



EPISODE 17

Google it: Smarter marketing with AI: Insights from Sean Downey, president of Americas & global partners at Google

Host: Alan Hart, leader in marketing and customer strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP

Guests: Sean Downey, president of Americas & global partners at Google

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.

Today on the show, I've got Sean Downey, president of Americas & Global Partners at Google. Sean leads the advertising business for Google, which makes up roughly somewhere around 70% of the business. We'll talk about the evolution of marketing and advertising platforms like Google. We'll talk about AI and automation, how that's been integrated into the Google platforms for anybody to use it that can use Google ad platforms themselves. We'll talk about change management and the leadership principles that he puts in place to help his teams be more innovative and adapt to change in a growing marketplace. That and much more with Sean Downey.

Well, Sean, welcome to the show.

Marketing Beyond | Episode 17

Sean Downey: It's great to be here, Alan. So, happy to talk to you today.

Alan Hart: Yeah, me too. So before we get talking about business, I have got this interesting stat that you've been to approximately 1,000 youth baseball games.

Sean Downey: Youth. That's the critical word right there. At least a thousand. I have three sons. They all play baseball. And I have one that's better than the others. And so he's a fairly accomplished travel player, and he travels everywhere on the weekends to play baseball since he was eight. So I've been in every state, almost every hotel. I even left Cannes last year early because he had a tournament in Georgia. I think it's important to do those things with your kids because it's a little bit of life balance but also shows your personal range. What I love to tell people about it is one night I was here, I was in the Mediterranean, I was sipping rosé, just having a great time, and then 24 hours later, I was on a fly-fishing boat on the Chattahoochee River. So, pretty good fun; fun life to have.

Alan Hart: I love it, I love it. I love the spectrum there, too, that you're illustrating.

Sean Downey: Everyone loves work/life balance.

Alan Hart: Yes!

Sean Downey: And work/life balance comes in, you know, sometimes you're more work, sometimes you're more life, but I think we should all be normal humans. Baseball teaches life lessons. It teaches failure. I'm a huge growth mindset person, and it's kind of fun to see your kid go through it because he's going to be a better person. That's a, you know, keeps me grounded when I'm coming to work.

Alan Hart: I love it. What was your path? Where did you get your start in your career, and how did you end up the president of Americas & Global Partnerships at Google? Big job. How did you get started?

Sean Downey: It was unintentional to find my way to this job. When I started in the workforce, there really wasn't a Google—at least a Google that anyone knew about. I think it was still in the garage in Menlo Park. But I'd like to say there was a grand plan or that I trained to do this role. I don't think I'm any smarter than a lot of people walking down the Croisette here, but I was willing to take some risks in my career and I joined the digital marketplace in a schoolhouse in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, building designed websites. And I took that job because nobody else wanted it, and I thought it'd be a place I could differentiate myself and build a career because this internet thing was new back in that time. And then I just found myself in a really fortunate place to learn that industry from the ground up. I did some startups—some that worked, some that didn't. I worked for some great companies along the way, like DoubleClick, and I was fortunate to get acquired by Google. And then here I am in this seat, but I think that's because I took a risk of something that was ill-defined and then worked really hard to master my craft and do well at it. And sometimes that works out for you, and even if you're not the smartest person in the room or the most pedigreed person, you just work hard and take risks, and you're going to find yourself in a fun spot.

Alan Hart: That's awesome. I'm going to pull on this thread a minute because I'm also from North Carolina and your connection to North Carolina and that story was pretty cool. I grew up in North Carolina. I went to NC State and UNC for business school.

Sean Downey: Amazing. I was in a schoolhouse in Jordan Lake, which was a really remote part of Chapel Hill, where UNC is located. Now it's highly populated. My first baseball player son was born in Raleigh, Durham. And I moved there because I went to school in Buffalo and it was really cold there—the opposite of Cannes! I wanted to go somewhere warm and work and find a job, and that launched my career. And it's really weird to tell people you

Marketing Beyond | Episode 17

launched your advertising career, especially digitally, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Nobody does that. You have to be in New York or Silicon Valley, and I'm a native New Yorker, so I ended up back in New York.

Alan Hart: I love it. I love it. Well, talk about Google's advertising business today. What is the scope of it? I mean, I believe if my numbers are right, it's roughly 70% of the revenue today. But tell me more about the scope.

Sean Downey: Well, it's the biggest business in Google, as you know. And we drive a lot of growth for a lot of companies. I think that's our core value proposition. And as the economy does well, whether you're a small business or a big business, we grow when you grow, and that's important for us. But, really, we're in the business of helping people grow their business, and we have these two amazing platforms that we focus the business on. We have this thing called Google Search. Many people have heard of it. It's where people go to find information, to ask questions, to get the answers that they want. It's where small businesses, whether you're in New York City or in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, can connect to commerce around the world and grow their businesses. And it's an amazing place to connect people and grow. And we think we solve a lot of critical problems and growth for our partners. So that's a huge portion of our business, obviously.

And then we have this amazing platform called YouTube. It's up and down the Croisette. You can't go five feet without meeting a creator. We are celebrating our 20th anniversary for YouTube, and we're celebrating at the beach today, down the street. But that's another place that's had its own ecosystem. That's where people go to be entertained. There's really only one YouTube, and we do short form, long form, audio, podcasts. It's a billion hours of podcasts watched a month. And that's a place to build a brand, to build resonance with a consumer base to, you know, get into a community. And that has a lot of solutions that help people grow their business—and also people build careers if your creator. And that's really the scope of the ads business. We have incredible places where you discover, you can be influenced, and then it's a really critical path to purchase that drives a lot of value for advertisers, publishers, creators, and ultimately allows consumers and people to find what they need and get a lot more educated.

Alan Hart: There's a lot of evolution, if you will, in the digital marketing space. You've got consumers, you've got privacy. How is Google adapting its ad solutions to meet consumers in a more private world? But also help marketers drive marketing effectiveness?

Sean Downey: Number one, we always start with the consumer, so thank you for asking it from that lens. Consumer privacy is the most critical thing for us. People are coming here to find something that improves their lives, whether it's personal information about something important in their life or to find a product that's going to improve their family life. And protecting their information, protecting who they are, all while delivering relevance to them, is really important. So we want to build solutions that serve that purpose so that we can have a good ecosystem.

For marketers, we want them to be successful, so we want them to make sure that we can go into a situation where they can find the right audience that's identified and work all the way through an influence curve to get to some level of purchase or intent. And that can be done in a really privacy-safe way. Like, you put it from a cookie/ID perspective, there are a lot of ways to do targeting and most of them are privacy safe. So we really focus on those things, and I think our job as technologists and platform owners is to make sure that you can be successful in that privacy-safe way. I built a lot of programmatic businesses at DoubleClick and Google, and cookies was one way and IDs was one way to do things. But technology advances and technology changes.

I think what's really working and resonating right now is this constructive AI-powered campaigns. They're really privacy safe. You're understanding intents, understanding behaviors, and then we're finding people that exhibit

Marketing Beyond | Episode 17

those. And we used to call that machine learning. We used to call that automation. That sounded really boring. The AI revolution allows you to say it's AI-powered things, and that's helping growth. And those are very privacy safe. It doesn't require individual IDs. It doesn't require us to know a lot about individual specifically, but we can find what a brand needs, who exhibits those types of traits, and we can find people that they didn't think they wanted.

So when I talk to brands, I ask them to do three things. I say, invest in first-party data, because no one knows more about your customer than you do. So tell us about them. We don't need to know who they are. What do they like? How they behave? And then we can go find those people on our platforms and we can make sure that resonates. We're trying to get them to use some of those AI-powered campaigns because that's how we're going to find people they didn't know that they needed. A lot of brands can get caught in the trap of thinking they know exactly who their customer is. When in reality, they're looking for people that they didn't know existed, that are incremental to their business, and a lot of those AI-powered campaigns do that. And we want them to have really good transparency about how they get that to other sites. And that's the crux of things that we're trying to accomplish. And when cookies were being bandied about, I asked my teams, I gave them a very simple task: Prove that you don't need cookies before they go away. So almost all of our marketers are really well equipped to leverage their first-party data, to leverage AI-powered campaigns, and they don't even worry about the specific technology. They just worry about the outcomes they can drive. And we're getting a really privacy-safe world because of that. And we're getting better outcomes for advertisers because of that, which is the entire point.

Alan Hart: You mentioned AI already, but maybe we take that step further. How is AI and automation influencing the products that you're able to provide to brands and agencies today?

Sean Downey: They're deeply embedded. Google has been an AI-first company for 10-plus years. And that's really important to remember because we've been developing the research, we've been putting them in our products for quite a long time. Everyone loved Generative AI, but, you know, general machine learning AI has been in our product set for quite a long time, driving a lot of business results. And we're investing all of our new things that we develop—in DeepMind, in the labs—into our advertising tools to benefit our customers. So I've got a lot of brands. We love to do AI labs and summits, and they come to me and they always ask, "How can I use AI in marketing?" And my first response is you are already doing this. Because if you're using Google Search, it's AI-powered. If you're using YouTube, it's AI-powered, so maybe we'll unpack it. What do I mean? We have a lot of our advertisers using AI-powered search, which means we allow them to look for search terms that they didn't know people were searching for. A lot of people are searching for things that you're not thinking they're searching for that are really relevant to your campaign.

Alan Hart: Product category, yeah.

Sean Downey: And the whole goal, as we talked about earlier, is to find consumers you didn't know you needed. And if I put you in an AI-powered campaign that has a broad search function, it's identifying those people in real time for you and extending your audience. That's an AI-powered format. It's built in the tool. You don't need any special skills. You just need to use the tool. That's a really important thing.

As we launch all these new things, if you walk up and down the Croisette this week, you've seen Veo 3, you've seen Imogen 4, you see these amazing creative tools. Those get embedded into the tool, and that enables a lot of small advertisers who don't have the resources that the large ones do to make creative messaging faster; to have a more resonant call to action that's going to work for them and improve their results. Those things all get built into the tool. Equally that happens in YouTube. We have AI-powered campaigns that help people get through campaign functions, because if you're on YouTube, I could be watching a 15-second video, which requires a certain ad. I could watch long form, which you might have a 30-second trailer, which people are so used to. I might have an audio ad. I

Marketing Beyond | Episode 17

might have shorts. All those things have to be identified in real time, and AI is powering that for them. And equally we're giving them some creative tools that help them scale production because they have more assets that could be produced. And so you could become a really good AI-driven marketer by adopting good tools that we did all the work for. You just need to go and be trained. And then you can focus on all the innovation and the efficiency that you can get on all the tools that make your operation better, make you more intelligent, help you scale creative outside the system. But we start by just building everything we have in the technology. And much like your cell phone, you don't worry about what's in it; you worry about what it does. So when you come to Google Ads and YouTube, you can do what you want and you get the outcomes you desire, and most of it's powered by AI.

Alan Hart: Well, I think it's pretty interesting that—I mean, it's just embedded, right? If you use our tools, you're going to be using and getting the benefits of AI. As you think about helping moving from the, say, products, if you will, how do brands and agencies adopt tools? How do you empower them to help them understand where advertising in the next generation of advertising is going? How do you support those two groups?

Sean Downey: Yeah, we do a lot of things. So maybe we'll put it in a couple of buckets for you. First, there's got to be some education number one because people see themselves better in a world, in a vision, if you can paint the picture where they can see themselves in it. I think that's always something that as a communicator you have to do really well. Paint the vision, let me see myself in it, and I will embrace it. That starts with what is their consumer doing. So what do you have to do well to market well and consumers are behaving a lot differently than they were two to three years ago. I always like to tell advertisers they're predictably unpredictable because they don't have patterns, and there's no traditional purchase funnel that you should expect. They are doing really four things. Like, if we want to be simple, they're doing four things. They're searching. We're all really well accustomed to searching for information. They're streaming. YouTube's the No. 1 streaming platform in the US for two straight years running. It uploads more content in a day than every other place does combined in a year. There's always something relevant to watch. The scrolling—we all love to scroll. Sometimes we're in the doom scroll on our commute, but that's a great place for inspiration—to discover new things—and of course, they're shopping. Now the difference is they're doing potentially all of those things at the same time. Like if you are on YouTube, you might search for something that turns into a stream that you might be scrolling. And then of course, you saw on it something you want to buy and you purchased it. Are you streaming? Are you scrolling? Or are you shopping?

Alan Hart: Right. All of them. [laughs]

Sean Downey: You're doing all of them. So you have to get people to understand that picture, and that means you must do things differently. You can't run your campaign structure the way you've done before. You can't run your targeting the way you've done before. You can't separate your budgets the way you did before. So let me start by educating you. So we do a lot of that. We try to get people to understand what's happening in this world and how you really get to discovery through inspiration to purchase. I think that's a really important thing.

Then we try and train them on what we think they should do foundationally. We talked about media—that's an easy AI case. We show them how to change that, how to adapt to it, how to create a lot of efficiency and growth out of it. Because the most important thing is it has better results if you get a lot of bump of improvements using some of these automated campaigns. On average, we're seeing about a 10% lift from AI-powered campaigns on Search and over 5% on YouTube. You get benefits. So, here's what they are. Learn how to use them.

Then they want them to understand the creative process, and there's all these incredible creative tools that are democratizing creation and the pace of creation more importantly. And we try and get them to understand what's the journey that they can go on. And a lot of this exists outside my tool set, but it's powered by cloud because they're releasing all these new tools. And we can talk to them about how do you generate really good insights. Can

Marketing Beyond | Episode 17

you use AI to make you smarter about your insights? What do I mean by that? Imagine a world where you could take all the campaigns that were ever successful and learn from them, and then make more of that look like them. Then think of the world where you could take all those campaigns and then decide which ones you were most proud of because they were work that represented your brand value and you merged the “I’m proud of this” and “It worked.” And use AI to tell you what that brief looks like, how to build more like it, and shorten your cycle to creation so you have a faster learning curve. We teach them that. Then we teach them how to create scale, creating through partners, where they can create a multitude of assets in real time because optimization has been limited by the ability to make things—like, I can’t make a thousand ads, because it’s too expensive and it takes too long. But with AI, I can find that thing I love that works, that resonates, and I can make thousands of them in real time because it’s all these tools that scale that development and there’s great partners doing this work in the marketplace. And then I can get into ideation and creation and shrinking that time. That’s important because the brief time for a CMO is shrunk. Lorraine Twohill likes to talk about this. She’s my CMO at Google. She used to have six months’ lead time for a campaign. We released products all the time now. In AI, she has 10 days. So how do you get from brief to execution in 10 days in the old process?

Alan Hart: Right.

Sean Downey: You fail miserably.

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Sean Downey: You can’t do it.

Alan Hart: There’s no way.

Sean Downey: But you can use tools to get there faster, and you can accelerate your development, you can accelerate your production, and you can accelerate your ideation really fast. So we teach them that. Then we get into measurement, and we talk about how do you model things, how do you look for the insights that you didn’t know existed, and how do you think about valuing things across a funnel and on performance? And we’re helping people redeploy measurement strategies with the right data—and that could be AI-driven. And those are all great. And then marketers are usually pretty happy. And I remind them, oh, there’s one more thing. Do you know what the one thing is?

Alan Hart: I have no idea.

Sean Downey: It’s this little thing called change managements because humans are slow to adapt to things that feel different. And the number one—they do a survey. I’ve been doing surveys all week because I have all these AI labs happening on the beach down here [at Cannes]. And I love the first question to be not what your strategy is, what’s your most important project; it’s like, talk about your greatest frustration in your journey for AI transformation. And every single table, every single day, morning and afternoon, says, “Change management for my people.” How do you get them to learn new skills? How do you get them to accept that they might have to advance how their job works? And that fear that it might take it away? All these things exist. You have to have a really strong change management plan, both for your teams and for your enterprise, because you have to partner differently with your cross-functional partners. That’s a journey, and that’s the education. And that’s a fun one, because most people love transformation, and they come here to solve problems and we’ve got plenty of solutions for them.

Alan Hart: Right. You’ve got such a massive business already. You’re managing change, new products, launching—this rapid cycle, if you will. As you think about leadership principles that you use to help your teams be more

Marketing Beyond | Episode 17

adaptable, more innovative, or think about innovation—and even think about those partners, agencies, and brands—what principles do you lean on in terms of fostering the right environment?

Sean Downey: Yeah, well, I learned most of my principles from my father. So, he was a car dealer. I sat in his office as a kid in New York, and I watched how he operated and a few themes came out that I realized when I was older. He had an open-door policy. He painted a picture that everyone in that building, whether you were the owner—his owner was a trust fund kid and he owned a lot of dealerships to occupy himself—or you were the kid that came in and washed the cars, you were valuable to the operation and your ideas mattered. So there was this collective vision of success for the dealership because he wanted customers to walk through the door of this little Honda dealership in Layton, New York, and feel welcomed and empowered to get what they wanted and treated well. And it was everyone's job to do it and anyone can improve it. I watched that happen day after day after day.

So I entered a leadership position and I want to create one vision. I want our people to be chasing the same thing with purpose. I want my people to have the same message, and I want my people to understand their role is to solve customer problems and help a customer reach their vision, and they'll do whatever it takes together to get there. And that requires you to do a few things. It requires you to have a growth mindset. I don't care if you fail. I love failure. I love fabulous failure. But I want you to learn something from it and then teach that learning to someone else so it's not repeated. I want us to ideate on solutions. Listen, that means our number one skill is curiosity. Ask what are you trying to solve for? Why are you trying to solve for that? What are your problems? And then present a solution and all the things I have to help them do that. Understand value. So, be a data scientist by understanding what makes value realized for a customer and be able to showcase that to them. Be a great storyteller. People understand stories better than data or lots of long slides. Tell our story of how people should get from here to here, using your tools and doing those things. And then most importantly, don't be afraid to have a point of view, be a challenger. And you empower all those things because you want people to be able to go to our customers, explain the value of what we have, solve their business problem, and be motivated to solve that first and foremost. And that culture is known, it's celebrated, and everyone knows when they walk through the doors in my building that they contribute to something greater than them. And that empowers innovation, that empowers customer orientation, and most importantly, it empowers growth personally and professionally. So that's it.

Alan Hart: I love that. Well, one of the things I like to do on the show is get to know you a little bit better. We know you've got three boys who play baseball, but my favorite question to ask everyone that comes on is, has there been an experience of your past that defines or makes up who you are today?

Sean Downey: Well, it may be a few. So, I think you learn the most when things don't go well. I think that's the most important part. And when companies go through tough times, everyone always maybe feels it personally. So I always like to remember that you haven't always been on top. When I meet people who are like, "Oh, your life must be amazing. You're the president of Google in the Americas. You have this great job, this great family, and life's been so easy." And life's been easy to you and your view because I've learned from all the things that maybe weren't so great, and I've learned that you can't ever take anything for granted because I've been laid off. I've been in a startup world that was shut down for no reason other than it was the wrong market fit. I've been laid off because the business didn't perform well, because we weren't doing the right things. So I've learned in that environment in those early 2000s that you can't take things for granted, and you must be the best at what you do every day, and you do that by learning and being open to feedback about how to make the business better. And that's been maybe at the worst time of your life. The first time I got laid off, I was newly married in Raleigh, North Carolina, with a 1-year-old. That's not comfortable. But then you have to figure out how to rebuild yourself, and that's a really important thing.

Marketing Beyond | Episode 17

The next time is we talked about my dad and his impact on me—was when he passed away from cancer, I got to recant in my brain, because I had to write the eulogy, all the lessons that he taught me. So, I gave you some of them that I learned as a child, but I didn't remember them until I was maybe 43 and I was reflecting on this man's life and what he meant to me and the lessons that he taught to me, and it started to really formulate my leadership principle, my personality, that I want to show up and work. I realized that you can't have a business Sean and a personal Sean. There's just Sean. And so he has to show up as his authentic self. You have to treat people the way at work you treat them at home. You have to be a compromiser at work the way you are at home. You have to build relationships at work the way you do at home, and I shouldn't be any different in my house at night than I am in the office or with my customers, because my job is to make people comfortable and know that they have a great environment and be welcoming. And when I learned that, I went from hard-charging business executive who cared about the bottom line and growth to hard-charging business executive who cared about people and environment and culture and it produced growth. And that's just going through maybe some hard reflection period when you're watching your mentor go through the tough time. So there's a little bit about me.

Alan Hart: No, it's helpful. If you were giving yourself—that young self—advice, what advice would you give your younger self?

Sean Downey: Don't be afraid to be honest with yourself! I think the hardest thing is when you come through with youthful bravado, which we all have, you think you know. And everyone has another level to reach if they're open to looking at it. Everyone could be a better public speaker, everyone could be a better data analyst, everyone could be a better seller, everyone could be a better engineer, but if you don't seek out your weaknesses and be open to them and accept them, you don't know what to work on. No one gets any better by working on what they're great at. They get better by working on what they're not so great at. So when you recognize that and you can accept it, then you can embrace true growth and then you'll be better.

Alan Hart: Is there a topic either you're trying to learn more about or you think marketers in general need to be learning more about, right now?

Sean Downey: I think change management. I'm going to go back to that. It's like the number one thing. I think people are trying to learn how to change a culture and reflecting on a lot of my conversations, whether it was with CEOs this week, or CMOs, but a lot of it was about how do I create this culture to reduce the fear of risk-taking, which is like a form of change management, because they see the opportunity. Like, if you walk down the beach here, it's really optimistic. There's all this amazing technology, all these amazing ideas, and all these executives here want to embrace it and alter the way their company works and transform their company. And the biggest challenge they have is how do I get my team and my company to embrace this. So you just can't will it. You have to think about really good change management strategies, how do you set up different KPI structures, how do you set up different celebration or recognition structures? How do you showcase it? And then how do you psychologically and emotionally move people to a different place? And that's a lot. So there's plenty of books on it. There's plenty of podcasts. There's plenty of experts. There's probably a self-help course if you want to find it. It's probably a YouTube podcast actually. They can probably find it. and I think that's a topic. I'm a student of that; I love that stuff. I think I'm noticing here a lot of people are quickly becoming students of that.

Alan Hart: What are you curious about out in the world? Could be a trend, a subculture, something you're just into at the moment. Just curious.

Sean Downey: I'm like trying to figure out how people find resonance with things. What draws somebody—like the psychological effects? Because as I'm trying to transform our YouTube story to the marketplace, YouTube's actual power is its authenticity, and not of the platform. It's authenticity of the creators on it who have drawn all these

Marketing Beyond | Episode 17

people, all these fans, to them because of their stories, because of how authentic they are. I'm really trying to understand what's behind? Because that's the secret to really great marketing. It's the secret to really great leadership. It's the secret to really great change management. But how do you tap into that, the ethos of something, or the resonance of something, and get people to understand it, feel simplified about it, and move them? It's probably some deep philosophical thing or that will probably have a book written about, and I'm super interested in it. So every time I see a creator—and I see a lot of them because they're crawling up through my beach right now—and that's what I asked them, "What did you do? And you find it's trial and error, and it's just, I'm just being myself. I'm telling my story. I'm treating these people like my family. You understand that everything becomes really human, and it's not lost on me that I work for a company that is powered in AI. But I really think humanity is its greatest strength because humans power all these things. If you can tap into that culture and what makes people resonate, great things happen. So I'm really obsessed with it. So this is my conversation with everyone. I'm trying to figure it out. Maybe apply some of it myself.

Alan Hart: I think it's a great question. It's great question to be pondering. And I love the notion you talk about—the humanity is what draws us together. Couldn't agree more. My last question for you: What do you think is the largest either opportunity or threat facing marketers today?

Sean Downey: Well, I'm an optimist, so I don't like to work in threats. I think the pace of ideas is the biggest opportunity. A lot of people ask me about efficiencies or jobs and what can be taken away with technology, and I'm always a person that believes that technology advances what you can do and guess what's happened since the dawn of time? You just even think about communication: We didn't communicate. We wrote on stones. We got some paper. We got a printing press. We got a radio. We got a TV. We got the internet. Communication has always evolved and it advances what you can do and not do. And the biggest opportunity is to understand what you can do and point yourself in that vision, because that's going to build like long-standing businesses and brands that last. And if you don't do it and someone else does—maybe to your threats—you'll be left behind. The penalty for complacency is irrelevance. And there's always the law of substitution. If you can't do something, there's a substitution for you. So it's really critical for brands to embrace the future, understand how to do it, and build a plan. And that has way more opportunity than downside, because if they get it right, it's going to be tremendous for them. And I think a lot of them are walking out of Cannes feeling that and recognizing that because so many of these things are real that weren't real a year ago, and they see that if they get it right, it's huge.

Alan Hart: Love it. Sean, thank you for coming on the show.

Sean Downey: It's my pleasure. It's been great spending some time with you.

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