

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE FIFTY-NINE
CREATING ROCK STAR EXPERIENCES**

**HOST: SHAWN NASON
GUEST: JAMES DODKINS**

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Shawn: Welcome to the fifth season of *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast, where bold leaders combine with big ideas to make life better for all of us. I'm your host, Shawn Nason, CEO and founder of MOFI. In these episodes, we'll be exploring the power, influence, and importance of Experience Ecosystems™. To do that, we're bringing together the most unique and influential experience experts in the world for honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, leading with heart, and getting real about heartsets and mindsets. In case you're wondering, an Experience Ecosystem is the web of people, touchpoints, and interactions that combine to create all of the positive and negative experiences we have in the world. When an organization wants to improve customer experience, they're wasting their time if they're not willing to engage and humanize their entire Experience Ecosystem. It's time to blow up some silos and ignite an experience revolution by putting people first.

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Shawn: I'm so excited, on this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles* we have James Dodkins. After playing guitar in a heavy metal band releasing badass albums and tearing up all stages all over the world, James Dodkins now serves as the CX evangelist at Pegasus Systems, where he researches extreme fandoms to understand how companies can create their own hyper fans. He shares those strategies through transformative training, engaging video content, best-selling books, and inspiring keynote talks.

He was named the UK's number one CX influencer by *Customer Experience Magazine* in 2020, the UK's most outstanding CX keynote speaker by *Corporate Vision Magazine* in 2021, and the world's number 10 customer guru by *Global Gurus* in 2021. James, thank you for joining us on *The Combustion Chronicles*.

James: Well, thank you for having me.

Shawn: James, what a resume. You went from playing lead guitar in a heavy metal band and touring the world and living the real rock star life to being an award-winning CX leader. How on earth did that happen? And why are you so passionate about CX?

James: The thing is, I think everybody has their own story of how they became passionate about customer experience. And mine is because I've played guitar in a touring heavy metal band. And for me, putting on an amazing show for your fans night after night is exactly the same as delivering amazing experiences to your customers day after day. And basically, the journey from being a real-life, legitimate, award-winning

rock star all the way through to being sort of like a pretend rock star now was when I stopped doing the music thing, I took the next logical step in any musician's career, and I joined an insurance company. You know how it goes. And I worked my way up that company, and I was convinced I was going to be CEO one day because he came to work in a helicopter. So, I was like, you know, I could do that, that easy job easily. But then it got made redundant. And for any U.S. listeners, being made redundant is like a U.K. term for, like, being downsized. So, you don't get fired, just your job doesn't exist anymore.

Shawn: Yeah.

James: Then I was like, "Ugh. What am I going to do now?" And I sat there and I thought a little while, and I was like, "You know what, while I was at this company, we had loads of really expensive crappy consultants come through." So, I was like, "Ah. I could be a really expensive crappy consultant." So, that's what I did. I became a really expensive crappy consultant, and it was pretty cool to be fair. I got to work with some really good companies. I worked with people like Disney, Lego, Adobe, American Express. I worked with governments all over the world, airlines all over the world. The biggest problem was though, I was miserable because I'd created this corporate persona for myself, because essentially everything I ever learned about business was from cartoons. So, I was wearing a suit and tie and had a briefcase, and I was trying so hard on any given day just not to be me.

And as the customer experience space was getting more saturated, and there was more people coming in all the time, I was really looking for a way on how I could stand out, and how I could differentiate myself, and how I could deliver the message that I wanted to share about customer experience in a more fun and interesting way. It kind of hit me all at once. There was a quote from a guy called Jerry Garcia from the Grateful Dead, and it's, "Don't try and be the best person in the world that does what you do. Try and be the only person in the world that does what you do."

I was like, I've got this really cool music career that I never really told anyone about it because I was almost embarrassed by it. I didn't want people to have preconceived notions about me because they would have been correct. I've got this organic love of customer experience that's grown over the years. Why can I not put these two things together and teach people about customer experience through the lens of music? And that is my origin story, mate. That's how I went from being a real-life, legitimate, award-winning rock star to being the customer experience rock star.

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Shawn: I love it. So many things, so many similarities in our path. I did the same thing. I actually went to work for an insurance company. But in between my music days to the insurance company, I actually worked for a company called Disney, and I was a Disney Imagineer. And then put on that corporate persona that you talked about, and that didn't go really well. And that's when we decided to blow shit up in my own life, and why we do what we do today. So, thanks for sharing your journey for sure. So, listen, you spent a lot of time honing your philosophy and approach to customer experience. What would you say is the secret sauce for game-changing CX?

James: Oh, dude, this is going to sound like such a stupid answer to the question, but focus on your customers. There's so, so many people in customer experience and just in business in general that don't focus on their customers. They're too busy focusing on other things like their processes, or their costs, or just other things that have got nothing to do with customers. Like, if you want a winning customer experience, so the very first step is to focus on your customers.

Shawn: Yeah. And, you know, so we talk at MOFI about this Experience Ecosystem. So, one of the things I learned when I was at Disney was this concept. They didn't call it that. There was a great gentleman who's been on the podcast, Lee Cockerell.

James: I know Lee. Lee is a cool dude.

Shawn: Right. Lee, *Creating the Magic*, and all the things that come into that ecosystem to create that experience. And that's basically what he said, "Focus on your customer." I was never on stage at Disney. I was backstage. I actually have a finance background now. That's what makes perfect sense, like you said, in your career. I went from musician to finance, to pastor, to now owning a company, all perfect things that they teach you in business school, right. That's what I learned, focus on what you need to focus on and focus on the right things.

So, in your keynotes, you talk a lot about looking outside your industry to find inspiration and best practices for designing customer experiences. And we actually put that in around market awareness in our ecosystem that you have to do that. Why is this so important, and what can come from looking outside your own industry?

James: It's a really good question, and I'm glad you bring it up. I think one of the biggest mistakes most companies make is they define themselves by what they do. They don't define themselves by the outcome they are there to deliver to their customers. And so, I mean, if we take Disney, for example, Disney are in the theme

park business, Disney are in the business of magic. And what it means is, that if you're a company out there, let's say you're an insurance company as we've already spoken about that. You have to realize that customers don't interact with an insurance company. They don't buy insurance because they want insurance. They buy insurance because they need security. So, when you start to realize that, okay, maybe we shouldn't define ourselves by what we do, and we should define ourselves by the outcome we deliver to our customers, let's say security.

You can then take a step back and look outside of your industry and other companies that are also good at delivering that outcome. Not just that do what you do, because look, I mean, for some companies that might be fine, but if you want to do things differently, if you want to break the mold, if you want to lead, if you just copy other insurance companies, if you just benchmark against other insurance, you are only ever going to be as good as another insurance company. So, one really good way to actually break the mold is to step outside of your industry and look at other companies that don't just do what you do, but deliver the same outcome that you do.

Shawn: You're preaching to the choir there, James. I worked in the insurance world here as you did. And they kept looking at other insurance companies and I'm like, "No, stop." And when that company actually did it this year in 2021 by JD Powers, they actually were named the number one company for customer experience.

James: Nice.

Shawn: Right. Like, so they looked and they figured that out for sure. So, one of your books is a collection of quotes from the world's top CX leaders. Can you share a couple of quotes with us that might've meant the most to you in that book?

James: Yeah. So, I mean, the thing is that's...to call that a book is probably a little generous. It's essentially a large document of copied and pasted quotes. The way that came about was I was looking for a customer experience quote book, and one didn't exist. And I was like, "Oh. Somebody should really make one of those. Do I know anyone that writes customer experience books? And I was like, "Ugh. Yeah, me." So, I took it upon myself to do it. The book is dedicated to both copy and paste, without whom the book would not have been possible.

And to be fair, there's 365 different quotes in there from well-known leaders all the way down to customer experience leaders that are doing the work every day that you might not have heard of before. But probably the one that has had the most impact in my entire customer experience career is from Steve Jobs, RIP, that you shouldn't start with the technology, you should start with the customer and work backwards towards the

technology. And it's just, it's such good advice that so many companies make mistakes with nowadays. They start with the technology, and they try and, you know, they buy fancy software, or they try and put like loads of cool different features in their products. And then, they go, "Now, how do we cram it into people's lives? How do we sell it?"

And I think you need to just do the exact opposite. You need to start with the customer, understand them at such a deep level that you know so much about them even more than the customer knows for themselves, understand their needs, understand their successful outcomes, and then work backwards towards the technology or the product or the experience. I think just that simple quote from Steve Jobs is, that is customer experience for me.

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Shawn: Well, our commonality with insurance, that's what our healthcare tried to do here in the United States for 10 years. And now we're starting to see the pendulum swing back that, no, you can't just do technology. Technology is not the answer. You know, James, and I know leadership and culture is a big passion of yours, too. And I've heard you say, businesses organize themselves for the success of the company and not the success of the customer. What do you mean by that and what must business leaders do to design for the success of the customers?

James: Yeah. I mean, I'm sure there's loads of different ways to do it, but the one that I talk about more is organizing like a football team or for my North American friends, a soccer team, if you want to do it wrong. The idea is, look, let me set the scene for you. So, there's a guy called Adam Smith, and he was a social economist, and he was actually on the back of a 20 pound notes in the U.K. until fairly recently. And he went to a pin factory in Scotland. And what he realized is that the output of that pin factory was largely dependent on the skill of any one person that was in on any given day. So, if you had, like, lots of really good people in, they'd make lots of pins. You've got loads of really bad people, they wouldn't make very many pins at all.

And he thought, wouldn't it be a really cool idea to take the process of making a pin, to split it up into its discrete tasks and activities, and then train people really well just to do those things. And essentially, that was the creation of the division of labor. But over time, of course, what that means is that, okay, let's say there's 13 steps for making a pin. You would have the metal extrusion department, you'd have the pin sharpening department, the pin cutting department, the pin packaging department. Obviously, I don't really know what they are, but you know what I'm saying. And then above those, you'd have people that look after the production of the pin and then the sale of the

pin. And then, of course, at the top, you'd have the person who knew the most about pin making, that would be the CEO of pins.

The thing is it worked really well. And, supposedly, according to statistics that are always correct, he increased output at this pin factory by 24,000%. So, people started to take notice and they were like, oh, okay, we should do that. It was even mentioned in the *Declaration of Independence* as the economic model for growth. And so, everybody started to do that. We, literally every single company, by a very small amount, is organized like a pin factory. And the reason it's organized that way is because it's easier for the company to deal with things. It's easier to administer things. It's not created to help customers because it didn't matter back in the day. We taught people and said, "Look, this is the one thing you've got to do. Just focus on that. Don't worry about anything else. You don't need to know any of it."

And the thing is, that was a massive departure from production. Let's say I was going to build a table. I'd go into the forest. I'd cut down a tree. I'd take that tree back to my workshop. I'd cut the wood. I'd sand the wood, I'd put it together, I'd varnish the table, I'd sell the table. I would service the customer when they needed to come back. I would own every single aspect of that process, but we atomized that and we changed things.

Now, looking at it in a different way. When you look at a current company, we organize people by skillset for the success of the department to make things easier to manage. And we take people and we say, "Okay, the person in the box above you tells you what to do. And you tell the people in the boxes below you, what to do. Don't worry about any other part of the business. This is what you need to do. We're going to train you really well to do this one thing." It's just the pin factory in the 21st century.

I think we do need to take a different route to this, and my suggestion is like a football team. So, imagine there's three questions. That's all you got to ask. Number one, who is the customer? So, in a soccer game scenario, in a football team, who is the customer? That's going to be the fan. Okay. So, that's question one answered. Who is the customer? Number two, what is their successful outcome? What is the thing that they need to achieve? So, in the football scenario, it's win the game. And then you say, "Okay, how do we put a team together with different skills and different core competencies who are best suited to delivering that outcome of winning the game?" So, in a football sense, it means that you put the team together with strikers and midfielders and defenders and a goalkeeper. And it's all different every single time, but that team has put together different skills or different core competencies who are best suited to deliver winning the game.

We don't do that in business. In business, it would be the equivalent of putting all of the defenders out on the field or putting all of the strikers out on the field. That'd be crazy. But if we do just take that step back and say, "Okay, who is the customer? What is their successful outcome? And how do we build a team to deliver that?" We would manage ourselves in a completely different way.

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Shawn: Yeah. We talk about tearing down your experience silos. The biggest issue that I would say, and this is just a, "Yes, and" to what you're saying is we organize the companies in silos. So, no wonder the CX experience is shitty. The whole ecosystem experience is shitty because associates and employees aren't happy, customers aren't happy, vendors aren't happy because we've done that.

And, you know, we just recently wrote a book that released this year, best-selling book called *Kiss Your Dragons*. And we talk about that concept and I love your three steps. And we talk about it from a swarm, a dragon swarm. Different people that look different, think different, act different, get them together to create that experience. You're going to have a really diverse experience instead of an experience, again, that looks like another company.

So, I have to ask this because I think our listeners need to know your opinion on this. When organizations fail at CX, when and where do they typically go wrong?

James: Well, I mean, it's step number one, not really understanding who their customer is. And when I say who our customer is, it's not someone's name. Hello? Yeah. That person's our customer. What I'm talking about is really who they are. People say, "Oh, James, no, we do that. We do segmentation." I'm like, "No, no, no. Segmentation is what a person is. I want to know who a person is." Being able to understand our customers at a deep level, at a psychographic level, understanding their behaviors, their lifestyles, their influences, understanding what makes them them, understanding their values. The thing is it is so easy to get a group of people who share the same demographics and have them all be completely different people. It's very difficult to get a whole group of people together that share the same psychographics and not have them be all very, very similar. So, I think that's probably the first step that companies get wrong. They segment based on circumstance, and they don't categorize customers based on who they actually are.

Shawn: Again, I'm on the same soap box as you are. Our very first experience design principal in MOFI is Know Me. I hate the word and I wish we could throw the word segmentation out. In the marketing world, using the term avatar, who is your avatar?

No, I want to know people, and I want to know what what's going on in their head. So, in your book, *A Customer Carol*, that re-envisioned Charles Dickens' classic novel as a story about becoming a generous, kindhearted and customer-loving human being. What was your inspiration for this? And what role does heart play in CX for you?

James: Well, right, so number one, that's a stupid book. You probably shouldn't go and buy it, but the, all the profits do go to charity with that book because I technically stole someone else's story. Basically, where that came from is I was having a conversation with a colleague around Christmas and *A Christmas Carol* was on the TV, in the background. And I was like, "Do you know what would be funny? If somebody wrote a book, but it's not that he hates Christmas. He hates his customers, and then, he's like visited by customer experience ghosts." And like, "Wouldn't that be really funny?" And we had a laugh. Oh, we laughed. And then, I was like, "I can do that." And literally, it took me a weekend. I spent two days writing that book, because the story was already written. All I had to do was change the word Christmas to customer experience, like, a bunch of times, find and replace in a Word document. And no, I did do more than that, obviously.

Yeah. That was written and published in two days. It's a bit of fun really for Christmas. But when you ask about heart in customer experience, my answer is, it depends. And that's probably not the answer you would expect. I think there are two types of experience, experiences that lean on relationships and experiences that are essentially transactions. Transactions, probably nine times out of 10 don't need to have very much heart involved. They don't need to have very much emotion involved. They probably don't need to have very much empathy involved. They just need to do what they need to do. You know, if you're trying to change your address with your bank, you probably don't need a big heartfelt, empathetic conversation with somebody about the fact that you're changing your address.

Now, that's not always true. If you're changing your address because a spouse has died and you've had to move house to somewhere else, then yeah. That's when the empathy and the heart comes into it. But that's when that moves from a transactional experience to a relationship experience, and all companies have got moments that can be relationship-building experiences. And I feel that we need to take the time to understand the difference between the two. Like changing a direct debit date probably doesn't need to be over the top. It can probably be something that can be automated that can be done very quickly without very much human interaction at all, which is good because then that frees up other people for more meaningful work. For if, you know, somebody in your family has died, for example, and you need to make a claim on your insurance to allow people to have that time, to have those empathetic

conversations. And, you know, that heart-centered experience, if you want to refer to it as that, and really build that relationship with people. So my answer is it depends.

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Shawn: What I liked in how you clarified that is, get those transactional experiences easy. And again, going back to our experience design principles, we talk about Know Me, Surprise Me, Make it Easy for Me. So, if you know me and you make it easy for me, it's really easy then to have that relational heart experience. And in our recent book, *Kiss Your Dragons*, we talk about how do you bring mindsets and heartsets together.

And also in that book, I want to talk a little bit about fear both in your experience as a musician and as a CX expert. So often, people in systems become paralyzed by fear, which is something that we explored in the book. What has your relationship with fear been throughout your career? And have you helped leaders navigate their fears to unlock better CX and better experiences?

James: Personally, I have had to overcome countless fears to get to where I am today in the music world. There was lots of fears that I had to overcome. You know, first, stepping out on stage and playing your first gig, the amount of fear you have to overcome to be able to do that. Then, leaving the music world, you know, the only thing that I'd ever known. Taking a normal person job, that was scary. And then, branching out on my own, that was incredibly scary. And then, probably the scariest thing of all was when I sort of branded myself with this whole rock star and music persona, because there was no going back after that. You know, that was a jump off of a cliff. That was it for me then. I couldn't just do it for a couple of months and then stick a suit and tie back on and be like, "Oh, forget that stuff. I'm a corporate person again."

So, when it comes to fear, personally, I feel like I've overcome quite a lot of fear. When it comes to people in customer experience and fear, there is a lot of times that I think fear does hold people back. And it is understandable. You can't say that it's not understandable. People, especially in large organizations are scared to make the wrong decisions because their own job is on the line, hundreds of thousands if not millions of customers can be affected by it. But the riskiest thing a lot of times, especially in customer experience is to do nothing. That's the scariest thing. That's the scariest thing for me, doing nothing is the scariest thing in life. Not trying new things is the scariest thing.

And we can be paralyzed by fear, and you end up with a far worse outcome than if you would have maybe just taken the leap and maybe trusted yourself a bit and backed yourself a bit, backed your ideas, backed your capabilities. So, the part of the question

about how have I helped people overcome that fear, I don't really know, to be honest with you. Maybe you have to talk to some other people that I've interacted with over the years. I'd like to think that I have helped people overcome that, but I don't really necessarily know how.

Shawn: Yeah. James, thank you for all these nuggets. I've taken lots of notes you've given us, but it has come to that point in this podcast that we have these things called The Combustion Questions. And there are three random selected questions that we're going to ask you that you have not seen or heard neither have I, they would just handed to me. So, James, are you ready for your first Combustion Question?

James: Yes, let's do this.

Shawn: All right. Combustion question number one, what would be your strategy for a zombie apocalypse?

James: Treadmills all the way around the outside of my house. Because they'd like walk on to the treadmills, and then they wouldn't be able to get any closer.

Shawn: Awesome. That's pretty powerful, man. Combustion question number two, big party or small gathering?

James: Medium soiree.

Shawn: Medium soiree.

James: No, I do know lot big party, big party.

Shawn: Big party. You're a rock star, big party. Right? All right. And the final one, Combustion question number three, what do you think about bonsai trees?

James: I think they're really cool. They're just like small versions of big trees that you can have in your house.

Shawn: I love it. Well, James, thank you again for being here on *The Combustion Chronicles*. How can our listeners find you? Where do they go to hear your wicked cool shit?

James: Yeah. Go to jamesdodkins.com if you want to see more about my keynote speaking, go to pega.com if you want to learn more about crushing complexity in your business, or just search me on LinkedIn and connect with me.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*.

Let's keep the conversation going by connecting on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

To learn more about the world of Experience Ecosystems, go to MOFI.co where you'll discover ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution.

Be sure to check out my book, *Kiss Your Dragons: Radical Relationships, Bold Heartsets, and Changing the World*, available now at Amazon. Then head over to ShawnNason.com to engage resources, a discussion guide, and information about everything from self-paced training to personal coaching.

You can find this episode's recap at ShawnNason.com. We know you lead a busy life, so if you're driving, exercising, or maybe just blowing your own shit up, don't worry. We've already taken the notes for you. Each recap is filled with exclusive guest information, episode themes, quotes, resources, and more.

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