

Cat van der Werff Transcript

Cat: I talked at the start about our mission to empower the world to design and do the most good we can. And we have a bit of a two-step plan there. So the first step is to become one of the world's most valuable companies. And then the second step is to shift that value and do good for the planet. And so I think as we build the brand over the next five years, what's important to me is that it's all about human inspiring and empowering.

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. Today, we're thrilled to be joined by Cat van der Werff, the Executive Creative Director at Canva. Cat spent the last six years working hard to turn Canva from an unknown online startup to an absolute powerhouse in the creative design space. Cat, it's so great to see you. I'm such a big fan of Canva, and I can't wait to dive into that.

Cat: You too, Matt. So excited to chat.

Matt: Great. So why don't we start by learning a little about your background? What led you to Canva and what were you working on before joining?

Cat: Yeah, sure. So I was born and raised in New Zealand, which you're going to pick up from my accent as we go along. But I started right back at university thinking I'd be an artist. I went to art school. And while I was there, I kind of realized that while I loved conceptual thinking and all that kind of thing, what I loved the most was solving real-world problems. So I switched degrees and that led me to a career in brand design. So I worked building some global brands and working at different branding agencies, which took me from New Zealand to Paris and then back here to Sydney, where I am today. And then in 2017, I had my son Fern. And so I took a full year off at that point. And I think, you know, as you do when you become a new parent, I started to think about how can I use my creativity for good and what kind of world I want to bring my child up in. And so while I was kind of pondering these things, that's when Canva called. And so I went in for an interview. When I discovered their mission to empower the world to design and then also to do the most good as they can along the way, I was sold. And so I started as Canva's very first brand designer. And I've been at Canva for six years now. And now the team is a hundred creatives across brands and campaigns and performance and production as well. So it's a mighty team and it's been quite a journey to get here.

Matt: So let's talk about that journey. So when you joined Canva six years ago, they were in a much earlier stage startup and now they're one of the largest private startups in the world and have been quite transformational in the space that you play in. Talk to us about what Canva was like when you first joined, what it was like working in the earlier days there, and what it's been like to have a front-row seat to the rapid transformation of the company.

Cat: Yeah, so I think, as I said, I started as the very first brand designer. At that point, we didn't have a creative team or even a marketing department. And so when I asked for the brand guidelines, I was given a logo. And obviously, we know that a brand is so much more than a

logo. But I think what Canva did have was this incredible ethos. And so the founders had done such an amazing job of really building in and instilling the mission and the values of the company from the start. And so I think for my first six months, I just kind of like, decided to kind of unlearn my understanding of branding from the working agency side. Because I'd never been in-house and I'd never been at this company the community just loved the product. And the internal culture was incredible. And so it had all these wonderful values that often from the outside, when you're trying to brand a company, it can sometimes feel like you're putting a plaster on top because you can't get inside and fix things. So it had all this amazing stuff already. So I was kind of like, what is the role of a brand in this space?

Matt - 00:04:21:

And when you look at the role of a brand designer, there's the brand of Canva, and there's also the design of all the templates that are within Canva. So are you working on how Canva is branded to the community of users, or are you working on picking the different design aesthetics and templates that live within the product itself?

Cat: How it's branded to the users. So like how we market the brand and bring the values to life through our brand kind of advertising and all of that kind of stuff.

Matt: Yeah, because the platform itself is robust in terms of you having a, I guess, an affiliate network of designers where a user can come into Canva and choose from a variety of designers when they're making their designs.

Cat: Yeah, exactly. So we have a whole other amazing team that all work on the actual content libraries within Canva. Now we have a full creator marketplace of people all over the world who can actually create templates and their local kind of look and feel and earn money through that marketplace as well.

Matt: Which is amazing. So what is it about the positioning and the product of Canva that you think has led to such a smashing success all around the world?

Cat: I guess going back to those early days, one of the first things I did was get into a room with our founders. And we spent about the first 12 weeks going, okay, so at the moment we only have a logo. But what do we want the brand to be? And what is your vision for the brand as we start to figure out what it looks like and how it shows up in the world? So at that point, we kind of got into a room and we did some workshops. And we had Mel and Cliff and Cam and Zach, who's our CMO now. And the first thing we did was kind of like say, what are the things over the past five years that have felt true to the Canvas brand? And so we pulled up all these different artifacts. Like Mel pulled up a picture of a man in an orphanage surrounded by all these kids. And he was holding a camera design on his iPad, looking proud. And Zach pulled up our very first press release and talked about how simple and clear the messaging is. And so through those artifacts, what we got two were the core brand tenants that we have today. And so those are human and inspiring and empowering. And those are the things that have really kind of like led all of the creative that we do.

Matt: Yeah. And in terms of the product itself essentially what Canva does is it democratizes design. I almost look at it like when Squarespace first came out, it democratized the ability to

build a website. But Canva does that in a much bigger way in terms of democratizing and designing anything. And I think that's impactful, and now you're starting to see that across many different industries where these sort of no-code tools allow people to do things that in the past they would have had to hire an agency for. It feels to me that over time, Canva has enabled the user to do more and more on their own than they would normally outsource. Is that sort of intentional? And how has that kind of journey gone from when you first started with some very basic templates and applications to where you are today?

Cat: Yeah, so I think that design journey, like you say, had to be very, very simple from the start. So the very genesis of Canva was Mel was teaching design in university and she looked and kind of just realized that, man, the design process is so complex and so convoluted. And if you're a student, yeah, and expensive. And so if you want to design a website, you have to go to one program and learn how to use it and pay for it. And it takes a very long time. And to do that, if you want to design a brochure, there's a whole different program you have to go to if you want to design a video. And so what she kind of saw was how can we bring all these different design types, no matter what you want to design, into one very simple design journey on one single page. And so that's how Canva's been built from the start. And so that very simple design journey doesn't change no matter what you want to design. So at the core, you have that simplicity and then you build on top with whatever design. Type it is, whether it is a website a video, or a brochure.

Matt: And it also feels to me that platforms like Canva, because there's Photoshop, like Adobe has a great suite of tools, but they're largely for professionals. They're for people who have that technical skill set and know how to use it. Where Canva, you don't need any technical skills. You just have to have an eye in terms of knowing what you want to build, and then you can easily build it. So do you think design is going to head more in this direction? I'm sure there are a lot of designers out there who think Canva is not good for them because they're artists and they feel like it's taking what they build and their craft and almost templating it. But I think most people look at it as this is an incredible resource. How do you feel about, I guess, that overall element?

Cat: So I think that the whole mission of empowering the world to design is really important because every single person in the world needs to use design or visual communication at some point in their lives to achieve a goal. And so like if you're applying for a job and you need to create a resume, or if you're trying to get your small business off the ground, all of those things, people shouldn't be held back from being able to achieve what they need to achieve because they can't use the tools. And so that's why that simplicity is so, so important in empowering everyone. And I think when you look at other programs like Photoshop, we're not saying that Canva is the only tool that everyone should ever use. Personally, coming from a brand design background, what I realized when I came to Canva was that I kind of had this light bulb moment where in the past, building brands, I crafted them in whatever programs I liked. And then the biggest pain point for me was that point, we handed over to a large organization. And so often, you know, you'd lovingly craft this brand and then hand it over and you would kind of see it suffer entropy once it was out of your hands if an organization didn't have all the resources or an in-house creative team to upkeep it. And so what I realized with Canva is like, wow, we can actually build Canva's brand and as designers craft wherever we need to craft and then bring all those assets into Canva, build out our brand templates there. And then that kind of like, hands over the brand to our organization of 4,000 people in a way that they can all use it, whether they're designers or not.

Matt: Absolutely. And as someone responsible for the Canva brand to your user base, Who is your user base? Like who are you targeting in terms of your ideal customer profile?

Cat: So we have spent the last decade focused on individual users. The first thing we wanted to do was start with that really valuable free product so that we could empower as many people as possible. And so that's been a really important part of our growth to date.

Matt: It was like a freemium model, right? Where you have to use certain functionality to get them on board and then they could unlock more by paying.

Cat: Exactly. And so I think, you know, today we have a pretty amazing community of small businesses, individual users. We've got a lot of students and teachers as well as non-profits, and they can use our subscription model for free. But I guess we're at a big turning point actually for the company where for the next 10 years, we're wanting to focus on actually empowering enterprises too. Because when we look at that mission of empowering the world to design, we mean everyone. And so every role in every organization as well. So that's kind of the next step for us starting to build our audience into the enterprise space. We have 90% of Fortune 500s use Canva in some way in their organizations already. And that's generally through bottoms-up adoption where people use it for personal use and then bring it into the workplace.

Matt: We'll be right back with the speed of culture after a few words from our sponsors. And I would imagine one thing that makes it palatable to the enterprise is things that your company does around brand templates, where the key designers can set, this is the font, this is the logo, these are the color schemes that match with our brand. So when they're democratizing design with an organization, they can make sure that it's consistent. That's probably one thing that creative people at large organizations worry about if they let everyone use a tool like Canva. Everything's going to look disparate and different. And I think that's one of the brilliant parts of your enterprise approach.

Cat: Definitely. There's kind of the brand kit and the brand hub. And so the team can build on-brand templates. You can even lock off if you don't want anyone moving the logo from a specific corner, you can lock it off so people can't move it. You can also switch off other colors and content libraries if you only want people using like only your brand is it. So there's a lot of level of control and how you can kind of help the brand stay consistent across large organizations.

Matt: Absolutely. One place where Canva's made a lot of progress as of late is in the area of AI, which is a huge topic for brands and agencies alike right now. It makes so much sense for Canva based upon the text-to-image functionality that AI has widely available right now, as well as text-to-video. How important is AI to Canva's future story product and overall roadmap? Looking ahead.

Cat: Yeah, we're trying to make sure that AI is integrated into Canva so that everything you do, AI is there too, you know, when we talk about large organizations, we want to help empower teams to do so much more. And so with AI, that helps to supercharge people's workflows. Last year, we launched Magic Studio, and that's like a whole collection of AI-powered tools that are integrated into Canva. So you can do things like magic design if you need to. You can describe any design you want. So if you want an onboarding plan for Valerie, you can pop that in and it'll

create an onboarding plan for Valerie in like a couple of seconds. So, you know, you can kind of get from the thing that you need to a template for what you need very, very quickly. So it helps with workflows.

Matt: And then you can start to customize it from there.

Cat: Exactly. Yeah.

Matt: That's very cool. And then when it comes to things like writing copy, because obviously there's the design and then there's the copy. And that's kind of like the two core sides of any asset that you're going to create. Is Canva working within the AI sphere to also enable easier copywriting as well?

Cat: Yeah. So we have our docs product, Canva Docs, and within that, you have Magic Write. And so Magic Write will help you ideate on headlines summarize a piece of text or even apply your brand voice. If you've got your brand voice within your enterprise account, it'll flow that through any piece of copy, which is great.

Matt: So, I mean, where do you see us all going in terms of the future of the design agency or the ad agency? I mean, do you see a world where individuals are going to be doing it on their own and companies are going to have to rely less on professional services? Over time, do you still see a role for professional services in certain applications?

Cat: I do. I think that while AI is this amazing tool, it's still a tool. And at the end of the day, it's there to kind of enhance human creativity. And so still having experts in the field and agencies is incredibly important to pushing humanity and creativity forward.

Matt: Yeah. I guess the question is, With these tools now at the disposal of people and these templates getting more and more relevant to their needs, because what's Canva so incredible at is the library of templates and applications are so broad that there are not many things you could think of that you'd want to create that Canva can't get you three quarters or even 90% of the way there instantly. And then it's just all about the customization, et cetera. And AI is really in its earliest iteration now. So your ability to command AI with your magic studio tool to make something even better and better is going to continually just move up in terms of level of quality. So the question is, where does that leave agencies? I think ad agencies, I used to run an ad agency, they're going to have to work more and more hard. And I said the bar is much higher for talent to compete against these tools that individuals have at their disposal now, which I guess is sort of the natural progression of anything when there are technological innovations like Canva in the marketplace.

Cat: Yeah, I think that when you look at agencies, though, one of the big things that we're seeing is the rise of visuals and just how many more assets you have to roll out across any campaign you do. And so once it was like just a TV spot with some cut downs, and now it's like thousands of assets across all these different platforms. And so actually, when you look at the agency, what they get from AI is something that can roll out all the different variations of that kind of outputs they need.

Matt: Yeah, there's a lot of tactical work with that.

Cat: Yeah, I would never take over the actual ideation in the core idea, but just helping to scale campaigns is important.

Matt: Yeah, bring it to life. So when you look at your role, I think you mentioned you said there are 100 people on your team now.

Cat: Yeah.

Matt: So how do you go about finding talent? What are you looking for in building out your team? And what do those roles entail in terms of building? Because that's a large number. Frankly, even a bit surprised by that, even given the size of Canva. Like what do all those people do? And what are you looking for, in people that join your team?

Cat: Yeah, so the team is structured in those sort of four different parts. So our brand studio team works on things like our actual brand development, as well as helping all of our other in-house departments build templates for whatever goals that they have. But they also work on our Canva Create events and the really big branded experiences. And then we have our campaigns creative team who are working on all of our global campaigns. We've got one that's just launched recently. And so that rolled out across five different markets. So they're kind of working on that stuff. And then our performance marketing team is doing performance creative in about 40 different countries now. And then we've got a production engine that runs all that. So it sounds like a lot of people, but there's a lot of work as well.

Matt: You break it down and it opens.

Cat: Yeah. But I guess in terms of things that we look for when people join the team, I think something really important about building in-house creative agents brought from the start was that Canva's brand is so inherent to DNA. And so what we've been able to do by building an agency in-house is that you kind of get to know the brand very inherently and very intuitively. And with every single project we do, we get to better the brand because we've learned from the past ones. And so as we bring on new people into the team, what we're doing is like really elevating the brand with every single new hire. So, bringing on, whether it's like last year, we were focused on motion because we need to use motion to bring the product to life. So we built out our motion powerhouse team and hired the best possible motion people in that space. So it's really about like elevating the craft and the expertise as we go and build the team.

Matt: Absolutely. And where do you hope to see the business overall, I guess, five years from now, because the growth has been tremendous? I mean, what's next for Canva in terms of the next phase of growth and evolution?

Cat: Yeah, I think we've talked to empowering enterprises. That's a huge focus for the business as a whole. Being able to get to that point of Canva is valued as a professional tool wall to wall in the workplace. And I think from my side, from a branding point of view, what I would love is I talked at the start about our mission to empower the world to design and do the best we can. And we have a bit of a two-step plan there. So the first step is to become one of the world's most valuable companies. And then the second step is to shift that value and do good for the planet. And so I think as we build the brand over the next five years, what's important to me is that it's all about human inspiring and empowering. But everything that we do should ladder up to, oh, it makes total sense that Canva has these values and therefore they're doing these acts

in the world to kind of help the planet as well. And so really building our values, you know, a bit like Patagonia, I guess, you know, Patagonia for their amazing products, but you also know what they do for the environment as well.

Matt: For sure. They have a higher calling. And I could see as the brand gets larger and has a bigger influence globally, that's very important for the company to stand for something. And also I would imagine it's very empowering to your growing employee base as well.

Cat: Yeah.

Matt: Great. So to wrap up here, Cat, I mean, you are in a very cool role and at an amazing company. When you look back at your career and I guess the decisions you've made, what are some of the things that you think you've done right? Kind of put you in the position that you are today. Because you wouldn't have gotten here if you hadn't made some really smart decisions in a room here and hadn't focused on some key areas. So I'd love to know what those are for some of our listeners.

Cat: Yeah, I think I guess one of the biggest attitudes I've taken to my career is just one of continual learning, actually, and like just this curiosity to figure out what's next. And so taking some big leaps and moving from a job where I'm comfortable to one where I'm not. And that happened for me, I think, coming to Canva. I have just in the six years I've been here, certainly did not know what I know now when I started. And so there's been a lot of times where I'm like, oh, my gosh, I do not know how to do this thing. I've got to figure it out. And so the level of growth we go through at Canva, you just have to be learning all the way. So that's kind of been important to me.

Matt: We normally end our podcast by asking our guests if there's a mantra or saying that they kind of like to frame their careers by. Has anything come to mind for you?

Cat: Yeah, so I have a Leonard Cohen, Lyric because I'm a bit of a perfectionist at heart and I try to like break out of my perfectionism. So this is it. It's there's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

Matt: Very cool. So true. And I think so many people in business strive for perfection. And when they do that, it becomes the enemy of progress. So I think you have to embrace the words and business and life to keep moving. So I love that. I am so appreciative of you taking your time today and talk us through your amazing journey at Canva and wishing you and Canva nothing but success moving forward. So thanks so much for joining today.

Cat: Thank you, Matt. So good to chat.

Matt: Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and the Adweek team, thanks again to Cat van der Werff, Executive Creative Director at Canva 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

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