



EPISODE 54

Protecting brand authenticity at scale

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

Guests: Meghan Gendelman, CMO of B2B, Canva

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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: Today on the show, I have Meghan Gendelman, chief marketing officer for B2B at Canva. Meghan brings deep enterprise marketing experience from nearly 13 years at Salesforce and a recent role at Docusign, and she's now helping Canva build visual communication into the essential infrastructure of modern work. Today on the show, we talk about what brand authenticity really means in a world flooded with AI-generated content, how organizations can stay on brand when LLMs can create anything, and the new roles emerging in an AI-powered marketing organization.

That and much more with Meghan Gendelman.

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, Meghan, welcome to the show.

Meghan Gendelman: Thank you. Delighted to be here.

Alan Hart: Well, I heard a recent story. I love New York City, and I hear you got to take your kids for the first time to New York—for their first time to New York. Tell me about it.

Meghan Gendelman: I go to New York for work all the time. My husband goes to New York for work some of the time. We've actually never taken our kids, and they're 12 and 10, so they're that sweet, perfect age where they're independent and adventurous, but they still like us. It's a really sweet time. And we were there for a family wedding, but we decided to add a few days in advance and just went full tourist.

We saw three Broadway shows, we went to the Statue of Liberty, we went to Ellis Island, we walked the High Line. And it had been, honestly, I think 10 years since I've done the full tourist of New York. It was a great time to be there, and I happened to be there during the week that the Knicks won, so there was also that.

Alan Hart: Oh, wow. Oh my, wow. That's a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Meghan Gendelman: I mean, I wasn't at the game!

Alan Hart: I know, but even just the city experience of the electricity of that.

Meghan Gendelman: Yeah, it was really fun.

Alan Hart: And three shows in one week? I love Broadway shows. Three in one week is like a dream, I think.

Meghan Gendelman: My 10-year-old wants to be on the crew. She wants to be behind the scenes.

Alan Hart: Oh, wow. OK.

Meghan Gendelman: And so she went full—we have all the merch of all the things. Yes. She loved it.

Alan Hart: I love it. Well, you are the CMO for B2B at Canva. How did you get your start, and how did you end up at Canva?

Meghan Gendelman: So I'm not a classically trained marketer. I have worked in sales, I've worked in customer success, I've worked in enablement, and I've worked in marketing. And I was working at Salesforce. I was there for 12 years, and then DocuSign and then Canva. But I was working at Salesforce and I was doing enablement, and I just—the work was good, but it wasn't my work. I missed the customer, and I missed talking about what was moving the business forward and things like that. So I went to a mentor and said, how do I get this job? I described this job as the dream job I have, and it was to work at an executive briefing center, which is a very tech thing, but to work in an executive briefing center.

And I wanted to host the customers. I wanted to ask the tough questions the sales reps were afraid to ask, and I wanted to—I felt like I had enough chutzpah at the time to say to our executives, you know what? We've already covered that. It's really interesting. Let's move on to this. I really felt like I could do that.

She's like, great. Love it. Totally. That job doesn't exist. But she gave me really brilliant advice and she said volunteer. Keep doing your job well, but just volunteer in the EBC. So I went back to my desk and I wrote the best email of my entire career, and it was four sentences long. I said, I'm a pretty good public speaker. I know the corporate pitch, and I almost never wear jeans. Call me whenever you have a cancellation. And in the next 45 days, I gave the corporate pitch 30 times.

Alan Hart: Wow.

Meghan Gendelman: And 45 days later, Al Falcione, who is an incredible marketer, called me and he said, I'm going to build a content team for the EBC. I heard you might be interested. And that's how I got into marketing.

Alan Hart: Oh, wow.

Meghan Gendelman: And then from there, I did content marketing. I did executive marketing. I did field marketing, demand gen. One of the great things about that time is every time I started to get a little bit bored, they'd be like, go do this.

So that was incredible. I was at Salesforce for 12 years, and then I moved to DocuSign and got to help them launch their AI product, got to help them build a category, do an entire rebrand. It was just an absolute time of transformation, and I loved it. And I wasn't looking to go, but I did say, while I think their ICP's really important, I missed selling to sales and marketers. I cared deeply about that. And so when Canva called, it was like, how do you not take that call, right?

Alan Hart: Right.

Meghan Gendelman: Because it's—I'm just going to say it—the hottest marketing company in the world right now, and I love enterprise and I love business, and I love helping marketers think about how to be better business marketers. And so I took the call. And then all of a sudden, I was pretty far down the path. I was like, I'm not looking. Am I looking? What am I doing? So when I started the role six months ago, it was just the perfect fit. It felt like everything I learned up to that point is going to help me help them move in that direction.

Alan Hart: Well, it's nice when it all comes together like that. Tell me a little bit about your organization at Canva. What's it look like?

Meghan Gendelman: So I have the, honestly, privilege of building the B2B marketing team within Canva. And so a couple things. We are a huge growth company, with over 260 million users and 195 countries. It is largely a B2C business, and that's how it started. And I think that's great because I get to build this B2B business within this massive company.

And I just want to grab that dragon's tail and ride! But the thing that most people don't know is that Canva's ready for the enterprise. Ninety-five percent of the Fortune 500 are on Canva today in one form or another, and we are doing incredible things with FedEx, with Stripe, with Keller Williams. And we just need to go show the world that we're there for them.

Alan Hart: Yeah. Well, tell me about the B2B offering that you have? How does it work? I mean, because to your point, Canva's literally everywhere, and it is like the secret, I think, that individuals have used to say, I need something. I need a new flier, I need a post, I need whatever. And they go to Canva. But how do the businesses take advantage of it?

Meghan Gendelman: Here's what I like to think about when I think about Canva. There are many people who use Canva for things that aren't B2B. For their wedding invitations. I was at a wedding and literally half the wedding was brought to you by Canva. There are people who use it for their very small businesses. They want to build their website. They want to do their social posts. And there are people who use it for enterprise.

Every single thing we build on Canva could be used by a business today. And so, I think the distinction is there's times and places where you'll use it for a tool in your personal life, but it's also a platform that you can run your marketing business on.

Alan Hart: I love that. Your background in enablement. I always think about Canva... what I know about the B2B offering and how you can control brand standards and things like that, which I think we'll get into in a second. But the ability to scale production and empower people that are in those enablement jobs is one of the key benefits, I would imagine, as somebody from the outside.

Meghan Gendelman: Yes, I agree with you. Because in the world we're all in today, everybody's asking us for more and more and more. I want to use an analogy to describe it. Right now, nobody needs a faster printing press. LLMs are doing that for you. What you need is a printing press that'll help you translate your content into 80 different languages. And by the way, not all of those languages use the same number of characters. So how do you resize it? How do you reformat it? How do you still make it look on brand for you? And that's the thing that Canva is offering, is that ability to take the brand standard that you, that any marketer, has built with tears and sweat and emotion and a lot of money.

How do you take that brand standard and make it that scale around the world? And so that's one of those things that I think really distinguish what we offer today and is also one of the reasons people love us. Like, you asked about enablement. The reason why 95% of Fortune 500 are on Canva is because people love to use it. It is actually something you can get in and start doing, and that is where the user love is going to meet the brand standard needs from the top and the two are going to come together.

Alan Hart: What is the impact of Canva for a B2B organization look like?

Meghan Gendelman: Yeah. Again, whether you're a small business or an enterprise, I'm incredibly proud of all the things we're doing to help our customers go faster. Help our customers be able to really drive business impact. And so, examples of that are you can take one

asset and you can convert it into—with bulk create—many, I mean, literally hundreds of different social ads and sizes.

And what's great is your creatives have been doing that. No creative I've ever met has been like, please let me reformat that one more time, right? That's not what a creative wants to do. It helps you do that. It helps you localize. It helps you translate. It helps your sales teams be able to customize their presentations to their customers while still being on brand for you.

It helps a business who, if you're anything like me, has spent a lot of money and a lot of time building mindshare and wallet share and really driving that aided and unaided awareness. Helping your entire team stay on brand helps protect that investment. In the world of LLMs, that is actually getting harder because anybody can build anything.

And so, when you do it on Canva and you're doing it within those guardrails that we talk about, you are really enabling people to have the freedom to go in there, to go fast, to do what they need to do for their customer, whether it's a social or a presentation or a website, and do it on brand. And that has been really a huge benefit to our customers.

Alan Hart: We live in an unimaginable, fast-paced time right now, and content and creation—the need for more. How do you think about maintaining brand authenticity with all of the volume that is out there and all the tools that are available to us?

Meghan Gendelman: I think brand and AI are probably the two most overused topics at Cannes right now.

Alan Hart: That's very fair.

Meghan Gendelman: But I think the thing you said that I really resonate with is authenticity. Any AI tool can—including ours—can help you generate more content. What we do differently is the difference between ticking the box on your brand and understanding how your brand feels. You can literally teach an LLM your colors, right? But that's where it breaks down.

Over 90% of customers are saying that they can tell when it's AI. And then what they're also telling us is they'd rather buy from an ad that's not as good, but real. And isn't that so powerful?

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Meghan Gendelman: So, personally, I feel like AI is starting to take away my executive functioning, and when I just stop and I write it authentically for my own voice, even with a misspelling or even with not the perfect punctuation, run-on sentences, customers engage with that more. So that to me is, I think, part of me being authentic.

But when it comes to a brand's authenticity, it's about knowing your customers; knowing what they know, believe, and feel about you, and making sure that that's where the human drives that; and then you let the content generate.

Alan Hart: Well, with all of this velocity, how are you helping brands stay on brand?

Meghan Gendelman: So if you're going to use Canva as a business, the very first thing I think you need to do is set up your brand systems and brand kits. It literally will help you bring in everything that the designers and the craft have built about your brand. So from your tone and your look and feel, your content that you brought in—set that up first and then from there you can build templates. If you do those two things right you will get the max amount of juice for the squeeze. Because what happens is—I always use the example of product marketing and sales. So if you're a product marketer, you have spent hours building this first call deck, and the first thing a seller does is change it.

Alan Hart: Yes. [laughs]

Meghan Gendelman: Right? That is the first thing they do!

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Meghan Gendelman: Or they go back to some old version that they had. And I don't blame them because they want it to look and feel custom to their customer, right? They have the right intentions. What Canva will help you do is if you build it in your brand systems, in your brand kit, then when they change it, it still stays within the guardrails, but they have the freedom within that to make it true to their customer.

Alan Hart: I think it's fascinating because Canva has already been empowering to users that use it. And now you're empowering the system of users that don't know that they can use it, but now they're going to use it. Right? It's very meta, actually, now that I think about it.

Meghan Gendelman: [laughs] I like that! The way I like to think about it, too, is it's one of those amazing products where people want to use it, and the CMO wants them to use it. It's not mandated in that hard way.

Alan Hart: Right. We've been talking a little bit about AI. LLM is obviously factored into the equation here. How are you thinking about new roles that come about because of all of this AI push?

Meghan Gendelman: Yeah. I'm actually really optimistic. I really, really am. I'm starting to see brand systems designers. I'm starting to see AI designers. People who can take a polished image and craft and update things.

I'm starting to see AI experts. We have one on our team who sits in the go-to-market role, who's literally helping all of marketing and sales connect better because—even outbound emails. How he's doing it in a way that's really custom bespoke to Alan versus to Meghan. AI ethicists are job [titles] right now. There'll be a transformation, but I'm optimistic about the journey we're on and the roles that are going to come up.

Alan Hart: No, I agree. And one of the things in our own Deloitte delivery transformation that we're working on: how do you teach and guide people in this process. And I don't know that this is a really great term, but forward-deployed strategy operators. This is people that, you know, they're the first that go in and conquer the ambiguity of what can we do with this—

Meghan Gendelman: What can we do?

Alan Hart: Right? And reimagining what that could be. But they're operators enough that they can translate to how.

Meghan Gendelman: Yeah.

Alan Hart: Because it's not enough to just go say, we're going to change everything. It's how are we going to do that? And how do I change what I do every day? It's an interesting time of finding those people because not everyone can do that transformation and how. But I agree. There's going to be a slew of other roles that come in right behind that.

Meghan Gendelman: You know what I think that requires? A beginner's mindset.

Alan Hart: Yes.

Meghan Gendelman: For me, right now with AI, what I'm noticing is that the individuals, the teams, the companies that are doing it right are shifting their mindset. They're not asking, how do I put it on top of what I already do? They're literally saying, if I were to operate and start from scratch and I was going to build this for the first time, what would I do differently? And that operator mindset is really fascinating.

Alan Hart: Yeah. And it's balancing the strategy with the operator. Not all the time is that in the same person. So it's finding a little bit of unicorns to start the process. You don't need them forever, but you need them to start.

Meghan Gendelman: And you need leaders who are willing to be vulnerable enough to do it with them and to own the failure.

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Meghan Gendelman: There's a lot of things that I've tried that frankly weren't great and saying that enables somebody else to go out and do it.

Alan Hart: Yeah, I agree. All right. Well, one of the things we love to do on the show is get to know you a little bit better. Has there been an experience of your past that makes up who you are today?

Meghan Gendelman: Yeah. I think the biggest transition moments in my life have always been when a leader took a bet on me. And took a bet on me oftentimes when I didn't know I was ready for it. And I had an incredible mentor who was really honest with me and she said, I don't really think you know your brand. And that hurt. So she said, I want you to do a 360. And if you've ever done a 360-degree feedback, they come in all shapes and sizes, right?

What I learned from the feedback was that my sellers loved me and my team didn't trust me. And the reasons my sellers loved me is they said things like, we love Meghan, she does whatever we ask. And just to be clear, that's actually not a compliment! That's the worst thing that you could say! And my team said that I was signing them up for too much and they didn't know what was going to come next. Which are very related, right?

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Meghan Gendelman: And so, I took the feedback to heart and I, first of all, stopped. And I was like, I actually know that I have enough brand equity with the sales team that I'm going to lean back, and I'm going to trust my team to lean in in that space. And I'm going to dedicate all my

time and energy into my team. And it built a leadership practice that I have today. I like alliteration, so it's that—that I really try to make decisions that are based on people, pipeline, and partners. And I say that in that order because if you get the people right, then you usually get the pipeline.

There are times when you can get the pipeline and not people, and there's time to get the people right, not the pipeline. But they do go hand in hand. And as I've gotten more senior in my career, the pipeline has turned to profit. You know, as I've owned more of a number and had a revenue responsibility and a P&L responsibility. But really getting those two right.

Then what I found is when you get those two right, the partners, which are your internal stakeholders, are on the ride with you. So when I go to make a hard decision, it doesn't mean that I haven't had to make hard decisions on people—and it's people, not person—but it means that I try to really think about it in that way. And that's the decision framework. And then above all of that is the customer. Like, at the end of the day, what are we doing for the customer? But yeah that 360 really made me shift how I show up as a leader.

Alan Hart: Well, if you were starting this journey all over again, what advice would you give young Meghan?

Meghan Gendelman: Can I do a personal and a professional?

Alan Hart: Yes, please.

Meghan Gendelman: OK. I always give this personal advice. You're never going to be as young and skinny as you are today. And the reason I say that is because there are pictures that I look at now that I'm like, oh my God, I wish. But back then, I hated, right? And so, be a little gentler on yourself. That's what I would say.

My professional advice that I would give myself, but also probably still need to give myself, is to trust my gut more. Back it up with data. But I think I generally have a good intuition of things,

Marketing Beyond | Episode 54

and the times that I have tripped up were either because I got in my own way, took my eye off the customer, or because I waited too long to trust my gut.

Alan Hart: I've been asking this question for a while, and it comes in different flavors, but there is definitely a drum beat from time to time of this "Trust yourself. Take the leap." It must be something about us as junior practitioners where we're looking for someone else to validate or to say yes.

Meghan Gendelman: It's a very type A thing.

Alan Hart: It is, it is.

Meghan Gendelman: I'm an overachiever who has to feel bad about myself! Yeah!

Alan Hart: Right!

Meghan Gendelman: I think, too, that on the trust your gut, but back it up with data—for a long time, I reversed that. I'd go, data first, and then I'd be like, oh, that's what I thought. And so now I seem to be like, what's the hypothesis? Now, go check, go test it. Maybe I'm right. I could certainly be wrong. But, yeah, I'd like to start with that.

Alan Hart: Well, is there anything you're trying to learn more about right now, yourself?

Meghan Gendelman: What am I trying to learn more about? Well, I'm still new at Canva. So, six months literally next week, and so I think just honestly diving into the job full time. And I mentioned my girls earlier. I'm about to be a mom of teenagers and learning how to do that as best as I can because if I were to do a really good job of this, they leave me, and I want them to still want to come back. That's my goal.

Alan Hart: I'm at the other end of that. She's 18 and going to college. And it's not easy to let go, but savor the moments you have.

Meghan Gendelman: One thing my husband and I try to remind each other is we have to keep looking out for each other, because at the end of this, they leave us. If you do it right, they leave and you're together. And so, I think, yeah. How to be a good parent to a teenager. It's the next chapter.

Alan Hart: Yeah. Well, as you look out into the world today, is there anything that just catches your eye you're curious about? You scratch your head about?

Meghan Gendelman: Yeah. So, we're at Cannes Lions festival right now. And I think one of the things that I am really loving this week is the appreciation for craft. And I joke with my team that taste is cringe because my taste isn't your taste. But there's something to be said about the craft. I've been really inspired by the craft. I've been really trying to look out for it. What is the craft of a great campaign? What is the craft of great visual?

What is the craft of visual communications in an AI world? What is the craft? And I think going back to that, and the other topic that really feels like it's resonating with people this week is in an IRL world. In a world where we're all connected all the time, sometimes in order to see eye to eye you have to meet face to face. And how do we think about just really great marketing, really great communications, and connecting with our customers?

Alan Hart: I love that. Well, as a marketer, what do you see as either the largest opportunity or threat facing marketers today?

Meghan Gendelman: I think the greatest threat—I'll speak for myself and then I'll speak as the profession. The greatest threat is to be a little too lazy. And so, what I mean by that is just like everybody else, I have been known to take my thoughts and throw them into AI and have them come back prettier. And in a world where AI also tells you how good you are and how smart you are, and how everything you wrote was perfect, I actually feel like it's not landing as well as it used to.

I said earlier that I think it's taking away my executive functioning. I mean, that jokingly, but I think that that's actually just a really easy way to do it. And I think the threat is that we all end up going down to the greatest common median average. Because that's what that is. It's literally learning from the greatest common data sets of all time. And so, if all we do is go to the average we'll be average. And so I think that's the threat.

I think the opportunity is a little bit of all the things we talked about. It's the craft. It's the trust your gut. It's the know what is genuinely going to connect and authentic with your audience. And that is actually just really good marketing. And then the AI can help you do that faster. And if I bring it back to Canva, we talk about thought leadership a lot. We do a lot of thought leadership like everybody. And I really believe that having a point of view, having the hypothesis, and then letting the AI help you research it, get it out faster, and those things that is going to help really separate good content from median average.

Alan Hart: Well, we are here at Cannes. There's AI everywhere, in every conversation. And it helps us be infinitely scalable. But I'm curious if there's one thing that you know AI cannot replicate, and how are you protecting it?

Meghan Gendelman: I think it's authenticity.

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Meghan Gendelman: I really do. There are lots of campaigns that I said take the brief. But do they resonate with what a customer knows, believes, and feels about your brand? You get to say our brand's migrating and evolving, right? You want might want to bring them on that journey with you, but you have to do it in that migration way. And so, we're an AI company too. I already said I'm super optimistic about AI, and I think it'll help us move faster and be able to build more, but really always underpinning with what is authentic.

Marketing Beyond | Episode 54

That's why brand systems and kits matter so much. Set it up so that you can't go off the rails too much. Have your own understanding of what it means to connect to your customer and then really, truly anchoring your team. When you don't know what to do, ask yourself what's right for the customer. When you don't know what to do, ask what would be different than what is already out there, and start pushing those boundaries and then let the AI scale it and go faster.

Alan Hart: Yeah. I love it. Well, Meghan, thank you for coming on the show.

Meghan Gendelman: Thank you, Alan.

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Marketing Beyond | Episode 54

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