Deloitte. Digital

EPISODE 9

Ep 9: What's next for performance marketing? Insights from Ed Kennedy, group product marketing manager at Adobe

Host: *Alan Hart, leader in marketing and customer strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP*
Guests: *Ed Kennedy, group product marketing manager at Adobe*

Alan Hart: Are you ready to go beyond the basics of marketing? I'm Alan Hart and this is Marketing Beyond where we talk about the questions that spark change and share ideas that challenge the status quo. Join us as we explore the future of marketing and its endless potential.

Ed Kennedy: Adobe reflects kind of how the market has worked, which is we've got a creative cloud and an experience cloud and the marketers use the experience cloud and the creatives use the creative cloud, and GenStudios, the first time we're bringing those two groups together so that you're creating, but you're also analyzing performance and you're publishing ads or emails directly to the channel, so yes that functionality's embedded directly within the product so that anyone can see what's working and then just immediately initiate a new creative workflow.

Alan Hart: Today on the show I've got Ed Kennedy. He's product strategy and product marketing leader at Adobe. He spent over 15 years in consulting and enterprise software. He's overseen more than 200 implementations of enterprise marketing and commerce solutions for the world's largest brands. Prior to joining Adobe, Ed was product strategy director at Optimizely and held previous executive positions at global consulting firms and creative agencies.

On the show today, we talk about his role at Adobe. We talk about GenAI, the application of it in performance marketing, and their new product around GenStudio. We talk about how Adobe is creating new functionality they call Creative Intelligence and what that is. And AI agents. You do not want to miss this conversation with Ed Kennedy.

Alan Hart: Well Ed, welcome to the show.

Ed Kennedy: Thank you so much for having me. Glad to be here.

Alan Hart: Well, it's not every day I get to talk to somebody that is also a yoga instructor. So, I mean, we talk about marketing and business all the time.

Ed Kennedy: There's not like a huge cross-section of marketing and yoga. Okay, that's nice to know. So there's few more of us out there, I'm sure.

Alan Hart: Yeah. So how did that come about?

Ed Kennedy: Well, like with all good things in a young man's life, it was chasing a woman into a yoga studio. It's like a first love, and it's like, oh, she did yoga, I'm going to do yoga. And then, like, totally got demolished by the heat and the sweat, and it was humbling, but then I actually found, yeah, I really love this and then wanted to teach it. So yeah, it's kind of random, but I definitely try to incorporate it into my work life.

Alan Hart: I mean, it balances you I would imagine. And something ... I feel like I need to be more centered in my life and I'm jealous of yoga.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah. Well, it's definitely because I need it a lot. It's like I used to take yoga, now I definitely have to teach yoga because, like, yeah, the more that just corporate America and the speed and pace of work just increases, you do need to have that off cycle or that down switch where you can actually turn off the noise or at least try to. And yeah, I try to go a couple times of a week.

Alan Hart: Well, from yoga to group product marketing manager, I think I got that right, at Adobe, where did you get your business start if I should say?

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, I mean, I spent a lot of time working at agencies, systems integrators, building and implementing large-scale commerce websites or CNS implementations. So I worked with retailers and CPG companies to implement the digital experience platform, whatever that means. So I did a lot of like owned media channels for about 10 years and then I affectionately came to the dark side, I came to software companies themselves. I miss working directly with clients as much as maybe you do on the field. So then I went over to Episerver, which then bought Optimizely and then they sort of rebranded to CMS with A/B testing and all their capabilities, and then came over to Adobe.

Alan Hart: So amazing. So what is the scope of your role at Adobe today?

Ed Kennedy: I lead all the go-to-market strategy for the new GenAI product that we launched, which is GenStudio for performance marketing as an app that lets marketing and creative teams create their own ads and emails and

it's kind of one of the first steps into having people self-serve their own content rather than just kind of getting in line with agencies or the in-house studio teams. So yeah, it's all about working with the agency partners and with our brands to start to roll out GenAI at scale.

Alan Hart: Well, I mean, you're at the nexus of everything marketers are talking about right now. In terms of GenAI, how to drive performance, advertising performance, how do you think about that in today's era like it's still the Wild Wild West and it's still relatively new, so I imagine it's a lot of change management as well.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, there's so much that people are still trying to figure out about how to use Generative AI. I think we were all amazed at what ChatGPT did when it first came out, or even Firefly with image generation like it was pretty impressive, but then when you try to apply that logically to how is that actually going to show up in a marketing campaign or in an email, that's when brand leaders get a lot more skeptical. It's like, can this really create on-brand content? You can enter a prompt and get some text back, or you can put in a prompt and get an image, but would you ever use that on your main brand social channels or your email and the answer for the last year-and-a-half has been a resounding no, and that's why everyone's been so sort of skeptical and passive. So it's not just about bolting Generative AI into your toolset, it's really about making sure that you're training these models so that they can actually write for you and create for you and that's what when we're working with leaders, they have to really start to wrap their head around and start to trust that this can work and they still want their hands on the levers and dials. They want to be able to do the final approvals on all content coming through. So we're big on "AI created human perfected" in all of the go-to-market messaging that we're bringing out and helping CMOs understand they can do this.

Alan Hart: I talked to clients a lot and it's your point, they don't want it to run free yet, but it also seems like there are some "easy" use cases in terms of versioning, things that are natural and going to have to happen within the digital performance media space in particular. Is that like where you guys started as well?

Ed Kennedy: Yeah. I mean just like ChatGPT sort of showed us that we could get rid of some routine mundane tasks or maybe offload something mentally to ChatGPT to give us back the analysis. The same thing is starting with Generative ads like what are the low-value, repetitive mundane tasks in the creative process that we can give to Generative AI and then have humans review and approve. And so when it comes to creative production of ads or emails or web content, the vast majority of all the content that's needed is versions of some core asset.

We want the agencies and design teams to still create core visuals. I don't see that being 90% Generative AI led and then 10% review and approval. It's really the 90% of all the versions and a different version of this email for this target audience or this language or this strategy, this product and that's what AI can take the first round at and then you can start to iterate. So it's really about starting with versioning and just getting some of that repetitive task off everyone's plate.

Alan Hart: Yeah, and it does seem that you mentioned the agencies still need to do their part, but I'm also seeing like a reevaluation of the operating model like where does the work get done for what pieces of the supply chain or the content supply chain, if you will, is that what you're seeing as well? I mean, there's no right or wrong yet, like there's no perfect way to do it, but I do see people shifting, altering, tweaking the operating model to try to get those efficiencies.

Ed Kennedy: I think there is definitely a lot of questions being asked by CMOs who own a large agency budget for either creative production or media planning. What role does my agency play now in using Generative AI? Do they bring it to me and I just outsource to them like I always have and partner with them? Or am I going to catch kind of that in-house studio model that so many CMOs are starting to build—some sort of smaller in-house studio that

does their own creative and maybe they still partner with agencies, but that power dynamic between brands and agencies is real, and it's been going on before Generative AI came along, but now Generative AI is like another reason to reevaluate. So I would say in about half of my conversations with brands, the directive is we're spending X with our agencies, I need to take it to X minus 10 to 20%. And so they are thinking cost savings, either through the agency spend or the media buying itself, the actual ad tech spending. But in the other half, they're thinking I'll just have my agency use this, let's increase output and increase performance. I don't think there's a right or wrong way, but the macroeconomic environment currently kind of is leaning us more towards fixed budgets, cost savings. And so I think that creates some tension in the system that we have to help our agency partners resolve and so we're going to work with both sides of that equation but ultimately lead to what the brand is looking for us.

Alan Hart: Well, I mean, the great thing about Adobe is that you guys, you serve both sides of the market already, it's natural. You're also in the, the genesis of the company was on the creative side as well, and so now you're getting to apply that at scale. How do you think about scaling the impact that GenAI, GenStudio type solution could have at a client, like are there gateways to better performance if you will?

Ed Kennedy: There absolutely are. I mean, we'll go as fast as a brand wants to be ambitious and has risk tolerance, so we're trying to make the elephants run. The biggest brands in the world are all in piloting mode still, but we do have some customers that we're working with right now that are really starting to move quickly. So the way we start to look at our projects to scale Generative AI is based on the channels that they're going to focus on. So a lot of times there's a performance marketing team that runs paid social or display ads, and we work just with that team in one country to scale up versioning using Generative AI. But really the email team in that country or the web marketing team in that country also can benefit and then if you think globally, that's where you really start to scale. So we're going kind of channel by channel, region by region right now, but we do have some ambitious brands who have a top-down directive for Generative AI and they're going all in, kind of all at once—and it's really about then how do you train people, how to prompt better, how do you optimize the workflow so that you can actually see the increased output inversions. It's one thing just to throw general AI at the problem. It's another thing to actually have it materially impact the volume of content you're producing, because the theory is more content equals better performance; we are seeing that borne out in our data, but you actually have to get there for it to work.

Alan Hart: Yeah. Well, and the promise of personalization. GenAI is one huge lever to be able to get to that one-to-one holy grail that I guess we're all trying to get to—and that gets to your earlier point about what like the balance if you will, between cost efficiency versus performance and how can I drive performance maybe with better personalize, but also at the same time doing in an efficient way.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, I get our email campaigns that we're running through GenStudio. The budget isn't necessarily going down for email spend; not necessarily It's direct spend on email and companies usually sort of set up their systems to send as many as they need to to the size of list they have. So in those cases we are seeing very much the focus on improved click-through rates, improved open rates, improved engagement rates and so that's what we're seeing more content equals more performance, but on the paid media side there is definitely a desire from the brands to optimize their spend, whether that's with the agency or with the ad platforms themselves and just achieve their goals faster.

Alan Hart: So Adobe's got some new functionality called creative intelligence. What is that? It sounds cool.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, I think as a product marketer, thank you. Yes, we do try to make things sound cool, but also have them be useful. And what we've been able to do is take in historical ad units from a brand's paid media site. So like if they're advertising on Meta or on Google, we can bring in and ingest all of their ads and then we use computer vision, use artificial intelligence to tag that image or that video with all of its attributes.

And when you bring that tagging against all your ads into a reporting system, you get a different piece of information back, which is what parts of my creative are performing better or worse with certain audiences. So it stops being about well, did this ad work for this channel or at this time or for this promotion or for this product? It starts being more about does blue work in this audience? Does dark backgrounds, do pictures of cake like that's one of the famous ones from our work is our own marketing team uses this feature in GenStudio and they found out that pictures of cake resonated with—I mean, who wouldn't want to see some cake, like on a YouTube role or like a Facebook ad—but it really did without that tagging and tying it to revenue, you wouldn't necessarily kick off a new creative round to go make more cake.

A lot of creative teams want to try something new. They don't necessarily want to go back and repeat, oh, let's just do a bunch of cakes, but when you can objectively say cakes perform better than phone booths, our next ad should feature food at least let's try food or, and let's scale that to other regions. Another example is when the Olympics happened, there was all of this football or soccer content that Adobe was putting out there and then they repurposed that for their Brazil market and really it showed how quickly—if you can look at the performance of the ad itself on the content or creative level, you can quickly double down in what's working and turn off what's not working. And I think that's where we're saving our clients' spend is we're just not putting dollars behind bad creative or just underperforming creative.

Alan Hart: There is that work hand in hand with the GenStudio stuff that we were just talking about, like does that data help feed into the GenStudio?

Ed Kennedy: Yes. And that's actually the entire vision for this product is that we're bringing. Adobe reflects kind of how the market has worked, which is we've got a creative cloud and an experience cloud and the marketers use the experience cloud and the creatives use the creative cloud, and GenStudios, the first time we're bringing those two groups together so that you're creating, but you're also analyzing performance and you're publishing ads or emails directly to the channel, so yes that functionality's embedded directly within the product so that anyone can see what's working and then just immediately initiate a new creative workflow.

Our ultimate vision is that you should actually be able to score your creative before it ships, if it actually is going to perform well. And then also use those attributes to inform the next time you use Firefly. So if you're going to ask for an image or a short 5-second video, you should just be able to reference: well, these are the attributes they're performing well with my target audience, let's create videos or ads off of that input.

Alan Hart: That's awesome. I mean, the thing of bringing those teams together, the performance marketers and the creative marketers with a better intelligence around it is pretty cool and the fact that like I do a lot of work in analyzing media effectiveness, right?, and the one thing that we always forget with those models is that creative actually wins the day.

Ed Kennedy: Creative carries the day. Yeah, it's the biggest contributor to incremental sales. It's like, yes, reach, relevancy, audience, it all matters, but I mean, we all know as consumers when we receive content that's not a fit for us, we get ad fatigue, we scroll, we skip, we don't engage, we disengage from that brand. And so creative is so important, but it's really interesting to watch a creative professional start to be exposed to the life of a marketer and watch them almost squirm, and seeing their creative performance broken down into little attributes of like, well, you chose to put a cake or a phone booth like that worked or didn't work.

But equally, marketers are having to take a role in the creative process. Now it's time for marketers to actually take that ownership of it's not just about speeds and feeds or just about my audience segmentation, or my role as, I

actually need to *think* about what message is going to resonate with my audience rather than just throwing a lot of different ideas against the wall.

Alan Hart: I call that marketing with a big M.

Ed Kennedy: Yes, exactly.

Alan Hart: That's marketing with the little M.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, like grown up marketing.

Alan Hart: Yeah, well, I know you've also got a new beta around AI agents in this process, so tell me a little bit about how that works.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, it's something we're really excited about. I mean, full disclosure, we're definitely jumping on the agent bandwagon like everybody's got to have an agent and we have one, too. In fact, Adobe is launching tons of agents right now. But I think where we're trying to stay pragmatic to what the customers and brands need us to do is we've shown them GenStudio where you can enter a prompt and get back, copy and/or enter a prompt and get back an image. That's great for like that one channel that one time, but what if I have a brief that is the genesis of my entire marketing campaign. It's got the goals, the personas, the channels, the products, the spend.

I want to feed all that context of the campaign into an agent and have it start giving me iterations of a campaign idea—like give and that's what this agent does. It gives you, like, three to five different campaign directions and starts drafting ads or emails based off of those concepts that you select. So it's, we're trying to get to a place and I think we will get there this year where the brief becomes the new prompt. So instead of entering a prompt to get content, you submit your brief and. it, the agent starts working for you and you interact with it from there.

Alan Hart: That's, that's fascinating. I mean, the new creative team could be these agents if you will.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah. I saw someone on socials recently talking about this idea of, like, a marketing engineer. This is basically this person that is really governing AI and overseeing how GenAI and the agents that power them are actually delivering on the scope of work rather than like this kind of separation of, well, this is what I do and this is what AI does. It's sort of like, the human, the marketing team is actually overseeing all these tools.

Alan Hart: It's a good way to put it and it makes me think of like the, I'm going to date myself, but when we moved from, like, print ads to, like, web, and then there was this transition of "interactive" people.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, they're all the interactive designers, and ...

Alan Hart: Yeah, and now it's just: you're a designer ...

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, because you do web and you do print or maybe you don't do print anymore. But there's definitely ...

And I see that true with like marketing analysts. I think that role of a marketing analyst that's deep in data is a really good persona for adopting Generative AI. And that's what we've had to do with GenStudios, we've got to find the evangelists that really love and are interested in Generative AI to do the first pilot—that's back to the scaling issue. That's actually the hardest part, is finding the right people inside of an organization that get it and are passionate about Generative AI, even outside of their work. They use ChatGPT regularly, or they're just they're creative in some way. And then there's a second wave that is really where the work begins, which is what we call the conscripts. It's when the brand team says all of you in this marketing department are now going to learn Generative AI and we're

totally changing the way you work and it feels a bit threatening. That's where scaling to production happens or it doesn't, is in that second wave. The people that love it, they adopt it, but the people that are a bit skeptical or nervous, they're the ones that can make that project fail or soar.

Alan Hart: Well, it's been fun talking about business and GenAI. I wanted to step back and have a couple of other questions I ask everyone comes on the show. My first one is my favorite question to ask, and it's has there ever been an experience of your past that defines your makes up who you are today?

Ed Kennedy: Yeah, I mean, I think if we slow down enough and reflect, there are probably key things. I did a lot of like personal work in my early 20s, a lot of personal development. And I learned like how much our lives are governed by stories and by narratives and that's why marketing exists. Like the reason that we connect with brands in marketing is because there's a narrative behind the ad. There's some idea that resonates with us.

And I discovered when I was younger that I was kind of playing out a story that was someone else's story or was like society's story about like what it means to like to have a career. You know, like life was about working really hard, and like getting married and having kids and I remember and realizing like, and I said at the end of that sentence and then I'll be happy. You know, like there's this story about humanity that I'm included in like that you just you work really hard, you kind of play the game and then at the end of it, there's some reward.

And I kind of realized like that how ridiculous that is and how like, no one, that's not true. That's just a story that I say and that we say, and so I think that had a really profound effect on like in my 20s and I do still work hard. I still have a wife and kids, but the whole context is different. It's just really about are we, are you doing meaningful work? You've seen probably or lots of people have seen, the surveys of people who are near the end of their lives, who the biggest thing that they deal with is regret of what they didn't do or the chances they didn't take. And I think that really hit home when I was younger and I've tried to stay true to that, even in a corporate world where I still need a paycheck.

I still need to pay for the mortgage. But have it be meaningful rather than just be a chase or a race. And I think that was like, a big moment when I was younger.

Alan Hart: I like that notion and I've been caught up in the rat race. I would describe that in my own terms and making sure you can enjoy the *ride* along the way. I think that's ...

Ed Kennedy: I think that's really all you get. You only get the ride. It's like that's all you get in life—you get to go on the (roller) coaster and then you get off, like that the ride is the experience. That's the life. And I think now, like in approaching, I guess middle age where you start to see I'm kind of sandwiched between not being as young as I used to be, having older kids and then having aging parents, like you start to really feel just that time, the timeless nature of like the present moment, and actually being able to enjoy. And so like, yeah, I spend more time like FaceTiming with my kids and try to connect with people rather than the work. You know? I think that's what AI or Generative AI can't mimic, and that's why humans need to run marketing. That's why when I talk to marketing leaders and they're concerned about like AI taking their jobs and like, well, where's the humanity? Are robots going to sell to robots? If that's the case, then we're in trouble.

But if we're going to stay in a paradigm where marketers are marketing to consumers or to businesses, then the humans are going to be in the driving seat and it's just about scale.

Alan Hart: Got cha. If you're starting this journey all over again, what advice would you give yourself, your younger self?

Ed Kennedy: That's a good question. I think it's the advice that I try to give myself now, which is like, don't take yourself too seriously. Like, I can kind of—my wife calls me intense and that's the nicest way that she says, she's like, "you're intense." And it's true and I am. And that's that comes from a good place, but I also like try, I have to really remind myself to not take myself too seriously. And also like, I think part of my story of like seeing that kind of life arc that we all kind of subscribe to in Western culture and kind of letting that go was also just the expectations. You know that like I have to be perfect or I have to do it right right away.

And I think I would want my younger self to know that it's going to be okay and like, don't take yourself too seriously and like, enjoy the ride and give myself some compassion or some empathy for like the hard moments that we've experienced. I think we all kind of suck up in corporate America and it's like it's about the work and it's about the performance and it's about the revenue or it's about the results; and sometimes it's really not about the people.

And it's like, how can we get back to that and just enjoy the time that we have together and the work we get to do.

Alan Hart: Is there a topic either you're trying to learn more about or you think marketers need to be learning more about today?

Ed Kennedy: I mean, obviously, Generative AI is like the go-to of course, like if you're not like, go to Firefly, adobe.com, enter a prompt like just it, try and see like have that connection to prompting for results use ChatGPT like start to get familiar with what your life as a future marketer will be. We have what we call GenStudio Academy where we like take people through a self-directed course on prompting.

So prompting is definitely a big one, but like personally back to this whole like what life, what matters in life is like I've definitely gotten into like the financial independence, retire early, the "fire movement." I'm not like a "fire person" like there are people that go to conferences, but I'm definitely trying to play a different game these days and I wish marketers were like and just corporate employees were just a little bit more forward-looking on their financial health and their financial future so that they don't feel like they have to work themselves into the ground just to make a paycheck.

So like, just taking some of that personal power back into your own life and career is what I'm passionate about and I guess would want others to be too.

Alan Hart: That's awesome. Is there any anything that you're curious about could be a macro trend or something very niche. Just curious what you're curious about.

Ed Kennedy: I mean the whole emergence of video generation is really fascinating because it's got that new wow factor to it like we just launched video generation and beta at Adobe. And it's so cool like it is so amazing. So I'm definitely like geeking out on like, you could take a picture of a brand campaign and give it to Firefly and it will create a video. That's blowing the mind. This is being filmed right now. And so like, that's probably where people start to freak out. It's like, oh, you could just take an image and like, you don't need to film anything anymore, it's probably not going to be the case, but it's just about how do we work with that technology? Like, I want to get that in the hands as many of my customers as possible. It's just like trying the video models that we have is just so, so cool.

Alan Hart: Yeah, it's fascinating to me how some of those tools, it can almost create entire worlds that you're living, not living in but you're immersed.

Ed Kennedy: Yeah. You're immersed. Well, there's going to be a time pretty soon where and what will happen when there's an Oscar-nominated short film that was completely made by one person and AI. Like where the entire thing was just made on a machine ... those are the futures we're going to start, those are now within reach or you can

imagine that that could be possible and that's pretty cool to sort of imagine how that's going to disrupt really all industries as we move forward.

Alan Hart: Last question for you. What do you think is the largest opportunity or threat facing marketers today?

Ed Kennedy: I think the biggest threat or the personal risk to any individual in marketing is to be cynical about Generative AI and to sit on the sidelines and wait it out. Like when the internet came out there were skeptics and there's some famous quotes of people saying in the '90s, "Oh, the internet? That thing's going up in smoke."

And you could point to like the metaverse like a couple of years ago is like that hype cycle that everyone saw the metaverse, but that required us to change our form factor and put on technology that just isn't there yet. Glasses, headwear just isn't there yet for metaverse, but I think it will.

But Generative AI fits right now in your form function—like how do you work? You sit at a desk, you work with a phone, you use a laptop. Like that fits your way of working and so if you're on the sidelines waiting for Generative AI to come work on you, you're going to miss the opportunity of shaping how it transforms your business. So I would be concerned of hearing any marketer say I'm not even interested in trying Generative AI, because it is just going to be so revolutionary.

Alan Hart: Well, Ed, thank you for coming on the show.

Ed Kennedy: Thanks for having me.

Alan Hart: I don't think I've ever been so centered yet thinking about the future.

Ed Kennedy: That's the idea. You should come, take a yoga class one day.

Alan Hart: I will. Thank you.

Ed Kennedy: Thank you so much, Alan. It's good to be here.

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