



EPISODE 27

Ford's data decisioning for dealers and drivers: Insights from Ford Motor Company Head of Marketing Technology and Dealer Platforms, Mark Sucrese

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

Guests: Mark Sucrese, head of marketing technology and dealer platforms at Ford Motor Company

Alan Hart: So today on the show, I've got Mark Sucrese. He's the head of Marketing Technology & Dealer Platforms at the Ford Motor Company. And on the show today, we're going to talk about marketing technology—the data, the decisioning, and the content—and then how AI is changing and evolving that marketing technology stack for the future. That and much more with Mark Sucrese.

Alan (voice-over): Are you ready to go beyond the basics of marketing? I'm Alan Hart and this is Marketing Beyond, where I chat with the world's leading chief marketing officers and business innovators to share ideas that spark change and inspire you to challenge the status quo. Join us as we explore the future of marketing and its endless potential.

Alan: Well, Mark, welcome to the show.

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Mark Sucrese: Thanks.

Alan: I'm excited to have you here.

Mark: Yeah, great to be here.

Alan: I've always had people on the show that somehow have a brush with celebrity. But I think yours is very unique in the fact that you somehow met and hung out for a little while with the Bollywood megastar Shah Rukh Khan. Tell me about how that happened.

Mark: Yeah. Well, I didn't know he was a megastar at the time. I was working for my prior company and was on a long work trip [in India] and had an opportunity. I was at breakfast one morning and a gentleman approached me, and he had a fairly big entourage with him at the time. And so I knew he had to be somebody important. And he was asking me why I was there, and he gave me his name and said his name was Shah Rukh Khan. He was telling me here's good food to eat for breakfast, and it was a lot of fun. So I got to meet him, sat and talked for a little while and had no clue who the guy was! And coincidentally, that night—it was a Friday—and I had plans to go to a movie that was a big hit at the time, and he was starring in that movie—so I hadn't even put the two pieces together! And then I went to the office, and I asked everybody, "Who's this guy, Shah Rukh Khan?" And they said, "What are you talking about?" And I said, "Well, I met this guy," and they just went crazy. And so the whole office was going nuts. And I said, "Well, who is he?" And they said, "Oh, this is like your version of Tom Cruise." I was like, "OK, great." That was kind of cool to meet somebody. I think that's probably why he was talking to me for so long is because I didn't know who he was. A lot of fun.

Alan: I mean, it's interesting. They're people just like us. But we, somehow, because of the fame and what they do... So he was probably pretty refreshed!

Mark: Yeah! And it made the movie more interesting that night. I was like, OK! Now I know who this guy is! It was a lot of fun.

Alan: That's awesome. Well, I'd love to know how you got your start in your career. You're now the head of Marketing Technology & Dealer Platforms at Ford, but where'd you get started? And how'd you end up at Ford?

Mark: Wow, what a long road. OK, so I started in telco long ago in sales and service, and I wasn't very good at it. I didn't like being a salesperson. Not very good at it. But I did understand data and how people interact and the human element of communication styles and things through that process. So, that was sort of one of my life-changing events at that time, as I had worked with a person that said you're making good money, but you should probably take a step backwards and you'd be better off in this area. And that area was in marketing. And so I moved into an early data science role that was under the marketing organization and fell in love with doing that work. I wasn't making quite as good money as in sales, but it was fun to do something different. And I found that really interesting, the sort of human connection with the data. And so I just stuck with that. And then, I moved into high tech. So I moved to Austin, Texas, and worked for Dell for 10 years. Did the same thing, worked in software and marketing, and had a lot of fun. I met some incredible leaders at Dell. I think Dell probably forged my career to where it is today. It was a great experience, a great culture. And then I wanted to give the agency side a little try. So I worked for a big agency for quite some time and ran an AI group, and that was a lot of fun. Did that for about a decade. And then I felt like it was time for something new. And I felt like Ford had the right culture. I really love where they're going, changing up the automotive space, and they're doing a great job. And so, this opportunity came about and I just felt like it was a good marriage for me to bring the skill sets I had in MarTech and working with people and bringing innovation. And that's where Ford sort of headed.

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Alan: Talk to me a little bit about the scope of the role: MarTech and dealer platforms. It sounds like a lot of complexity.

Mark: It's really more about—we call it CX and DX—so it's dealer experience and customer experience. So, regardless of where folks are engaging with that brand, you're either a consumer that's new to the brand and learning about Ford, or you might be an experienced consumer and working with the dealers. And so regardless of where that's at, within a life cycle of a customer, those are the platforms that myself and my team support, and they're really focused on building connections with Ford. So, whether it's better website development or email programs or communication styles—those impact both, whether you're showing up at the dealer or you see an advertisement on television, right? They're the same. But, yeah, they work through different technologies to bring that to life.

Alan: Yeah. And so do you—most people listening to this hopefully know that the dealers—it's a B2B2C kind of business model, right? Because you've got Ford, the mothership, and you've got the dealers. They're all independent businesses in their own right. And then you have people like me going to buy a car. Or a truck. [laughs] Building technology at each of those layers is unique and I'm sure brings its own unique challenges.

Mark: Yeah. I mean, I think the challenge there is really within the data, because you think about customers that may own small or large businesses and they're buying from our Pro division and they're buying Ford vehicles like a Transit or something to that effect. They still might go home and have a Ford F-150. So they're still customers in different ways. And so, understanding your data and how to communicate with them and recognizing where they are in that journey, I think, is an important part of what we're doing. And Ford is on a mission to create those really great experiences for those people.

Alan: Yeah. You mentioned data. So, it leads me to personalization—because you can't really personalize without the data. How are you thinking about personalization now and the data you need to enable it, power it?

Mark: Yeah, that's funny you say that. When I was in Dell years ago—I'd say the early 2000s, 2004—marketers were talking about one-to-one communications then. I mean, here we are two decades later, we're still talking about the same thing. But I think, for personalization, that sort of reality is here now because there's massive amounts of data. People engage with brands anywhere they want, whether it's social media or, traditional marketing—engagement areas like an email campaign or something. They're still engaging with us, but they're all over the place and there's no consistent journey. So things like AI play an important role, creating these hyper-personalized experiences. So now the idea of having a segment of one, where a person can be individually treated and communicated to, is really where I think that we're headed. And I think that's where personalization is, is trying to get as close to that one-to-one. So that reality that we were talking about 20 years ago now is real. And I know we tried to get there back then, but I mean, I think the best you could do back then was maybe some macro or micro segmentation. Now, I think it's a real thing because, with the speed of the tech that we have and how fast the AI is working and how much data it can consume, we can get a better understanding of each profile.

Alan: Well, maybe a follow-up to that question is you've got your own data. You probably have to have third-party signals coming in as well. And then, as we talked about that layering of the B2B2C, you've got layers of signals that you've got to aggregate. Any top-level learnings of how to harness that? I mean, it's a lot.

Mark: Yeah. I think with the promise of what we have today, it's overwhelming at times. So I think it's important to get small wins along the way and show value in that. I think trying not to do maybe too much at once is the right approach. I mean, I think, where Ford is doing a great job is they're really focused in and fine-tuning their messages to each consumer. So if we can recognize them as a business owner or a regular consumer and you can get some

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small wins along the way—maybe it's the type of vehicle they might have an interest in or where they've been shown a vehicle they'll test drive or something. And being able to just focus on that moment in time and looking for those signals around that moment and focusing on that, I think we get some wins that way. I think over time, yeah, I think the idea is to bring the entire journey into that spectrum. But trying to boil the ocean all at once is challenging. So, yeah, that's what we tend to do is focus on those micro moments that are impactful.

Alan: So, as a MarTech guy—I'll put you in that bucket for the moment. We've got data. We know what we want to do to try to get to one-to-one personalization. But you've got a decision, at some level. And it feels like every company I talk to does it very different. They have their own unique ways. And sometimes they're outside decisioning models that are feeding into the system, and sometimes the models, the decisioning, is happening inside of whatever the tech stack is that you're working on. How do you think about the decisioning that has to happen around all that?

Mark: I mean, it's actually one of the three key pillars that we're really focused on. And, to your point, if you put the bookends—I'd say the bookends are data and content—so content has to be curated, created, designed, and developed in a very molecular way, the same way you're looking at your data. You're looking at the data in a molecular way. So once you have that, then having an appropriate decision engine. So big software companies are trying to tightly couple that into their platforms and using them more often. Where I've seen really great examples of this is where that is somewhat of an abstract layer. To do exactly what you talked about earlier—how do you understand these little moments when they're either shopping or browsing or buying—and having that decision engine be able to siphon through data, find the appropriate message or content or communication, and then give it out and serve it at the right time. So yeah, I've seen both. I've seen tightly coupled packaged solutions and sort of stand-alone. I'm sort of leaning more towards the stand-alone side. I think it allows me to help within things like maybe you're at the site of the dealer, or maybe you're in a call center. It doesn't always have to focus on the digital element of it.

Alan: Right. More customization.

Mark: Yeah. Exactly. And the modeling that you referred to allows some flexibility there. You want out-of-the-box stuff because you want to go to market fast. But being able to tap into how quickly AI is moving today and tap into all these models that are out there and the ability to use some of that is a great way to go. And a lot of those tightly coupled systems don't allow for that. So having something that's more abstract is sort of the approach.

Alan: Well building on what you said, you've got data, the content. You have decisioning as this middle layer. Let's throw AI and agentic on top. Is it an accelerant? How do you think about it integrating into that entire ecosystem?

Mark: I mean, happy to say coming into Ford, I was very pleased how far along they are. They've got a very good AI development team, and they're doing a heck of a job. And I'm excited to tap into all that work that's gone on. I think for Ford, like other companies, AI is still new. And we're very cautious on how we take our steps forward because, as you've clearly seen, probably all the cybersecurity risks that are out there and privacy laws and everything. So we're just making sure that how it gets used is appropriate for our business. But again, we're focused on building those customer relations. So they're going to play a role in it. Agentic is going to play a role in automation and creating effectiveness in our engineering teams, creating those hyper-precise experiences and learning from that. I think we'll be taking cautionary steps along the way. [laughs]

Alan: Yeah. Very measured approach. Do you see it helping you more initially on the back end versus, say, customer-facing? Or does that matter?

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Mark: Yeah, it's—no. It doesn't matter. But I mean, it's a good question. I think going back to my earlier comment about trying to get small wins, taking some steps along the way, we're doing that in how we roll out those AI things. You'll probably see things on [ford.com](https://www.ford.com), where you can communicate with chatbots and things. But yeah, I run an engineering group, so we're using it to help improve efficiencies and that, and streamlining code development. And, yeah, I think we're seeing it on both sides. It's easier to test and learn though on sort of back office and do experimental work there, before you ever take anything out to the public. So there is more work probably going on there, but you'll see it on both sides, yeah.

Alan: OK. Well, given your vantage point and, not necessarily at Ford, but as you think about automotive in general, where do you see the technology for the automotive industry going? And what the vision might look like in the future?

Mark: I think, as an automotive fan, I'll just say, I think in general, like you see it in all automotive industries, you see a lot of the in-vehicle-type activities going on and a lot of self-driving vehicles. So I still think all companies are progressively moving into that space, but I think where you'll see a lot of companies using this type of tech—and this is probably things that are in product development, being able to move product into a production environment in a quicker way than the way they were before—rapid content development and testing. So we see that in the engineering space, too, like you can move through code development more rapidly. And I think that's where I probably see all that is just time to market, creating efficiencies, sort of that fail-fast approach to things. When you think about the automotive industry in general, it's a hundred-year business—over a hundred years in the making, in our country. And so, there's a lot of change that can happen in that space.

Alan: It's vital to how this economy runs, to be honest. One of the things we like to do on the show is also get to know you a little bit better. My favorite question to ask folks is has there been an experience of your past that defines or makes up who you are today?

Mark: That's an interesting question. I had given this some thought. I had, early on, the one experience I had was, I had a colleague, that I mentioned earlier, tell me that you're better off and suited for a different role, and you should look at moving out of the sales environment. And I just felt like that was a hard thing to hear from somebody, especially when they're a friend, that maybe you're not best suited for that role! [laughs] But in the end, that's, I mean, here we are 20 years later and—

Alan: Worked out pretty well! [laughs]

Mark: Worked out pretty well! So, so, yeah, I think I would say that that was a key moment in my life to change my career. And I'm still great friends with that person. So, yeah, I would say that was probably the catalyst to where I'm at today.

Alan: Well, if you were starting your career all over again, what advice would you give your younger self?

Mark: I would say, I mentioned the term “fast-fail” earlier, but I probably apply that to myself. I think my younger self always felt like I had these great ideas, and I think I held onto them too long and would try to—whether they were working or not, those ideas, I would try to continue to push them until somebody believed that there was a good idea. I think it's important now to learn that, it's OK to not have everything perfect—that fast-fail approach. OK. It's not working. Let's move on to something else, and don't hang on to that stuff too long. And that's worked out far better for me in my career. as my older self! I'd probably say that was better. I'd probably go back and teach myself that I held on to things way too long.

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Alan: Yeah. Well, is there anything you're trying to learn more about right now or you think marketers should be learning more about?

Mark: I think, in general, marketers are really very technical these days. I mean, if you're not a marketer that's investing in tech, you're probably somewhat outdated. You really need to consider how—like even creative agencies. I came from a creative agency, and it's where art meets science now. That science piece has to be well adopted into that creative world. So I think marketers have to take a tech approach to stuff. And I think that's something that I try to foster here is that blend of art and science and working with the business. That's why I really was excited to come to this new position is bringing that concept forward and working closely with the business and trying to mesh that world of art and science.

Alan: Are there any trends or subcultures that you're taking notice of or you're just curious about?

Mark: Yeah. I mean, I love all the excitement around AI, within the engineering worlds. I don't know if I'd call that "subculture" these days anymore because it's out there, but it's kind of fun to explore the possibility that's out there. At every turn, there's new things that we can do and create those efficiencies. So I'm pretty excited about that.

On a more personal note, I'd say there's an off-roading subculture that I really love, the sort of overlanding communities and stuff. And so I think that married well coming over to the Ford brand. I mean, the Bronco is incredible. I love the idea of that. Looking forward to marrying that little personal world with my professional life now and tapping into that subculture, too.

Alan: That's awesome. Well, last question. As you think about going into the future, what do you think is either the biggest opportunity or threat facing marketers today?

Mark: Marketers stay relevant and they hone their craft using AI, then it becomes a more effective tool for running their day to day and don't become irrelevant. So I think that's a threat, but it's also a promise, too, that they could do a heck of a lot more with well adoption. So, I think, that covers for me the opportunity and the threat. There's an opportunity in there, if you're an adopter of it. But yeah, it could become a threat if you're not.

Alan: Awesome. Mark, thanks for coming on the show.

Mark: Thanks! That was great. Awesome. Appreciate it.

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