

# **THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES**

**EPISODE SIXTY-ONE  
INFLUENCING THE INFLUENCERS**

**HOST: SHAWN NASON  
GUEST: ANTHONY J. JAMES**

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**Shawn:** Welcome to the sixth 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. As an experience evangelist, I believe the only way to build a sustainable and thriving business is by putting people first.

This season is all about human-obsessed, maverick-minded influencers who are changing the business landscape by standing up for what's right, prioritizing relationships over transactions, and taking a few risks along the way.

Mavericks think differently. And, human-obsessed mavericks take all of that mavericky stuff up a notch. Filled with empathy, these special mavericks put their heads and hearts into action to think bigger and more boldly about changing the world each and every day.

Ready to blow up the status quo and ignite a people-first experience revolution? Yeah, me too. Let's do this.

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**Shawn:** On this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*, we'll be speaking to Anthony J. James. Anthony uses his influence to help other people increase theirs. As chief growth officer and CEO of InfluencerActive, AJ connects small and medium-size brands and businesses with vetted influencers who can become trusted voices in both the B2C and B2B channels.

As group CEO for innovation and growth at Trinity Consulting Services, he helps clients drive their growth strategy, and digital transformation and generate innovative ideas for global markets. From new startups to big brands, he's helped teams get smarter while the business grows. Before joining the global consulting ranks with IBM and other brand names, he was a graphic artist, animator, and creative director, all skills that continue to serve him well. AJ, thank you for joining us on *The Combustion Chronicles*.

**Anthony:** Shawn, great to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Shawn:** Well, first off, AJ, I wanna thank you. As many of our listeners may not know, AJ does not do a bunch of podcasts. Although he's got all these millions of followers on LinkedIn, so thank you for doing this. You took such an interesting path to where you are now. So before you were a consultant and an influencer, and I know you don't always like to call yourself an influencer, but you are, you were a graphic artist and creative director. How did you make that transition and how does that background help you serve clients better today?

**Anthony:** Well, we're really going into the archives, Shawn, to tell you the truth, you know, over a quarter of a century ago. But from a graphic artist to sort of what I'm doing today, as a consultant, I think the skills translate all the way through, because ultimately, it's really about, you know, listening to clients' business problems and coming up with solutions for them and typically, you know, many leveraging on my domain space, it was around blending creativity and a very early innate interest in technology. You know, I like to think of that creative space with the graphic design and the animation background.

And my 20-plus years in the technology field, blending those two together is really what I call innovation and what I talk about as far as innovation, and that's what I still do today. It's really listening to and helping clients articulate the problems worth solving, getting them to a point where they just say, "Wow," when they see that solution, when they see the solution we deliver to their business problems that, you know, there's no better result than them, you know, saying wow when they see that solution. So, that's the background, that's where I started. And that's what I'm still doing today. It's not really very different.

**Shawn:** Well, that's brilliant, and I love how you talked about the blending of all of that together. So AJ, at MOFI, we love to celebrate mavericks. When we talk about maverick mindsets, people, you know, who zig when everybody else zags, and I really do think that defines who you are. So, I know you've worked on four continents during your career, which is phenomenal. Do you find that different places around the world are more accepting of this maverick mindset or less accepting of it? What's your take on that?

**Anthony:** You're right. I mean, I think across cultures, and I became sort of a real fan of, and a little bit obsessed about, working in different cultures and these different mindsets that they have. And, you know, I'll give you a little example. I do think there are cultures...and, you know, what I worked in, say, the U.S., I'm now gonna talk a little bit more about Asia and Asia-Pacific. There are cultures within Asia-Pacific that are real sticklers for the rules, right? And people like you and, I think, we like that rule-breaking because I think that's where innovation is found with a, you know, a little bit of rule-breaking and a little bit of creativity.

So there are cultures, and I think about my three and a half years in Japan as an example, things are very much done by the book. It's very culturally driven as well, but when you do break the rules and you get to a point where a solution is just so breakthrough and so different.

And really it's not breaking the rules greatly, it's just bending them a little bit and connecting the dots in slightly different ways, but it's not following the rule book. It's not following the way that it's always been done. It is actually celebrated quite openly. And, you know, you do hear things, like, "Wow, why didn't we think of that? Why didn't we think of that before?" when really the solution is right there in front of them.

[05:36]

**Shawn:** And I find it fascinating, too, AJ, that what you're saying there is in a culture where rule-breaking isn't the norm that you still press in, and once you get past that and you get to solving that right problem, as we've talked about that, then you get the aha moments and that's what's so brilliant.

**Anthony:** And it's staying focused I think on, in that maverick mindset. It is about staying focused on your belief. I think I've found I've been very single-minded in being able to see the vision, not 5 or 10 years down the track, but what's just over the horizon, what should we be working on now to be ahead of our competitors in 12 months or 18 months, and staying focused on that, even despite those that are saying, "Well, you shouldn't be doing that, or, no, you can't do that." It's staying focused on that one consistent vision of what you're trying to drive towards and adapting, and being flexible at the same time, and being able to pivot quickly when you need to be able to pivot.

**Shawn:** With that being said, I love that just seeing over the horizon, how can mavericks tackle then the tomorrow problems that their companies need to start working on today?

**Anthony:** There's a couple of perspectives I would bring to that. And the first one would be is you need to have very wide vision. If you want to be working on the tomorrow problems, as you put it, you need to know what the trends are and what's happening now.

I get thousands of messages a day on LinkedIn saying, "Where do you get the content? Where do you get the posts that you share?" And it's all about having very wide vision in the market. Knowing what's going on and seeing trends and seeing movements that are happening in other industry verticals that actually apply to the problems you've got today in your business.

It's then looking a little bit ahead. It's not looking, like a lot of these futurists do, and looking 10 to 20 years in the future. You know, I was on the international speaker

circuit, and I used to speak with some of these global futurists, and we always used to have a little bit of a joke that you'll be gone by the time...in 20 to 30 years, you'll be out in the industry doing something completely different, whether your predictions of technology come true or not.

I'm looking at, you know, 18 months, that 18 months over the horizon, and being able to connect the dots today to deliver solutions that are gonna put you ahead of your competitors in that next 12 to 18 months. That really is the key. We've got everything in front of us today, it's all here, it's all now.

We see trends in technology. We see things with Meta talking about the metaverse, and we've looked at augmented reality in retail. All the pieces of the puzzle are there. It's really, I think, up to, again, those mavericks to put the pieces of the puzzle together to see the picture that's maybe not the picture that's on the outside of the box, if that makes sense.

**Shawn:** Well, no, it makes total sense. I've heard a lot of people, you talked a little bit about trends and futurists. I actually went through a training through Institute for the Future. But what you're saying is just look 12 to 18 months out. You don't have to look three to five years or 10 years, but look just a bit over that horizon.

And you actually put a quote on LinkedIn recently that said, "Sometime over the next decade, your company or an organization will be challenged to change in a way for which it has no precedent." And I think that's what's brilliant about what you're saying is getting prepared now for what that decade-out looks. So to wrap up a little bit around the maverick mindset, what is the one piece of advice that you would give to a maverick to thrive in an environment that celebrates actually the status quo?

**Anthony:** The one piece of advice I would give is if you truly believe in your idea, if you truly believe in your concept, your startup, whatever it is, if you can't go a minute without thinking about it, then go and do it, find a way to make it happen. Despite what anybody says to you, despite, having no money, no funds, if you believe in that idea enough, you'll make it happen. You'll find ways to do it. And the ideas are there, you just have to look a little bit more broadly and a little bit more widely to connect the dots in those slightly different ways. And you'll find the solution.

[09:58]

**Shawn:** Brilliant. I'm a huge believer around experiences and experiences that matter, and in the importance of making every part of the customer experience count. And I was really privileged to see that when I was at Disney.

And again, recently you shared a quote, and it talked about, "Loyal customers don't just come back. They don't simply recommend you. They insist that their friends do business with you." So how might companies create experiences that build that depth of loyalty that you were talking about?

**Anthony:** It's a very interesting question, Shawn, because it's one that I do think about, you know, quite a lot and quite a lot for some of my customers. We start to talk about authenticity here and we start to talk about having a real voice. In so many cases, customer loyalty is wrapped up in the numbers and loyalty is run by spreadsheet.

And look, I've partly been guilty of this, running very large teams within creative agencies as well. But I think we start to lose focus on the customer themselves and listening to the customer, and giving the customer a voice, and having an authentic discussion with them, and an authentic conversation rather than being wrapped up in the corporate marketing message or the poster on the wall that talks about innovation, but actually never delivering it.

So, building that deeper loyalty, I do think comes down to authentic voice reaching those that actually want to be engaging with us, and having a real discussion today. I think we've lost too much of that in the corporate battle that so many of these marketing groups within organizations and their agencies are stuck with. That drives the real discussion, that drives the real interest in your business. We used to talk about this 20 years ago. There's no better marketing than word of mouth. I've started a little platform that's 100% word of mouth.

Bringing that authenticity back to the conversation and getting rid of the corporate jargon and that fixed marketing message, because it drives a number in a spreadsheet, is where a lot of organizations need to be going.

**Shawn:** So we're going to talk a little bit about your new gig. And I have been very fortunate to be a part of this platform now, but traditional influencers can do a good job at humanizing consumer brands. But what I don't think they resonate with is B2B buyers at all.

So, Influencer Active is a new platform that you brought to market where you match businesses with B2B influencers that you vetted, and that the organization has vetted, and somehow or another, I passed that vetting process. So I'm on that platform now. How do you know somebody belongs on your list of active influencers?

**Anthony:** I'll start by asking you a question because you've used the word quite a few times, or you've used the title "influencer" quite a few times. And I think you've actually answered the question in the question you've asked me, but when I say to you "influencer," who's the first name that comes to mind?

**Shawn:** Many for me, but I would say, like, Walt Disney is an influencer, the Kardashians.

**Anthony:** The Kardashians. Yeah. I hear that one a lot. Yeah, absolutely.

**Shawn:** Yeah.

**Anthony:** What you typically don't hear is somebody like Cory Warfield. You don't hear a name like Talal Al Murad, you don't hear some of the names in the business world that are actually influencers. And that's what fascinates me the most. Over the last five to 10 years, businesspeople like yourself, like me, have built significant networks of influence with other like-minded businesspeople that follow us or are connected to us, or engaged with us in business discussions around topics that interest us.

I mean, I think your example of the phone system. You're not going go and buy a brand-new financial services system because Kim Kardashian put out a post...can I mention her name, I'm not sure... on her Instagram. I mean, no CEO in their right mind is gonna go back to their board and say, "I just saw a post on Instagram that Kim Kardashian put out for SAP's brand-new ERP, I think we should implement it." You'd get laughed out of the boardroom, right?

**Shawn:** Yeah.

**Anthony:** Now, if you had somebody like a Dan Burrus, a major tech influencer in the U.S., a name that maybe you've not even heard, Shawn, but he's an actual influencer on LinkedIn. If somebody like Dan is posting about a brand-new ERP, board members and CEOs who follow him are far more likely to listen.

I think the other interesting thing in the question that you posed as well is these B2B influencers...and you're right, no B2C influencer on TikTok doing a dance about

a product is going to sell to a CMO or a CEO within a B2B organization. But 80% of these businesses can't afford a half-million-dollar, one-off post on Instagram from a celebrity influencer.

So we've got this, you know, celebrity culture. We've got this, you know, these influencers that typically are from television, or movies, radio, and music, etc. You've now got this gigantic pool of business influencers who are not necessarily household names but have built these significant networks of influence.

So, yes, at Influencer Active, we have a number of gates. One of those gates is they need to have influence within their industry vertical. And that's really interesting and really easy to see as well. You only have to visit their Twitter account or their LinkedIn account to see the sort of impact and influence they've got when they post to their very highly engaged networks of other business professionals.

[16:05]

**Shawn:** I love the model. And when our dear friend, Cory, introduced it to me, and I started really leaning into being an influencer. You know, that was my goal is I've got to get on the platform. So I'm really honored, first off, that you brought it to market and that I'm allowed to be a part of this amazing community that you've brought to market.

**Anthony:** It's great to have you there. It's great to have you there, Shawn. And I think what's interesting that as well is even from a word-of-mouth perspective, we've already helped hundreds and hundreds of brands that have realized that celebrity influence is not gonna sell their product.

**Shawn:** Yeah, yeah. That's so true. I want to put this in real practical terms around business case and value proposition thoughts. You wrote something on LinkedIn last year that probably stopped a lot of marketers in their tracks.

You said that projecting too much positivity around a brand can actually make consumers mistrust that brand and that acknowledging weaknesses...and I'm quoting you on this, "Allows armies of advocates to develop without the rose-tinted glasses that marketing agencies like to place over the eyes of the masses." So how should businesses accept and respond to constructive criticism, AJ?

**Anthony:** Look, I think constructive criticism is the best feedback we can really get, right? I mean, I don't think in today's world constructive criticism should be ignored. I think the answer to the question actually lies in the question itself. They need to start accepting and responding to constructive criticism, because ultimately, it's an

attempt by the customers, the suppliers, the supply chain, whoever it is, to improve the experience with their brand.

It's not about trolling. It's not about...it's not there to defame or attack. It's meant to make things better. And unfortunately, too many organizations, too many marketing teams have become closed off to that sort of feedback. Right now, right now, look at the situation we're in now, Shawn, like coming out of the back of a pandemic, coming out of global lockdowns, businesses going to the wall because they've been locked out, the whole world wants to be better.

We wanna be better from the virus. We wanna be better from the economic problems. We wanna be, you know, better from the issues of climate change, whatever it is. So I do think companies need to stop downplaying that constructive criticism they've got, and instead, they need to start listening to and thinking about those improvements can be the ...and how they can be brought into focus, how they can actually highlight those to bring that constructive feedback to life.

Remember the Pan Am smile. Everything's rosy and everything's good, and don't worry about it. Well, you know, unfortunately, you're never too big to fail. Right. And we know what happened to brands like Pan Am.

Brands that are working with their customers...and even quickly and rapidly prototyping customer experience improvements that not just focus on old-fashioned market research, but co-designing solutions, listening to their clients. And the other one that gets me, Shawn, is, the issues that so many brands have around their intellectual property, and their images, and their brand. And, I had a story just recently, if I can share quickly, of a brand, actually, somebody in their marketing group that approached me and said, "Hey, we've got this really innovative tech product. We think your followers would really like that on LinkedIn." And it was very much a tech product. I was engaged through Influencer Active. I posted about their product. Within 20 hours, I think there was 1.3 million views of their 13-second video.

The marketing person that engaged me said, "I just can't comprehend what's going on. Our inbox is just full of inquiries, distributorship inquiries." I think it was two days later, the CEO reached out to me and said, "I don't know who gave you permission to share that video, but it wasn't me. And I'm instructing you to pull it down."

It was their marketing manager that engaged me through Influencer Active. Their CEO knew nothing about it, and then was offended that his so-called intellectual

property was shared on a business channel without his permission. So, I personally think some of these organizations really need to just get over it and start getting out there and being real people rather than brands that are so internally focused on their IP and hiding the criticism.

[20:53]

**Shawn:** I love it. And, you know, obviously, I spent seven years working for a company that is all about IP at Disney, but there's a time and place for it.

**Anthony:** Time and place, absolutely.

**Shawn:** Well, AJ, we can go on and on with you probably for another hour, but it has come to that point here that we do this segment called the Combustion Questions and they are three randomly selected questions that I was just handed. So I've never seen them.

**Anthony:** Hit me, hit me.

**Shawn:** I know it's kinda scary here. So are you ready for your Combustion Questions?

**Anthony:** I'll give it my best shot.

**Shawn:** Awesome. So Combustion Question number one, AJ, if you could design a planet, what would your perfect planet look like?

**Anthony:** You know what immediately comes to mind, and maybe it's a little bit sad, but it's the...well, what's the name of it...the planet where the Autobots from *Transformers* come from. It's probably a very hyper-realistic augmented reality world. The world from *Ready Player One* where we, you know, technology is part of our lives, but you do have those areas that you can go to, to switch off and get away from it, but I'm an always-on kind of guy. So I think that sort works for me.

**Shawn:** I love it. I actually just watched *Bumblebee* last night, so I hear you.

**Anthony:** There you go.

**Shawn:** Awesome. Combustion Question number two. Do you prefer cake, pie, or something else?

**Anthony:** You didn't give me the option of vodka or gin, but...

**Shawn:** Hey, there you go. You can use vodka or gin.

**Anthony:** Question number three?

**Shawn:** We'll just leave it with vodka and gin. Question number three. What do you think about spiders?

**Anthony:** I would typically say to my kids a good spider is a dead spider.

**Shawn:** Amen. I'm in 100% agreement with you. AJ, thanks again for an amazing 30 minutes here with you. And I'm going to ask this question, but I think it's pretty well self-defined, on how can our audience find you, AJ?

**Anthony:** LinkedIn, definitely. I'm a single-channel sort of guy. I think I've got a Twitter account somewhere, but Anthony J. James will find me on LinkedIn, and I'm very happy for anybody to follow my profile and reach out. Send me a message, I will absolutely do my very best to reply to everybody.

**Shawn:** Yes. Well, again, thank you. And we'll have to have you back again, AJ, because there's so many great nuggets, so thanks again.

**Anthony:** Love to, Shawn. Thanks for your time.

**Shawn:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*. If you've enjoyed this episode, please take a few minutes to subscribe, rate, and review.

Remember that I'm always looking to meet more big-thinking mavericks, so let's keep the conversation going by connecting on LinkedIn.

If you want to discover more about human-obsessed, maverick-minded experience ecosystems, go to [MOFI.co](http://MOFI.co) where you'll discover ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution.

And be sure to check out my book, *Kiss Your Dragons: Radical Relationships, Bold Heartsets, and Changing the World*, available on Amazon. Then head over to [ShawnNason.com](http://ShawnNason.com) to engage resources, a discussion guide, and information about everything from self-paced learning to personal coaching.

As always, stay safe, be well, and keep blowing sh\*t up!