

Noha Abdalla Transcript

Noha: So when you come to our website, for example, or we see you on digital platforms, how do we put together the right pieces of information to identify who you might be and to put in front of you the right offer? And so that's an area of focus for us. But to your point, I think this direct relationship and loyalty that you can build with your customer base is going to be critical in the future.

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, I'm thrilled to be joined by Noha Abdallah, the CMO of Choice Hotels, which counts Radisson, Comfort Suites, and Quality Inn, amongst many others, as brands. Excited to dive into this really interesting landscape for consumer travel. Noha, thanks so much for joining today.

Noha: Thanks for having me.

Matt: Absolutely. We're going to start by just learning a little bit about your background and the steps that you've taken to land you in the position that you're in today.

Noha: Great. So my background is in Strategy Consulting and marketing. I started my career in marketing after 9-11. So I was in Strategy Consulting when 9-11 happened. As a result of the catastrophe that happened in our nation, my project was canceled, my office was shut down, and I was laid off from my first job. But also as a result of that, the American Red Cross was suffering from a little bit of a PR crisis. People had come out to donate blood. And unfortunately, a lot of it wasn't used and was being shown thrown away on the news. And so they had a shortage of blood donations. And that's when I started my career in marketing. I joined the American Red Cross so I could create a national blood donor awareness campaign to raise the nation's kind of awareness about why there's an ongoing need for blood. That's really where my marketing career started and where I really kind of started to understand the importance of customer insight, awareness, marketing, PR, and really where my love for marketing began.

Matt: It's really interesting because a lot of people younger in their careers, if they have a point where they stumble, they hit a roadblock like you did. And obviously, it was due to external circumstances. Nonetheless, they can get discouraged. And I'm sure you were somewhat discouraged at the time. But like they say, when one door closes, another one opens. Talk to us about what you remember, that experience of dealing with failure or obstacles early in your career, and how you're able to persevere through it.

Noha: Yeah. I think to your point when you're in it, it's really hard to see the bright side on the other side. But kind of 20-plus years into my career, I can now kind of fondly look back at all of those challenging moments and think about how I came out on the other side a little bit stronger. And the other kind of anecdote I like to share, which is a little odd is that I was an A student my entire career as a student, high school, college, MBA. I got my only B plus in my life in marketing. And so I don't know what that says, but I think it says that I persevered to prove to that professor that I was going to figure this out and I was going to do well in it. So-

Matt: Well, make sure we send your professor a copy of this podcast.

Noha: Exactly, exactly.

Matt: Awesome. And then you spent seven years at Discovery Communications, which oversees, among other brands, Animal Planet, which is a property that I love. Talk to us about your experience there and diving into the entertainment world.

Noha: Yeah. So I leveraged my experience in the kind of healthcare marketing space from the American Red Cross to get a job at Discovery on a channel that was called Discovery Health Channel. And since then, it's evolved and I think became the Oprah network. But while I was at Discovery, I did start to kind of learn more classical marketing. I worked for a leader who had been trained kind of on the CPG side of marketing and I worked with that leader for seven years, both on Discovery Health and then on Animal Planet. It was a really fun kind of creative environment to be in marketing and to learn marketing, everything from kind of project management to campaign development, media planning, and social media at the time. And so figuring that out. I was lucky enough to be part of a rebrand project where we were tasked with taking Animal Planet from this kind of background channel that people watched or just turned on for their cats or dogs during the day to something that people would want to tune in for. And so we did a lot of customer insight work, which I really enjoyed. What we found is that people enjoy watching animal programming when they can compare what's happening in animal life to what's happening in human life. And so we use that insight to relaunch the network. And. The programming, the marketing, the look, and the feel are really more about dramatic storytelling versus a kind of background programming. And that made a difference in the performance of the network and the advertisers ultimately that we were able to attract to the network. So that was a, I think, cool opportunity and project that helped me understand the value of customer insight, and the value of branding. The role that marketing can play in product development and in influencing the kind of the product or the programming in this case, and a transformation of a brand and the results.

Matt: That insight is so interesting and frankly exciting to me because I'm sure you're familiar with The Planet Earth, which is another amazing show that I think it's BBC. I was so inspired after watching that I started to write down kind of almost like a thesis for a book called The Nature of Business, which is trying to assimilate the way that animals act in the wild to help companies act in the business world because the similarities are everywhere in terms of the way that animals act with each other and how humans act with each other both socially and in business. And the fact that that was a core insight of the network is just fascinating to me. So I guess it's not just me that's seeing the power in that.

Noha: Yeah, and this was 12, 15 years ago. So definitely an insight that I think lasts through time.

Matt: Yeah, 100%. So from there, you jumped into the financial services world and had a great career and stint at Capital One, where you would end up as vice president of digital brand strategy and social media. When you joined Capital One in 2011, it was really at the birth of the social media era. Facebook had been around for quite some time, but it was not until 2010, and 2011, that big brands like Capital One started to see platforms like Facebook and Twitter as something more of a mandate that they needed to jump on. And I know there's no shortage of regulations in the financial services industry that also created issues in you doing so maybe in the way that you might've wanted to. Talk to us about that journey at Capital One and what some of your core takeaways were from that experience.

Noha: Yeah. So when I joined Capital One, I joined on the bank side of the house. So obviously, the company has numerous lines of business. But at the time, they were trying to expand the bank to be a national bank. It was more of a regional bank. During that time that I was there, the company bought ING Direct, an integrated ING Direct, which was an online savings bank. And I helped with the rebrand and the relaunch of that into Capital One, which was the online checking platform. And while I was there, I was tapped on the shoulder to say, hey, you did a great job with this. Like kind of like as a consultant, come now start this other thing that we want to build, which is social media. And I said to them, me? Like, I don't know anything about it. And they said, oh, don't worry, you're a smart marketer. You'll figure it out. My other concern with taking it on was the fact that I had come from Animal Planet, where there was a small team, one person on my team who managed social media. But we had a lot of content at Animal Planet. The content was not a challenge. We had a lot of it. Um. At Capital One, my question at the time was, why would anyone want to follow their bank on Facebook? And that was a question we needed to answer because at the time, Capital One had bought a lot of followers through a partnership with a gaming company called Zynga and there's a game called Farmville.

Matt: Everyone did it. Yeah. I mean, I was involved with the campaign with Bing where they kind of were the pioneers of that. And a lot of companies had all these followers that weren't necessarily fans. They joined for the wrong reason. And it was a race to like some followers back then. I remember it clearly.

Noha: That's right. We bought them and I inherited that page and I had to figure out what to do. Do we fire followers? Do we start a new page? What is the reason for why someone would want content from Capital One and where am I going to get the content from? And that was an exciting, again, challenge in my career and one in which I was able to really kind of chart new territory. Like nobody had really figured it out. My peers and my boss were kind of like, you know, this is, you know, open space, figure it out. And so the good news was Capital One had a lot of really strong advertising. And so the first kind of phase of building out the social media presence was around figuring out how to take some of the strong advertising work that was being done around the NCAA and the venture card, et cetera, and bringing that into social. And it really at the time was matched luggage. It was kind of very similar. And then we started to say, well, what if we did some more behind the scenes? And what if we did, you know, outtakes and things like that, that were different from what was going to be in the ad campaign? And that's how it started to build. I started it on behalf of the credit card side of the business. And then other lines of business came and said, we want this too. So small business banks came, small business credit cards, auto loans, home loans, commercial, everybody came and said, we want to build this too. Then we had to figure out how many pages Capital One needed to deliver on all these different business needs and how should we organize them. And so that was, again, another opportunity as a marketer to kind of influence the strategy of the company in the platform. It then grew into content marketing, as well as digital product marketing, and thinking about how to take some of the innovations that Capital One had and market those to their customers.

Matt: Right. And obviously, you've been incredibly successful at your stint at Capital One. The company has continued to do well, really building a brand that has gotten itself into the cultural zeitgeist. I think that they've done a great job at piecing it all together for sure. What's interesting to me is that you made the leap from the financial services space to Hilton, where you had a short stint before finally settling in at Choice Hotels, which we'll dive deep into. But before we do so, what's behind your decision? You're going up the ladder pretty fast at Capital One. The company is doing well. What precipitates the decision for you to say, you know what, it's time for something

new. I'm going to join Hilton. Was that a tough decision to make? And how would you, I guess, advise other people who maybe have to decide that in their career when they're at a bit of a crossroads?

Noha: Yeah. I mean, I think it ends up being a personal decision. But I get up in the morning and get excited about my job when there's something new to figure out. There's a new challenge. There's a new opportunity. There's something I can build. And the moment that the job starts to get a little bit more mundane like, this is the seventh season of this. I'm going to market on Animal Planet or I'm going to build another social media strategy for another line of business. If it's more kind of rote, then I'm not as excited. And so for me also as a marketer, what I've learned is that by changing industries, I also learned something new about a new channel or two or three that may not have been part of a previous industry or previous company. So I got a lot of experience, for example, in TV marketing when I was at Discovery. When I went to Capital One, I got experience with retail marketing in our bank branches. I got experience with direct mail, which we didn't do when I was at Animal Planet. And so I think every time you make a switch like that if there's an opportunity to learn something new, to tackle a new challenge, it's great. In the case of Hilton, I was approached by a former colleague of mine, a former boss of mine. Who used to work with me at Capital One. And she said, come over here and build social media for Hilton the way you did it for Capital One. And I said, thanks, but I've already done that, right? And as a marketer, I don't want to be kind of branded as a social media person. I want to go broader. I want to do other things than just social media. And she said, you know what, come over here, teach us how to do this, set it up globally. That will be kind of the new thing in a new industry.

Matt: Which is a whole different ballgame. Right.

Noha: And then you can kind of pick your head up after a couple of years and pick something else. And so for me, again, I was looking for what can I do that's new and different that's going to challenge me. It was the opportunity to do something on a global scale. And it was the opportunity to learn a new industry that, frankly, I was passionate about, hospitality, that drove me there, as well as an opportunity to work for somebody who I had a lot of respect for. So that was the decision there.

Matt: That's great. And then you would eventually end up in your current role as chief marketing officer at Choice Hotels. What excited you about this opportunity? And tell us, I guess, what are some of your big priorities here in 2024 that you're focused on overseeing their portfolio of brands?

Noha: Yeah. So the opportunity to join Choice Hotels was one that I jumped at, right? As I talked to the CEO and the board and understood kind of the transformation that Choice Hotels was looking to make, it got me excited. So first and foremost, the company is a company that's been around for 80 years. It's a company that's been focused on franchisees' hospitality and technology. An area that they wanted to kind of build and grow was kind of the focus on the guest, right? So how can we take a company that's good at franchising and make us good at guest strategy, loyalty, and experiences? And that, for me, was something that I'm passionate about, as I talked about, as in all my jobs, I've really focused on the customer insight and how can we use that to really drive the company to a new place. So the opportunity to help with that was great. The other thing was that Choice Hotels has been kind of known for hotels in the mid-scale and economy space, but over time had diversified into an upscale and extended stay. And we were at the time purchasing Radisson Hotels Americas, which was an opportunity to. Grow the upscale business on behalf of the company. And so figuring out how do you not only integrate a set of really well-known brands but how do you then come out on the other side and have the company stand for kind of this broader portfolio? Again,

this was another opportunity for me. To think differently about how to take the brand to a new level. And so those two things alone, I think, were really exciting and were what ultimately drove my decision to join Choice.

Matt: Yeah. And when you look at the economy, extended stay, and then upscale, those are very much three different types of, I guess, buyers. And there are probably different insights to drive but drive purchasing. But at the same time, you probably want to have a unified strategy, a unified loyalty system, et cetera. So is that challenging to balance? Because many brands, if you work for Mercedes Benz, you don't have that challenge. But that's a unique challenge, I would think, as a CMO.

Noha: It is, but it's also a great opportunity because as we've learned through a lot of customer research and even just kind of knowing yourself and the occasions that you travel, there are different versions of you, right? So there's the version of you that goes on a guy's trip. There's a version of you that goes on a family vacation. There's a version of you that goes to the family reunion.

Matt: Or a work trip, right?

Noha: Right? A business trip, right? And so for all those different occasions, you might, you're going to need to be in a different place and you're going to probably need a different type of hotel. And so I think what Choice uniquely offers is 22 brands all over the country and the world. And we undoubtedly have something that's in the right place, the right price point for you, depending on kind of what you're looking for and what that trip location is.

Matt: Absolutely. And when you zoom out more broadly and look at the travel and hospitality space post-pandemic, a lot has been written recently about revenge travel and the travel boom. And coming out of the holiday season, you saw it. You saw hotels packed. You saw airlines full, lines everywhere. What are some of the trends that you have your eye on relative to the consumer and the travel space in 2024?

Noha: I mean, I think what we've learned as an industry is that people took for granted the opportunity that they had pre-COVID to travel, right? And they didn't want to lose that opportunity again. And so while there may be kind of economic challenges and inflation and things that are making it a little bit tougher, it's one area that consumers aren't willing to give up. And so they're thinking creatively about how can I still make the trip, but do so in a more kind of economical way? How can I make a smarter decision about how I'm going to get there, and where I'm going to stay? And the good news is that is a great place for Choice to play because we have hotels at every price point. And so if you are looking to kind of still make that trip, but just do it in a little bit more of an economical way, we probably have a hotel for you.

Matt: Yeah, for sure. Another big change we've seen in the advertising and marketing industry is the crumbling of the cookie, so to speak, and the real power of first-party data. And I would imagine, given your portfolio of brands and the fact that you serve the consumer directly, that your ability to aggregate first-party data creates a real advantage for you in terms of delivering contextual content for the consumer. Can you talk to us a little bit about your thinking and maybe some of your work in that area?

Noha: Yeah, I think this change in the industry, if you will, is going to be an opportunity for brands to drive an even deeper direct relationship with our consumers or our guests. We have a loyalty program, Choice Privileges, that has over 63 million members. Our opportunity is to use the data that we have about them in conjunction with other data to get to know who they are, what their passions, interests, and likes are, and to try to see the signals of when they might be in the market for travel and leveraging that relationship that we have with them to make a suggestion, a recommendation, an offer that's going to meet their needs. We have been working very closely with a partner, Amazon. To help with customer identity, right? So when you come to our website, for example, or we see you on digital platforms, how do we put together the right pieces of information to identify who you might be and to put in front of you the right offer? And so that's an area of focus for us. But to your point, I think this direct relationship and loyalty that you can build with your customer base is going to be critical in the future.

Matt: Yeah, when you talk about a profile of the consumer, and you were talking earlier about the different versions of you, it's kind of a marketer's dream to have both a portfolio of brands that could kind of match up to the different versions of you and then have the first-party data that the contacts that deliver that. I mean, it's a pretty cool opportunity, I would think, and unique for sure.

Noha: That's right. On our website, we have proprietary technology that we use, for example, that takes thousands of data points to make a decision about how, for example, to order the hotels when you do a search based on what we know about you and a number of other factors to increase the likelihood that we're going to present you with a hotel that you'd be likely to book at.

Matt: Absolutely. And just, you know, as I hear you talk about this technology you're deploying, and I look at your background, I mean, when you started, you know, in your career, much like myself in 2001, 2000, there was no Facebook, there was no YouTube, there was no Snapchat, there was no iPhone, right? And now we live in a world of big data and AI, and it's so much more sophisticated. And you've been through all these tectonic shifts in the marketplace over the last 20-plus years. How have you been able to keep your finger on the pulse of the industry, and these technological advancements, to make sure that you remain relevant as a professional so you can continue to lead it within your field?

Noha: Yeah. I mean, again, it's an area of kind of passion and interest of mine. And so not only has it been helpful in my career to work at different companies that are at different stages of this technological evolution and kind of bringing that along in each place that I've been. But also I look for opportunities to connect with peers, former colleagues, and bosses to kind of share best practices and insights. I join industry groups, whether it be within hospitality right now or also just more globally, marketing kind of leadership. Groups that allow me to continue to kind of push my thinking and make sure that we're not kind of getting stale and how we're approaching things. And so lots of reading online, lots of podcasts and things like that, but also going to these industry events and making sure that I'm leveraging the network that I've built over 20 plus years to ask questions. How are you attacking this challenge? How are you dealing with this? And I do think looking across industries is often really helpful because probably within your industry, the companies are probably doing things pretty similar. It's when you kind of look outside of the industry that you can say, you know what, there might be an opportunity for us to think very differently.

Matt: Absolutely. I also saw that in doing my research you are a Global Board member at MMA Global. So being involved in those big industry consortiums, et cetera, also allows you to get touch points, I would imagine, with people across a variety of industries.

Noha: Yeah, the Global MMA Board is a great opportunity. I think what it allows us to do is get in a room and talk about what are some of the similar kinds of challenges and opportunities that we're facing and how has one company started to solve them. How do we partner together to kind of think differently and potentially, you know? Come up with a solution that multiple companies could use. And so again, it's a really good place to kind of workshop, if you will, AI, how do we handle AI, you know, personalization, like all of the kind of buzz words, but in reality, they're all part of what we need to do as marketers today. And so that's been super helpful.

Matt: Absolutely. Going back to the travel industry as well and some of the trends, I noticed that you and your organization talk about the five R's as kind of five key consumer trends that are shifting the face of the travel and hospitality industry. I'd love you if you don't mind, for our audience to kind of go for what those five R's are and why they matter to your organization.

Noha: Yeah, that's right. Thanks for bringing that up. So we at Choice Hotels have identified these five long-term trends that are impacting our business and that we think Choice Hotels is well-positioned to take advantage of. So the first one is around rising wages. We know that the average American's wage has increased by over 6% since 2020. That means there's kind of more money in their pocket to spend. Now, there's inflation and whatnot that comes with that. But coupled with that, many, many surveys have shown that Americans want to continue to travel. They're just going to figure out how to do it in a little bit more of an economical way. So rising wages, I think, is an opportunity for choice because it means that people have a little bit more money to spend and we know that they've prioritized travel. The second thing is around remote work. And so we all know that with COVID, it brought this kind of new appreciation and... Ability for people to work from anywhere. And so we've seen that in our data. We've seen that people tend to now check in on Sunday or they stay through Friday or Saturday. They don't check out on Thursdays. And so there's this blend that happens between the work week and the leisure. And Choice, again, is well-positioned to take advantage of that. The reshoring and rebuilding of AMERICA. So more and more manufacturing is happening in America. And when that happens, there is more investment in the construction of, for example, these factories, and roads, and a lot of those workers who are involved in those projects stay at Choice Hotels, given where we're located. And so, again, that's another trend that we think we're well positioned for. And then you've got road trips. So nothing like COVID to kind of really make people think about how they're going to get from A to B. And a lot of people jumped in their cars. And we have over 4,000 hotels that are within one mile of an interstate. That's kind of one of the and, you know, key benefits of where we're located. And so with this kind of increased trend in people going on road trips, we've seen an increase in bookings. For our roadside hotels. Then there's retirement. So more and more people are coming to retirement age every year. And those people have money. They have time. They want to stay at hotels. And so, again, that's a really important trend that we are well positioned for. So those are the five R's. And again, they continue to ebb and flow a little bit in terms of the metrics and how they show up. But we were early in kind of identifying that these things were happening. And we've been continuing to refine our strategy to make sure that we can continue to take advantage of them.

Matt: I love that. Some of them are super unique, those insights and ones that I would think that provide you an advantage that you've dug into them. You've seen these new markets emerging. And then I would imagine that drives your messaging and your targeting and all those things you could

take advantage of growth opportunities. And speaking of messaging, I know that Choice Hotels has a new campaign coming out on January 8th, which is, I believe, your first campaign since completing your integration with Radisson. So excited to hear about what you're doing and why it's important to the company.

Noha: Yeah. So we have a campaign launching on January 8th that we're super excited about. It will feature Keegan-Michael Key, who we selected as our spokesperson based on the fact that he's got this really kind of approachable, charismatic nature. He's also got a great sense of humor and has often played the role of many different people. So the customer insight that we built this campaign off of is that there are a lot of different versions of you and different reasons that you might travel. And Choice Hotels has a hotel brand for you, no matter what occasion you have. So the campaign's launching, I think, at a perfect time. It's post-holiday hangovers. People are looking for where am I going to kind of plan my next trip. And so it allows us to kind of be top of mind and potentially that kind of go-to place, choicehotels.com, that people want to check out first as they're planning their next trip.

Matt: Very cool. But a great way to kick off the year with a big new messaging campaign. I'm sure it's really exciting for the company to get that across the finish line.

Noha: Yeah, we're excited about it. I think it allows us to showcase the new brands that have joined Choice as part of the Radisson integration. So in the campaign, we highlight four of our 22 brands. We highlight Radisson and Cambria, two of our upscale brands, as well as Comfort and Quality, two of our mid-scale brands.

Matt: Awesome. We'll be looking out for that for sure. So shifting gears to you as we wrap up here. Noha, you've had a really exciting career, worked for some prestigious, well-known brands, not just worked for them, but led them. What would you tell 20-year-old Noha when you're first starting that maybe you wish you knew based upon what you've learned throughout your career, which maybe some of our younger listeners can take who are at the beginning of their career journeys and hope to end up in the CMOC themselves one day?

Noha: Yeah. So I think to the 20-year-old marketer that's starting, my piece of advice would be to try as many different things as possible, right? You're not going to know what you like, or what you don't like until you try it. And so whether it's raising your hand to take on a new project or try a new channel or try a new role, even kind of trying different companies. I do think that there's a lot to learn earlier in your career about what you think you might like versus what you like. And so before I started to really focus on marketing as a career, I had had internships in finance. In international affairs, in law, right? I tried a whole bunch of things before I landed on marketing. And then in marketing, I also tried a variety of roles and brands to get to a place where I started to understand this is what. Gets me excited and what I'm looking for in my next step.

Matt: I love that. And, you know, is there with that? Is there a mantra that you kind of like to live by if you had to pick one for your career that maybe has stuck with you throughout your career that gets you going every day? Does anything come to mind?

Noha: Yeah, I got some advice early on that I've kind of stuck with and given to others, which is when you're at kind of a crossroads in your career and you're trying to decide, should I go left or should I go right? Oftentimes, there's no right and wrong answer. It's just a different path. And you're going to learn and grow from whichever path you take. So I think once you kind of realize that it's

not that big of a deal what decision you make, it can be a little easier to just go ahead and make that decision. And you learn from it and you grow from it.

Matt: Yeah, it's liberating in some sense, right?

Noha: Yeah. For sure.

Matt: Absolutely. Well, I want to thank you for joining us today. I do not doubt that you're going to see nothing but continued success here in 2024. And we'll be looking out for your campaign that's launching Choice Hotels in the weeks ahead. So thanks again. And we'll be in touch on behalf of Susie and every team. Thanks again to Noha Abdallah, the CMO of Choice Hotels 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 slash podcasts](https://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.