

Linda Lee Transcript

Linda: You have to start with knowing who you are, believing in yourself, having confidence in yourself, but understand that if there's a gap of who you know yourself to be and how others see you, that's the area for Insight.

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.

Matt: Today we're going to be speaking with Linda Lee, chief Marketing Officer of meals and beverages at the Campbell Soup Company. She has 20 years of diverse experience in competitive industries and a record of achievement and leading large scale operations for blue chip companies to unprecedented growth. Linda, so great to see you. Thanks so much for joining today.

Linda: Thanks so much. Great to be here.

Matt: Absolutely. I was fascinated in reading your background because you started your career as an engineer and not many people who end up as CMO start it as an engineer. Talk to me about that journey of why you started in that area and how you sort of slowly meandered your way into the world of marketing.

Linda: I did everything not as books would tell you to do or as mentors would guide you to do, which is to have a destination, know where you're going, how you get there. It was totally serendipitous. I loved chemistry and math and sciences, so I studied chemical engineering. And just by chance, P&G did their intern recruiting and got into that program and started in product development on Pringles. And that was really the first, I guess, introduction to the world of brands. And I found myself really curious about, wait, I can't get to the development part until you explain to me what the brand strategy is, who our consumer is, the positioning.

Matt: Before you can put your chemistry knowledge into play, you have to understand the story in the background of what you were building for.

Linda: Exactly.

Matt: Which I think is an interesting lesson because a lot of people today just want to jump in and build a brand, but without really or build a product, but without a story behind it. You really kind of are rudderless in some ways.

Linda: And I think that is the scientific approach of really understanding the problem you're solving for understanding the boundaries of that so that you can then find an answer to it.

Matt: Absolutely. And so many of our guests who are CMOS on The Speed of Culture podcast started their career off at P&G. And I often asked, what is it about P&G that makes it such a breeding ground for future talent? And what were some of the core takeaways you remember from your time there that really have had staying power?

Linda: So I would say we often say people are the greatest asset right. That's something that's often said in my experience there and I was in recruiting was that they really knew who they were and who would be successful at PNG. And so the rigor that's placed in the recruiting side, the screening side, I think that's a difference that I haven't seen.

Matt: The standards they set for the talent they bring in.

Linda: Yeah. They just know who they are and what they're looking for and therefore who is going to be successful long term there in both success and performance, but also successful in satisfaction. You can have a lot of third people, but if it's not a good culture fit, you're not going to be able to retain them. So I think the algorithm of how to identify talent from the beginning to come into that pipeline, honestly I haven't seen anywhere else now, this has been a long time ago. That was in the mid 90s. Things could have changed since I was there, but that was very unique. And everyone knows the training. It is definitely a build from within the organization. So just a tremendous place to begin to really learn what the gold standard looks like. But then some people choose to spread their wings outside of PNG.

Matt: Of course many do. Many people we spoke to started at PNG and ended up having a prolific career, as you have in the CPG or technology or other spaces. After you were at PNG for seven years, you went to the General Mills and you were in the Insights function. And I love that because we were just talking before the podcast started, that the tried and true path for many to become a CMO is as a brand manager is in the advertising function. And you not only spent four years at General Mills in the Insights function, but then many more years afterwards at Mondelez, two more iconic CPG companies talk to us about the leap from being on the product side to an Insights manager and an Insights director eventually, and why that was so important to you in your journey.

Linda: It was honestly, again, not planned. I knew I was interested in the commercial side, in the brand management path, but for some reason I couldn't fully commit to that. Whether it was to go back to business school. Interesting. Yeah. And I got a call and took the call, it was General Mills for something that wasn't product development. So I decided to go over, interview, and meet folks. And I remember leaving that day of interviewing feeling like, I know it doesn't make sense, I don't even fully know what Consumer Insights is, but I need to just go. And it was really the people who I met and went there and quickly learned the other aspects of Consumer Insights that I wasn't familiar with. I was familiar with the products research side, but not the advertising strategy, communications, all of those aspects I learned really from great, great mentors and managers.

Matt: And how formative do you think that was for the market that you are today? Because obviously when you're in the Insights function, you're thinking about the consumer, you're asking the why and really digging deep. What were some of those learnings and how did that kind of change and evolve your thinking as a professional through those years?

Linda: I think, just as I would say, Procter, it's known for the brand building, for the brand management. General Mills is really known for at that time, definitely known for its consumer insights function. So I felt like I was learning amongst the best and back to that gold standard. Because now I was no longer in products research and R and D, but rather in consumer insights, the brand building. Whether it was Pillsbury, Betty Crocker, cheerios, that was my lesson about the rigor that goes into developing the campaigns, the innovations, putting the consumer at that center, but really utilizing the right methodologies to have confidence and validation in the work.

Matt: Absolutely. That's everything. And you obviously go on and then spend a decade at Mondelez as well in the Insights function. A company that I know also works very hard at understanding the consumer, keeping their finger on the pulse of where things are going with brands like Oreo. And I imagine your work there only emboldened that overall strategy of understanding the importance of consumer, how you frame marketing in general.

Linda: Yeah, when I went there, we were still Cadbury. That then became Kraft, that then became Monterey's. And I made that move because I missed being in a global organization. And just when you love understanding humans and what motivates them and drives them, there is a commonality that goes across borders. People are much more similar than different. And I missed that aspect of it. So that's why I moved over to Cadbury, still in Insights. But while I was in that role, we expanded to global categories and I was going to apply for Director of Insights, global Insights. But someone said to me, no, you really should look at applying for the Director of Innovation position. And so that was my shift from Insights to innovation. Again, unplanned. Right. Someone planted a seed that I decided to take a look at and give it a try, and it was another pivot or a door that opened that I walked through.

Matt: And then as part of that role, you were behind an incredible launch for Mondelez into the Gum category in China, which I know is incredibly successful. Talk to us about that process of launching a massive new product category in such a hard to decipher market like China.

Linda: Exactly.

Matt: That must have been just a wild project to be a part of what goes into something like that.

Linda: I would say naive. Right? Because had I known how difficult it was, there's something about not worrying about knowing because of knowledge of the speech completely. And so for me, I had exactly 18 months of being dropped into a country that I had never worked in and having to build everything and launch within 18 months. I'm sure for entrepreneurs that may sound long, but for a large entity, that is actually quite short when you have to build everything, including the manufacturing and the route to market, much less the route to consumer. But when I landed there, my first question to the team was just to give me the last five case studies of successful launches, new brand and category launches. And they came back and said, that actually doesn't happen here in China. The last one was a decade ago. I think it was a minute made. It doesn't happen in China because of the complexity. People don't launch nationally. You launch in a region and you slowly expand your way. So that was probably a bit of a tip that this was not an easy challenge but had an incredible team. What I learned from that experience was because I didn't know the market, I didn't know the people, I couldn't choose.

Matt: My team culture in China is so different.

Linda: The consumers, the culture, the competitive set, everything is different. But what I learned was that for the lack of experience and sophistication, passion and fearlessness overcomes it all. I just focus on the end in mind and planning for success and ability to pivot along the way.

Matt: Determined in the outcome.

Linda: Be determined exactly. Rather than I think here in the States, oftentimes the language is more of go no go. Should we do it? Should we not? It's about passing through things and still ever at every gate having a chance to say no. That's I feel like a larger company.

Matt: That's why they don't take risks ultimately. Right.

Linda: Developed markets, large companies, large established businesses. That's the mindset.

Matt: What's risk aversion?

Linda: They have more to lose than to gain.

Matt: Right. That's why a lot of these large legacy incumbents only get disrupted because a lot of the leaders there, their whole job is just don't get fired. Right. So they're going to take the tried and true path the easy way. And then there's entrepreneurs who get funded and they see opportunity and they nip at their heels and sometimes they win.

Linda: It's back to it coming down to humans and understanding humans and what motivates them and how do you pull those levers then?

Matt: Right. Because I would imagine your time prior in the consumer insights field and really understanding consumers or I e humans helps you in ways not just dealing with your outbound marketing, but how to deal with individuals.

Linda: Absolutely, 100%.

Matt: Right.

Linda: I mean, that is if you just think about as you move through your day. Yeah, it is psychology. Right? Psychology and a practitioner of it. But it's that simple. It's that simple. And I think of marketing as my job is to influence consumers' behaviors. That is it. So what am I doing to be able to shift them from a point. To a point, yes.

Matt: Absolutely. So for the last four years, you served as chief marketing officer at Campbell Soup Company. Obviously, you know, becoming a CMO of an iconic company like Campbell Soup is an incredible achievement. Did you think at all when you were starting back in 1994 at P and G that that's where you would end?

Linda: Oh, my God.

Matt: Now, right?

Linda: I didn't even think that. What did you envision years ago?

Matt: Right? You didn't think that far ahead. You were just looking at what was next.

Linda: Absolutely. And to be honest, so, first of all, I mean, back in the day I didn't even know marketing was a career. I just knew I loved brands. As a consumer myself, I didn't understand why and how that came about. Of course. Now I do. And I would say even today, I'm not sure this is my

destination either. I don't see anything ever in linear paths. And so, no, this was absolutely not part of the plan. And I don't even know if I meet what I believe are probably what you would expect of a CMO. I know the feedback I get is very just real, accessible. Not to say others aren't, but I've never seen myself, maybe as someone that would be in this role, that would be qualified.

Matt: Right.

Linda: I mean, talk about impostors syndrome.

Matt: Although, looking at your background, I can't think of somebody who's more qualified. But I understand what you're saying. So why did you decide to join Campbell's? What was it about the company that excited you when you decided to join?

Linda: It comes down to two things: challenge and the people who I get to take on that challenge with. And I've always been challenge driven. Some might think, oh, there's more to lose than to gain. Anytime you take on something that's high risk or highly difficult, I see it as a lot of smart people have tried. And so in some ways, the bar is low and you can only exceed. And I love the ability to look at big problems that have long existed, but put a creative spin on that, to unravel it, to then build it back up to something stronger, and then, though, that on its own, at this point in my career is not enough. It really is. If I'm spending this much time on something that I love to do, what's really critical is I get to do that with people who I respect and trust and that I don't take for granted. I don't think you can always find yourself in that situation. But certainly in this case, I wasn't looking for a role like this, and I wasn't considering Campbell. It really was, okay, I get the challenge, which is, how do we win in Soup that shares the company name? Long time challenges. But then to be able to do that with people that I knew and trusted was really the unlock.

Matt: Absolutely. And your tenure at Campbell Soup has been anything but boring because the Pandemic hit. Obviously it was an event that definitely, I imagine and through this seeing, what did the stock price provide a lot of tailwinds for the brand because people were home and soup at home or kind of go hand in hand. And then obviously then the vaccines came out, people started to go out in the real world again, although we're not really where we were pre pandemic. There's a lot of people working from home, et cetera. How has all those external changes to the consumer impacted your role and how you look at your future go to market strategy?

Linda: I would say two things. One is it actually starts internally and in those first calls it six months, nine months of the pandemic. There was a shared experience that all of us were going through and there's no question the amount of pride and appreciation for being an organization that is so front line with our manufacturing, our sales field sales, that brought and we knew we had a role to play. It brought a tremendous amount of pride and just, I think, solidification of the relevancy of what drives us. Right. That actually was a very important piece to our transformation. But then with the consumer side, the good thing is that we had a strategy in place and we were just beginning to execute that when the pandemic hit. So we knew what the blueprint looked like. It was an acceleration of that and we quickly went from how do we make sure our brands show up in a modern way to how do we make sure we've got content that is bringing utility and value to our consumers. Because right now exactly, we don't have a demand problem. What we have are people, humans who are having to cook a lot of meals at home. So what an incredible way to be able to provide that value, to reintroduce ourselves and make sure that we're providing utility and value into their lives. That was, I'd say, every three months something evolved, things kept evolving and so we

had to be agile in understanding what the needs were of the moment and where we actually have a right to show up because we're adding value.

Matt: Yeah, absolutely. And I think you think about the difference between advertising, like the Mad Men error, which is like if you can have a check in a checkbook, you write the check and you're going to be able to force your message on the consumer's throat to fast forward to today. And you have to start with the consumer and say, what do they care about when they wake up at 06:00 A.m. And what are their unmet needs and where do we fit in? And that's the difference between advertising and content. I think a lot of companies lose that and they still think about their unique selling proposition where ultimately consumers only listen to a unique selling proposition if they have to. Right now, they don't have to listen to anything.

Linda: Right.

Matt: So you have to say, what does utility look like? To your point, is that challenging to do in ways that connect with your brand? Because ultimately, I do see a lot of brands trying to provide utility, but in ways that are really disparate from what their product or service even is. And that disconnect, I think, often means that what they're doing might be great, but it's not going to lead to business results.

Linda: So I will tell you, it's not hard for me, right, but because you got to know who you are, right? You got to be honest to yourself of what do consumers expect from us and want from us and meet them where they are? So I think it's when you have a clear, just knowledge or North Star of who you are, then it becomes easy. It's just the rigor of filtering, of whether or not something is authentic or not. And sure, once in a while you might mess up, but that's how you learn. But honestly, one of my biggest fears, especially with such an iconic brand, one of my biggest fears is to come across as a poser. I do feel that I do set a higher bar for some of the brands more than others. Certainly the more iconic you are. I do think coming across as a poser can be problematic.

Matt: Absolutely. A challenge. Being like an iconic brand, like Campbell's or Chevy or any iconic American brand is always, I would think, the fear that we're not contemporary enough. Now there's the millennial mom, and it's going to be a Gen Z mom, and how we make sure that we're not left behind.

Linda: Right, but do it authentically.

Matt: Authentically. So how do you look at modernizing the brand and continuing to evolve your messaging, your brand equity pillars to make sure that it can connect with tomorrow's consumer?

Linda: So, from a metrics standpoint, it's very simple, which is, we are growing faster with the younger generations than the older generation.

Matt: Why is that?

Linda: Well, why is it that is it the reintroduction of the brand, and it starts with the product and the utility of that. And we got that acceleration during the pandemic, and it's now continuing that. And I would say it entered through the door of memories, people who had memories of chicken noodle soup. Yeah, nostalgia. We all were in need of comfort. And certainly you've got the holidays, too, as another entry point. But that's what I call memories. Those are from rituals, and that's where

we brought everyone in. But what is growing and keeping it growing becomes inserting. It then enters your life, making that one additional meal that I call everyday dinners. Everyday meal being a shortcut, preparing a dinner that everyone's going to love. That's the journey that we're now on, what I'll call Chapter Two. This is a long term investment and evolution of rebuilding the relevancy. In other words, you could call it modernization of the brand. So that's from a usage point of view. Oftentimes I talk about how important packaging is. The shelf.

Matt: I see you're wearing the shirt package. Not everybody can do that. It just shows how powerful the packaging is. You wear that T-shirt, it's a cool T-shirt. Most other brands, people can't wear their T-shirts.

Linda: Or at minimum, though, everyone that's a CPG brand, right. Packaged goods. You're on a shelf, though. You're on a digital shelf or a physical shelf, that is your number one reach. And you need to make sure that the first place we tackled was making sure you could do all this great advertising that feels more modern, shows up in modern ways. But if you look, first impressions, of course we know what shows up for an interview.

Matt: It's like the same thing.

Linda: Exactly. So making sure that we showed up physically through the package, that was a really important touch.

Matt: So what's that process look like? I imagine it must be almost like having somebody on the operating table, because this brand and the packaging is so iconic and you don't want to mess with that equity, you want to maintain that equity, but at the same time slowly push it forward. So I imagine that must be a pretty intense process.

Linda: So, funny enough, this was my first major decision when I joined. It was a project that had been underway for about six months, I think. And they showed me the latest work, the round of work, and how you just described that fear of or touching something so iconic, you could see it in the work. And I had to call a timeout.

Matt: People were being too careful, you mean?

Linda: Yeah.

Matt: Right. Too much pressure.

Linda: And as a result, it actually made it feel older.

Matt: Right.

Linda: That unwillingness to walk away from nostalgia. And so the time out was a complete rebrief of I know we've spent six months on this, but we need to start all over again. Number one, starting with we cannot have a brief that's four pages long with 8.5.

Matt: The best briefs are the shortest ones.

Linda: Yes. And that is bringing back the what's the problem we're trying to solve, what are we trying to communicate? And it cannot be a kitchen sink of bullet points. We re-briefed it and it really in that very first round since the rebrief, we just saw three awesome directions that really pushed the boundaries. And it's the permission, right? The permission that you give the creatives, you can always pull back.

Matt: Right.

Linda: And that was it. Very few times, actually, do I ever get within the first round, a direction that actually ends up seeing the light of day. That's not an easy thing. We all wish for that. It's not so simple, but it happened. And the rest is history.

Matt: How much testing goes into ultimately arriving at that decision before you actually say, okay, we're going into production.

Linda: Of course, a lot of testing. The good news is we have a lot of proven, validated methods. That's actually not the difficult part. What I have found though, because I've done multiple redesigns across very well known brands, what I have found is that you should never be testing to see if you should do something or not.

Matt: So validation, basically, you need to believe.

Linda: In it and it really becomes what are the yellow flags, the red flags, the blind spots? That's what that should be for. Not to make a decision of, do I do this, do I not?

Matt: So interesting.

Linda: So I much rather why do you feel that?

Matt: Because you feel like if you do that, you're going to be in the sea of sameness, ultimately, that consumers just want something closer to what it is now.

Linda: Honestly, I feel like if you don't know in your gut that it's the right thing to do, what's the value that you bring?

Matt: Well, that's right. And I think in this day and age, everyone talks about data, data, data, and it can be to a fault. Right. If you just let the data decide what to do, then ultimately where is the human input? Where is the instinct, where is the creative?

Linda: Well, you don't understand why.

Matt: Right?

Linda: So if you get data that's not good, then why? What do you do next? How does it inform you of what's the actions that need to be taken? You need to go in with a hypothesis of what's working, what's not. Let me then make sure the power of numbers helps me know that I'm not just talking to myself, that there is a broader audience. But if you just look at data on its own and you don't have that thought process going in and you don't, it doesn't mean you're going to be 100% right all the

time. Of course not. But you need to enter into those, being able to articulate that and then use the data to help you understand what's really going on.

Matt: Absolutely. So we've talked about the strategy piece and the insights piece, and we just had a really fascinating discussion. On the creative side. The last piece of the overall puzzle is media communications. Gain the message out and the world is so different today than it was when you entered the workforce. We both entered around the same time in the mid 90s, there was no real internet. There was no YouTube, Facebook, social media, or iPhone. Yeah.

Linda: Any of it. Any yeah.

Matt: So when I tell my kids, when I first started working, there really wasn't the internet. I mean, there was barely any email, right? There was barely any email. So it's such a different world. You've obviously done a great job sort of evolving through all this. But as we're here in 2023 and looking towards the future, what are some of the changes and innovations in media that you think are particularly compelling so you can continue to get the messages that you're building out to the right consumers.

Linda: I mean, I think the biggest change is back in the day, all advertising in my opinion was very much through the voice of the brand. Yeah, that was it. And you had a few channels to choose from. And now getting the right balance of messages that are through the voice of the brand versus through the voices of others, that is critical in achieving building the credibility, the meaning, the awareness they have to work together. And depending on what kind of budget you have, how big is your awareness? You have to consider all those pieces. It's not a one size fits all. Here's the equation. There's just a lot of nuances and I genuinely believe there isn't one right answer.

Matt: Yeah. How are you looking at things like retail media, which I know a lot of the big box retailers are pushing to varying degrees of success right now because there's a whole nother playing field now for CPG marketers.

Linda: I mean, I think it's exciting.

Matt: Yeah.

Linda: It theoretically closes the loop of your collapsing kind of upper funnel funnel, lower funnel. You're collapsing sales and marketing even as functions then large CpGs. It is the theoretical data and optimization efficiencies that can be gained effectiveness for someone who's got an engineering and science background. It's a theoretical mind blowing of what you can do with it and then let's overlay the generative AI and things get really cool. So from that standpoint, it provides abilities that we didn't have. Then you have this whole other element of we've got our portals into those data sets. So that ability to really get real time dissection data exploration of what's happening at that human level, not just looking at dollar sales, ACV velocities, but rather segmentation and how are those consumers responding? What does switching look like? There's just a lot of things that we used to need to brief someone to go do the analytics to then come back to you weeks later. It's all at the fingertips.

Matt: Yeah, I mean, if you think about a CPG marketer for years and maintenance is still the case today, you don't really have first party consumer data. You're the end consumer, you're selling

through an intermediary versus other companies that sell direct and that can make it challenging in this data driven world. And now some of these new platforms.

Linda: And they take cookies away. Right. You start to look at it because we've always said right now in the short term, we're not a first party data company. And back to you got to know your strengths and play into those. And you also have to say these are certain things that we're just not going to be great at. So by having that understanding of what your boundaries or constraints are, it allows you to then be creative and how you. Solve for it. And that's where the second party data gets to be of real value.

Matt: Absolutely. So as we wrap up here, switching gears back to you, Linda. You obviously have had an amazing career, lots of exciting projects, and obviously you continue to make a real impact in the CPG and consumer landscape. If you had to Zoom out and think about some of the things that you think you did right along your path to get here, what do you think those things were?

Linda: I would say the first is not operating from a place of fear and I don't think through the lens of failure. Now I'm a perfectionist. I'm an overachiever, as with everyone else. Don't want to fail, but I don't beat myself up. And I don't believe that everything ends with failure. I see it as learning, and that's how you get better. So I called it earlier as, like, naiveness. But it is coming from a place of when you don't worry about failing and you don't come from a place of fear and you look at it through what's possible. That definitely has been important. The second is not subscribing to what has been what is the playbooks of career paths, the playbooks within business, within brand building, within whatever that is. I don't subscribe to it. I'm not very good at following rules.

Matt: Right.

Linda: But what I do focus a lot is trying to understand the principles of which those rules are built upon and then a different way to that or with a career. It has been when doors have opened for me, a little crack that I wasn't expecting, didn't quite understand, didn't make sense. I considered them and chose to walk through many of them that then opened up new doors that I didn't even think would be available to me. And so it's a little that combination of not being afraid to walk through, to look at something and really consider it, but then the willingness to just not have to worry about, do I have the experience? Do I know what that playbook looks like? The willingness to create what sounds like.

Matt: You're very comfortable betting on yourself because if you don't believe in yourself, ultimately you don't know how you would and.

Linda: You know, good point. I didn't think of it that way. But I always advise people absolutely. Feedback that people give you, you have to give it truly is a gift, and you have to consider it and try to understand good and bad and bad feedback, although it doesn't have to define you. And so you got to start with knowing who you are, believing in yourself, having confidence in yourself, but understand that if there's a gap of who you know yourself to be and how others see you, that's the area for insight.

Matt: Yeah, the blind spots.

Linda: Why are you showing up the way you are if that's not who you know yourself to be?

Matt: Right?

Linda: And I think that's tied to this betting on myself. It's what's within.

Matt: Yeah, I love that. So, finally here Linda. Is there a mantra? You've gone through so many great life lessons, and I feel much more educated just about your world and the CPG world because of it. But is there a mantra that you'd boil all this down to in terms of how you like to live your life that comes to mind?

Linda: So, I have my favorite quote, P.S. Elliot quote that I've had since 1992. And it's very specific because it was in a college pamphlet when I was applying to colleges, and I remember cutting it out, and I still have it. And the quote is, only those who risk going too far know just how far one can go. So I think that really is the mantra to how I've tried to live my life again, unplanned. But I guess it seeped in to just how I showed up.

Matt: Very cool. I love that I'll have to check out that quote. And I really want to thank you for taking the time today. It's been amazing to go through your journey and all decision making frameworks, and I have no doubt that you'll continue to push the limits and better yourself and take risks. So thank you so much on behalf of the Suzy and Adweek team. Thanks again, Melinda Lee of Campbell Soup Company, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate and review The Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Till next time. See you soon, everyone. Take care. The Speed of Culture is brought to you by Susie as part of the Ad Week Podcast Network and a guest creator network. You can subscribe to all Adweek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcasts. To find out more about Susie, head to susie.com and make sure to search for the Speed of Culture in 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 Susie, thanks for listening.