



EPISODE 39

## How sales and marketing can grow together: Insights from Braze Chief Revenue Officer Ed McDonnell

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

**Guests:** Ed McDonnell, Chief Revenue Officer, Braze

**Alan Hart:** Today on the show, I've got Ed McDonnell. He's the CRO for Braze. He leads customer experience, global sales, and partnerships. He has got 25 years of experience working with many different software companies. And on the show today, we talk about Braze, we talk about the age-old question of marketing and sales, and we kind of—he's sales, I'm marketing. We go back and forth on that conversation and topic, and then we talk about AI and how AI is changing shopping forever. That and much more with Ed McDonnell.

**Alan Hart:** 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.

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**Alan Hart:** Ed, welcome to the show.

**Ed McDonnell:** Hey, thank you, Alan. It's great to be here.

**Alan Hart:** Yeah. Well, I hear you've got some exciting fantasy sports activities planned very, very soon.

**Ed McDonnell:** Well, they were last weekend.

I've been doing fantasy baseball for the better part—it was 30 years this year. And I got together with 10 of my closest friends. We went up to Candlewood Lake in Connecticut. We get together, we come together on Friday, most of us, and we barbecue a big meal. And we get together and we share laughs and some fun. And then the next day, we sit in a room and we draft baseball teams, make fun of each other and do all the crazy things that you would want. What I've learned over the years, it's actually not about baseball, although we all are baseball fanatics. It's 30 years of friendship with these same folks. Best man in my wedding's there, another guy that was in my wedding, and it's just a lot of fun, and it's something that I hold dear and mark that spot off and make sure that I get to go do it. But we had a ball, and I drafted a good team, so I feel very good about myself right now! [laughs]

**Alan Hart:** Well, it's amazing to me, I mean, how much people get into that stuff. I mean, everyone becomes a statistician at some point.

**Ed McDonnell:** So what I love about baseball, like doing the baseball side of it, is the strategy behind it. Because it is—it's a lot of math, it's a lot of thinking through how to gain categories, not categories. So, I love the strategy behind it and how you think about the strategy.

That's what's kept me in the baseball side of this thing forever. I think football's easy. It's like one and done, kind of put your team together and go forward and have some fun. But baseball's every week, and we have a great group text string that is an all-year type of activity and it's a great friendship moment.

**Alan Hart:** I'm not a big Major League Baseball fan, but it's a long season, too, so—

**Ed McDonnell:** A 162 games! [laughs]

**Alan Hart:** You start this, you're in it.

**Ed McDonnell:** You're in it!

**Alan Hart:** You've got to stay with it.

**Ed McDonnell:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're in the deep pool, so you've got to work it into your process.

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And you have to have enough tools to make sure you can manage it, so enough information that's coming at you. What I did cool though, this year I built my own draft software.

I coded my own draft software this year and had a lot of fun with it. It got some things right, got some things wrong, but overall I used it as a way for me to learn some of the tooling and some of the way that you can apply these tools to everyday life, and it was a lot of fun.

**Alan Hart:** Well, add “vibe coder” to your résumé. [laughs]

**Ed McDonnell:** I'm not there yet! No. I don't know that I want to add it there, but I had a lot of fun doing it.

**Alan Hart:** Well, you are the chief revenue officer at Braze.

Talk to me about where'd you get your start in your career? How'd you end up at Braze?

**Ed McDonnell:** Ooh! My career... I'm, I'm old!

**Alan Hart:** I'm right there with you. I'm not a spring chicken.

**Ed McDonnell:** If you look at the first part of my career—so if you just kind of think in chapters—I did a lot of the roles that reported to a chief revenue officer. I did them. So I was a cold caller out of college for Prudential Securities, but my first job in technology was working for a small market-data company called ILX Systems, where I was on the customer support desk.

So I was an original customer success manager that would take phone calls from our customers and then go meet our customers and help train them, which led me to direct sales, which led me to sales management. And so I spent the first 10 years of my career at a company called Thomson Financial, the Thomson Corporation today, Thomson Reuters. I met my wife there, which is awesome, and so that's kind of the first chapter. And I think all roads lead you to where you are—all the different opportunities and moments. But that first part of my career, I just kind of did the jobs, which led me into sales leadership, which led me into first, second, third line leadership.

But then I decided I was going to go start a company. And so after 10 years at Thomson, I got with a group of eight other folks. We raised [Series] A and B money from Draper Fisher and from SoftBank. We built a tool that sat on top of AOL Instant Messenger to help capital markets and over-the-counter traders share liquidity information. And they were already using the AOL infrastructure. We just built a better mousetrap on top of it which was crazy at the time. I was just having my first child, and I thought it would be a good idea to leave Thomson to go start a company. But what a wonderful experience.

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We eventually sold the business to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The product is still in use today for some derivatives products that are traded out of those markets. Then that led me through some other companies in the financial services organization until my run at EDGAR Online came to an end. And EDGAR's a famous, you know, EDGAR Filings.

So I worked with them for a little bit, but when that came to an end, I kind of had to make a decision. Do I want to stay financial services, or do I want to try something different, which was kind of the second chapter, which led me to a wonderful company not far from where you live called Eloqua, which was a marketing automation technology. And at the time, I had to make some conscious decisions. Did I want to go financial services and stay financial services? Did I want to pivot and do something different? And so, this is back in 2010ish, and it was easy to kind of think how do you get into high-growth software?

Like at the time, it was still pretty early days on what that looked like, and I had the opportunity to go. I went from running global sales for a public company to a first-line sales leader running a northeast territory for Eloqua in high-growth software, and it was maybe one of the best career decisions. Outside of joining ILX where I met my wife, it was the best career decision I could have made. But it led me to Salesforce. I had a great friend that worked at Salesforce. I remember him calling me up one day. He's like, "Hey, you're in this marketing technology thing. We have a marketing cloud," and this is like early, early days Salesforce, when they didn't really have a marketing cloud, but they labeled something a marketing cloud. And he's like, "You should come over and work for us." And that led me to meeting the team over at Salesforce. At the time, it was Salesforce or Oracle, like, we got bought by Oracle, or 2012, do you go work for Salesforce or Oracle?

And I was like, I'm going to go try this high-growth Salesforce thing. That looks super exciting—great platform, great run over the years at Salesforce, again doing second-line leadership to third-line building the Marketing Cloud business over the years, with lots of help from lots of people, eventually running their Commerce Cloud business, their retail business, we're at Shoptalk, so I had the fortune of leading the retail business at Salesforce, consumer goods business, but at some point, after 11 years, I was like, what's next? What do I want to go do? I wanted to go try something different. I wanted to see if I could do chief revenue officer.

I wanted to do that in a public landscape. And I had a really good friend who left Salesforce not too long before. She was the CMO over at this company called Asana, which is a work management platform. I wanted to do something outside of marketing technology. I thought it would be good to expand and go try something different. She convinced me that it would be a good idea to jump over to Asana and be their CRO. And I went and I did that and had a ball, and we did some really good work in the work management space.

Ultimately, I really missed this. I missed marketers, I missed the marketing office, the marketing community and had a wonderful opportunity that led me to meet Bill and meet the team at Braze and see if this would be an opportunity to come and run back what I just have so much passion about. And so I

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say all kind of roads lead because through that entire experience, I had to do all the roles that exist in my office, whether it be sales, customer experience, partnerships. So all of those, at some point, I did some of those roles, so learned from the ground up.

Got to work at some amazing companies that provided me platforms to learn and grow and build. We sold the company eventually. I wasn't there when it happened, and we had some—that was back in 2008, and if you remember like me, having a financial software company in 2008 was a little rough. And things at EDGAR definitely fell apart. But those learnings brought me on this journey to where I'm at right now.

And so, that's my journey professionally—just getting to do a lot of the roles, really being excited about the community I get to work in. I am, every day, I'm so excited to work in the community of marketing and digital experience and work with some of the most creative, incredible people out there. I get to go lead that for what I believe to be the best platform for them to be successful in Braze. And so it's, like, that's it.

**Alan Hart:** Yeah, and we're here at Shoptalk. Tell me a little bit, update me on where Braze is today.

**Ed McDonnell:** I think we're just getting started. We're having a lot of fun, right? We are a customer engagement platform. We are a hundred percent purpose-built to help a retailer connect what they always wanted to connect—store, in-app, store-to-app, to your channels, to your customers and your consumers. And we do that for lots of folks. Retail's just one of the places that we serve, but I think we serve the retail community and the digital-first community just so well. We've been around for 14 years.

Our two co-founders are still here, so Jon [Hyman] and Bill [Magnuson]. Bill's our CEO, Jon's our CTO. Still here, still doing incredible work, and still leading this company, with all the passion they had from day one. We just announced our earnings yesterday, so we just crossed, \$800 million in ARR, on a very solid growth rate, in terms of software right now.

So I think we're doing really well, but we're also doing really good for our customers and really helping bring them along on a journey, and so that's Braze in a nutshell.

**Alan Hart:** Ah, I love it. I didn't realize 14 years. That's substantial.

**Ed McDonnell:** I don't know the whole story because I've only been here for eight months—but, you know, Jon and Bill started at a, I think it was a TechCrunch Disrupt—

**Alan Hart:** Oh, wow.

**Ed McDonnell:** And, you know, if you two are listening right now and I got that wrong, I'm sorry! But it was something along those lines. And what I love about it is they saw the disruption that was about to happen in mobile and they built something around that disruption.

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If you're looking to innovate on your in-app experience and connect your in-app experience to your total digital experience, there's nobody better out there than Braze. And we do it for some of the biggest brands and companies in the world today.

And they continue to follow that disruption index and follow where the world is going to be disrupted next. We've done that for many, many years, and being led by two co-founders that can kind of see the future is a lot of fun.

**Alan Hart:** I wanted to talk to you about sales and marketing. So...you're sales. I'm marketing. We're not always working together! And so, I want to just get your ideas on how do you think about bringing sales together with marketing and marketing together with sales?

**Ed McDonnell:** This conversation's older than us, Alan. [laughs]

**Alan Hart:** I know, I know. And it'll go on for decades, unfortunately probably.

**Ed McDonnell:** It actually might, right? I mean, I think I've been answering this question for the better part of 15 years, but I will say it was a lot harder before.

Technology has absolutely helped that cause, but sales and marketing—whether you're B2B, B—like, whatever you classify yourself as in terms of whatever nomenclature they use in today's world, B2B, B2C, D2C, blah, blah, blah. Like all of those things, they're are people responsible in a company for growth. And those people either kind of have a distribution or sales title and the other side has a somewhat growth or marketing-type title. And ultimately those offices have to work really, really well together in order to drive the growth of an organization. And 15 years ago, it was sales and marketing alignment. That was the thing, right?

And I think what I love about it is alignment. It's alignment and agreement to do the work and do the work forward. That's where I see best practices and where I've seen some of the best work happen. And listen, I've been fortunate to work with some of the most incredible marketers in software. It's hard to do 11 years at Salesforce and not run into some of the best marketers in the world. Some of them are CMOs at companies that are right out on the floor here, and others are just doing incredible work. And you know, some things that I've learned along that journey are you have to align on what's the vision, what are you looking to accomplish for your customer? And so there's kind of, in a B2B software world, there's two centers of gravity. There's your customer, and there's your account executive. There's your sales engine. And you have to build kind of inside out from those two perspectives, as you think about that tight go-to-market alignment that has to happen. And where I see that alignment really coming together is when the heads of those two offices can agree on this is our customer journey—not our sales process—our customer journey.

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How do we build awareness to acquisition through contract, through renewal, through advocacy, through second—like, that whole journey. If you can agree—and when you agree on those touchpoints—that’s where magic really happens in that alignment, in that agreement. Because it’s no longer about top of funnel, middle of funnel, which, of course, you need deep alignment on how do you manage top of funnel? How do you manage middle of funnel? Whether that just be through your paid and digital perspectives at the top, whether that be through PMM and brand in the middle, You need alignment on the programs and the plays and the initiatives that exist in that entire wheel of top to middle of funnel.

But ultimately, if you don’t have alignment on what’s the customer journey, and whose role and responsibility is it across that pathway? In my opinion, that’s where real magic does happen in the alignment of go-to-market—is when, OK, in awareness, this is where we’re directing our funds and our programs in to build awareness.

And there, it’s all the way down to what are the markets that we’re going to go spend money in? And what are we trying to accomplish with the money we’re spending in the awareness channel?

And then at acquisition, it’s like, OK, what are we doing in acquisition and who’s in acquisition? Whether that be the incredible work we do through our inbound channels: How does that connect to my business development team? How does that then connect down to the account executive? In today’s day and age, a lot of it is what tools are we using to create efficiencies in that entire journey, and where do we see productivity effectiveness and efficiency. And so that’s where I do think tools have made it easier, and from what I’ve experienced, when you align on the customer and the journey you want your customer to experience from awareness to advocacy. That’s where you really, truly build the acceleration that you can see in any organization.

**Alan Hart:** It makes sense. It takes me back. One of my early jobs—before business school, way, way back—was product marketing, or solution marketing, I think, is what we called it back then. And then I spent a little bit of time doing industry marketing, which put me out in the field with folks like yourself, like carrying a bag, and I think that exposure of side by side, walking in to customers together really clarified what was really important that I was doing as a marketer and what was not. In a modern context, how should marketers like myself, or people listening to this, show up the best way when we’re going to go talk to our revenue partners or our sales partner?

**Ed McDonnell:** Yeah. I love that you brought up the customer. Because, to me, it all starts and ends ultimately with that customer. And what I deeply partner with our marketing team and the marketing teams I’ve worked with is you need customer context. Whether you do that through advisory boards, where you’re bringing customers together in a group way to gain insights, influence, and understanding from them into how we should be thinking about their journeys and how they can help influence our product direction. I think, as you just point out, it’s being in the field. It’s joining those customer calls, listening to customers, understanding from first-party perspective what’s happening with our customers? What challenges are they faced with? Because I’ll tell you, walk around the floor here at Shoptalk and you

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have the meetings that I've been having with some of our customers—the problems they had five years ago, they're still the same problems. But now, those problems are just accelerated because of the noise and the other elements that have come into their world. So to your question, what can marketers do, it's understand the customer as well as we do and understand the pain points on what that customer's trying to solve, and let's build together around that.

**Alan Hart:** Well, I'm curious, if you give me a little inside baseball.

**Ed McDonnell:** Sure.

**Alan Hart:** I know baseball is your thing now... [laughs] If I want to pressure test my sales colleagues, how do I see if what they're telling me is real versus not real? How do I know if they're really in it with me?

**Ed McDonnell:** If the partnership and alignment is consistently around the customer and the customer journey, it's not about sales or marketing; it's about the player of the program. And when you go and inspect the player of the program at any point in that journey, it will quickly become clear, well, is it at the top of the funnel? Then it's like, OK, what's going on with paid? What's going on with digital? Is it at the middle of the funnel? Oh, well, what's going on there? Because the middle of the funnel is where you start to see the shift of where the handoffs are happening. Is it at the handoff level? Is it in...? What stage of the sales process? Because if you're in the middle of the funnel, you're in a sales process now.

So inside of that customer journey, you're squarely in whatever your stages are in whatever company you're running: stage 1, 2, 3, 4, X. It's, oh, look, we have a problem at stage 3. And stage 3 is largely the handoff from BDR to salesperson. What's happening in the... why are we falling off? Then it's no longer about what is sales doing. It's no, in our process, in our plays, in our programs, where's the choke point? And then when you go and identify where that choke point is, well, then it's, OK, do we have a pattern within that choke point? Is it a certain region? Is it a certain selling organization? Is it a certain... where? But that's where I don't want to say like data is the answer. It is the guide that points you to where the choke points are that then allow you to go make different decisions or different programs within your funnel. You also have to have a cadence around it and you have to have a process.

We have a weekly cadence on pipeline and pipeline effectiveness across our regions, across our motions, across our stages. We meet every week as a team. It's a religion meeting. Like, you have to show up to it, and it's uncomfortable sometimes because it's, hey, something's not performing. Something's always not performing. Anybody that tells you their pipeline is "wildly performing" is not telling you the truth, right? There's something underperforming in your pipeline every single day, and it's identifying where it is. And hey, is that by choice? We made a decision four months ago. Here's where it's showing up in your pipeline. Then you get another decision point. Do we want to do anything different, or are we OK with the direction of travel, of performance? And that's OK. We're allowed to make those decisions and continue to go, but you have to have a cadence that allows for that conversation to happen and allows for the agility to either change or continue forward.

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**Alan Hart:** It would not be a conversation today if we don't talk about AI.

**Ed McDonnell:** Do we have to? [laughs]

**Alan Hart:** We kind of do, we kind of do. How are you looking at AI, either at Braze or in general, today, in your function?

**Ed McDonnell:** We're doing some really incredible things at Braze, and I'm really proud of the work we're doing there. We're really leaned heavily into decisioning. Our decisioning platform it's pretty powerful. It's an autonomous agent platform. It helps marketers not have to make certain decisions around what the next best action is or what the next best move is in a campaign or what the next best timing is to send that communication. It is an autonomous agent based on inputs and levers that then take over for the marketer, and it makes those decisions in the moments that matter most for whatever that programmer campaign is running.

That's kind of where we started. But earlier in February, we fast-forwarded a release on our agent console and our Operator products. We brought them to market about a quarter and a half faster than we originally said we were going to go do. In the first month we've been in market, we've seen incredible results from them. Our agent console is where you build and deploy agents right inside of a campaign canvas. So I want a brand voice agent to go and run through my campaign. Good. Go deploy it with agent console. You want a sentiment analysis agent running through your campaign? Go and deploy it.

I'm really excited about what we're doing with Operator though, which is a conversational AI interface. It's where a marketer can go in and say, hey, I just noticed that my abandoned cart attribution is dipping. Why? An operator will go through your program and using other connectivity tools like MCP [Model Context Protocol] to go even inside and outside the Braze interface and come back and say, here's where your campaign is dipping, and then come back and say, here's what you should do. And then you could continue that conversation, as you would with any type of agent or console in that way, and go and fix your campaign. And we're seeing incredible uptake in our Operator use cases that are out there in market right now.

So that's just from a Braze lens. And obviously at Braze we're using the tools to help us go faster as anyone should be. Personally, like I said, I developed a draft software and I thought that that was good for me to just learn how to go have that conversation with another tool. But then how it walked me through actually having to build something! And I am not a coder. I have never coded a thing in my life, but this kind of, it gave me perspective on how to do it, and I'll continue to lean into those things.

What's interesting is you see around here though—because we are at Shoptalk—I sat with a small potential partner of ours, technology partner, where they built an agent that sits on top of a website. He showed me the prototype that they're working for, for a customer, and the customer's a clothing brand in

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a major market, not the United States. The agent sits on top of the website, so very agentic commerce-like. And just asked it a simple question like, “Show me all that’s in this catalog that’s on here in a LBD.”

And I was like, I don’t know—what’s an LBD? Long black dress. That’s how people apparently talk to agents, right? And the website changed. Every single carousel on the catalog on the webpage changed to that model in a long black dress. And I was like, that’s cool.

And you could see where some of this stuff is going, as to how it is going to be such a prevalent part of how not just technology is being built. I think everybody sees how it’s happening, how it’s helping and happening in the build of technology. But as people that interact with the technology every day are simply trying to be better informed or make better decisions—that’s where it’s really going to show up and I think accelerate consumer—not just awareness, but consumer behavior.

**Alan Hart:** I love that example because that one little signal from a user to an agent changes the entire experience. And right before your eyes.

**Ed McDonnell:** Right before your eyes. I mean, it happened in seconds. I was like, whoa! That’s cool.

**Alan Hart:** We love talking about business. We may talk about business a little bit more, but I want to switch gears.

**Ed McDonnell:** OK.

**Alan Hart:** Get to know you a little bit better. We know you like baseball. My favorite question to ask everyone that comes on the show is, has there been an experience of your past that makes up who you are today?

**Ed McDonnell:** Oof. There’s never one.

**Alan Hart:** No, that’s true.

**Ed McDonnell:** I feel very fortunate. I grew up in a blue-collar town, blue-collar parents. So my mom was a nurse and she brought herself from—

**Alan Hart:** Mine was an X-ray tech. [laughs]

**Ed McDonnell:** Yeah. My mom started in her early twenties as one of the youngest nurses at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx of New York, in the cardiac critical care unit. And she took that to, in her career, to be the vice president of nursing at St. Joe’s Hospital at one point.

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So, like, she brought in her career through her time, but she was always a caretaker. Late '90s/early 2000s, flew to the Philippines and flew to Seoul, South Korea, to go and recruit nurses back into the United States.

She was a caretaker to all that were in her presence. So I learned from that. My dad was a retired cop—and also a caretaker in many ways and a protector in many ways. But super blue collar in a blue-collar town called Port Chester, New York, right in between Greenwich, Connecticut, and Rye, New York. So we were the little town that serviced the other two prominent towns. But that's an experience that, you know, the friends in the community that I grew up with absolutely had a big impact. My family's had a wonderful impact on my life, whether that be my sisters who I just feel so fortunate to be around, and they've done incredible things with both their families and their careers. And they are the matriarchs of our family right now with our parents not here.

You know, a couple years ago, I had a pretty big health challenge, like a very significant serious health challenge, and that's one of the things that led me to kind of think differently about do I want to stay at Salesforce or not. It was, hey, if I want to go kind of do CRO, what am I waiting for? Like, it was a big enough like, oh, snap. Like this is, yeah, go do it! Like, live your life, and you may fail. And by the way, that's OK, because you also may not. Those are all moments. I think the baseball draft moment: Having a group of friends for 30 years that you get to see—and you may only see them once or twice a year, but when you do those 30 years have never passed. Like, you're back to the same people you are. And I think all of those have molded me as a human.

I am very fortunate to be the father of two incredible kids. My daughter is a sophomore at George Washington University. The way she approaches everything just informs me, not just as a dad, but even as a professional today. Some of the things she's bringing me: "Hey dad, how would you handle this?" or "Hey dad, what would you do in this situation?" I'm like, oh, you're testing me as a leader and actually making me think differently. How do I lead this next generation of people based on what you think and what's important to you? And, yeah, my wife and my son. They are cornerstones to everything that I am.

**Alan Hart:** I love, I love it. Those deep human connections that we have with others, with ourselves, when we reflect on our own humanity make moments matter.

**Ed McDonnell:** Yeah, and ultimately—listen, we might be Skynet in three years. [laughs] For anybody that knows the reference out there, like, it's not 0% probability! It might happen. The thing that AI could never take away from anybody is the human connection.

**Alan Hart:** Yeah.

**Ed McDonnell:** And if you want it, and if you want to give yourself [over] to accept it, it's out there for you. It's out there for you.

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**Alan Hart:** Well, if you're looking back, what advice would you give your younger self?

**Ed McDonnell:** I get this question a lot, especially in town halls or "ask me anything" type moments. And I have the same answer anytime anybody ever asks me: Chase experiences and skills, not titles.

The workforce has been so trained to chase a title. I want to go be "X," whatever "X" is. And what gets lost is, well, what experience do I need to be successful in X? What skills do I need to actually do that job? And the advice I give to folks is be very intentional about the skills and the experiences that you want to build in your careers. That will lead you to a title at some point in your career, but you'll actually be successful when you get it because you will have built the experience and the skill to do that job and do that job well. And so, whenever I'm with somebody, I'm like, instead of talking about you want to be a vice president or you want to be a director, or you want to be this, why don't you back up for a second. Tell me the skills you have. Write them down on a piece of paper for me and tell me the skills you believe you have. And then I ask them, now write down the skills you want to go and acquire. And too many people get lost in, well, I have a gap, or I'm not good at that. And it's like, well, do you want to be? It's the question I ask them. Is that something you want to be good at? And they think, they're like, well, I think I do. OK, great. Then that's a skill you want to acquire. But if you don't want to be good at that, don't acquire the skill. Go find something that you want to go and acquire that will actually benefit where you want to take your career, and be open-minded to it could be something that you're not actually thinking about. I know it's a long answer to the question, but—

**Alan Hart:** No, it's good. It's good.

**Ed McDonnell:** Chase experiences and skills, not titles.

**Alan Hart:** I do think that's lost on a lot of people. And you even hear pro athletes, right? Like, if you don't enjoy practice, you're not going to enjoy the game.

**Ed McDonnell:** Correct.

**Alan Hart:** Right.

**Ed McDonnell:** It's a great—to go into the sports analogies, that's right. Kobe Bryant worked harder than anybody in his generation of NBA players, and there's so many stories out there, how he would start his day at four o'clock in the morning and by the time nine o'clock came when everybody else was just getting up, he had already been through two workouts and a healthy breakfast. And he was about to go back to the gym. And he's just like, I was better than my peer set because I simply just put the hours in and developed the skills that were important to me over that course.

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**Alan Hart:** Is there anything you're trying to learn more about right now? We know you're vibe coding, but—

**Ed McDonnell:** Yeah. But I think it's important, right? I mean, it's impossible to walk into a conversation and not talk about AI right now. And it's not that I'm trying to learn about AI. I am trying to understand the applicability for go-to-market.

How to help go-to-market be more productive and more efficient without impacting growth. That's a professional learn that I'm trying to kind of really, really understand also understanding a lot of the research that I've read—and Deloitte has published some of this research, Alan—is that there's no shortage of AI; there's a shortage of people using it for use cases that are actually driving the right behaviors to gain the productivity that companies and organizations are looking to deploy. I am a Gen Xer, and so we have sat between this analog/digital world, in many ways, over time. But what I've always appreciated about our generation is we're unafraid to learn things. And I just want to continue that curiosity, that open-mindedness of, hey, this isn't just a thing, it's not a theme. This is a way to improve the way that you show up every day and improve the work that you can do and get more leverage back into your day so that you can go do the creative work and the real work that matters.

So it's something that I'm pretty leaned into to try and understand. I'm constantly trying to understand team dynamics and leadership dynamics. I'm very invested in what those look like.

I have a really good friend that writes a weekly newsletter. He's been doing it forever, and every now and then, he'll write in one of his Saturday morning blogs, "I can't believe I'm still doing this." And I always text him back and I'm like, I can't believe you're doing it either, buddy! But two weeks ago, he put something out there about team chemistry. And it was one of those impactful things that I started thinking about like, hey, yeah, team chemistry is a real thing. So I use that as an example of I'm constantly trying to find inspiration for what should we be thinking about and working on, so those kind of boil up to the top for me right now.

**Alan Hart:** Anything out in the world that you're just curious about? Spark your interest?

**Ed McDonnell:** I'm a pretty boring guy from those perspectives. I love fantasy books, so those always keep me pretty grounded in thinking about world building and what worlds can be built and how does that all come together. Over last summer, I got hooked into Sarah J. Maas and *Throne of Glass* and that was a wild experience to kind of go through.

And I just finished *Red Rising* through *Morningstar* [series], which kind of blew my mind as I got through the end of that. So just trying to find different authors and different things to keep me super occupied. I am an avid golfer. I am not good at it, but I have more gizmos and gadgets to try to help me get better at it on a day-in and day-out basis. And so, those are things that I try to keep pretty grounded and pretty simple. Being the CRO of a publicly traded software company keeps me kind of on edge on a daily basis. I

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tell Bill our CEO all the time, “I’m really stressed, but don’t worry! I’ve got that stress that you want to wake up to! Not that makes you want to go to sleep.” Because those are the two different types of stress out there. There’s the one you wake up and you’re like, I’m ready, let’s go. And then the one like, I need to go to bed because I am exhausted. So that keeps my brain really, really going. That I don’t have to be so curious about, but that I can just have fun and be me and kind of do the things that I enjoy. And golf and reading are two that really come to mind.

**Alan Hart:** Golf is one of those skills I chose not to be good at. [laughs]

**Ed McDonnell:** Listen, I chose golf. It has not chosen me! [laughs]

**Alan Hart:** OK, fair enough! Well, two more questions for you. What do you think is the largest opportunity or potential threat facing marketers today?

**Ed McDonnell:** It’s going to sound weird, but themselves.

**Alan Hart:** Oh, well that’s fair.

**Ed McDonnell:** You walk around this great conference that we’re at, and I walked by a booth and there was a gentleman speaking around a crowd, and in a matter of 90 seconds, he said, “The old way is dead. We have to go do it the new way.” And I have no idea what he was talking about, by the way, because I walked by the booth. But in the time I walked by that booth, I heard him say it five times in a row. And I just kind of thought to myself, he’s not wrong. Whatever he’s talking about, he’s not wrong, because—and it’s not whether the old way or the new way—it’s just, I think every marketer has that opportunity today to really be the thought leader for their company. At the board level, they are the growth engine.

I love the marketing community. It is my favorite community to work with. It’s my favorite community to be around and to interact with. It’s why I chose to want to pursue Braze as that next step in my career because I wanted to come back to it. And they own the growth of an organization. They own the direction of how growth gets accomplished, and whether you are one of the largest manufacturers in the world, whether you’re a B2B software company, the marketing office owns the growth strategy of the company and they’re the ones that have to execute that growth strategy. What an incredible place to be.

But if the marketing office doesn’t also continue to evolve as to how to do that—not just cost-effective. The easy thing is how do we do that cost-effective and profitable. Of course. The world has told us that already has to happen. It’s how are we evolving to make sure that we are reaching customers, consumers, patients, clients, whatever it is in your wheel of your servicing. How are we going to do that and do that effectively? And we have some research out there that’s specific kind of to retail and consumer brands where we did a survey—I can’t remember how many people were in it, but it was enough. You know, 93% of brands said that we’re doing great on engagement and experience with our consumers, and we surveyed the same consumers and shoppers and 53% said they feel like the

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experiences are great. And it's like, that's a pretty wide variance in how marketers feel and brands feel, and how the shopper and the consumer or whoever feels. And I think that's the opportunity. Don't just think you're doing a great job. Are you actually meeting that customer, that consumer, that client, that distributor, that patient, whoever it is that you're interacting with—are you meeting where they are, giving them that experience that they're looking for that will make them feel like they're part of your community? And you've been doing marketing for how long, Alan?

**Alan Hart:** Twenty years.

**Ed McDonnell:** Yeah. Long time, right?

**Alan Hart:** Yeah. Long time.

**Ed McDonnell:** One-to-one personalization! Right time, right moment, right message! How long have we been...?

**Alan Hart:** A long time.

**Ed McDonnell:** But it's never been more available.

**Alan Hart:** That's very true.

**Ed McDonnell:** Today that's never been more available to every marketer in the world, regardless of the company that you work for. And that to me is, wow. The moment's actually in front of us right now to go and accomplish it.

**Alan Hart:** Agree. Well, last question for you, in a sentence, what do you think is one way a agentic AI is going to change the way that we shop?

**Ed McDonnell:** We've been spending 20 minutes together here. I don't have one sentence for anything! [laughs] I think it's the experience I just talked about with that company I just shared. We no longer live in an age where you're just going to go to a website, look for something, buy something. You're going to curate it to the best of your ability. It is going to be like Google was back in the late '90s.

You're just going to go to a blank webpage that has a simple text bar, and you're going to say, "I have an event on Saturday night. It's with my partner. We're going to be with friends that we've known for 20 years, and there's going to be alcohol involved. What should I wear?" And it'll cure—like, it will know enough about you to curate. "Here's five options. What next path do you want to take? Is it going to be a formal evening or do you want it to be more casual?" And you'll just keep going down that until you get to the best offer for you. You'll click on it. It'll take you to that brand's website that allows you to then go and

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purchase. And that's what I think we're going to an experience like that. And you could use that for, you're buying an outfit. You can use that for, I'm going to Rome—and I'm going to Rome with my partner. We're going to spend three days. We want to do 50—you can tell it! I want to do 50% sightseeing and 50% relaxation, and curate it for me. And the next step will be do you want to do that with guided tours or do you want to do that on your own? Guided tours. Here's the five guided tour companies to use with. OK, I like this one best. Do you want to book it? Yeah!

I think, that is the agentic—we can call it agentic commerce because we're at Shoptalk and everybody wants to call agentic shopping commerce. But to Ed McDonnell, that's "I want to go to Rome."

**Alan Hart:** Right. [laughs] Shopping.

**Ed McDonnell:** And that will be—I think we'll be there very fast. I think the time frame where I do think AI will just accelerate everything is in consumer behavior and in consumer experience. It'll take longer in B2B and in corporate land, I believe, just because the adoption curves—it'll be faster than the last. It'll be faster than the internet. But it's still not going to be tomorrow. But I think in consumer behavior where you're already seeing just insane innovation and experiences.

**Alan Hart:** Love it.

**Ed McDonnell:** Yeah.

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

**Ed McDonnell:** Thank you. It's been great.

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