



EPISODE 50

The future of fandom and its impact on brands

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

Guests: Andrea Hopelain, GM and SVP, Global Marketing, Electronic Arts

Alan Hart: Today on the show, I have Andrea Hopelain. She's the GM and senior vice president of global marketing at Electronic Arts. Andrea leads marketing across EA's entire franchise portfolio spanning EA sports, Madden NFL, The Sims, Apex Legends, and more, reaching hundreds of millions of players worldwide.

A former collegiate soccer player and lifelong believer in the power of play, she's built her career connecting fans to some of the world's most beloved sports, entertainment and gaming brands. Today on the show, we talk about how fandom is evolving from passive consumption to active participation, how EA is building a platform for the future of fan engagement, and what AI simply cannot replicate. That and much more with Andrea Hopelain.

Alan Hart (voice-over): Are you ready to go beyond the basics of marketing? I'm Alan Hart and this is Marketing Beyond, where I chat with the world's leading chief marketing officers and business innovators

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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, Andrea, welcome to the show.

Andrea Hopelain: Thanks for having me.

Alan Hart: Well, the one thing I heard about you is that we should not challenge each other on the pitch.

Andrea Hopelain: I played competitive soccer growing up. And, gosh, what an interesting way of comparing and learning how to lead it was by being an athlete. I don't think I really recognized it at the time. I was just out there frizzy hair running back and forth across the pitch.

But I played center midfield. And if you know the game, you know that that is not the fastest person on the pitch. It's not necessarily the strongest to muscle you off as a defender, but it's a playmaker. It's someone that sits in the middle and sees the entire field—corners, horizons—communicates broadly, and knows when to put the ball through to the people who can put it in the back of the net. And as I've grown in my leadership along the way, I didn't realize what a fundamental those life lessons on the pitch would have been for what I do today.

Alan Hart: Yeah. Well, you're now the GM and senior vice president of marketing for EA or Electronic Arts. Where did you get your start—from soccer to business?

Andrea Hopelain: I started right out of college at the scrappiest end of marketing. I did a lot of local promotions trying to get people to come out to the Ford dealership to meet the Laker Girls and test-drive a car. It was like, how do you build an audience? How do you connect them to brands? That was probably my first chapter in the marketing world.

I then moved into new places like distribution marketing, affiliate marketing, learning how brands through, in my case, cable providers at the time meet their audiences. And over the time, I went back into consumer marketing, went back into business brand management and along the way, as I've worked for some of the best companies in the world—Disney, ESPN, Sony, Hasbro, today EA—it's really about getting closer and closer to the fan and getting closer and closer to how to envelop an organization's mission around serving a fan and driving audiences and helping them feel like they can belong. But then as a business, also knowing how you can build a business around that belonging.

Alan Hart: Right. Tell me a little bit about the scope of your organization at EA—and I think it's just recently evolved.

Andrea Hopelain: It has, it has. I have the fortune today of leading global marketing for the entire electronics organization, all of our franchises, everything from all of our sports properties at EA Sports FC™, Madden, College Football and the like, as well as some of the rest of our portfolio: The Sims, Battlefield, Apex. It's a really fun role, with a really talented team. We serve almost 300 million fans a year inside of our games and experiences. I think on sports last year, we had almost 11 billion hours of sports play.

Alan Hart: Wow.

Andrea Hopelain: So it's an enormous responsibility, it's an enormous challenge, and it's a whole lot of fun.

Alan Hart: I mean, those are some amazing titles that you just rattled off. And 300 million fans? That's a lot. How are you thinking about the evolution of fandom, as you—because you're at the center of it.

Andrea Hopelain: I think we are too. Fandom today is so much different than it was when we were growing up. We were delighted to watch our favorite heroes on television. We were delighted to see them in action on a big screen. Today, fandom is so much more interactive. Gen Z and Gen A have completely rewritten the recipe of what they expect from engagement around brands.

Today, fandom is like “participatory or leave.” They're out if they're not able to participate, if they're not able to create, connect. And so, we're really sitting in a really sweet spot knowing that our core capabilities today at Electronic Arts are deeply rooted in interactive and participatory fandom.

Alan Hart: And as you think about that shift from observing to participatory, what are some of the things that you are seeing as people evolve with the platforms themselves?

Andrea Hopelain: We're seeing them increasingly spend more and more time with their friends inside of our platforms. Social connection has become a really, really important component of how we build and develop for fans. It goes back to wanting to feel like not just a place you can play, but a place you belong. Want to meet up with your friends? It's like your new third space. And so that's become more and more important to how we build games. How we build our experiences is making sure that it's easy to find your friends and easy to stay and play and interact socially and communicate with them.

The other component of that, though, that's really fun—particularly this week—is we just announced (last week) EA Advertising, which is our new platform for brands to come in and advertise inside of our platform. And when you think about some of those trends that we've been talking about here—participatory versus a lean-back entertainment—we have one of the ripest environments for brands to engage with our audiences, knowing that—I think the stat is something like 99% of those that are coming in are seeing and interacting with our brands because it is so participatory now.

Alan Hart: Right. And as you think about talking to marketers and brands, how do you think about the opportunities that that presents to them now?

Andrea Hopelain: Every marketer today is thinking about where to spend their dollar most responsibly. And for a really long time, everyone has been focused on reach. You know, how many times and how far and wide can my brand reach? And I still think reach is important, but I don't think reach matters if you can't meet your audience in a participatory environment or in a space that they feel like they belong. Otherwise, [it's] just brands passing you by along the way. But when you feel like you belong somewhere, or when you feel like your identity, your friendships, your connection, your entertainment is inside of a platform like EA Sports or like some of our games, it's a really rich environment for brands to meet their customers in places where it feels organic and natural and not just sort of a billboard along the way.

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Alan Hart: Well, extrapolating a little bit, you start watching the live versions of these sports titles and then you want to continue that excitement in the game environment—and with your friends, to your point. It seems like a natural bridge to have that reach with the live piece and then the higher engagement on the platforms themselves.

Andrea Hopelain: That's exactly right.

Alan Hart: We're building the plan for the marketers right now. [laughs]

Andrea Hopelain: That's right, that's right. If they listen to us, they'll just know!

Alan Hart: Well, it's fascinating. How do you think about all of the games and titles that you have and the platforms you have? Do you see yourself now as a platform?

Andrea Hopelain: Very much so. I think we have been for some time. We have really rich underlying technology that allows us to build and deliver these games. In the instance of sports, we have live data coming in. We have real-world data coming from what's happening in NFL games, in Formula One races, in hockey matches, and on the pitch. And so real-world sports data coming in. And then we have the data from all of our players who are interacting and choosing how they want to play.

So it starts from a really rich fabric and tapestry of technology and interactive components, and then we have the place where you can meet your friends and you can connect with them. So that is the start line of building a platform. But then we are able to build on top of it: IP, characters, stories, worlds, entertainment, advertising. For me, as we think about building forward, we always think about how do you best serve those that are in the game? How do you build around them, and how do you build beyond? I think we have a very, very rich platform to keep building from that only really becomes the future of entertainment.

Alan Hart: Right. Well, I knew you had all the integrations in the live data. I wasn't thinking about the totality, though, of all the data that you have. I mean, the player behavior, the players and interactions that they're having with each other. It's a very rich environment to even test things, I would imagine, in the future.

Andrea Hopelain: It's powerful, and it gives us a lot of opportunity to continue to think about how to personalize, how to hyper-culturalize, how to connect brands with very specific audiences. And so I think it's only going to keep getting better and better for what we're able to do to serve our fans.

Alan Hart: As you think about the future of fandom, it feels like you're at the nexus of this. What does it look like? What does your future look like?

Andrea Hopelain: I mean, I think we are the future of fandom. I think that if you go back to fandom is increasingly not passive and that notion of it's participatory or they leave, I think for us it's really about belonging. I want EA to be not just a place you play, but a place you belong. And I want our fans, irrespective of the team, the league, the sport, the theme, the character, the worlds that they love—irrespective of those things—to feel like we know them, we know why they're here, we know how to serve

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them, and their passion can be served while they're playing, while they're connecting, while they're watching, across the board.

Alan Hart: I really love that cultural connection and making sure people belong, and that you are very authentically allowing that to happen, which is pretty nice. Pretty nice. I mean, from a market perspective, anyway.

Well, one of the things we love to do is to get to know you a little bit better. We know I should not challenge you to soccer. But my favorite question to ask everyone that comes on the show is, has there been an experience of your past that defines who you are today?

Andrea Hopelain: I would say probably my life growing up as a child. I moved seven times. I lived in seven different cities before seventh grade. And at the time, I was young enough to be able to adapt fairly quickly. But I think that that actually created probably a little bit of the style of who I am today—quite adaptable to new situations, always willing to walk into the room, happy to be on the path uncharted. I always say to the team, the road is really long. For me, it never ends. We're never finished. We're never finished growing. We're never finished learning. And so really, taking paths uncharted is something that I have a little bit of a superpower in of, you know, give me the brief. Let's figure it out.

Alan Hart: Ready to go! Well, if you were giving advice to your younger self starting all over again, what advice would you give?

Andrea Hopelain: I would say, maybe from a career perspective, what I would try to teach people, earlier than I learned, is to learn how your company makes money. We all get really wrapped up in our early careers, learning about our job and our roles and how we fit into the organization. And the org chart tends to be an important focus for a lot of people. It's who do I report to, where do they lead, and how does it go, and what's my next step on the ladder? I would say that the sooner you can learn how your company actually makes money—where you profit, where you don't, how different distribution choices can be an accelerant or detractor, how spending in different platforms are more profitable or less profitable.

I think the more context you have about those things, and the faster you can learn how your company actually makes money, the smarter you are walking into any room, irrespective of the path you choose in the organization. And it just gives you leverage as, you know, it's just wisdom of walking into the room to know how your choices impact the rest of the company.

Alan Hart: I think that's one of the wisest things I've heard on this show in quite a while, especially for marketers listening to this. It's that we get wrapped up into the artful side of marketing, and you have to be grounded in how that is actually driving your business and what are the levers that you can pull. So I think that's very smart, especially for marketers.

What's one topic you're trying to learn more about?

Andrea Hopelain: On a personal side, I've been really invested lately in building a living wall. Which on the surface is just a fun, creative hobby with plants. But, as I'm learning how to navigate, it's really an

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interesting metaphor of the tapestry of what it is to build a community. I'm building this community of plants on the wall and trying to tend to them and give them each their individual needs and their spaces and grow them in the right directions to create the right harmony. And as I've been doing this—every morning I'm out there before work, watering them and tending to them—I think about what a metaphor it is for the work I do today at EA Sports with our communities around the world and trying to bring them together and create the texture that allows them to thrive.

Alan Hart: I love that. I'm just curious, for myself, how did it work? Is there soil in the wall itself that you...?

Andrea Hopelain: Yeah, there are these really great planters that you can now buy that kind of go at an angle, and you can attach them to the wall. Yeah, so it gives you a little bit of a head start.

Alan Hart: OK, but you're out there, you have to water them periodically.

Andrea Hopelain: Yeah, and the succulents don't want a lot of water. Some of them want a lot of water. So it's a real art.

Alan Hart: A lot of needs.

Andrea Hopelain: I didn't quite realize what I was taking on, but I'm really thrilled by the process.

Alan Hart: I love it, I love it. As you look out in the world, what are you curious about?

Andrea Hopelain: I'm really, really watching what's happening right now across all of our teams and watching what's happening with AI. And I'm really trying to stay focused on the fact that AI will be an enormous accelerant for us in so many ways, but it will never take away from taste. It won't take away from human judgment. I think creativity is in our minds and in the connective tissue of what we experience in the world and what we can imagine. And so, I'm really trying to stay focused on the balance that we are lucky to have at this moment in our careers.

Alan Hart: Well, as a marketer, as you think about marketing itself, what do you see as the largest opportunity or potential threat facing us today?

Andrea Hopelain: I think the largest opportunity is belonging truly. Truly. I think that we are all looking for a community. We're all looking for places that we feel like we are seen, recognized and known. And I think that that is the greatest opportunity for any brand out there. And if you're not focused on how to ensure your audiences feel like they're a part of something and that they belong, I think that's the biggest risk.

Alan Hart: OK. Well, we are here at Cannes. There's AI, it seems, everywhere. As you think about your brand and your company, what's maybe one thing that AI cannot replicate? And how are you preserving that, doubling down on that?

Andrea Hopelain: It's probably double-down thing where I just want—I don't think AI can create belonging. I don't, I think it can know us quite well, and that's amazing, but I don't think it can create the human connection that people want. Our fans want to play together. They want to compete together.

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They want to have joy together and laugh together. They want to put fun, healthy challenges in front of one another and combat a little bit. I think that there's no accounting for that in robot form or AI form.

Alan Hart: I love that notion. It's almost like a real-life living wall.

Andrea Hopelain: Yeah.

Alan Hart: We're all plants trying to communicate with each other.

Andrea Hopelain: We are all trying to do that. And I think perhaps that's probably one of the beautiful sides of AI, is it can take away some of the things that don't bring us joy. And maybe the skills, renaissance skills, that all of us—that were developed over time by humanity—I hope that those come back, where we spend more time face to face with one another. We spend more time in real life versus behind a screen.

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

Andrea Hopelain: Thank you for having me.

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