EPISODE 45

Scaling relevance: Insights from Visa Senior Vice President of Marketing Kevin Skirde

Host: *Alan Hart, leader in marketing and customer strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP*
Guests: *Kevin Skirde, Senior Vice President of Marketing, Visa*

Alan Hart: Today on the show, I've got Kevin Skirde. He's the senior vice president of marketing at Visa. And on the show today, we talk a lot about his career, where he got his start, his background in going to St. John's University. We talk about some stops along the way in BNA Bank, which is now Bank of America. Also, he worked at Amex as well. Then we talk about Visa, what he's doing, what he's building in terms of the marketing services that they do for their clients, how he thinks about taming the complexity of marketing—and much more with Kevin Skirde.

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: Kevin, welcome to the show.

Kevin Skirde: Thanks for having me, Alan. I'm really excited to have a conversation today.

Alan Hart: Yeah, me too. Me too. Before we get into talking about your career and background, I do have to start at this one place because I hear you have a, or you used to have a fear of flying, but I'm trying to like reconcile that because you worked in the travel industry at one point. Tell me about this.

Kevin Skirde: Yeah, that's correct. That's correct. So early on in my tenure from career and even before, I hated to fly. I was actually petrified. And when I got married, my wife and I got married, you know, she has family in Italy. So her dream was for us to go to Italy. And I was like, it's not happening because I don't like to fly. I'm petrified. So it needs to be a car or we need to go on vacation where it's accessible not by plane.

So I'm about nine, eight, nine years into my career journey and it was time to make a pivot from where I was and move and I really wanted to get into American Express. So I applied for this job, really excited about it. Went on the interview process and I got the offer, and it was in American Express Travel. Came home, told my wife, I was like thrilled. And she's like, that's awesome, but you don't like to travel. You don't like to fly. Like, you're petrified. Like, literally you, if you get on a plane with me, you make me—you won't let me get up to go to the bathroom. You make me sit there. I mean, that's how bad it was.

And I realized, I was like, OK, well, I really wanted the job. The job was really cool. So I've got no choice. And it kind of leans into my philosophy around experimenting and getting yourself comfortable in the uncomfortable. And this certainly was going to be an uncomfortable moment the first time I had to take a flight for work. I remember it vividly. It was August 2005, so almost 21 years ago. And I had to fly to Phoenix, and I kept my wife up the entire night before because I was so worried. I'm like, I'm going to fall out of the sky. I don't know what's going to happen, but I was petrified. And obviously I'm here, 21 years later, and my job actually helped me get over a personal fear I had and something I was super uncomfortable with. So the key moments for me—and I now travel all over the world—I call it a privilege because it absolutely is a privilege, both for work and personally. I get to see all parts of the world, and it's an amazing thing. So I'm super glad I got over that fear. We've been to Europe many times as a couple, as a married couple. I think my wife is very happy with me that I got over that fear.

But there's three things: be comfortable in the uncomfortable, be willing to take an experiment. Like, your career is a lot—and I know we might talk about this—your career is a lot about experiments. And then, I think the merge of your personal life with your work life, especially nowadays, it blends together. So obviously I travel a lot for work, but personally, when I'm on the road, I do get to enjoy things and see different sites that I wouldn't have seen without maybe having this part of my professional career. So yeah, so I'm over it. There are days when you're bouncing around in the air and you hit that turbulence that it does, uh, it is a white-knuckler, and you do get a little nervous again, but I've learned to figure it out and overcome it, which is exciting.

Alan Hart: Yeah, no, that's awesome. One of those white-knuckle events recently, I was coming out of Denver. Denver is always a little bumpy when you come out of the—

Kevin Skirde: It's always bumpy going over the Rocky Mountains there.

Alan Hart: With the mountains, yeah. But the pilot comes on beforehand and he's like, "We're going to—it's going to be about 40 minutes of turbulence." [laughs] Yeah, and so it's one of those, you're like, ugh, is this ever going to end?

Kevin Skirde: It's when they tell the flight attendants to take their seat and then they don't say anything afterwards that you're kind of like, is this going to end soon, like in a good way, not a bad way? [laughs]

Alan Hart: Right. Yeah, exactly. Well, I'm glad you're actually traveling the world and enjoying all the things that travel brings to you. Let's talk about how you got your start. You are now the senior vice president of marketing at Visa, head of marketing services. But how did you get your start? What were some of the other stops along the way?

Kevin Skirde: Yeah, I would say it was an interesting start. The beginning might've been a little bit hard. But what I realized quickly—I used the word "experiments" before. What I realized quickly is to figure out what motivates me, figure out where I want to go, and figure out how to get into more of an executive-level role. I had to build a really strong foundation. If I look at what I do today and the role I have today, I don't think I would be as successful or as comfortable in the job, in the leadership position that I am today, without having some pretty pivotal moments along the way. And I truly experimented, especially in the beginning, because I felt there were areas that I knew were my strengths, but I felt there were areas I needed to develop. So starting with MBNA Bank, a lot of people don't know who MBNA is because they were bought by Bank of America in 2005, but at the time I joined them, they were the largest credit card issuer.

And if I think about the moments at MBNA, it was about execution. They were phenomenal in sort of delivery and execution. It was about speed to market. They were always like, don't ever say it can't be done. Just figure out how to get it done. They were big into service. They had this thing called "two-ring pickup." It was all about customer service. And I learned that that's a truly important thing. If you don't service your customers correctly, you're going to lose them. You're not going to retain them. And that's where I started to learn about experimenting and taking jobs that I didn't think I was equipped to take, but other people realized that, hey, I could be good at these jobs.

Then I moved to American Express and that was truly about a little bit of a different skill set. It was about building a world-class product. They were very much about the loyalty side, top of wallet, really making sure the benefits that they put in market were going to be used and they were going to be relevant to the consumers. So that was a good learning for me, and they were about precision. And that's also where I started to become an operator, because I ran a couple of different small businesses for them—not small business in the sense of how you define small business, but a smaller business for them in the context of the company. And I truly began to figure out, hey, being an operator, being a GM in the lens of marketing, but also outside of marketing, when it relates to partnerships, really motivated me. It was something I really got interested in.

Then I had an opportunity to start a company 2007 through 2010. It was a pure startup. We started a credit card company. And I think a key learning and moment at that point in time, it was about doing a lot with a little. We had funding, we were well backed, but we were also in the middle, a year later after launch, we were in the middle of a financial crisis. And we wanted to keep going, and it was like, OK, how do you reinvent yourself at a time where it's super complex and it's super scary? And how do you operate with a sense of urgency? Because you don't have time. You've got to succeed, otherwise your doors are going to close pretty quickly, and you've got to be creative on how you do it. And then the last one is Visa.

I joined Visa in 2016. I think there's three things there. One, I came in and there was a huge opportunity to focus on leadership. Leadership is really important to me—building right cultures, building good performing teams, high-performing teams. People, relationships, to me, are the keys to, a lot of times, to your success. It's not just about what you do, it's how you work with people. So that was number one. And then we had to reinvent where we are today. What we're doing today didn't exist 10 years ago. We built that, we reinvented it, and then we scaled it, and now we're sort of, we're a business that is really growing and really important to the company.

Alan Hart: I love it. A lot of lessons, if you will, that you've picked up along the way. One thing you keep coming back to is this notion of experiments, and you've highlighted some of them, but what is it about an experiment as you think about it? How do you… I guess maybe an easy question to lay out is like, do you know you're in an experiment when you're starting an experiment?

Kevin Skirde: I don't think you always realize it, especially early on. Now maybe so because you've kind of, after 20, almost 30 years—geez, that's a big number—almost 30 years of working, you're guided by your experience. So you do know, you start to know it a little bit better, but you don't always know it. And you don't always understand it in terms of the outcomes, good or bad. And honestly, sometimes the bad outcomes are just as important as the good outcomes in terms of your experiments. And I can talk to that a little bit.

I think of a couple different experiments that I took not intentionally in my career. First one was early days at MBNA. So what happened was I really wanted to be in sports marketing. That was kind of my aspiration. Studied it in college. I worked at the Knicks in the Garden as an intern. It was awesome. But it was a hard industry to break through coming out of college—really, really difficult. So I kind of just had to take a job to take a job to kind of start my career and start to gain some experience. And I got an opportunity to go to MBNA through a relationship of mine. And the goal was to actually start in sports marketing, and the guy's like, listen, you know nothing about the credit card space. Like, you're going to start in credit. And I was like, oof, that doesn't sound too exciting. And it wasn't. It was like two years of just… like, I hated the job.

But I had this purpose that I wanted to get into the sports marketing world, which was kind of my intent, where I wanted my career to go. And when I was in credit, one of my leaders came to me and she's like, you know, I actually think you should go to risk. I was like, risk? I'm like the furthest thing from risk, OK? But she's like, you've got a really good mindset. There's this job in risk. It's called a risk analyst. Basically, what they do is they try to figure out how to predict who's going to go bad, right? From a credit standpoint. How to predict delinquency and charge-off, and then create strategies around that to minimize the impact to the company. I was like, you're just like getting further and further away from where I think I know my strengths and weaknesses. But she's like, just call the person, the hiring manager, and apply for it. I was like, OK, well, if you're asking me—because I still hadn't gotten the opportunity, the call, for sports marketing yet. So I was like, I might as well.

So I did, and I got the job, which was like, I can't believe I got this job. I remember going home to my wife and like, I'm so not qualified. I look at the people around me. These people are so much smarter than me. They're so much more analytical. It was actually one of my favorite jobs. I had to work harder than probably everybody sitting at the table because it was a definite development and a learning curve for me. But I absolutely loved the job. I think where I found my strength in that job is my ability—I wasn't number/analytical guy that was sitting next to me who was so ridiculously smart. But when I took the information and I built the strategy and I learned how to code and I did all that, and then I brought it into our executives and translated it and presented it. I think that's where the strength lies. And I realized like, OK, I have a really good opportunity to take complex things, make them digestible, and explain that to our business executives. That's one way of doing that is in risk—could be finance, it could be lots of different ways.

It's funny. One of the folks that worked for me a year or two ago said that. She's like, you have an unbelievable way of taking something super complex and just making it really simple. That was kind of the first experiment that led to me to realize there's more things out there than what you're just focusing on. And this could be helpful even when I get into sports marketing.

A second one was I finally got into sports marketing and I was doing—because of that role actually, that's the funny thing. I got into sports marketing because the executive calls me, he's like, hey, I didn't realize you learned how to do all this stuff. We actually need someone that could be more analytical in marketing and sort of do the analysis and the measurement and the impact. And he's like, I'm going to bring you on. So that's how I got into sports marketing because of the risk role. I probably would have taken a lot longer to get into sports marketing, but the risk role got me in. And when I got into risk, they're like, hey, can you do some finance stuff for us, too, and manage the expense budgets? And I'm like, sure. Not my scope, but sure, I did it. The CFO for the card business is like—a year-and-a-half later, two years later—he's like, hey, I kind of want you to come over purely into finance and run profitability analysis. I'm like, again, this is kind of weird because I don't know this stuff.

So, I took it. I actually did a job swap with another guy who I became friends with and still very close to in this time. It was like, again, another moment where I was like, I didn't believe in myself. Someone believed in me. Probably had some blinders on of my strengths and my weaknesses. Went in and I loved the job. And honestly, that job—if I didn't do that job, I don't think I could run as successfully as I run this business today and understand the intricacies of a P&L and how to manage a P&L.

So those are two positives. One negative, and this is an important one. When I was in American Express, this was that travel role that I took. I was loving it. It was such a great job, a lot of fun, but I wanted to get promoted to director. I had two young kids at the time and I could use more money and I also want to move up in my career. So I went and applied for a job and it was director of business development over in our network area. And you know when you know something in your gut and you're like, it just doesn't feel like it's going to be a good fit, but I kind of kept going and I knew I was going to get the job just because of the experience that I had. Not to be arrogant, but I had what they were looking for, and I got the job. And Day 1 on the job, I came home to my wife and said this was a mistake. And I took the job/money over passion and motivation. And that was when I knew never ever put money in front of my passion. So, three different experiments with very different outcomes that gave me a lot of good insight into my career and how to continue to navigate my career.

Alan Hart: Right. Yeah, those are great lessons. Well, let's talk a little bit about your role today. So within Visa, tell me a little bit about the org that you run and what you've been building.

Kevin Skirde: Yeah. So think of Visa marketing into three buckets. You've got the work we do from our brand, consumer, and how we kind of go to market. You might see a post on Instagram or TikTok. You might see a TV commercial within the NFL. Then you have B2B. We market to our clients. And then there's what I lead with so many great people around the world, which is marketing on behalf of our clients.

Our job is to get up every day and help our clients grow their business. Our job is to help them improve their marketing practice. So what we've done is we've had a world-class organization for a long time. We are one of the number-one payment brands in the ecosystem. Putting that all together, we were able to package that up and bring the best of the best, inclusive of our expertise and our people, and go to our clients and say, hey, we can help you. That could be building your brand, from a product standpoint. That could be driving new cards, getting those cards to be top of wallet, getting those customers to be loyal to using our sponsorship properties, our creative expertise, our media expertise, our insights, our data. And when we put that all together, we have such a powerful value proposition. And we've built this unbelievable engine where our clients are starting to become truly dependent on us.

So you can look at us as consultants, you can look at us as an agency. I like to say it's a lot bigger than that. We are their marketing partner. We sit next to them. We're an extension to their team. And we've really helped, I think, build the relationship and strengthen these relationships. It's not just about making them more successful. I think we've really built a stronger relationship with our clients because of this offering. It's really been fun. We've been at it now for about six years, and it's just been a joy to see it grow and see it expand. It's not just the people within my team. It's the entire marketing function. It's the entire sales organization. We all operate as one team, and that's what makes us really, really successful.

Alan Hart: It sounds like it's hugely impactful also to your customers, your clients, if you will, and like you said, helping them grow their business. I mean, you're doing that across a number of companies, a number of clients or customers, however you think about it. You're an extension of their marketing efforts, if you will, on their own behalf. How do you think about just harnessing the complexity? It's hard enough to market one company, but now you've got multiple—

Kevin Skirde: It is, I mean, you have to—if you don't go in there and understand their customer and their brand and how they go to market, you're going to get it wrong pretty quickly and you lose credibility. But I think marketing sits at the intersection of complexity between data, tech, media, partnerships, creative. As I said earlier a little bit, our job is to make sense of the complexity, organize it, simplify it, and drive shared value. My job, my team's job, is to go into the client and find a shared value and make sure we're articulating that in the most simple and digestible way to the client. So, if I break it down into three areas, first, you've got to understand your client's goals. So, you're not operating independently just purely for Visa's goals, you have a shared responsibility there.

Second, you can translate that and sort of figure out how to navigate it. It's really unifying the sum of all these individual components, I said, whether it's data, MarTech, creative, media, etc., and orchestrating the combination of those disciplines. I think we have an advantage—Visa has a clear advantage with that—because we sit across the entire ecosystem. We see what's happening across all of payments. We see what's happening all over the world. So it puts us in a really good spot to help figure that out.

And then third is you take that and you've got to build a strategy with a clear compass to drive the best outcomes. And if you do all that, I think you can take something that's super complex, break it down, embrace it, and make it digestible. So when it gets to the customer, whether it's a website or whether it's a campaign, whatever that actual action is, it becomes actionable and it becomes relatable to that customer. So you use complexity as an advantage versus a disadvantage.

Alan Hart: I love it. And you're living up to your hype of breaking things down very simply. So I can understand it. [laughs]

Kevin Skirde: Thank you. Maybe it's because I'm only so complex. I can only go so far! I don't know. [laughs]

Alan Hart: I love it. Whatever! It's working, so live into it! When you think about marketing in general, as you are a marketer and you serve other marketing organizations, what do you think about? Like, how do you think about breakthrough marketing to different audiences?

Kevin Skirde: I think it's getting harder as generations evolve, but I would say a couple of things. First of all, we use sponsorships in a lot of our marketing because that connects people's passions. And when you're connecting to somebody on the human side through culture, that's one way in to break through versus just being more generic.

You have to figure out what motivates people, what's in their mindset, what matters to them, what are their interests. How are you hearing and seeing them individually and understanding their values? Because if you, especially I would say for the Gen Z audience, they've become very focused on their values and making sure the marketing that you put out there connects to who they are. So let's take music. Music is a shared interest across many people. By integrating culture, artists, or even sports and athletes into your marketing, it gives you a way to connect to that audience that's meaningful, that will break through. It's not always about what you say, but it's about delivering those experiences.

People now, especially both the affluent and Gen Z consumer, are more focused—years ago, if you celebrated your birthday, it was about what you got in terms of a tangible gift. Now it's about what are you going to do? Like, what event are you going to go do? So, for example, for my birthday, my wife always takes me to a basketball game because she knows that's a passion of mine. So if you market an athlete to me via basketball or the Knicks, that's going to connect with me really well. So as you learn more about the consumer and their values and interests, you absolutely can break through. Doesn't mean it's not easy, doesn't mean it's not hard, but that's really, I think, the way we've sort of approached it, how we've talked to our clients about it, and how I see the younger generation. I have two kids in college; that's how I see them interacting through culture.

Alan Hart: Yeah, I would agree with that. Mine's not in college yet, but we're looking at colleges.

Kevin Skirde: Close, close! It's not a fun time. It's fun once they're in college. That process to get there is a little bit overwhelming.

Alan Hart: It's a marathon, that's for sure. Well, as you think about marketing, where do you see the next frontier in terms of marketing for you and at Visa and more broadly as an industry? Where are we headed here?

Kevin Skirde: It's a hard one to answer. I think obviously AI is going to be really important as we go forward. But AI is evolving every day—almost really difficult to keep up with. And as you think about MarTech and personalization and social media, social media sort of is the center of gravity for Gen Z. My kids, your kids, they grew up in a digital world. It's easier to communicate with my son sometimes on Instagram than it is through—my one son won't even text me back. My other son, he'll text me back, but the younger one, sometimes it's easier to hit up a post on Instagram or another platform because it's something that they share interest in. So we connect very much so in basketball. We trade a lot of communications through basketball. But campaigns, the notion of just sending out a campaign is changing where you now need to be more continuous—have to a continuous relationship with that consumer. And it's more about journeys. So instead of having a one-off, hey, you're going to send out this one campaign, one to many, it's one to one, and it's ongoing, finding them at the right point in time.

It's less about segments, right? So you used to do a ton of targeting and back in the day of direct mail and segmentation. Now it's more about individuals and understanding what matters for that individual and personalizing it and making sure they feel that you're talking to them, not to somebody else. It's about moving from interruption to relevance. So think about when you're out, and you're kind of online on your phone. I do this often; I'll be traveling, I'll go on my phone just to break up the time, and these stupid ads just pop up in the middle of you doing something, and it's like so annoying and frustrating. No one's going to respond to that because it's kind of a nuisance. So you've got to find the pocket, the place, to interject that marketing in a culturally relevant way that isn't so in your face. And then it's also about the emotional connection.

If you're just focused on awareness and driving looks and you're not focused on how you're connecting with them, and that could go back to our conversation before, using culture and sponsorships and influencers to kind of help with your messages, it's going to be really hard to make that connection emotionally. So it's a tough question because we're all, as marketers, constantly trying to reinvent ourselves, use the technology, but also find the way that the new generation responds. So how a Gen Z responds is very different than how I might have responded or continue to engage and respond. So you have to continue to reinvent yourself. So it will evolve, it will continue to evolve, inclusive of the AI that we use to get there.

Alan Hart: It makes sense. Picking up on another phrase you used earlier, "marketing sits at the center of complexity." All of those things that you just laid out there, it makes our job even that much more complex. But you can't get the effectiveness without the complexity.

Kevin Skirde: That's exactly right. Totally agree.

Alan Hart: Well, I want to switch gears. It's been good talking about marketing, but we'd love to get to know you a little bit more, besides overcoming your fear of flying, which I'm still thinking about. My favorite question to ask anyone that comes on the show is, has there been an experience of your past that defines or makes up who you are today?

Kevin Skirde: Yeah, I don't think it—yes and no. I don't think it is only one thing that will ever truly make up who I am. Hopefully there's a lot of things that got me to where I am today. But I think there was a defining moment in my life early on in my career when I was in school. As I mentioned, I had a huge passion to go into the sports marketing industry. I think a lot of people do. And back then it was new. It wasn't structured as it is today. It was more of a newer course, newer career, newer major in the university. On top of that, I had a very strong goal of going to law school. Wasn't sure if I actually wanted to be like a pure lawyer to say, hey, just go in and do corporate law or whatever. But I felt like the law, married with the sports marketing background, could take me a lot of different directions.

And that's if I worked at a, whether it was a team or a stadium, arena, whatever it would be, I felt like the law degree would be super helpful. So, of course, I applied, I went to St. John's University undergrad. My dad worked at St. John's, so there was no other place I was going to go because he spent 40 years there, and I applied to St. John's Law, had great references. I was on the edge of my LSATs. I wasn't always the best test taker.

So I was on the edge. I was really on the edge—close enough to get in, but close enough maybe to also get rejected. I said, you know what? I'm close enough. I had some good references, including one of the board members. And when I got the letter that I didn't get in, that was a really tough moment for a couple of reasons. One, what am I going to do? Where do I go from here? Because this was my map, just kind of my compass. This is what I told myself I had to do. So there wasn't a plan behind this.

You know, I said to myself, OK, pause on the law school because it doesn't mean I can't go to a different law school. And I did wind up getting into law school at some point, and I did start it, but I realized it wasn't for me. So it was actually the best thing that happened to me because I realized this was not the area that I wanted to go in my career. But still stay on the track of sports marketing, and obviously you heard the story about trying to get into MBNA. Like, I really never—I worked in sports marketing for like two years, I think, and that was it. There's always been a component of sports, you know, throughout my career—especially now, because we deal with the Olympics, we deal with FIFA—but I don't work in sports marketing, and I love what I do.

So that moment in time, which felt like a terrible, terrible thing. And here my wife, who was my girlfriend at the time, she was on-track, very clear with her journey and her career what she was going to do. And I'm like, I'm lost at a young age and having to try to figure out how to reinvent myself. And that's where the experiments really became part of me building who I am into the job that I have today. In the job that we have, like, listen, if you're to go be a lawyer, it's very much more defined. If you're going to be a teacher, it's very defined. If you're going be a nurse, it's very defined. If you go into the corporate world and you're a marketer, or you work in the payment space, it's almost very undefined in a lot of ways, but that's good and bad. It's good because you can do a lot of different things. It's bad because you've got to figure out your journey and how to navigate, how you want to move up the ladder, where you want to go, where you don't, and the experiments allowed me to do that.

I couldn't be happier. I never would have said, hey, if you asked me like 10 years ago, Kevin, you want to be the SVP of marketing services for Visa or for a company like this? I wouldn't even know what it was. But I absolutely, wholeheartedly get up and I love my job every day. I love the people I work with. I love the ability to go help clients and have an impact. I love the fact that we've built this business and there's so value to it. So, that moment in time, which felt like a really, really tough place to be, I look back and I'm like, it was the best thing that happened to me. Here I am today and I probably do it way better than I would have been as, you know, in the sports marketing industry as a lawyer.

Alan Hart: I love that. Well, if you were going to give advice to young Kevin, what advice would you give young Kevin if you're starting this all over again?

Kevin Skirde: That would be a long conversation. I would say first, prioritize having some fun. I think because, if I go back to this last story, I think because I felt like I had to really work hard to figure out my path, I invested a lot of my time into my career and work. If people ask me now, oh, what's your hobby? I'm actually not—besides trying to play golf a couple times a year, maybe exercising here and there, watching sports, I've put so much into my career and my work, which is not a bad thing. But I think if I could go back, I would say, hey, prioritize some fun along the way. Have some fun and prioritize your well-being because that's really, really important.

The second thing is, be patient. I had so many moments, but early on, you're looking so far ahead and you're trying to think about, OK, what's the big moment in your career that you're aiming for? Live in that moment at the time and take that opportunity.

The third thing is learn, learn, learn. Be that sponge and just keep learning. Because when you do that, A, you'll enjoy it more in the moment, but B, as you get to the moments that I'm in today, you'll sort of be much more equipped and prepared for it.

Alan Hart: Well, speaking of learning, you're nailing my next question: What's one topic you're trying to learn more about yourself?

Kevin Skirde: Huh. This is an awkward one. Retirement! [laughs] Like, what's the next chapter? I've got a ways to go, but it's not that far off, considering how many years I've been working. And how do you go from this high-paced, high-pressure role into that next chapter—and that next chapter might not be full retirement, but it might be something different. And when is that? And then when you do retire, how do you actually get into the position of not actually getting up to go to work every day? And what does your life look like? What is your purpose in life in those two chapters? Because your whole purpose for the last whatever many years has been working and building your family and supporting your family. I think that's where we all, when we have kids, we all start to think about.

I remember seeing my father retire probably about 15, 16 years ago. Hard worker, had a great high-profile job, a lot of pressure, and he retired. I'm like, that's it? It's done? Like, nobody talks to you anymore? It's over? Like, you just go from getting up and working five, sometimes six, seven days a week, out at nights, traveling. And then all of a sudden, you're getting up to make yourself some bacon and eggs in the morning, and then you're going to think about what you're going to do for the rest of the day. That just seems really different. That seems really strange.

You know, it's been on my mind because I'm like, OK, what does that in 10 years look like for me? How do I make sure I'm making an impact and creating some type of I guess impact is the best word and sort of motivation for me every day outside of the workforce?

Alan Hart: Yeah, I'm not there yet either. But you just gave me a bunch of anxiety as I heard you talking about it. Because I'm probably like you, too—I don't have that many hobbies, really any real hobbies. I have exercise, things like that, that you describe. But that notion of like the wheel just grinding to a halt? Now I'm like, what do you do?

Kevin Skirde: I have to think for many people in our positions, it's a real thing. It's a real thing. Our jobs are complex. Years ago, when you'd come home from the office and there wasn't the ability to keep working. Now, you come home from the office, you don't stop working. And it's OK; it's just part of all that. That's why I say work and career and personal life has blended together in this day and age. Yeah, it's an interesting one. We'll see where I land.

Alan Hart: Well, I'm going to call you when I get a little closer! [laughs]

Kevin Skirde: Call me in 10 years, and we'll have a follow-up session here.

Alan Hart: Yeah, maybe you'll help guide me through that process. Maybe that'll be your new purpose, helping other people figure that out!

Kevin Skirde: That'll be my job.

Alan Hart: Yeah, exactly. Well, we talked about what you're learning more about. What are you curious about in the world today?

Kevin Skirde: Yeah, having two boys, both in college—one graduating in May and going off to get his master's of engineering, and one a sophomore—understanding how the world evolves and the job market evolves for them. I had the opportunity recently to speak at my university and do a sort of guest speak at a class and it was around career navigation. And that was one of the biggest questions. Like, hey, there's no internship for me. Hey, there's no job. I'm having a hard time getting a job. Really worried that AI is going to change or replace my job.

Having two boys kind of getting ready to go into the workforce—my older one really soon, the younger one, a few years from now. What is that going to look like for them? How are they going to navigate their career? And it's going to be very different than how I navigated my career. The one thing I told them recently, I said, listen, you need to embrace AI. If you don't, you're going to be left behind. But you don't fully understand what that means, especially at their age. But life is going to be very different for them, and the workforce is going to look very different. And how you go to work and show up every day is going to be very different.

There was no working from home when I started. There was only working from home maybe about 15 years ago is really when we started it. I think it was like 2010, '11, and even that was a little early on. And then the pandemic changed so much that working from home now is just part of what you do, at least partially. But you don't want to lose that human connection. And I think they grew up in the digital environment. Human connection is very different for them.

For me, relationships are so important to my every day, both for work and personal life. And every job I have had, except for one, has been through my relationships. I think relationships for them has to become important, and they can't let technology get in the way of the relationship. And so we'll see where it goes, but I've been helping them try to figure out how to navigate this sort of complex environment, which is going to be very different for me at my age versus for them.

Alan Hart: So true. Very poignant thoughts. too. What's going to matter in the future? I wholeheartedly agree with it. Relationships, I mean, as long as we're still operating as humans, relationships are going to matter.

Kevin Skirde: Yeah. But I don't see that as a priority in a lot of places, which I think is a missing art in a lot of ways. Again, I go back. When I started my company, this credit card company called Partners First in 2007, we had a great idea. I guess you could consider we were a fintech and didn't realize we were a fintech at the time because it was all digital.

And it was like doing affinity-based marketing, so it was kind of MBNA, but focused on the middle—the medium and the smaller groups. All the big banks were getting out of the medium and smaller groups. We saw our market there, and it was. It was a good demand, good opportunity. We were kind of maybe a few years ahead, and unfortunately the market crashed a year later. I was responsible not only for marketing, but I ran our operations and I ran the relationship with TSYS, our payment processor. And I remember my boss, who was the CEO from day one, because me and one other guy built the operations and spent a lot of time down in Columbus, Georgia. He's like, you need to be down there every week. This is once we got it built. We'd spent four months down there together, and then once we got it built, he's like, you've got to go there every week. And I was like, why do I got to go there every week? I'm like, it's Columbus, Georgia. First of all, it's not easy to get to from Delaware. I've got to fly, I've got to drive. And he's like, trust me, you've got to build that relationship. We need them. They're the backbone of our company. I said, OK, I'm going to listen to you. You've got a lot more experience than I do. And our owner called us—the guy that funded us—October 2008, because we had a trigger in the contract and in two weeks, the trigger was going to kick in. And what would happen is if the trigger kicked in, we would be on the hook for seven years with TSYS, and our penalties would be massive.

So that works if you're a scaled company where you're into this business and the market crashed. It doesn't work for us. And the owner says—calls me personally on my cell phone—he goes, "Kevin, you need to go down and renegotiate that and extend that out as far as you can. Or I'm shutting the company down." Now I had 40 people. We've built it from seven people to 40 people. And you have a personal responsibility for those people, right? It's scary. I remember coming home to my wife and going, OK, this is on me.

So I flew down to TSYS the next week and I sat with one of the senior executives who was a much older gentleman than I was. I was fairly young at the time. And I said, Bill, I said, you don't have to do this. I said, but hopefully our relationship that we've built, you'll understand what this means not only to me personally, but also to my 40 people that part of our company. He goes, you know what, Kevin? He's like, we're losing money on you. Because think about it: They work on volumes. That's where they're to make their money. We had no volumes, and we're just costing them tons of money. Cause we're making them do tons of different things. And he says, I have no reason to do this, but I really like you and I want to see you guys succeed, so I'm going to do it. And I was like, that's when I knew relationships matter.

I mean, that's really when I understood it and I went back and I think hopefully I've told my boss, my old boss, who's a friend of mine, you know, he guided me in a way that I didn't understand at the time, but I truly understand now.

Alan Hart: That's a great story. Last question for you as we round out here. What's the largest opportunity or threat you see facing marketers today?

Kevin Skirde: Yeah, I think everybody probably would hopefully answer this the same is AI. I think it's both. Again, I said earlier, if you don't embrace it, you're going to be left behind pretty quickly. I think with AI, it's giving tools and making it more accessible for the smaller company, who is now going to be able to compete with the bigger company in a more consistent way. Because before AI, it was harder for them. But now with solutions and these capabilities, they're going to be able to compete. It's taking the mundane, repeatable processes and execution out of the human's hands. So that's all kind of the hard part, the threat. But on the opportunity, it's elevating the human side, in my mind. You as a human need to kind of be much more in the judgment side and build the strategy and less on the delivery and execution. So it's less around the making and the doing, and it's more around the directing and getting to the better outcome. Because it's going to be harder because you have so much coming through the pipes and there's going to be so much more competitiveness.

Because everybody can now be a little bit more on an equal playing field, it's going to be harder to get that breakthrough and connection. So you're going to need the human side of it to make sure you're connecting in and directing, at least for now. I'm sure the AI is going to evolve to make it even better. We'll be directing, but I think that's a big thing that you've got to make sure you're relevant. So it takes the processes out, automates them, you become more efficient, but you've got to make sure the strategy is correct and the human side of it's connected. So it's a little bit of a balance on this one. Listen, if you asked me six months ago, I wasn't spending much time in AI. And one of our executives said, I can't remember the exact quote, but he spends a good amount of time learning each week. And I was like, you know what? This is an area that I need to focus on. And I spend a disproportionate amount of time now using AI to do everything. Now, it's the start. There's a lot of things I have to do after, but it does automate my tasks and I can do a lot more and I can make it a lot better. You've really got to embrace it because you don't really know the power of it until you're actually in it.

Alan Hart: Yeah, very true. Just my own personal experiences: Using it allows you to learn how you can better adapt your own work to make a better use of it. So you completely change the way that you're working. But you would, to your point, you would never know that unless you're actively using it at least every day.

Kevin Skirde: And I will say from when I started a couple of months ago to now, the technology is better. The models are better. But you also start to become conditioned on how, like in the beginning, you might've put a basic prompt. Now you're actually talking back and forth. You're literally talking back and forth as—that's a human. That's your sort of assistant. So as you become more precise in how you communicate, the output of it is so much better.

Alan Hart: Yeah, one hundred percent. Well, Kevin, thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing all the goodness today. I really enjoyed having you on and having a good conversation.

Kevin Skirde: This has been fantastic. I appreciate you having me. In 10 years, we'll come back. We'll talk about retirement.

Alan Hart: I love it, I love it. We'll set the date now.

Kevin Skirde: All right, Alan. Thanks so much. Appreciate it.

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