



MARKETING BEYOND

WITH **ALAN B. HART**

EPISODE 43

How experimentation can fuel marketing effectiveness: Insights from General Motors Executive Director of Marketing and Consumer Engagement
Laura Thornton

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

Guests: Laura Thornton, Director of Marketing and Consumer Engagement, General Motors

Alan Hart: Today on the show I've got Laura Thornton. She's the executive director of marketing and customer engagement at General Motors. She literally grew up embedded in the automotive world. Her father spent his career in the industry, and after initially considering law school, she committed to automotive and never looked back.

On the show today, we talk about how Laura is leading GM's dual-track marketing transformation and foundational MarTech modernization running in parallel with this thing she calls "Project Leapfrog." It's a rapid pilot program testing AI-embedded tools and capabilities to compress traditional timelines.

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That and much more with Laura Thornton.

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.

Alan Hart: Well, Laura, welcome to the show.

Laura Thornton: Thank you, Alan. Happy to be here.

Alan Hart: Before we get into business, you literally grew up in the auto business, right? Tell me more about that.

Laura Thornton: Yes, I did. So I'm one of those stories where [there's] generational automotive in my family, so grandparents, grandfathers who both worked in the auto industry—one who worked in tool and die in manufacturing, and the other who worked on the line.

My dad, 43 years at Chrysler, now Stellantis, retired from there. And I kind of always knew it was going to be something that I was interested in, but I sort of fell into it after college and haven't looked back. Loved every minute of it.

Alan Hart: Well, where did you get your first start? Because you're now, if I got this right, you're the executive director for marketing at General Motors.

Laura Thornton: Yes, executive director for customer engagement. Started at the bottom, literally. I remember getting my first job supporting automotive on the agency side and working as an account coordinator. And for anyone listening, or those of you who have done that, it was literally a playpen, a corporate playpen of 50 of us just running routers around the agency, getting approvals and learning the business from the bottom up.

And it was such a rewarding experience because you learn about client service, you learn about complex personalities in the agency, and I really learned how to love to work at that point. I grew up in the agency side, in leadership positions, learned how to lead teams, really support clients and think strategically about the problems that they were solving, and then made the jump over to the client side about 10 years ago, and I've been with General Motors ever since.

I've been in successive roles there, leading teams both from kind of a business marketing perspective on the OnStar side, and now in customer engagement, and it's been an amazing experience. Anyone considering making the jump to client side, it's very rewarding, depending on the client, and, yeah, I've had a great time along the way.

Alan Hart: Yeah. Professional services to client side, it's rewarding.

Laura Thornton: Yeah.

Alan Hart: Is it fun being the client now, telling the other folks what to do?

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Laura Thornton: Yeah. So I got to a point on the agency side where I would sit across the table from my clients and provide them recommendations and ideas and strategic thinking, and then it would be on them to figure out what they wanted to do with that.

And I was like, “I want to be the one on the other side of the table. I want to be the one making the decision.” And so, I think I had grown confident enough in my own skills at that point where I knew I could take that leap. You know, with the right support around me, make good decisions. And it’s wonderful. It can be stressful. It can be high pressure, but I love every minute of it.

Alan Hart: That’s awesome. Well, tell me a little bit about your team and scope, if you will, around customer engagement.

Laura Thornton: Yeah. So we’re a newer team. I’d say we’ve been around for about a year and a half inside of GM. I lead all of essentially owned customer communications, and we call it “from insights to action” across the customer journey.

So when a known customer is starting to come back into the shopping process, as they buy their vehicle, get onboarded, and continue through their ownership journey, my team leads all the communication strategies, all the insight development, and end activation, which includes leveraging all of the MarTech and tools that our partners and product build for us.

Alan Hart: Gotcha. And I hear you are driving quite a bit of transformation, both just marketing in general, but also the MarTech stack. You’ve got an interesting—when we talked before—an interesting approach of challenging the status quo. So tell me, one, what does the transformation look like, and what’s the essence of it, but then what about the status quo?

Laura Thornton: Point blank, leading a CRM team can be quite antiquated, and with all the modern technology that’s out there now, it shouldn’t be at all. And about a year ago, I was here at Adobe Summit and met with partners and had a new agency that we had just onboarded, and we were just on the cusp of some Adobe tech kind of onboarding and transformation.

And we were sort of walking around this very summit hall thinking to ourselves, “What could we do that isn’t linear?” And I think a lot of times, as users of technology, we think about tech adoption in a linear way. And we’re like, “OK, we’ve got to go through steps A, B, and C to get to an end outcome.”

We walked out and we said, “What if we could just leapfrog ourselves in certain areas and completely bypass what the normal steps of progress would look like, and try some net-new things that are just completely out of the norm, completely out of process in our normal ways of working, and see what we can come up with?”

Alan Hart: I love it. Well, where did you get started on this transformation?

Laura Thornton: Yeah. So we quite literally coined a term, Project Leapfrog. We organized a team around it. We found like-minded individuals from inside the company and outside of the company in our partner areas, and we

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just started to build a list of ideas and a backlog of things that we could test or learn or try and said, “OK, what are the really easy low-hanging fruit, low-risk, low-entry point things that we could try as a team?” And just started.

And we started meeting weekly, and we started giving teams the empowerment to try and to fail and to test, and not have it interrupt kind of the day-to-day of how we work—have it kind of live completely outside of the core—and that’s how it’s been running since.

Alan Hart: OK. You’ve got sort of a parallel path. You’ve got a maybe more traditional is the wrong word, but a transformation going on, and then you’ve got these leapfrog efforts going on simultaneously.

Laura Thornton: Yeah. So we’ve got our common way of working, which, you know, as any team exists, it might feel slower than we want it to feel. But it’s intentionally designed around quality and scale. And if you think about the products that we’re servicing, and millions and millions of owners, and billions of interactions every year, it has to be well thought through.

And I’m not saying that any of our other transformation efforts aren’t, but that beast exists for a reason. The leapfrog efforts are more like low-entry, low-risk, smaller things that test how we could potentially break the norms in very specific areas of how we work.

So, for example, Adobe brought to us their GenStudio product, which is an AI-driven email creation tool, and we said, “OK, we’ve got an email that needs to go out maybe in a couple of months. Let’s just start building in it and iterate and see what we can come up with.” And within a matter of about a week and a half, we had a communication ready to go.

Alan Hart: Wow.

Laura Thornton: So instead of taking the normal couple of months of testing and trying something, we were like, “Wait a minute. What? We might have something here.” And it wasn’t perfect and, you know, a week and a half turned into a couple of months, as we started to think about how that would influence process change and team dynamics, and who gets trained on this tool, and how would we use it, and how can it make the best creative possible, but it was a starting point for us.

Alan Hart: Yeah. So when you think about these leapfrog pilots, how do you define what rises to the criteria of—maybe what are some of the criteria that you use?

Laura Thornton: Yeah, I can’t say that we’ve got specific guardrails or criteria. It’s more about literally cooking up new things. So, looking around and saying, “OK, what’s changed in terms of agentic capabilities?” At GM, I feel very fortunate that we have invested heavily in AI.

We’ve got an on-prem LLM [large language model] solution that we’re working in almost every day. We’ve got a team that’s dedicated to building agentic solutions for us in-house. That didn’t exist a year ago when we thought about leapfrog. This team now all of a sudden, in the past month, has come in and tinkered around with us on our backlog and said, “Hey, here’s two agentic solutions that help solve QA monitoring and audience overlap analysis.”

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Alan Hart: Oh, wow.

Laura Thornton: And they're sort of beta testing right now. My team's playing around as users in those agents. But even six months ago, there wasn't anybody or any way of that happening. So, remaining agile, I think, is kind of a principle—maybe not a guardrail. It's just a principle that we've tried to have. We push things away that we think maybe don't have value, and we start fresh on a new idea.

Alan Hart: OK. Interesting. Well, you talked about the email example and this QA agent. Are there any other examples that come to mind that you could share?

Laura Thornton: Yeah. We've got some interesting things we're working on right now that I think every marketer goes through the idea of what am I doing with a third-party agency? What am I bringing in-house? And the things that I'm really keen on at the moment are areas and ways in which my team can upskill themselves, being more hands-on. So some of the pilots that we're running have to do with them being able to not only author creative, but author briefs or debate insights with an LLM or an agent, or just start to play around with how these tools can help them upskill.

There's an interesting concept out there around human-centered AI, and I'm very, very interested in the robots not taking over, but us becoming better as individuals and making sure that my team has the skills in order to do that. And so a lot of it's democratizing some of these little pilots and saying, "Hey, go try. See what you come up with," and then have them bring back solutions, examples, whatever it may be.

Alan Hart: Gotcha. Well, if you were going to tell your peers outside of GM— they're headed on a transformation journey—what lessons would you share with them, either about transformation in general or this notion of leapfrogging?

Laura Thornton: Taking risks is something that can feel very daunting, and as marketers, we have to be open to trying and testing new things. So that has to be fundamental. I am fortunate to live in a culture inside of General Motors where risk-taking, testing, and learning is just a part of our modern marketing DNA.

So if you're out there and you don't have a team or a leader who's championing that, just keep working at it. Keep trying, keep doing science experiments. Try things that you think might have parallels in your world. And if you do have a leadership team or a corporate environment that is championing this, just go. There's no science or right equation to getting this right. You just have to create the environment for people to feel confident and empowered to try new things really.

Alan Hart: I love it. Well, one of the things we love to do is get to know you a little bit better. We know how you grew up in the industry, surrounded by the industry. Has there been an experience of your past that makes up who you are today?

Laura Thornton: I would say coming back to the example of coming over to the client side of the business, that was a big risk and a big change in my career plan and path.

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I would say I always knew that was what I wanted to do, but it wasn't easy to get there. I share this example a lot with people who I'm coaching and mentoring as well. Sometimes the jobs that you don't get can really define where you go, and I look back at opportunities that I might have been really passionate about, or I thought it was the perfect job for me, and it didn't work out, and it could have crushed my spirits. But I used those opportunities as learning events to say, "OK, everything happens for a reason. There's a reason why that didn't work out. Onward to the next thing, and good work will pay off, and I'll get to where I want to be." And I hate to say trust the process, but there is a little bit of that in your career. And I think that's defined me is not getting bogged down in times when I was told no or jobs I didn't get. Just staying on a path and saying, "I'm just going to keep doing good work, and results will follow."

Alan Hart: I love it. Well, if you were looking back, what advice would you give young Laura?

Laura Thornton: Confidence is something, especially in marketing, that is hard to find authentically. And I think in an area like this where the discipline is so subjective sometimes, there's definitely, from a performance marketing standpoint, numbers and outcomes trump everything. But creative and insights and strategic development is very qualitative.

It's very subjective. And learning to find your voice at a young age in this industry can be very hard. I think I would look back at myself and say, "Just keep working at it. Keep finding your voice. Keep trying to become confident in practicing creative reviews, practicing pitching to clients, practicing authoring a strategy, and just try and try again and fail and be OK with that." Because those things stick with you long term, and they're what will set you apart in the end.

Alan Hart: I love that. Well, is there anything you're trying to learn more about right now?

Laura Thornton: Change management, leadership. It's inherent in what we're doing as marketers right now, especially as things are changing so dynamically, and we have teams of people that are looking up at us as leaders and saying, "How do I do this? Like, give me literally a blueprint for change." And so I'm trying to figure out how to make sure I can galvanize entire teams and organization around change and feeling comfortable in it and feeling like it's going to benefit them and not take away from them. So that whole idea of change management, thriving through change, leadership, culture, like that, it's everything for us right now—for me, at least, yeah.

Alan Hart: That notion of change management right now in this moment, we've always had change, but I don't think at the velocity that we have it right now. I mean, it's very noticeable.

Laura Thornton: It's very noticeable, and companies who are newer in the digital age are being forced through it as well. So nobody is out ahead of this at the moment. And for us, I hate—it's not an arms race. It's more like who can create the culture for teams to, again, thrive through this type of change and create the cultural norms where people can test and fail and not feel like they're going to get fired for it, not feel like they're going to lose their job because they came up with an AI solution that does a portion of what they do.

Alan Hart: Right.

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Laura Thornton: People have to feel good about this, and that's a tough thing to get right. Ultimately, at the end of the day, the business outcomes are what we're looking for, but the people are what sit in the middle of that, and I'm very keen on that being a positive environment.

Alan Hart: If you look out in the world, marketers tend to be curious people. What are you curious about right now?

Laura Thornton: Ooh, I'm curious about this transition to, despite everything we just talked about of AI and automation and all that, analog experiences.

So there's a little bit of a macro trend around a return to that. I think it's coming out of post-pandemic world where we were all virtual everything. People are starting to crave more of that. I find that in my personal life a lot right now, where we're like, "Let's actually go to happy hour. Maybe we're going to start a book club!" Like, old-fashioned things are cool again. So, I also think there's something around just, it's like the walking away from digital experiences and valuing more human connections in brands, in experience delivery, and how brands are behaving in general.

There's something that we've got to figure out how to get right there, because I even had an experience the other day, and I'm not going to say what brand it was with, but it was a very frustrating AI interaction where I didn't know how to prompt it properly because I didn't know what I was looking for. They didn't know how to service me, and then I couldn't actually get to a human. And I was like, "But I know if I could just talk to somebody, we could figure this out."

Alan Hart: Right.

Laura Thornton: So there's something we have to thread that I'm very curious about. Brands like General Motors where it is a high touch—buying a car is high touch, but we want to augment with digital. So, yeah. Figuring that out is high on my list.

Alan Hart: Not losing our humanity in the process.

Laura Thornton: Yes, yes.

Alan Hart: OK. All right. I like it. Yes. What's the largest opportunity or potential threat that you see for marketers on the horizon?

Laura Thornton: Not being able to change fast enough, not being able to keep up with this pace. And that can create, I do think, some undue pressure. A lot of what's going on right now, we almost have to watch and see in some areas, which is why, again, coming back to the leapfrog idea, setting aside some tests to tinker around with while protecting your core, while all of this gets sorted out, is—not that someone's got a magic answer to everything that's happening right now, but the industry is changing rapidly, and if we overreact and over change, or change in the wrong ways at scale, it might have the opposite effect. So little bit of caution in some areas while also taking risks is what I see happening out there.

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Alan Hart: Maybe, to use a car analogy, pump the brakes a little bit—

Laura Thornton: Yeah.

Alan Hart: Every once in a while. Pump the brakes a little bit.

Laura Thornton: Yep, yep.

Alan Hart: We are at Adobe Summit. AI is all around us. So if you had your choice, what would you have an LLM or an agent do for you?

Laura Thornton: OK. So in my personal life, I like to garden, I like to do things around my house to make—I basically have rooms that I'm like, "OK, I hate this room. Now I want to change it again." Interior design-type stuff. Something that would just literally tell me exactly what to do, and there's some interesting tools emerging there, but there's nothing perfect yet, and I would love something that's better out there.

From a professional standpoint, one of the toughest things that I think any marketer works on is product naming. [laughs] It's so subjective! And I would love something that's just a name-my-product agent that just comes back with a recommendation that anticipates every single human-that-I'm-about-to-walk-into-a-room-with's point of view and then tells me the perfect answer! [laughs]

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Laura Thornton: Save me a lot of time.

Alan Hart: That's funny. Maybe you could build little agents for all those stakeholders and then have them debate with each other, with your agent, and just come out with the answer!

Laura Thornton: Yeah. There you go! [laughs] Oh, I love that idea. That's great. And then I can go pitch and be a superstar!

Alan Hart: Yeah. You are already a superstar, but yes! You could be a whole other class of superstar.

Laura Thornton: Well, yeah. That would be a good one.

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

Laura Thornton: Thank you, Alan, for having me. It's been a pleasure.

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