

Hiroki Asai Transcript

Hiroki: Airbnb is really about these connections and these experiences, these real-life connections and experiences that you can have with people. What we offer isn't something that you do on a screen. What we offer is connection and an experience that you could have in real life, which I love.

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. Up today, we're thrilled to be joined by Hiroki Asai, the Global Head of Marketing at Airbnb. Airbnb has seen phenomenal growth over the last couple of years. One of my favorite brands. I'm looking forward to this. Hiroki, thanks so much for joining. Great to see you today.

Hiroki: Thanks for having me, Matt. Happy to be here.

Matt: Absolutely. So tell me a little bit about your background. Did it start on the marketing side, or the design side? How did you enter the great world of marketing?

Hiroki: Funny. It's a long story. I started on the design side. I studied as a graphic designer and then graduated college and started to work in design studios. And then most designers went up the ranks and started to work on larger and larger projects. And then I think at some point in my career, I realized that I was okay as a graphic designer. It wasn't fantastic. And then maybe I should start taking a look at other avenues to take this. And so I think, you know, kind of naturally, I segued into doing things more on the marketing side, broader than graphic design.

Matt: Got you. And obviously, where you have your background a lot of people normally have their heart. A lot of marketers don't have an eye for design. They're more focused on the performance metrics or the actual tactics. I would imagine, given that your background isn't design, you're acutely aware of the aspects of design, and how it impacts any campaign that you bring to market.

Hiroki: What's interesting is I think my design background gave me the skills to understand form and typography and all those sorts of things in the story. But I think more importantly, I think what it gave me is this understanding of the customer and understanding of an audience. And I think that's something that I try and hold on to every day that we do things and every season where we go through a campaign is understanding the other person that's going to be at the other end of this. Because I think it's very easy for us to work and to design for ourselves and for what we think is important versus what the person at the other end of it thinks is important.

Matt: Yeah. That being said, though, I do think, and I'm sure you'd agree, that there are general trends in design that happen over time. Like if you look at the design from the 70s or 90s, it looks different from today. I know you spent 16 years at Apple. And what Apple is known for, in my opinion, from a design standpoint, is sort of like simplicity is the ultimate sophistication. The use of white space and easy-to-read and easy-to-understand creative, I think, and translate it

through their products. Like, where does a movement like that kind of come from? And are we still in that movement when it comes to just overall design trends?

Hiroki: Yeah, I think it's probably less of a movement and a trend and more that it's a principle that we try and employ here at Airbnb also is that the person at the other end of your work or your communication or the app has a lot going on. And you're probably not the center of their universe. So you're competing for attention, you're competing for headspace, and you're competing for ears. And so I think getting to the point, making it as elegant and simple as possible is a really good discipline in making sure that what you're trying to do cuts through.

Matt: Absolutely. And we talk about being built for the flick. And especially when you look at younger consumers who are spending all their time now. Not on watching the television, but on their phone in social media feeds where you have a limited amount of time to gain their attention. And if you try to overcomplicate it, they're just going to flick right by you.

Hiroki: It's interesting. It's human nature to try and add more to a story, to embellish it, make it bigger, try and bring someone in. And I think what happens to a lot of. Designers and marketers and storytellers you start to add so much that you start to get ahead of who you're talking to. And the reality is, like you said, people are swiping through pages and they've got 50 things going on at the same time. They have lives to lead. They have families, they have friends, they have a weekend plan that they're trying to figure out. So you need to feel a lot of restraint and stay as simple and quick as possible. And it's so difficult. It's so much harder than it sounds.

Matt: Yeah, this is all about discipline, especially in an organization. It was a very famous meme where they said, and I don't think this is the case of Microsoft at all anymore. But at one point, it was like, this is how Apple would design a product. Here's how Microsoft would just show how Microsoft is very feature-laden in its messaging and was just kind of too much. And Apple just said two or three words. And I think at large companies, there's often like multiple departments, everybody wants to get their feature in. Everybody wants to put in a little two cents at the end, you have something that is all things to everyone and nothing to no one. So I think it's much harder to imagine it's much harder for a large organization to impose that discipline because you're fighting against internal forces.

Hiroki: Yeah, and I think that's what's unique about Airbnb these days. And what we're really lucky to have is we have creative founders. So we have founders that are designers.

Matt: Yeah, so let's get into that. I mean, Airbnb is an incredible generational company. You joined Airbnb in 2020. So we're talking about in the middle of the pandemic. There were certain points in 2020 where people thought Airbnb was going to be out of business. But obviously, they went through a distressed time when they had to raise money. And then towards the end of 2020, we started to see this trend where people wanted to get out of their homes, and being in hotels wasn't safe. And renting your own home at Airbnb was great. Talk to us about that journey when you first joined Airbnb. What surprised you when you first started working, I guess, remotely at that company and kind of the ups and downs of your first year there?

Hiroki: It's funny. I was advising pre-pandemic. So I was there for about six months before the pandemic hit. And it was kind of fascinating. It was great to witness a company that was under such hyper-growth. And the expansion was just happening so quickly. It was a little overwhelming, the speed of growth that they were experiencing. And then to see it all stop

overnight was unbelievable. So then I came on shortly after the pandemic had started to help reorganize and reshape the marketing and the design teams and other things as well. But it was pretty amazing. It was pretty remarkable to see. I mean, you know, who gets hit harder in a pandemic than a travel company, when travel becomes, comes to a standstill?

Matt: And how do you look at marketing and communications during a period like that? Is it telling consumers we're still here when the dust settles? Because that's such a, also a tenuous time in terms of marketing, because you don't want to say the wrong thing either. So like, how did you approach that, I guess, when you first joined, when the pandemic did hit?

Hiroki: Yeah. And this is kind of unique to Airbnb. And this is kind of interesting is most companies are one product for a million people. Airbnb is a million products for a million people because everyone and every home is different. Every experience is different. And so it's got unlimited variability, which means the way that that supply gets used could be unlimited as well. And so in the pandemic, what's interesting about us is people tend to use Airbnbs in the way that they need based on what's happening. So the pandemic happens and we go from being vacation rentals to suddenly a way to get away as a family or to get out of the city or get to a larger place or work remotely. And so I think your question was, what do you do as a marketer or a storyteller in that environment? And I think it just really goes back to that basic principle of let's understand what the customer is doing. We all know the mindset. We all know the frame of mind. We all know the uncertainty and the terror that's happening. But then we can also see trends of how they're using us and how we're transforming. And so I think we need to be able to speak to that. And talk to them and meet them where they're at, if that makes sense.

Matt: It makes complete sense. So fast forward to today, 2024, and the brand has come out of what was a tenuous time, obviously really on fire and is an iconic global brand that has redefined travel. I stay in Airbnb all the time, love the brand, love the work that you guys are doing. What's your vision for the brand moving forward? And what are some of the key temples that you believe are core to the overall messaging and value that Airbnb provides?

Hiroki: I guess the first part to that question is what we're trying to do right now is to convince people that if you're going to travel, especially with a group, some trips are always going to be better on an Airbnb. There are just some limits to the physical structure of a hotel and the physical location of a hotel that's going to limit your trip.

Matt: Like you have to sleep in bed with your kids. That one is, you know, that's the perfect example. That was an awesome insight.

Hiroki: Yeah. And there's this kind of truth hiding in plain sight about traveling in a hotel versus an Airbnb. But what's core to Airbnb is really about when you travel and if you get a great host, there is a sense of connection that happens. There's also a sense of connection that happens when you use Airbnb because families are much closer together, and friends get to share one space. And so the core of the experience that people have is a connected experience with us, a real human connection. Now, there are other ways that you can connect without staying in a place as well. And so we're excited. To start to lean into some of these other territories and offerings where we can offer human connection.

Matt: Yeah. And I know that you mentioned earlier that different people look at Airbnb and use it for different things. Some people will now use it for ski trips, other people use it for family reunions, etc. I would imagine with all the advancements we've seen with AI and programmatic and the ability to sort of personalize its scale, that that provides a whole new realm of opportunities for you to be contextually relevant for your different consumers that you're going out and messaging. It does.

Hiroki: And what's exciting for us is the ability and the potential to employ AI in our app and a lot of our services. Because when you think about it, everyone's ski trip is going to be different. Everyone's family reunion has different needs, different locations, different sizes, and different things that they want to do. And so when it comes to matching and personalization and being able to design that kind of a trip. We think that there's a lot of potential in AI. It's very exciting.

Matt: Yeah, for sure. And just curious, do you think the old way of advertising, like what used to be in the world of linear television, you would just hear about people's unique selling propositions like 350 horsepower or 20% more absorbent because companies could cram those messages down to the consumer's throats. After all, they couldn't skip over it and they could just write a big check. And now you don't see that anymore because I think brands are taking to earn consumers' attention, especially in a social media context. And they are all shifting the storytelling. So in that regard, would Airbnb ever put out messaging about how easy it is to pay or just things that are functional on the product? Or do you think we're in a world as it relates to you and marketing in general, that's far more just exclusively in the storytelling realm?

Hiroki: I think it's a mix of all those things, to be honest. The way we look at it, and it's a lot about the way that we're designed as a company is we're very functionally organized. And so we have a design group that's focused on design, a product group that's focused on product, advertising on advertising, marketing on marketing. What that allows us to do is we can cross-pollinate and work cross-functionally to think about the customer and how to talk to them when they're at specific points. And I think at the highest level we do, there is still a lot of people out there that don't understand the benefits of traveling on an Airbnb versus a cruise or a hotel or staying in a hotel. And so there's kind of that job to do, and there's a right place and the right story to tell that. And then there are things like easy payment methods, the ability to find something very, very quickly. And those are communicated through the experience of the product. And so I think humans, there's certain things you're okay listening to and hearing, and there's certain things you kind of don't want to hear. And the best way to communicate it is just through experiencing it. And then there's all this stuff in between, I guess. And so when you can think about all those things at once and take a look at it from how is the customer watching TV, listening to the radio, listening to a podcast, picking up the app, opening it, getting an email, talking to someone else, how all of these things work together, I think, is the way that we like to think. And we've purposefully designed our organization to be able to do that as well.

Matt: We'll be right back with the Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors. One interesting thing about Airbnb is, unlike when you rent an apartment or even at a hotel, if you get a hotel room at a Westin, you probably stayed in the Westin before, so you generally know what the rooms look like. People will book an Airbnb and rely on the pictures, but they've never really been there. And for maybe a big choice, like a family reunion or a big birthday, you want to be more sure. And now with the Apple Vision Pro and the ability to be immersed in these

experiences, do you see that being a bigger part of your storytelling to allow you to kind of de-risk it for your customer? Almost like feeling like you're there before you go, so you book with more confidence.

Hiroki: Yeah, I think, you know, Airbnb was one of the first commerce sites to employ really rich full-screen photography of homes. And so we've always been at the forefront of embracing these kinds of technologies to manage the right expectations and let people know what they're going to get. So when it comes to technologies in showcasing homes or in the UI and the app itself, we're always looking towards new kinds of mediums and new technologies to do that. But I think the way we look at technology is it's always going to be in service of the connection. It's never going to replace the connection.

Matt: Right. And it's not the idea. Technology is never really the idea. It's a medium or a method to get whatever your core messaging is across.

Hiroki: Right. And for a brand like ours, which is all about human connection, we're going to actively look at any kind of technology that's going to enable that to make it simpler and easier.

Matt: Yeah. So I know we talked about sort of the personalization. But I would also imagine at the same time. Airbnb has kind of a distinct consumer segmentation in terms of different types of consumers that are, I guess, using your product in different ways. How do you look at that segmentation and how is that evolving, given, I guess, more recent consumer trends in the marketplace?

Hiroki: Yeah, Airbnb at its core is great for group travel. And we always tend to attract the type of travelers that travel in groups. Now, luckily, that's across every generation. When you're younger and you're taking a weekend ski trip with your buddies or your first weekend away with a partner. You're going to want to have all the benefits of what you would get in group travels if you were a family or a group of older friends. And so when it comes to our segmentation, we look at each emerging category of customer and guest. And we want to speak to them, our media, and our tactics appropriately. But the core thing that we're selling across all those segments and all the people is just this idea of traveling as a group, connectedness, and togetherness on a trip.

Matt: Yeah, and that's where memories are formed. Those are where the lifelong memories are formed, right? Those groups travel when you bring family or friends together when people look back at their lives. Those are some of the moments that people will note as transformational in many ways. So I think for Airbnb to play a role in that is special.

Hiroki: Yeah, group travel for us is a really big deal. It's become more and more clear that I think we're up to now 81% of the trips on Airbnb are group trips. And it makes sense given the kind of supply that we have. And we've done a lot this year to design for group travel too. We have a whole new way. We rewrote our messaging app to enable the group not only to travel as a group but to be able to communicate as a group. So the host can talk to them immediately. All guests can talk back to the host. We've done a huge amount of work in making sure that once someone makes a booking, an invitation gets sent out. So everyone understands all the details and can download all that information into the trips tab. And we've also done a lot of work on wish lists to make sure that groups can choose a home together. They can vote, they can take notes, they can share the wishlist. So we're investing heavily in these facilitating groups.

Matt: Right. So it goes beyond just booking the place you're playing a role in deciding what place to book in and people collaborate over that decision and ultimately share and join the experience.

Hiroki: Yeah, and facilitating that collaboration that we know is already happening today.

Matt: Absolutely. So I know that we're at the kind of peak of some big news for Airbnb. And I'd love you to share with us some of the big things that Airbnb has planned for the summer for our audience here at Speed of Culture.

Hiroki: Yeah. So we are getting ready to announce, maybe by the time this airs, we will have already announced icons on Airbnb, which are super, super exciting. When you tell the story of icons, it's kind of interesting because Airbnb started as a place where people can share their world. And it started with tugboats and sometimes submarines and graduated into houses and then houses of all shapes and sizes. But it's always been this platform where people share a little bit of their world with everyone else. Now, while we were growing, there have also been a lot of things that have been listed that have taken off. Like the Barbie house got listed. The Shrek house got listed. The last blockbuster got listed. And those things took off and they kind of captured people's imagination. Because I think people come to Airbnb with this idea of taking a window into a whole nother world. And so we've pushed that far this year with icons. And so we've gotten the 11 most interesting icons and had them list and share either their experience or their world on the platform.

Matt: Can you give us some examples of some of those icons and some of the experiences that you guys are going to be offering?

Hiroki: Yeah, sure. One of the more exciting ones is the house. So we've created the house from scratch and built it and you can stay in it. And the thing will lift 50, 60 feet off the ground.

Matt: No way. Like what the balloons are going to take in the sky?

Hiroki: It's crazy. The whole thing was built. It's got tens of thousands of balloons on it. The thing lifts off the ground. It's out in the plains of New Mexico and it's available for booking. It's unbelievable. We also got together with the Prince's estate and the Prince's family. And we, together with the Prince estate, rebuilt the Purple Rain house. Now, a couple of years before Prince passed, he had purchased the home in Minneapolis where the movie was shot. So we, together with them, recreated the whole Purple Rain house, just like it showed up in the movie. And you could stay in it. And you can not only stay in it, but they also have unreleased recordings that he had made leading up to Purple Rain, as you can listen to as well while you're there. It's pretty unbelievable. We also worked with Ferrari. And in their trophy room, we built out a bedroom so you can stay in the Ferrari Museum amongst all the trophies and all the cars. And then at the same time, you can have one of their F1 drivers taking on a lap around the Ferrari track. And so we've built and we've created and worked with a lot of these icons to create these one-of-a-kind, unbelievable experiences. There's one more. I mean, this one's my favorite is, have you ever been to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris?

Matt: I had a long time ago.

Hiroki: Beautiful museum with the two giant clock towers. On the other side of those clocks are just basically big empty rooms. In one of them, we built an entire apartment designed by the designer who designed the Olympic torch. And so it's built this unbelievably beautiful hotel room out. And so you can Airbnb it. You can stay on the other side of those clock faces in this gorgeous apartment. And you're also going to have a view of the opening ceremonies of the Olympics when they happen in Paris. As that whole thing happens on the Seine. All of these icons are unbelievable.

Matt: This is such a cool idea. And the question I have for you is, this is a great marketing campaign, and the buzz you're going to get from this is going to be unparalleled. But do you also see this as a new business opportunity, where, it's just sort of like an ultra-premium experience that you're going to need to build an offer on the platform moving forward at the same time?

Hiroki: Well, what we want to do is we want to take people on a journey that Airbnb is more than just a stay. And so a lot of these icons aren't just stays, they're actual experiences. In the up house, you'll be able to experience the entire recreation of the house and the house itself will float. When you go to the Musee d'Orsay, you'll be able to see the opening ceremonies. We're working with Doja Cat, who's going to put on a living room concert for you, for her guests. And so these are all unbelievable experiences. And so what we want to do is show people that this is the first step in thinking about Airbnb more than just stays.

Matt: Right, as an experience. But I just wonder, over time, there won't be a filter where you have this ultra-premium search filter where there's just a hundred of these things all over the world that are just extra. It's not a normal stay. Because I just think people want experiences. We're in the experience economy. It's come roaring back. And you see that with things like F1. You see it with things like the Taylor Swift concert tour and all sorts of things where people are willing to over-invest in this. I just think this idea is right on the times in terms of where people want to invest their money and their time. And it, I think, is going to be an amazing campaign just elevating how people view the brand.

Hiroki: Yeah. And what I love about experiences too, is it reinforces who we are. It is about going to Airbnb and staying in a place or having an experience that opens you up to someone else's world. And the great thing about these experiences is there are icons all over the world. We're working with Janhvi Kapoor, who's part of, probably the most well-known Bollywood family in the history of Bollywood in India, to open up her family estate for the first time and invite her fans in to be able to hang out with her and see this estate. And so it plays to this idea, which I love, that Airbnb is really about these connections and these experiences, these real-life connections and experiences that you can have with people. What we offer isn't something that you do on a screen. What we offer is connection and an experience that you can have in real life, which I love.

Matt: Well, very well. Thanks for sharing that with us. I can't wait to see how this unfolds in summer. It's going to be awesome to see. So shifting gears, Hiroki, as we wrap up here, you've had such a cool career and you're working and heading marketing for such an iconic company. As you look back on your career, and it's been such an exciting, impactful career that you've had, what are some of the decisions that you think you made along the way that set you up for where you are today? Whether it was to take a certain job or to lean into a certain skill set, there are a lot of well-intentioned people, who work hard and have skills, but they still don't end

up gaining the success that they feel like matches their potential. So what did you do that did set you up for that?

Hiroki: That's a really good question. I think when I look back at my career, the thing that's been consistent is I've always had this passion just for creativity and for design and design thinking. And so every career decision that I've made has always been in pursuit of working with great creative people, great creative teams, and great creative companies. And I've always just kind of felt and trusted in myself that if you surround yourself with kind people and talented people and you feel like something exciting is going to happen, then you're on the right path. And so I think if there's any conscious decision I made, it was just to make sure that I was around the kind of people that I wanted to be around, around other creative people, and doing something that I felt was first and foremost kind of fulfilling and exciting for myself.

Matt: Yeah. And was there a point you think early in your career when you knew that you did know design, which gave you the conviction that that was something that you were good at? Do you remember a moment or was it just something that slowly happened over time where you became an expert in that area?

Hiroki: That's funny. Ever since I was 12 years old in sixth grade, I wanted to be a graphic designer. I was focused on it and looked at all the design schools and stuff through junior high school and high school and ended up going to a non-art school because that was the only school that I could afford at the time. But I think I always loved design and I always loved creativity. However, I knew that as a graphic designer, my skills could only take me so far. I knew I was pretty good, but not great. And so I think there was a trend throughout my career as a graphic designer into other things. I just realized that, hey, maybe there's something more to creativity and design than actual typography and things on paper. Maybe that can apply, be applied to something else. And so I think that's kind of how my thinking evolved.

Matt: Absolutely. Well, it's been great to see. And obviously, you are applying it to much bigger things, including the campaign that we just talked about. So appreciative. Finally, Hiroki, is there a quote or mantra that comes to mind that you like to live by? This is what we always ask our guests to wrap up on podcasts.

Hiroki: I guess the mantra that I've always tried to live by is just this concept of beginner's mind. This idea of always trying to take a look at something as if you've never seen it before, or you're seeing it for the first time. I think when it comes to, especially for, you know, if you're doing something that you're in a profession where you have to present something to someone else, or there's a customer at the other end that has to try and understand what you're saying. Just this idea of looking at the world and looking at every day and the work you do outside of yourself with a beginner's mind, unencumbered by everything you know. Stripped of all your own biases and try to see it as fresh and cleanly as possible. That's always kind of helped me in all the projects that I've worked on.

Matt: Yeah, keeps the curiosity too, right? A beginner's mind is you're curious and you're entering everything with kind of like this open-mindedness and imagination.

Hiroki: Yeah, and it's like the simplest concept, but it's the hardest thing in the world to do. But I think that's been the one thing that's probably stuck with me.

Matt: Awesome. Well, listen, thank you so much, Hiroki, for joining. I'm a huge fan of you and the Airbnb brand, and I'm excited to see you roll out this next creative campaign and everything else that comes afterward. I appreciate the time, and I can't wait for our listeners to hear about your journey.

Hiroki: Thanks, Matt. Thanks for having me.

Matt: Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and the Adweek Team, thanks again to Hiroki Asai, the Global Head of Marketing at Airbnb, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review The Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Until next time, peace through and 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.