

A close-up portrait of Deirdre McGlashan, a woman with dark hair, smiling and wearing a red top. The image is partially obscured by text on the left side.

GROWTH HUNTERS PODCAST: Episode 3. Deirdre McGlashan, Chief Digital Officer, MediaCom

OPINION

DEIRDRE MCGLASHAN, CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICER, MEDIACOM 24 JUL 2019

In the third episode of Growth Hunters, MediaCom's Chief Digital Officer talks to Sunday Times journalist Mark Edwards about the role of digital, and the difference between growing sales and growing brands.

Mark Edwards: Your job is Chief Digital Officer. And for most people, that would just be a job title. But for you, it's also a challenge. Because when you arrived at MediaCom, you said memorably and very quotably, that your job was to eliminate your job title. So, two-part question: what did you mean? And how's it going?

Deirdre McGlashan: What I meant by that is: everything is digital. And so, by using that as a title, you make it seem like there is this digital area, and everything else is not digital, when by now literally everything in every channel has been digitised to some extent. So, it's kind

of the responsibility of everybody, I believe, to understand digital because it is within our practice.

ME: It's very hard to think of *anything* that isn't digital now. So, this podcast is about growing brands. What's the one thing that you *know* you know, about growing brands?

DM: I think the one thing I *know* I know about growing brands is that there has to be a brand! And the brand has to stand for something. So, growing sales does not equate to growing a brand. When you see a lot of companies, particularly D2C companies that are explosive in terms of sales growth, it does not necessarily mean that they have a strong brand. Sales growth is a great goal. But if you focus only on that, and you don't grow the brand, it is a short-term proposition. Not a long-term sustainable growth plan.

ME: And the problems arise, presumably, when competitors come into the market, and you haven't got a brand, so you can't differentiate?

DM: Exactly. Or if you take a look at, you know, the slipper company Mahabis, almost anybody who's ever had Facebook has been, let's say, targeted – or blanketed – with Mahabis ads. They realised explosive growth, their numbers were incredible. But they went into administration last December. So, I think that's a really interesting case of a D2C brand that looked like it was on a very hockey stick trajectory. I don't really believe that they really grew their brand. I don't think people really knew what they stood for, per se. Except for being blanketed by their ads on the internet.

ME: Okay, so a phrase I hear a lot around MediaCom is 'optimising yourself into a suboptimal position'. Is this what's going on there: they're so intent on the targeting side of things that they forget to actually create the brand?

DM: It's a danger. Yes.

ME: So how do we advise companies? How do we work with companies to make sure they don't do that?

DM: I think when we talk to companies a lot of the language that we use – as we think about the communications system – has to incorporate that brand building activity as well as that transactional activity. And I think as there are more opportunities to transact in digital media, the two worlds come closer and closer together. So, I think our idea of Brand Response is more powerful now than it's ever been before. Because we need to build brands, but we also have this amazing response mechanism that we really should be taking advantage of as well.

ME: So, just as you have to eliminate your job title, because everything's digital, equally, all the people who might have begun working in the 'digital' world need to also embrace the brand side of stuff. We need to have people who can think about both sides or we going to get a bit lost.

DM: Digital is not purely performance. But I do believe that a lot of people who work in a digital specialism may have come up through a technology background, or something more along the sciences route. And so, one of the things that would be very beneficial for them to understand more of is marketing, you know – just traditional marketing, the marketing funnel, etc, etc – because it might not be part of their previous experience.

ME: What's the thing out there that people believe about growing brands that you think maybe isn't true?

DM: I believe that some people think that you either do brand activity *or* you do performance activity. And to grow your brand, it has to only be brand activity, and I think more and more consumers expect those worlds to converge.

ME: So, we need people that can think across and work across both so that we make sure that, wherever relevant, we're doing a bit of both.

DM: Absolutely. But it starts with the objective setting. And to be very, very clear on what the objective for each campaign is. And what's the primary objective, what's the secondary objective? Because otherwise if every objective for every campaign is to drive sales and

build brand, how do you chase that down? So, it has to be more thoughtful: this campaign's *primary* objective is to increase, you know, brand love by X amount; but off the back of that we expect to measure it in this way, and we expect to see X amount of transactions out of it. So, I think the definition of the objectives becomes even more important.

ME: Managing the huge number of data points (and the amount of data flooding out) is a big issue these days. How do you make a call on exactly what we focus on – what's important, what's not important?

DM: Once again, it starts with setting the objective and setting out a measurement plan. If you know what it is you're trying to achieve and how you're going to measure it, you can filter out the noise – because otherwise, if you're just gathering all of those data points, it's very easy for data to lead you astray. Because data can prove almost anything! So, you always have to figure out what's your objective? And what am I measuring in order to prove that I've reached that objective? Or that I haven't?

ME: And is that a big part of your conversations with clients: what's the data that matters? What's the data that's meaningful?

DM: Absolutely, it's a big part of all of our jobs when we're talking to clients about their data and analytics. It's fine to gather it all together, but you need to understand what it is you're trying to learn from it. You can't just take it as a direct translation of 'Oh, people did this. So, therefore, that must be the thing to do'. People did this, but *why* did they do it? Which is why I think as we move digital data through our system, we're looking at a lot of attribution modelling within business science. So not quite as long and laborious as an econometric model, but with multiple touchpoints so that we can understand attribution better.

ME: So, what's the question that clients ask you most?

DM: Clients ask us a lot about commerce and eCommerce. They're really trying to wrap their heads around that and how they can win in that world. They look at Amazon, they look at the D2C brands. So, what we try to talk to clients about is how can we bring brand and

commerce together. As I said, the two need to be working hand in hand.

ME: It sounds like the one thing that hasn't changed in all this is you've got to get the brief right?

DM: It all starts with the brief. Because then the consumer journey starts to fall into place, the system starts to fall into place, and therefore the asset inventory starts to fall into place as well.

ME: Can we still think in terms of 'a consumer journey'? I mean, obviously, there are millions of consumer journeys, there always were. But we used to simplify and map out the consumer journey. Do we still do that?

DM: If we think about systems planning – I believe that our system basically is the consumer journey, because we look at the interconnectedness of the different pieces of exposure, and what has impact on another. So, therefore, we do some good attribution to what a consumer would be more likely to do, what might be their next step. And I think that's basically our media consumer journey. It's not exactly a traditional journey like, if we were doing website development, it's not an information architecture or consumer journey in that context, but I think it is traversing through your brand activity.

ME: When do clever algorithms become AI? What's the tipping point?

DM: Machine learning is the specific arm of artificial intelligence that we always mean.

Sometimes it is very hard to tell what machine learning is versus just a very smart algorithm. By definition, machine learning can learn from itself and will continue to evolve, whereas a good algo is just trained to process data in a certain way.

To be perfectly honest, sometimes it's very hard to tell the difference between a good algorithm or AI. I believe that if, if the product does what you want it to do, and you're not being charged a premium for AI, do you really care, you know? So, we shouldn't be too

fussed as to how real it is, we should really only be thinking about 'does it deliver what I want it to do?'

As we get into AI and machine learning, I think the question that we need to continue to ask the vendors is what data points is it being trained on? Just in the same way that if we were to buy a panel study or something, we would want to understand the makeup of the respondents, so we know what the ingredients are. Also, I think that as we are rushing towards this, there's always the potential risk for unconscious bias, based on the data that it's being trained on.

ME: From your vantage point, what's next? What's the next big thing coming along? What are you excited about?

DM: I am really excited about our BLINK proposition. I'm really excited about using technology to help our clients answer their marketing problems in the broadest sense of marketing. And so that's kind of every touchpoint, through to the packaging, and also post-consumption. So, being able to help our clients find solutions that will be able to help them service the consumer better, have a better brand experience fuelled by technology.

For example, with Mars, we've done the Launchpad programme. Some of the things we're looking at include drone delivery of ice cream in a given market. Or they have this thing called the 'perfect shop'; the retail shop has to look a certain way, and so they have inspectors that go into retail stores to type up what's different to send it to the store manager.

We were able to help them find a piece of kit that specialises in retail and now those inspectors simply have to hold the tablet up, take a picture and the software does that differential for them. So, it just helps them provide a better experience for the consumer, enabled by technology. And that's what's really exciting to me.

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