you by Suzy as part of the Adweek Podcast Network and Acast Creator Network. You can listen and subscribe to all of Adweek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcasts. To find out more about Suzy, head to suzy.com. And make sure to search for The Speed of Culture on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts, or anywhere else podcasts are found. Click follow so you don't miss out on any future episodes. On behalf of the team here at Suzy, thanks for listening.