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Connecting brand to demand in a zero-click world

Host: *Alan Hart, leader in marketing and customer strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP*
Guests: *Kimberly Storin, Chief Marketing Officer, Zoom*

Alan Hart: Today on the show, I have Kim Storin and chief marketing officer at Zoom. Kim's a brand transformation specialist who has led marketing at companies ranging from SaaS startups to Fortune 50s and was an M&A consultant at Deloitte early in her career.

Today on the show, we talk about the double-edged sword of nearly universal brand awareness, how Zoom is shifting to B2C style tactics to win in a B2B world, and what it means to rethink brand as a pipeline. That and much more with Kim Storin.

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 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, Kim, welcome to the show.

Kimberly Storin: Thanks for having me.

Alan Hart: Yeah. So I hear that you were born to be a marketer, a CMO. [laughs]

Kimberly Storin: [laughs] I guess so.

Alan Hart: Or formed, maybe after birth, to be a CMO! Yeah. Tell me a little bit about that. Your parents.

Kimberly Storin: I grew up as the—or, I guess I should say, I grew up. I am the daughter of a CFO. So a CPA by training. Who had moved up to CFO. and my mother was a graphic designer and she was a long-term employee of a local furniture store. Did all of their layouts for their advertising every week. And then on the family front, she was known for putting chimps in our family photos and putting the dogs everywhere in photos. So, she was really revolutionary at the time. Now she's like learned AI. So now it's even scarier because she can really turn it out. Before, she had to use Adobe Photoshop. But—

Alan Hart: Now—

Kimberly Storin: Now, she's all over the AI.

Alan Hart: Straight from idea to execution.

Kimberly Storin: Exactly, exactly.

Alan Hart: That's funny. Well, you are the CMO of Zoom. What was your path? Where did you get your start? How did you end up at Zoom?

Kimberly Storin: So I actually started my career in crisis communications and as a consultant at Deloitte.

Alan Hart: Full circle

Kimberly Storin: That's right. Full circle. And now I'm here at Zoom. But I think the background of coming from a management consulting experience is so different than a lot of marketers. And so I didn't have my fingers on the keyboard doing marketing. Although communications in many ways is a marketing function. But I really had to learn strategy from the get-go and understand how to deal with a crisis and understand how to manage reputation. And then going into management consulting really understanding how M&A shifts a narrative, a corporate narrative, and understanding brand strategy in a way that was quite high pressure. Because if you make the wrong decision in a big $4 billion acquisition or a divestiture, the stakes are high. And so that's how I really learned brand and marketing and communications was coming up through a client service background.

Alan Hart: I love that. Well, what does marketing in your organization at Zoom look like?

Kimberly Storin: Marketing for us, we have communications and marketing in one function, and marketing before I joined had been decentralized for over two years. And so we've been really working to bring back together all of the elements of marketing, from product marketing and corporate communications to demand generation to brand social events. You name it. It fits under marketing now. They are one holistic marketing organization, and I really see us as the voice of and the voice to the customer. And so we've got a lot of levers that we can pull in terms of how we do that. We own customer advocacy, we own content, and there's a lot of ways that we can drive that perception shift that we're working so hard to drive.

Alan Hart: Well, one thing as CMO of Zoom is everyone knows the name, right? You know, the brand awareness—

Kimberly Storin: Ninety-nine percent brand awareness.

Alan Hart: OK! One percent. Right! [laughs]

Kimberly Storin: Who's that 1%? Right?

Alan Hart: Well, how does that translate? I mean, so high, high, high awareness. How does it translate, to your point, of where you're trying to focus?

Kimberly Storin: It's a double-edged sword, when you think about it. So, we do have extremely high awareness, but it's really awareness of a singular product that we were known for during the pandemic. And so, what we've been really working to do is to shift that perception. So our growth is coming because we are investing in platforms that expand, and build on, that video conferencing, but take it to the next level—and expanding the audiences.

So where IT or an SMB has been our primary buyer of the Zoom platform historically, now we've got products and portfolio that serve marketing leaders and HR leaders and customer support leaders and recruiting leaders. So that means that our job is now to connect the dots of the Zoom that they think they know, and help them understand our system of action, which is taking all of the context of these conversations, whether those conversations are outside your organization or inside your organization, and then embedding AI to really power conversation to action, conversation to completion, in a way that, in many cases, is unexpected because they still think that we're that one-trick pony. So bringing that understanding of the breadth and the depth of what the portfolio and what our secret sauce is when it comes to the context of those conversations. And our federated AI approach is a really—it's a big challenge in helping the IT teams understand. But then even more importantly, now we've got these new audiences that we have to help bring along—and audiences that we don't necessarily own. We're still building those audiences.

Alan Hart: Interesting. So how do you think about marketing needing to keep up with that buyer journey? Because it's—

Kimberly Storin: It's changed.

Alan Hart: A lot of complications, I guess, complexity to it.

Kimberly Storin: So I think the latest data I saw is that we only see 6% of the buyer journey anymore. So it's kind of the tip of the iceberg. And that 94% that's below that line is effectively the dark funnel. And the move to AI has really changed that buyer journey substantially, especially for us in B2B. So more than 50% of people now are starting their discovery journey on an LLM. And I think that number is probably higher in B2B, if I were to guess. But we're seeing so many searches now are now zero click. And that really shifts. So brand becomes even more important. Like, brand equals pipeline now.

Alan Hart: Right

Kimberly Storin: I used to say "brand to demand," like connecting the dots. And I'm realizing more and more with the shift in the buyer journey that it's not a brand to demand. It's brand equals demand. And that's a big mind shift for B2B and businesses in particular that are so used to putting a quarter into performance marketing and expecting a dollar out. And that's no longer the case, so it really changes how you think about being that voice of, and the voice to, the market. How are you connecting with people in an authentic way that builds trust? Because that's all that matters in that 94% of the time. Who's talking about you? Who's advocating for you? Are you showing up in the right places at the right time, and are you top of mind? And so now, we've got a big challenge as B2B marketers overall of how do we be present? Because all of a sudden, when you get to that 6% of the iceberg, all of a sudden you're on a short list. And the research shows that the majority of the time, when you're on the short list, the buyer's already decided who's going to win that deal. And so, yeah, the dark funnel is real.

Alan Hart: That's interesting. I mean, as you talk about it, the whole brand-to-pipeline conversion, only seeing 6% of the journey itself, you're in this almost B2C world for B2B. Is that how you see it as well? Taking maybe—

Kimberly Storin: No. So, we really are a B2B company at the end of the day, but we have the ubiquity of a B2C brand.

Alan Hart: Yes.

Kimberly Storin: And so, ultimately, yes, a big piece of our business is transactional. But it's still a business decision. So whether it's a solopreneur who's building their business based on one person or if it's a Fortune 50 customer, they're still solving business problems. And so even though we have the ubiquity of a consumer brand and we have an online transaction, it's very much a business online transaction. Like they're looking to reduce friction, they're looking for value, they're looking to make their lives easier. They want Zoom to be indispensable. But it's still, at the end of the day, when you talk about how we're monetizing, it is truly a B2B decision, even if it feels a little bit consumer-ish.

Alan Hart: How does that show up in your marketing? You've got the Zoom Ahead campaign and those aspects.

Kimberly Storin: So it was really fun. I talked to about 50 customers before I started at Zoom, and I realized I heard the same thing over and over again. And whether it was like, I went down a rabbit hole or whether it was talking to big enterprises like Deloitte, what I realized was, at the end of the day, Zoom has so much preference when it comes to users and ease of use. It just works, and people love the product. And I realized that we had an opportunity to lean in to the fact that we are part of the cultural zeitgeist. We do have high preference. Our NPS scores are very high. And so how do you tell that story in a way that enables the users to feel seen and their preference to feel seen, at the same time that we don't alienate the IT decision-makers, especially in the enterprise, that are making those choices. And so Zoom

Ahead was really our opportunity to be distinctive in the market. Right? We look at our competitors, and they don't really have the right to be in the cultural zeitgeist in the way that we do. And so that gave us an opportunity to leverage humor to break through. And we found this really great intersection of humor and heart and product truth that I think only we could own. And so tapping into the comedy and humor of Colin Jost and the *Saturday Night Live* mindset. I mean, if anybody is culturally relevant, it's somebody like him who's writing jokes on a weekly basis that really resonate. And so I think we were able to partner with Colin and his team and build something that was really special and really distinctive in the market. And it was Zoom's first brand campaign.

Alan Hart: What's next? What's ahead for either Zoom Ahead or marketing as you go forward?

Kimberly Storin: Well, Zoom Ahead continues. We can't talk about it, but I'm very excited about where it's heading. And you'll see more this fall in terms of where we go with it.

It's an extension of the ad that we had that launched in the college football time period here last year. But I think it's going to even showcase more of Zoom's system of action and the work that we're doing to bring an AI platform and really make people's lives easier because we embed it into the workflow. So that conversation-to-completion will really be clear. So that's the product truth that we'll be leaning into.

Alan Hart: Awesome.

Kimberly Storin: But it'll be fun. I promise. Funny and fun.

Alan Hart: Funny and fun. Well, one of the things we love to do is get to know you a little bit better. I'm curious if there's been an experience of your past that makes up who you are today

Kimberly Storin: I mean, absolutely. I feel like that is all of us, right? At the end of the day, we're a product of how we grew up and our past. And I do think, for me, like we've talked a little bit about my family and how we got here, and I do think that that's such a critical part of informing who I've become. I don't think that without having the influences of my parents—both in terms of the art and the science that it takes for marketing, but also of just supporting the ambition that I had early on—I don't think that I would be here today. But I've also had great mentors throughout my career who have really either (A) given me very hard truths, in a supportive way, or just really supported me throughout my career. And so there's, I think of one very formative moment. I'd left Deloitte and one of my mentors, who was the head of strategy, he and I were having a career conversation and he said, what do you want to be when you grow up? And I said, I want to be you. I want to be the head of strategy at a big company. And he said, I hate to tell you, like, you're not going to be. You're not a finance person. You've got some DNA! [laughs] But you're not a corporate finance person. And he said, but marketing needs you. And marketing needs somebody who comes from a strategic background, who understands transactions, who understands crisis and reputation. Like, marketing needs you. And so even though it was this hard truth of maybe I don't have what it takes to be as strategy and finance-oriented as he was, he also saw that I could be really successful. And so he helped me pick my major, ultimately. And that was a big turning point in my career.

Alan Hart: That's amazing. And ultimately lands you as a peer to people like that, in those roles.

Kimberly Storin: Mm-hmm. It's funny because throughout my career journey, I found myself—you know, obviously, I partner really well with CFOs. Shout out to Michelle [Michelle Chang, Zoom's CFO]. But I also have found that I partner really well with the strategy team.

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

Kimberly Storin: Sleep more.

Alan Hart: I think that's good advice here at Cannes, too!

Kimberly Storin: I know, right? But I think we now know how much sleep impacts lifespan and health.

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Kimberly Storin: And I just remember being 21 years old in New York City and working hard and playing hard and not sleeping a lot. So I'd probably go back and sleep a little bit more. [laughs]

Alan Hart: Well, what are you curious about in the world today?

Kimberly Storin: I'm curious about a lot of things. But one of the things that I am most curious about is anatomy and our body. And while most people go through their midlife crisis, I decided to get certified to teach Pilates and take a hobby and really go deep in it. And so I spent 500 hours in anatomy classes, really learning how our body works and how all the muscles and the joints and everything comes together. And I feel like it's really made me a better athlete as a result of it. But I'm really passionate about it.

Alan Hart: That's awesome. Multidimensional, Pilates and biology. And you're a CMO by day.

Kimberly Storin: Exactly, exactly.

Alan Hart: That's amazing. Well is there anything out in the world today that you're just curious about, you're noticing

Kimberly Storin: Um, I think the biggest thing that I'm inherently curious about right now is where do we go with human connection. And on one hand, I'm fascinated by AI. I've been working in this space and ML [machine learning] and DL [deep learning] for years before we even called it really AI. We're still calling it ML/DL. I launched an accelerated server, GPU accelerated server, with NVIDIA back in 2015. And so I'm always curious about—and I'm optimistic about what AI can do for us—but I also look at the next generation. I look at the importance of social and connection. I do wonder what that's going to look like as we continue to drive into a world that is so AI-centric, and what happens to marketing. People are craving in-person connection again. They're craving authenticity. They're craving personalization. And so it's really, while we're leveraging AI to supercharge our teams in certain ways, we also have to be conscientious that connection is what is going to drive revenue. Balancing that efficiency with real, authentic connection is going to be a challenge. So I'm really curious of how we continue as a society to put emphasis—

Alan Hart: On the human—

Kimberly Storin: On the human connection, because going back to my comment of sleep. What else drives lifespan and health span? Human connection. And so that's going to be our biggest challenge as a society I feel like going forward.

Alan Hart: Well, you may have already answered this question, but what do you see as the largest opportunity or threat facing marketers?

Kimberly Storin: I mean, ultimately, I think it's exactly that. The pressure to do more with less in a world that is still valuing human connection. So finding that balance and getting it right is going to be so critical. And being agile enough to recognize what works and what needs to be scaled because it works and what needs to be killed. And having those hard conversations. Like, paid search is not the channel that it was five years ago. Like I said, so much of the search is now zero click that it really shifts. You've got to be able to have those hard conversations with your team. You've got to be able to look forward and extrapolate where the world is going and dial things up and dial them back where needed. So, the agility piece becomes even more important—and being able to take calculated risks. Because with AEO [Answer Engine Optimization], we don't necessarily know what next week looks like.

And so you're learning every day, and nobody has the answer. So ultimately, being able to take those calculated risks and to be agile is going to be what drives transformational marketing leadership going forward.

Alan Hart: Well, to use your analogy of the search, it's like, well what are they searching for? And then, who is searching? Is it a human or is it the agents?

Kimberly Storin: Right. And how do you build content—

Alan Hart: For both. Yeah.

Kimberly Storin: For both, ultimately, because it's going to be very different. And I think, like I said, I think people move so quickly into this mindset of it's all or nothing. And I think really the world that we're going to be living in is agents and humans. And that means they'll be two separate paths, because you can't use the same content for both. You can't have the same journey for both. And you have to think, how are people learning and what do they need to know about in that 94% of the time before they talk to you? And so, removing friction becomes so critical. Answering their questions before they even know that it's a question that they have. Because they don't want to talk to buyers until they're 80% of the way done. Sorry—talk to sellers!

They don't want to talk to your sales team. And that's a different world. Especially for B2B enterprise sellers who have built these relationships over time and now their buyers are looking for all of this information before they ever pick up the phone, before they ever want to talk to you.

Alan Hart: Yeah. Well, we are here at Cannes, and AI is everywhere.

Kimberly Storin: Everywhere.

Alan Hart: Everywhere.

Kimberly Storin: But so is human connection! [laughs]

Alan Hart: That is true. And that may be the answer to this question. But what is the one thing that your brand is doubling down on, and how are you going to protect it? That's not AI.

Kimberly Storin: Right, right. So, I mean, for us, it truly is perception shift. And with perception shift comes the need for authentic connection. And so that's really what we're doubling down on right now is being distinctive, driving—like, going back to marketing basics. Thinking about how do we achieve mental availability? How do we be distinctive in the market? We're not the size of our competitors. Those guys are big. So we have to be scrappy. We have to be doing things that maybe feel a little uncomfortable and take those calculated risks and bring that humor, bring that heart, bring that product truth, and do it in a way that really connects with humans. And that's what's going to ultimately drive the change in our perception.

Alan Hart: Well, I love dusting off, if you will, the brand management playbooks and infusing the mental availability and distinctiveness of marketing science. You triggered all of the right things for me today!

Kimberly Storin: Nerding out! [laughs]

Alan Hart: So, yes! But thank you for coming on the show, Kim.

Kimberly Storin: Thanks for having me. This was fun.

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