



EPISODE 55

Curiosity as a creative advantage

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

Guests: Jo Shoesmith, Chief Creative Officer, Amazon

Jo Shoesmith: I think the curious will win the future. And I think there are curious specialists and there are curious generalists. And we will definitely continue to need both, because there are people who are those generalists who can visualize the big picture and bring all of those things together, and then there are specialists who are going to be able to go deep and make us really smart on a specific topic.

Alan Hart: Today on the show, I have Jo Shoesmith, chief creative officer at Amazon. Jo leads one of the most celebrated in-house creative organizations in the world, named Ad Age's In-House Agency of the Year, and has been behind some of Amazon's most beloved work, including the iconic granny sledding ad and the global 'It's on Prime' platform.

She grew up in rural Australia and has held creative leadership roles at IPG, Leo Burnett, and Clemenger BBDO. Today on the show, we talk about how to protect and teach human creativity in an AI-native world, what it means to be both a builder and a curator, and whether the future belongs to specialist, generalist, or simply the curious.

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That and much more with Jo Shoesmith.

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, Jo, welcome to the show.

Jo Shoesmith: Thank you for having me.

Alan Hart: Yeah. I hear you grew up in a very rural part of Australia, and I want to know a little bit about that, because one, I don't interview that many people that grew up in Australia, but two, in the rural parts of Australia.

Jo Shoesmith: Yeah, I grew up in a very isolated part of Australia that is on the border of two states and on a river. And I was just going spider hunting in the bush at night after school, and there were koalas and kangaroos jumping around, so that actual postcard version of what people think Australia is, was very much my childhood.

And it was wonderful. I think that the isolation—I think you get to a certain age where it's not wonderful anymore and you really want to flee. But the isolation actually forced my imagination to do a lot of work and a lot of the heavy lifting. And I think it was a big contributor to my creative career that followed.

Alan Hart: I love that. I have to ask, are kangaroos as dangerous as they look like?

Jo Shoesmith: I'm much more scared of wombats, which probably would be surprising to people because they're like barrels and they chase you and they're not nice and they make horrible noises. But I'm less scared of large spiders, which is interesting. I think the things that people are very obviously scared of tend to be more harmless and have somewhat of a role in the ecosystem because the spiders kill flies. So you want spiders around your house. But yeah, wombats, kangaroos? No. Not for me.
[laughs]

Alan Hart: I love that. Well, from the rural parts of Australia to now chief creative officer at Amazon, where did you get your start in your career, and how'd you end up at Amazon?

Jo Shoesmith: Yeah, I think that that isolation really bred curiosity in me. I had such an itch to scratch, to get out of my small-town life and go to the city. And so, I went to—and I was a prolific drawer. I was the kid walking around with a notepad in my pocket, and I was sketching everything, and I turned up to a university in Melbourne to study what was ultimately going to be fine art.

I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and I stumbled into this thing called advertising. And I've always loved team sports. And advertising to me felt very much like that because you had copywriters working with art directors, working with photographers, and I really loved the speed with which you make ads versus what can be the isolation and slowness with which you make art. And so, I followed that pursuit. Got my first job in Melbourne at Clemenger BBDO, where I was really fortunate to have a lot of great

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mentors who taught me a lot, and I really kind of got that foundation of what it meant to work in the industry and what the culture of the industry was like. Went from Clemenger to Leo Burnett, which ironically, was two buildings down the road in Melbourne.

So I packed up my box and walked two buildings down the road. And my time at Leo Burnett was amazing because they were always really great at giving people opportunities to move around the network because they understood that creative people tend to get itchy feet when they've been on the same brief and business for a while, and gave me an opportunity to move to Chicago, which was a huge step for me.

I had this kind of foundational, this is what the job is in Australia, and then you come to America and the scale of everything was so much bigger and also the newness. My first two briefs were NASCAR and college football. Firstly, I didn't even know there was a thing called tailgating. You can imagine I get this brief for college football and I'm trying to figure out what that is.

And then NASCAR was completely foreign to me. And so that inherent curiosity that I had that brought me to the city and brought me to America was then sparked again because I had to learn from scratch things that I just knew nothing about.

But it was a wonderful experience. And then I kind of got to a point, which I think a lot of creatives get to in their career, where you feel like you could take the next job, but it's probably going to be quite similar to what you do. It's a different—same job, different place.

And I'd always had this itch to scratch of going brand side, but never really had a brand approach me where I thought that's where I want to work. And then Amazon knocked on my door and couldn't say no. I mean, it's such a fascinating company. The role that I had sits very centrally to all of the verticals of Amazon, so I knew I would get to work across a lot of the business but really go deep and understand how the business works.

Alan Hart: Well, I mean, one, you had me at NASCAR because I was a kid that grew up just north of Charlotte.

Jo Shoesmith: Charlotte is like, I remember the first time I saw the green trees and the railway tracks, I was taken straight back to the scene.

Alan Hart: That's pretty accurate. Yeah, that's pretty much my childhood.

Jo Shoesmith: It's beautiful. And very much like southern charm. Yeah, I loved it.

Alan Hart: NASCAR fans can be a little nuts, but...

Jo Shoesmith: It was an education, yeah. Going and seeing those car races, and the tattoos of the drivers on the back of their calves.

Alan Hart: Yeah.

Jo Shoesmith: I am a big fan of fandom in general. NASCAR fans take it up a notch, I think, is how I would describe it. [laughs]

Alan Hart: So chief creative officer at Amazon, give me a little bit of sense of your scope of your organization.

Jo Shoesmith: Yeah. It's big. There's a lot to do. The way my team sits within it is we work across all the verticals. So, if you can imagine—and some of the horizontals. But we work on everything from kind of our core business, which is Amazon, Amazon Retail, and the Prime membership program, which consists of all the parts; and then growth initiatives, which can be things that are emerging new product experiences that we're building, like might be health, like business, grocery.

And so there's kind of two universes to that. And because we sit centrally, we're able to really help teams figure out how the brands fit together and how to bring the commonality of the voice and who we are and why we've been responsible for designing those kind of central systems and that live across all of the universe.

And I feel really fortunate because it gives you a very deep understanding of the business, because if you work in one vertical, you kind of go deep. I guess I'm the generalist in your analogy. I live across the entire ecosystem of Amazon.

Alan Hart: Well, when I was reading about you, you talk about yourself as both a builder and a curator, and those are two different things. How do you bring both of those disciplines and approaches to what you do?

Jo Shoesmith: Yeah, that was a big part of why I was recruited into Amazon is that I did study design for many years. And so system thinking and designing brand systems is a big part of my background. And so the builder in me builds things that scale. So whether that's our brand architecture coming to life in a brand design system that travels the globe or a platform like "It's on Prime" that launches in every country, in every language.

And so you're building these systems that scale, that bring that continuity to the brand and that recognizability to the brand. And then the curation and tastemaker side of it is making sure we make the right work and that that there is that high judgment of what creativity is the best representation of our brand and what stories we should tell.

And then I love a moment where you have all of the work on the wall, and you start to connect the dots and start to figure out, OK, what are the things? What does our brand start to look and feel like? Because, you can imagine, we have this philosophy of building really fast, which is super important.

We build, we try, we learn, we fail, we test, we optimize. You don't want to slow down that process, but also by doing that, your brand can become incredibly fragmented because you've got a lot of people running in different directions building. And so, a big part of my role is how do I bring people, how do I build things that are useful, but also help to educate why it's important that every media dollar actually is cumulative so that people recognize who's talking to them in every country that they're in.

Alan Hart: Well, we have so much push around AI and automation and things like that. As you think about training and instilling creativity at Amazon, how do you make sure that taste and... you protect the humanness, I guess, of the creativity and the creative process?

Jo Shoesmith: That's a good question. I mean, I think inherently creatives are the most curious beings that I—they were way ahead of AI before anyone was talking about it. My creative teams were coming to me three years ago going looking at this thing that I built, or suddenly I went to a meeting and the storyboards were really good and I'm like, huh, what happened to the storyboards? This suddenly looks like you've already shot the ad.

So there was this kind of natural, organic pace that the tools were just embraced by the creatives because we love a new tool to play with. We love a new toy, which is how it kind of manifested itself. But the other part of it that they've really celebrated is we have more ideas than we have time or money.

And every creative, every creative has got a bottom drawer full of ideas. And what AI has enabled us to do is to make those ideas a reality. So things that may never have seen the light of day have actually become a thing. And so I think it's finding that balance of the role of AI takes the friction out of a lot of things.

It's like any tool. It's like [Adobe] Creative Suite. It takes the friction out of the process and allows us to move really fast. But in company, in conjunction with high judgment and creativity and taste and those things working together.

Alan Hart: I use this friend. I don't name her, but she's a creative director. She was the first person to start to use AI in the creative process that I know, and the things that she would make, I mean, literally in an afternoon. It just blew me away. Entire experiences straight from idea to real.

Jo Shoesmith: And before being asked.

Alan Hart: Oh, yeah.

Jo Shoesmith: I've created... At first, that was a side hustle for people. What I've ended up doing is actually making a group of (I call them) the instigators. The most passionate first/earlier people that were into it and put them in a group together so that they act as this kind of contagion across the team. And it kind of migrated from a few hours of the job to it's a full-time job. So now they sit in a hub of a bit of an ensemble cast of multidisciplinary people ranging from media, to creative, to production that just educate everyone else. You need people to have that job within an organization so that everyone comes along and isn't left behind.

Alan Hart: It's kind of like when we used to call "digital new media," and you had those new media pods. The same type of concept.

Jo Shoesmith: Yeah, absolutely. I call them the agitators because I need them to poke everyone. I'm not letting anyone get left behind! [laughs]

Alan Hart: Well, I like the contagion metaphor, too. You want it to spread.

Jo Shoesmith: It spreads really quickly. Yeah.

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Alan Hart: Well, as marketing evolves, I feel like we've been on a trajectory to specialize. Like, you have social media folks, you have this other type of discipline, and this other type of discipline. As you think about specialist versus generalist, where do you think the future is? Is it we still need both or is it flipping around?

Jo Shoesmith: I think the curious will win the future. And I think there are curious specialists and there are curious generalists. And we will definitely continue to need both, because there are people who are those generalists who can visualize the big picture and bring all of those things together, and then there are specialists who are going to be able to go deep and make us really smart on a specific topic.

Alan Hart: So my favorite ad, not of all time, but of recent history is the Amazon granny sledding ad.

Jo Shoesmith: Thank you.

Alan Hart: There are no words uttered in this entire ad, and it takes you on an entire journey. What should we know about that ad that maybe we don't know about that ad?

Jo Shoesmith: I mean, I think my favorite part of the process was the casting, because we were obviously looking at a lot of people coming in, and we needed to depict—it needed to feel like these people have been friends for 60 years of their life, which is not easy to do. And these three women walked in—and we were looking at men and women. We were looking at lots of different groups of people.

And these three women walked in and it was like it was undeniable. They walked in and started nattering with each other, and it was like they were immediate friends. And so even to watch that on film was like, OK, we're done. We don't need to look at anyone else.

We had it. We found our three women. And at a live stage for them, what was really amazing, they came on set and it was a little bit of a terrifying shoot because they were on a real mountain. I mean, obviously an extent of the mountain, but we were putting these women in their 80s on sleds in a very slippery environment. But I can't tell you—they embraced it with such joy.

And you can see it in their faces. In fact, there's some outtakes where Susan, one of the ladies, she was coming down the mountain with her arms in the air. And they had the time of their life doing it. But they had this kind of moment and they talked to me about it.

I'm actually friends with Maya, who was the lead lady, and we talk all the time. And I actually cast her in the year afterwards. I put her in as another member of the family just to get her in another ad. But they talked about what the experience was like for them.

One of the women cried on set. She's like, I've met two new friends, I've had this moment. You're depicting aging as a woman in a very positive way. And then once it was out in the world, that came back in spades. We saw—everyone wants to make the ad for Gen Z that's a mirror of Gen Z, but we made an ad for Gen Z that showed their grandmothers and the girlfriends that they aspire to [have]. The comments that we got were, "I want—it's the three of us!" People would write. "Hey, Sue and Jo, that's going to be us in this many years' time!"

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And then we had young men going, "I hope my mother has that." And then we had all the women saying, "That's me! I want to have that kind of..." So I wanted to be able to create those nostalgic moments. So it really did strike a nerve in a moment where the world felt chaotic. We were all craving traditions and familiar.

And to depict this long-lived tradition between these three women who were somewhat unlikely characters, whose chemistry was undeniable on set and who are still fast friends to this day.

Alan Hart: We'd love to get to know you a little bit better. We know you grew up in a rural part of Australia, and you can still hear it today. But my favorite question to ask everyone that comes on the show is, has there been an experience of your past that makes up who you are today?

Jo Shoesmith: Yeah, and my mom's happy I've still got my accent, by the way. Twenty years later, I'm sure I'd be in trouble if I'd lost it. Yeah. I think growing up with a single mother in a rural environment really taught me that there weren't men and women's jobs. Like, on a farm there's just jobs to be done. Whether my aunt would go out and bring the cows in, or whether someone needs to fix the fence. It really isn't gendered. And so I grew up in this environment with a mother who cut down, in fact, up into her 70s was cutting down trees. And I'm like, mom, I think you might be a bit too old to be that high up on a ladder. So the idea of what was a man's job and what was a woman's job just never existed to me.

So when you take that mentality to it work. They put me on power tools because I came from the country. And I worked on Black & Decker, and I worked on utes [utility vehicles] and trucks and cars and things that I knew how to drive. So I knew how to do all those things. So I think just that never really considering myself as being put in a box and it actually just enabled me to not have that be a distraction and just move forward.

And if there was a job to be done, might as well be me doing it.

Alan Hart: I love it. Well, if you were to look back at young Jo, what advice would you give her

Jo Shoesmith: Gosh, she's very stubborn. I don't know! She might not listen to any advice that I gave her, but if I could get five minutes with her, I would just remind her probably earlier on to be a builder, not a [critic]. And I say that in that I think it's really easy to be very critical of ideas. I think we've all been in those meetings where you're in the room and it's really easy to shoot things down.

It's actually really hard to build things up and to find the idea and the nugget of truth and that thing, and then help other teams focus on the thing in their idea. Because most ideas you get presented to you have a nugget of something. And so I am eternally optimistic, but I also think that ability to find the idea within the idea and then build it into something amazing, versus finding all the problems with something, actually makes for not only a much more enjoyable workplace, but I think you find things in that. You become that builder who people come to because you can find that potential in something.

Alan Hart: What I'm hearing is you're a much friendlier, nicer, creative leader now than you were earlier.

Jo Shoesmith: Which I think happens to every creative! Every young creative is full of angst. And maybe that's just, with age, you grow into this idea of how to be a bit more constructive.

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Alan Hart: I love it. Well, what are you trying to learn more about right now?

Jo Shoesmith: Everything. I mean, just generally curious. I don't think I would say I'm in one lane. I work across—I've recently expanded my role, and I now run media operations and creative production

Alan Hart: Oh, wow. OK.

Jo Shoesmith: And there's a lot of things sitting underneath me. And so that has been a really great expansion of opportunity for me to go deeper on topics that I may not have been as deep on before. So it's exciting. It's a really exciting chapter and next step for me.

Alan Hart: That's awesome. Well, this question was built for you. What are you curious about out in the world today? Things that just make you take notice.

Jo Shoesmith: Goodness, that's a good question. Just give me a second. [laughs] It's because I'm curious about everything!

I'm always very like, oh, shiny object. I might be a bit of a goldfish actually if I describe it that way, but I find myself just, I'm curious about the smallest and the biggest things. I was talking this morning, and I know we've had a lot of conversations around AI and there's been lots of full funnel, lots of AI, lots of general conversations going on within the event this year.

But I find myself really curious on the smaller ideas, on the simpler ideas, on the people who've found things that are sitting right in front of them and just looked at them with a different context. We did that when we turned our boxes and vans into an out-of-home network, right? So yeah, I'm always curious to find that kind of thing that's sitting right in front of you that's so obvious that you just didn't see coming and making myself just very aware of that.

Alan Hart: Well, as the marketing community looks at the future, what do you see as either the largest opportunity or potential threat that's on the horizon for us?

Jo Shoesmith: I think the biggest opportunity is everyone becoming business owners. I think the amount of people leaving agencies to start their own businesses is kind of amazing. And it actually started a very long time ago in Australia when I was a young creative, I always say 120 years ago, but a while back, but when I started in my career, I remember creative teams leaving the agency and going, we're starting an agency. We just decided we want to do our own thing. And so it was a trend there very early on. But I'm really proud when I see someone do that and take it on and take that leap and take that jump. And I think it also means that there's a responsibility for some of our art schools to be thinking about how they teach business, business fluency to creatives. So that not only they understand the business that their clients are in, but when they have that itch to scratch, as a young creative or as a young strategist or as a young account person, and go, I want to start my own thing, that they have some foundational knowledge to do it.

Alan Hart: Well, we'll bring AI one more time into this conversation. We're at Cannes. It's in the ethos here. What's one thing that you believe AI just maybe simply can't replicate and you want to double down on it and preserve it? How are you doing that?

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Jo Shoesmith: I think your team's culture. Because we keep talking about the balance of humanity and AI, and there's definitely a debate and a conversation that needs to be had. But the culture within a creative department, the culture within an agency, the culture within a brand is evolving because of these things.

And I probably nostalgically look back on my time in a creative department where I quite happily sat at work until 10 o'clock, and half the time I wasn't working. I was just effing about with friends. But I met my husband in that context. I met friends for life in that context. And so the culture of the company and the person that you work for is what keeps you and retains you within an organization.

And I think we're not talking enough about the impact of culture within teams, within organizations. And that's something I'm very focused on, is making sure that my team have a really clear vision for what success looks like, and that they have fun going to work every day.

Alan **Hart:** Awesome. Well, Jo, thank you for coming on the show.

Jo Shoesmith: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

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