

# GROWTH HUNTERS

## PODCAST: Episode 2. Sasha Savic, CEO, MediaCom US

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SASHA SAVIC, CEO, MEDIACOM US 04 JUN 2019

In the second episode of Growth Hunters, MediaCom's US CEO talks to Sunday Times journalist Mark Edwards about how to grow brands, how to grow a media agency, and remembering that you're a brand too. Scroll down to listen or read the highlights of what he said...

Mark Edwards: What's one thing that you know you know about growing brands?

Sasha Savic: There are many things that help brands reframe themselves and grow. But from my experience where I have seen the quickest and most dramatic shift from non-performing to performing brands is was always connected to the culture changing in a



company.

I have worked on traditional big brands – Coca-Cola, Procter and Gamble, Mastercard – and now the newer digital companies; but I prefer to split them into companies that are trying to win and companies that are trying not to lose. And there's a big difference.

I believe I have helped some companies along the way move from being companies that were trying not to lose into becoming companies that were trying to win. That means making quicker changes in your marketing beliefs and mix and execution; being ready to fail but being ready to learn from failure, and recruiting and seeking different mindsets and different talents.

But changing culture and establishing a culture that expects the unexpected, a culture where good is not good enough – that's just the starting point. After that, you need to have a strategy to deliver.

The companies that grow and the leaders that lead these companies – they're celebrated for their strategic brilliance, but actually, they should be celebrated even more for their ability to have disciplined delivery of their strategic brilliance. You have to have both.

One thing that differentiates growing brands and companies – they're just confident in their business model. They go with the idea that they will win. Others go with the idea let's try to improve 3-5% versus what we did last year

**ME:** It's not so much a target as a ceiling...

**SS:** Correct. And if you've set yourself a ceiling on your ambition that usually doesn't end well.

**ME:** And we know that your ideas on growing companies are not just theory. Since you took over as CEO of MediaCom in the US, it has grown significantly. I'm sure that was a complex process, but can you pick out a few key things that made a difference?



SS: Advertising agencies, media agencies, digital agencies – we all go through these cycles of ups and downs, and when I came to MediaCom, the office had lost a couple of big accounts, and one of the key challenges for me was to make people believe that they can win. Step number one was making them believe they could win one or two accounts. From there you move to a point where – last year we pitched 19 and we won 16, a rate of conversion that's never been seen. So, we go into the room with an attitude of "no one can beat us".

I joke that we won all those accounts by not answering the brief. It's not really that we didn't answer the brief, it's that we had a very strong opinion on what are the real challenges that clients are facing and the real solutions.

And sometimes you just know – after the first five minutes of the first chemistry session, you know this marketing team are perfect for us to work with, and other times after three minutes you're... oh my God, what am I even doing here?

So, the next thing was let's sit and really listen to the clients. Let's not try to sell what we have on our menu. Let's really listen to what their challenges are. So, we installed some simple things, especially in new business; for example, we will never repeat one slide ever!

**ME:** From one presentation to another? No copying and pasting?

SS: That's not allowed. We're serious about our creativity in media. Media agencies for years and years and years went to their clients and said, "you're not spending enough" and "you're being outspent by your competition". If there is one thing I know that definitely doesn't grow brands it is just mindlessly spending more than anyone else. Especially in today's world where you have such a crazy choice of channels – and you need to put together the right system, the right mix of channels.

It doesn't matter how much money you have, it's never enough. So, thinking creatively and differentiating brands from their competitors and from everyone else through very simple, crazy ideas.



We try to have no more than 25 or 30 slides per hour. Which is probably three times less than usual.

ME: 25 slides an hour – that will be a shocking figure to some in this industry. There's often a tendency to try to cram in as much information as possible. 25 slides – that's to build in time to listen?

SS: Personally, when I present to clients I tend to have 10 slides an hour. And there is a very simple reason why. When we talk to clients who pay our salaries we need to be very serious about what we tell them. And I think clients are looking for simplicity and clarity – not just data, one fact another fact, most of which they already know.

I would rather present conclusions and then discuss them with the clients – and leave enough time to do that. In new business, we've been winning pitches where we ended our presentations 45 minutes before the given time.

The traditional long-winded media presentation where the media planner who was working till midnight last night, therefore, has the opportunity – the *right* – to present 120 slides... no, that doesn't work anymore.

If someone gives you two hours, it doesn't mean you have to talk for two hours. That's the *maximum*.

ME: Over your career, what have you changed your mind about?

SS: Everything! I changed my mind about my ability to dismiss things. In this industry, 25 years ago we used newspapers for this category and TV for that category, and then the Internet arrived and we all said TV and outdoor suck and everything is digital. But if you focus your mind on the given challenge that the brand needs to overcome in order to grow, and if you look for the specifics of the audience, you shouldn't be creating any sandboxes in your mind. Always thinking about the fashionable thing limits true creativity.



We pitched for and won Signet, the biggest jewellery business in the US – and most of their revenue comes from wedding rings. The American man is trying to find the most impressive and unusual place where he can ask the question “will you marry me?” and then the story of that moment will be told to their friends.

We started with that insight – and we went to a media pitch with an idea that was really packaging. We went to the pitch with a mock-up of the wedding ring box, which – when you opened it – inside was a camera that was connected by Bluetooth to your phone. As you open the box you initiate the camera and you can broadcast that moment when you ask the question via Facebook to your family and friends.

Now if someone went to media people and told them this could work better than any data and analytics and all the stuff we spend 99% of our time talking about they would say “packaging? What do you mean?” But as long as you open your mind, and as long as you have fun combining ideas, you can come up with unexpected ideas that the client loves. So, you’re really getting to the heart...

Yeah, one thing that has never changed in all these years is that if you start with a human consumer insight and create your solution based on that insight, then you’re doing something right.

ME: Yes, we’ve got used to talking about how much consumer behaviour has changed, but human beings, human nature – that stays the same. We all understand other humans. But it’s easy to lose that simplicity.

SS: I think people lose that simplicity because they get lazy. The hardest thing is thinking up new big ideas.

ME: What advice would you give to people just starting out in their careers in this industry?

I love it when I talk to people just starting out. Every month we have 30, 40 people starting, and I meet with them all. And I have been a frequent speaker at Cannes Young Lions.



I tell them this. It may sound cheesy, but I still go to the office every morning with this secret idea that I might have a chance to do something that can change the world – change how people do things, use products, introduce a product or service that can make people's lives better. If you have the chance to do that a few times during your career, it's worth it.

I think also we need to do a better job explaining to people working in agencies what is their role in people's lives – consumers' lives and the clients' lives.

In this constantly changing world – in which a CMO in the US office has a shelf-life of 16 months – when we go to a new business presentation, I ask our people “with our presentation, are we giving them hope or not?” Because if you know that if your brand is not growing quickly, you will be updating your CV! Sometimes it's also about understanding hope and the human side of the story.

I think curiosity and willingness to learn is super-important. Isn't it funny that people in this industry sometimes have a problem reinventing themselves? We spend all our lives building our clients' brands, and we forget that every single one of us is a brand – and that if our brand is not updated, upgraded and reinvented in this world of change it can become irrelevant quickly.

So, I say to people – make sure that you have both short-term and long-term brands – think about your personal growth.

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