



EPISODE 57

Business lessons from building music fandoms

Host: Alan Hart, Leader in Marketing and Customer Strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP

Guests: Naomi McMahon, Executive Vice President of Global Marketing and Partnerships, Universal Music Group

Naomi McMahon: Marketers—and we’re guilty of it too—we’re constantly chasing attention because it’s easy to measure clicks, views. But that’s a trend. That’s a moment. And I think cultural relevance is a relationship built over time, built through deep understanding. That’s the juxtaposition, I think. And the irony is the brand, the most culturally relevant brands get the durable attention.

Alan Hart: Today on the show, I have Naomi McMahon. She’s the EVP of global marketing and partnerships at Universal Music Group. Naomi leads one of the most sophisticated brand partnership operations of the music industry, delivering value across 40-plus markets and connecting iconic artists and global brands at scale, from Coca-Cola and Samsung to McDonald’s and Pokémon. She began her career at Harley Davidson and has since become a respected figure at the intersection of music, culture, and brand strategy.

Marketing Beyond | Episode 57

Today on the show, we talk about how brand partnerships have evolved from tactical add-ons to true business strategy, how music functions as a cultural beacon for brands, and what it takes to build partnerships that are genuinely mutually beneficial for both artist and brand. That and much more with Naomi McMahon.

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.

Well, Naomi, welcome to the show.

Naomi McMahon: Thank you so much for having me.

Alan Hart: Well, you're in music, in the business, if you will, and I hear that you also still have your first-ever concert ticket.

Naomi McMahon: I sure do. It's a very prized possession of mine. So, I was 13 years old. My godfather took me to the National Basketball Arena in Dublin I had a boyband obsession at the time. There were a few on the scene around then, but I think for many reasons, I collect concert tickets. So this started a very early—I was observing and following fan culture long before I realized what that was or entered the business. But it has an emotional connection for me. It has a very special memory for me. And yes, it started a—I became a bit of a concert ticket collector after that as well.

Alan Hart: It's almost a foreshadowing of where you might end up.

Naomi McMahon: Yes, I think so! I think I was destined to ultimately be in this intersection of culture, fans, and brands, yeah.

Alan Hart: Well, you are the EVP of marketing and partnerships at Universal Music Group. Where did you get your business start, and how did you end up at Universal Music Group?

Naomi McMahon: Actually, interestingly, fandom showed up very early in my career. I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to get work experience in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with Harley Davidson around their hundredth anniversary. I had never sat on a motorcycle, let alone produced a live experience for 130,000 consumers and fans of Harley. So I was really thrown in the deep end when I arrived in Milwaukee from Dublin. But it really ignited something in me. The whole experience of seeing how a global iconic brand builds community, builds brand love. I mean, Harley owners love the Harley community and the biking culture. I mean, they tattoo their body with a bar and shield. It's real fandom. So, to see that up close and to be a part of that was incredibly, inspiring for me. And, yeah, definitely ignited what was to come.

Alan Hart: So what happened after Harley?

Naomi McMahon: After that, I went back to Dublin. I graduated from Trinity College, and I accepted a position in New York with Enterprise Ireland, an Irish government agency.

Alan Hart: That's quite a switch.

Naomi McMahon: It was not a traditional path, for sure. But what was interesting is it gave me the opportunity to work with some of the leading technology companies in Ireland. So again, thrown in the deep end. Maybe this is a recurring theme in my career. Thrown in the deep end of really future technologies. And I worked directly with the CEOs of these incredible companies, and where they knew the tech—and I certainly didn't when I started—I could help them with brand positioning and storytelling and actually translating it for the US market. So I essentially became their sales and marketing arm.

From there I met John Coleman, the founder of the VIA group, and moved to Madison Avenue and essentially helped him build a community of marketers and do some really great work in advertising. And I spent a number of years there and learned a lot about brand strategy and, again, storytelling, with big, beloved American brands. And we were awarded Ad Age's Small Agency of the Year. And then, at the time, we were hosting these salon events and it coincided with me attending Billboard's first Music & Advertising Conference in New York. And that also lit a fire in me.

Coming out of that, I really felt inspired by the emotional connection that brands—and, you know, trying to deepen [connection] with consumers—and how music did that so effortlessly, and artists had that connection so authentically. So, we started to bring artists into our agency world and our marketing community. And from there, I got an opportunity to go and work with Sony Music's in-house creative agency. So it felt like a very natural—I jumped at it. It felt like a very natural progression. It really enabled me to be right back in the epicenter of fandom, and yet on the brand side of things, and I didn't really realize that role existed until it presented itself to me.

So I spent five years at Sony, helping to build that creative agency and externalize it really for brands so that they could tap into the culture creation engine within a music company. And then 11 years ago, I joined Universal Music.

Alan Hart: That's amazing.

Naomi McMahon: And the rest is history, as they say. [laughs]

Alan Hart: Well, it's quite a story. And, starting with Harley, and the fact that you hadn't sat on a motorcycle. Harley fans listening to this will be like "of course it had to be a Harley, the first motorcycle you ever sat on!" But then making the switch to music and how that coincides with your passion for music, obviously, from an early age saving tickets. So it's a nice arc.

Naomi McMahon: Yeah. It's not a straight path, but it's been a really rich and very inspiring one.

Alan Hart: Well, tell me a little bit about your organization at Universal Music Group.

Naomi McMahon: Universal Music Group is one of the biggest music entertainment companies in the world. We operate in over 72 countries and markets. What is unique to us—and it's the division within which I sit—we have a central partnerships group that supports the overall business across our entire roster and our entire ecosystem. And UMG's purpose is to shape culture through the power of artistry. So artists sit at the center of everything we do, and my team essentially acts as a bridge to partners—so,

Marketing Beyond | Episode 57

brands and agencies and other media entities and platforms that are looking to engage and create meaningful experiences and opportunities with artists and music.

Alan Hart: Brand partnerships, have been around for a while, but what's been the evolution as you see it?

Naomi McMahon: Yeah. It has actually evolved quite significantly, which is great. It keeps my job interesting and exciting. I think the evolution has really gone from what could be seen as a more kind of tactical, transactional moment to now a much more strategic, collaborative partnership. And I think that's very exciting and valuable on both sides, for brands, but really for the artists as well. And for us, really looking at how can we shift from consumption to connection. How can we shift from doing something that establishes reach to something that is truly meaningful? I think there's been many shifts in terms of how the perceived value and the perceived impact and something really being approached with more of a long-term perspective than ever before. And certainly we see it from artists. So, when you can create that shared understanding and vision, it amplifies and magnifies the size of the opportunity and impact.

Alan Hart: Well, I mean, to your point, you're matching them with brands. That intersection of finding the right matches. As you think about examples that come to mind that maybe you've had a hand in. What did that look like?

Naomi McMahon: It comes in all different shapes and sizes. The beautiful thing is music is very scalable and malleable. And no two brands are the same. Every brand has different needs and different objectives and a different story to tell. And I think the brands that lean in, the brands that release a little creative control, the brands that take the time to understand the artist's world. It's really about world building. And it's understanding the artist's world, understanding the fan community surrounding that artist, understanding how to show up in a way that's, I know a very overused word, but authentic and real. And there's a lot of talk here this week about AI, but I think what's real and raw and authentic is very much at the heart of what makes a really great partnership. And there are a couple of great—there are many great examples. There are a lot of brands that are doing this right and really taking the time and being very intentional and investing in music and partnerships.

There is a large financial services company, who have really, over many years, consistently looked at how they can leverage both audio and music and partnership to build trust, to build credibility, especially with a younger consumer. To enhance the experience for their customer and give them what they really want from a financial services company, which is absolutely security, but it's also experience, it's access. It's access to the things they care about. So, across all of the touchpoints of this brand, they've looked at ways to embed and integrate music, and that's everything from sonic identity and the sound of the brand through to the artist ecosystem and the worlds that they build within music, through live and merchandise and content to storytelling and reach fans in different ways.

Alan Hart: The ones that have stood out to me, too, are the ones that integrate in the live, the off-channel, if you will, experiences, but also tap into either a passion point of the artists themselves or their other business pursuits that they're doing as well.

Marketing Beyond | Episode 57

Naomi McMahon: That's exactly it. And I think that's where artists exist within a creative ecosystem. And again, it's that world building. It always comes back to that the artist has multiple different facets of themselves and, really, the music is one piece, but their world can extend into multiple different avenues and touchpoints.

Alan Hart: Music is so powerful. I mean, it can unite a lot of people, right?

Naomi McMahon: It's universal, we say. [laughs]

Alan Hart: [laughs] You planned that! That's amazing. Yes, it's universal. But as you think about it, as a cultural beacon, how do you think about it tapping into culture and the opportunity, if you will, for brands and marketers?

Naomi McMahon: Yeah, it's interesting. Culture moves fast. Music has a really significant role in shaping culture. We've spent the last number of years really looking at how we can enrich our data and leverage it to predict trends and understand what's happening within culture on a local level. So, looking at those cultural signals and essentially creating codes that help us understand the creative and the fan behavior that's underlying a cultural phenomenon if you will.

From a brand perspective, use that to empower decision-making and how should I show up? Where? With what artist as a partner? So, really, the power of the data to help, I guess, reduce the perceived risk maybe. But also just really enable brands to get ahead of what is happening in culture and really not just be a part of the conversation, but help to shape and lead culture, which is very powerful.

Alan Hart: Yeah, and I love the blend of literally art meets science in that example.

Naomi McMahon: Absolutely. Exactly.

Alan Hart: How do you think about the coexistence? Because, to your point, finding the right artist or the right style of music to attach yourself with can get tricky.

Naomi McMahon: It's very subjective.

Alan Hart: Yes!

Naomi McMahon: Everyone has their own, well, I think from a musical—everyone has their own—

Alan Hart: Right.

Naomi McMahon: Music is very personal. So everyone has their own musical tastes. You know, a CMO may have a daughter who has their own very specific artist they love. So there can be a lot of influencing factors in the decision-making of how to show up and how to activate. I think it's that blend of understanding the data, understanding what's happening on a global but also truly a local level. Understanding what's happening in music. There's so many exciting things happening in music as it relates to the consumption of music and how music is traveling.

Spotify just released their global top 50 report last year, and there were 16 different languages in the top 50 songs. So, music is being consumed from multi-language, multifaceted—it's traveling farther than it

Marketing Beyond | Episode 57

ever has before. So you really have to understand that, and you have to blend the data with cultural instinct and judgment. It's a blend of the two, but there's a lot of nuance, and it is very subjective.

Alan Hart: Well, to our earlier point, music is universal and brings people together. There's so many opportunities. I also think about the courage that marketers really need to have to be relevant in culture and to pick artists that maybe push the brand in new spaces, because new spaces are new opportunities as well.

Naomi McMahon: Absolutely.

Alan Hart: Obviously, you have to manage risk, but there's also an opportunity that you may miss out on otherwise, if you don't push it a little bit.

Naomi McMahon: Well, and to that point, culture is all about the outlier, right? So it's just how do you make calculated risks. And, I think, marketers—and we're guilty of it too—we're constantly chasing attention because it's easy to measure clicks, views. But that's a trend. That's a moment. And I think cultural relevance is a relationship built over time, built through deep understanding. That's the juxtaposition, I think. And the irony is the brand, the most culturally relevant brands get the durable attention. So I think it's that knowing what's the right bandwagon to jump on and when. Slow and steady. To your point, culture is happening in local communities. Thankfully, now culture has fragmented. So instead of there being a handful of mass cultural moments that you could be a part of, now there are thousands happening around the world. So I think there's more opportunities to be a part of culture, and it doesn't require big media budgets anymore.

Alan Hart: That's true. Well, one of the things we love to do on the show is to get to know you a little bit better. My favorite question to ask everyone is, has there been an experience of your past that makes up who you are today?

Naomi McMahon: My Irish heritage has definitely shaped who I am. My values, my culture, my identity. But I would say my New York life has probably defined who I have become. My ambition, my resilience. My belief that anything is possible. I think it has shaped my horizon, if you will. Whereas, Ireland built my roots.

Alan Hart: That's a beautiful answer. Well, if you were giving a young Naomi advice, what advice would you give her?

Naomi McMahon: I have a young Naomi in my house right now. I have a soon-to-be 8-year-old, so I think about this question a lot! I would say, quite simply, trust yourself sooner. I think don't wait or always wait for permission, for validation, because the reality is, in life, when you're making decisions, the answers aren't always there. So, I think you have to trust that life unfolds exactly as it's destined to.

Alan Hart: That's great. Well, is there a topic you're trying to learn more about yourself?

Naomi McMahon: Oh. So many. I wish I had more time. Slightly away from music, but somewhat connected: longevity. Trying to figure out the secret to slowing down aging. I'm only starting the journey, so I'm not an expert.

Alan Hart: I need tips, as you learn these, yes.

Naomi McMahon: Here's my top three: Exercise. I say to my husband often, I wish they would invent a pill. It would be probably one of the most prescribed pills in the world, but a pill for exercise. Because, again, committing the time to that is something that can be challenging, but something I am very committed to. Nutrition, obviously. And then, I think the third is probably the one I've focused the most on this year and it's connection. Connection to my purpose. Connection to my people, family, and friends, and connection to my passions. And I think connection is so closely tied to well-being, and social connection is so important for humans. And interestingly, to tie it back to my day job, UMG has invested a lot in the area of well-being and mindfulness, and music has such a role to play in helping us release stress, helping us focus, helping us sleep. Sleep is good for longevity too. And obviously community, connection. Music is very much the throughput.

Alan Hart: I love those examples. Is there anything out in the world today that you're just curious about? That makes you stop and think?

Naomi McMahon: I'm curious about so many things. I'm endlessly curious. I think it's fascinating. I just spent time in Asia and visiting our teams in Japan and China, and I think it's fascinating how music is expanding and the types of music that is breaking internationally. I think it's amazing to see where K-pop and Latin music is now mainstream. It's not just happening in those markets. And looking at the rise of J-pop and Mandopop. And I mentioned it earlier, but I think it's fascinating how artists are mixing music from different genres and in different languages. That wouldn't have happened a decade ago. So I'm really curious as to where that goes. I think it's an incredibly exciting, creative time. So I'm excited to be a part of all of that and travel around the world and experience it all.

Alan Hart: In a very small way, I am addicted to some social media videos where it's like deejays that mix really random songs together and make something entirely new that I've never experienced before.

Naomi McMahon: Yeah, that's it. But isn't that lovely? You can discover something new at any stage, at any age. And even if you have—and I have a very specific music taste—but I love that discovery, and I love that I can still discover just new sounds.

Alan Hart: Yeah. Well, last question for you. As you think about marketing and marketers, what do you see as either the largest opportunity or potential threat that we face?

Naomi McMahon: I mean, I mentioned it earlier, I think the largest opportunity is the fragmentation of culture. And it's easier than ever before to tap into communities and leverage culture on a local and a global level. And I think there's a lot of opportunities for marketers. Like I said, you don't need to be a part of these big, mass cultural moments. Now it's happening in communities, and we know who they are and we know how to reach them. And we know how to make them care about your brand. And it's the same with ours. We're using the same insights and understanding to help shape how they build their audiences as well. So I think it's a really exciting time to be in culture marketing anyway, for sure. And I think there's a lot of opportunity that has been unlocked as a result.

Marketing Beyond | Episode 57

And then the threat: I think it's this chasing attention versus really focusing on relevance and relationship over time. I think cultural relevance is slower to build and to measure. But being patient and giving that the time. We're at the risk of forgetting that in the pursuit or in the of trends and constant metrics. So, we just have to remember both.

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

Naomi McMahon: Thanks for having me.

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Marketing Beyond | Episode 57

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