

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

Episode 88

CREATING SURPRISE AND DELIGHT MOMENTS

Host **Shawn Nason**
Guest **Lisa Holladay**

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Shawn (00:40):

Welcome to the eighth 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 a maverick-minded, human-obsessed experience evangelist, I believe the only way to build a sustainable and thriving business is to put people first. Throughout this season, we'll be connecting you, the listener, with cutting edge leaders who are challenging old ways of thinking with bold, new ideas and a commitment to human-centric design. Experience matters, people matter and revenue matters. That's why it's time to ignite a people-first experience revolution.

My guest today, Lisa Holladay, is the Chief Experience Officer at Tiger 21, the premier membership organization for high net worth wealth creators. In this role, she's responsible for optimizing the member experience, particularly along the dimensions of learning, access and connection. She and her team curate an integrated portfolio of high-end member programs resulting in engagement and retention. Before joining Tiger 21, Lisa held leadership roles in branding, advertising and public relations at luxury brands ranging from Mercedes-Benz to the Ritz Carlton. But she hasn't spent her whole career in luxury space. She previously held positions with the Challenger Center for Space Science Education and the Association of California School Administrators. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Lisa.

Lisa (01:43):

Hi Shawn. Happy New Year. I'm so glad to be with you.

Shawn (01:48):

So glad to be with you and wow, like what a career you've had and we're gonna dive into that and all the brands that you've worked for. But you know, Lisa, a few people have ever heard of Tiger 21 and to be frank, I didn't know about Tiger 21 until we connected on LinkedIn and started to build a relationship and even fewer qualify for the membership end of Tiger 21. But it's really a fascinating group. So when you're at a dinner party and someone asks you where you work and what you do, what do you tell them?

Lisa (02:23):

Well, it's a great question. You're right. I have to say, even when the recruiter called me, I was like, Tiger 21, but I've worked in luxury brands. If this is a real thing, I should know about it. Well, it's a real thing. I feel really, really blessed to join Tiger 21. I actually had a, one of our members ask me the same question at a recent event. Obviously, she said, I know what Tiger 21 is, but what do you actually do? And I explained my role to her and she said, okay, I think I've got it. You're here to make sure that our members love Tiger 21. I'm like, you've got it. You know, that's been my sweet spot in my career is really building brand loyalty and I love it. So you did a great job reading what Tiger 21 is. The way I tell people to think about it is it's really, it's as if you have your own personal board of advisors.

So these are people that can come together and share their wisdom with, with each other in a really confidential setting. The core part of the member experience is a monthly group meetings with 12 to 15 other members and we have a professional facilitator who really leads and guides those discussions. So that's the core part of the member experience. I'm responsible for everything that happens to a member outside of that core group meeting. So it could be our annual conference, which is our global exchange. It could be ski retreats, it could be a women's retreat. It's all of our programming, learning activities. Of course, Shawn, now virtual events are a part of our lives. So I oversee all of our virtual events too. So that's why I, I try to frame it up around these pillars of there are learning opportunities, there are opportunities to access. We just hosted last month, VIP events during Art Basel. And then the main component is really bringing those opportunities for our members to come together and connect and learn from each other.

Shawn (04:02):

Truly fascinating, truly fascinating to me. So let's dig into experience because again, your career started in one industry and we're gonna talk about that in a little bit about engaging on your journey here. But you've worked for some really great brands and so, you know, I worked for the Walt Disney company, our listeners know that. I'm very proud of that, that experience. And I'm a firm believer that no organization, whether it be Tiger 21 or anyone else, can thrive if it doesn't really focus on what we call at MOFI, and I call

the Experience Ecosystem™, and that's all those aspects that you talked about, members, employees, but you also use third party vendors, like all that Experience Ecosystem™. You have something that you have to keep very tight around the Tiger 21 way, as I would say. So what's unique though about navigating experience with these high net worth individuals and customers of these luxury brands?

Lisa (05:05):

Well I love that you said, mentioned the Tiger 21 way, because that's actually what we call it internally, our corporate culture is the Tiger 21 way. And you and I haven't talked about it so you didn't know, but yeah, and I'm a big fan of what Walt Disney is able to accomplish, especially on such a large scale. So I think it, it, of course you have that background, which is why you're able to engage in these great conversations. I think anytime you're asking people to give up their time, regardless of whether it's a luxury consumer or not, it's super important what type of experience you're delivering, right? No matter how much money any of us have, we can't buy more time. So time is just so valuable. I think once you are in the high net worth or luxury consumer space, these individuals have access to so many experiences, they're able to curate really, really almost any type of experience they want.

There are some exceptions to that, but so I think where there's the opportunity when you're, when you're building experiences, when you're building, in this case it's a member journey. When I was at Mercedes, it was a customer journey, when I was with the hotel situation or in the hospitality business, it was our guest journey. But it's really thinking about every single one of those touchpoints and how you can not only meet, meet expectations but exceed those expectations. I think obviously, attention to detail and getting the basics perfect is just table stakes and a must. I think for us, what really I try to instill in our team is genuinely caring about every single individual because we are smaller, we should be able to take the time to really individualize that experience and their member journey with us. And then I love trying to create surprise and delight moments.

So what are those things that are unexpected? Even if you have, even if you're high net worth, even if you're a luxury consumer, just what are those special, special, you know, a lot of times it doesn't take a lot of money to make things really, really special. And then

I love executing across a sensory experience. I think Disney's another organization that does this really well. You know, if you can engage with every sense you're creating memories for an individual and I think being in the memory making business is what events is all about, you know, experiential, that's why I have a passion for it. I think there's uh, creating indelible marks, there's just nothing like that. So I think if you have the privilege to work in the industry, we do and do that for other people, it's, it's just super special.

Shawn (07:25):

So what I love, again, you and I had no conversation before this, I want our listeners to understand that, is you actually called out two of the three fundamental design principles that we use at MOFI and the first one is 'Know me'. And you're just talking about that, about your member, right? The next one is 'Surprise me', and the other one is 'Make it easy for me'. And even when you're talking about the sensory experience and then creating memories, you do that by making it easy for people, right?

Lisa (07:56):

Yeah and I think, yeah, and I think also Shawn, that's what I meant, and I like that you say make it easy for me, but that's where I, I always talk to my team about, we have to get the basics first before you can layer on. Because nobody wants to spend time standing in a line. Nobody wants to figure out where the bathrooms are. If somebody has dietary restrictions, they don't wanna feel hungry at an event. So it's just kind of those basics are first and foremost, you know, everyone's time is so valuable and I just think if people are going to make the investment of their time, then you should deliver something that's super special.

Shawn (08:27):

I love it. Love it. So let's start talking about your journey though, because I think this is fascinating to our listeners and how all of us get in this, and I'm, I'm always very interested in how do people get into this. So, but I know you started out studying and working in education and again we hadn't talked Lisa, but at one point I was a Chief Innovation Officer for a university. So how the heck did you end up in this space?

Lisa (08:53):

Well, it was not a linear path, I'll tell you that. I was never one of those kids that knew what I wanted to do. I was always positive. I loved learning, I loved being in school and I was the oldest of three girls in our family and I liked teaching my younger sisters. I taught at my youth group at church. So when I got to college, you know, a million years ago when I went to undergrad, they, maybe they don't do this anymore, but you know, they force you to declare a major, which I think is crazy for some freshmen, right? So I'm like, what the heck? Education and I love to read and write, so English. So that's why it ended up being an education degree. Unfortunately you don't do your student teaching until your senior year. So when I do that I was like, wait a minute, this is not the career for me.

I love the students but I just know, I knew it wasn't my passion. So I delayed reality for a little while. I went to graduate school, I went and studied Shakespeare abroad, I came back and my parents literally said, okay, get a job. Just go try something. So that's what I did and it was actually such great advice because I, and that my first six years out of grad school I probably worked five different jobs and I learned something from every single one of them. But I would, you know, I'd stick it out if I had made a commitment for a year or two years, I stuck it out. And then finally Mercedes-Benz and I found each other and I went to work for Mercedes-Benz USA. It was, I never would've thought, if you'd asked me if I'd ever work for an automotive company that I would, but I, when I joined, I was on the PR team, I was launching new vehicles to press, to consumers.

My, there were times where I'd actually pinch myself and say, I can't believe somebody's paying me to do this. You know, I research locations for press events, where are the best restaurants? What are the best car drive scenes, by the way, always doing this in a Mercedes-Benz, which was crazy at the time, I was driving, I was driving a beat up Toyota Corolla and I will give a plug to Toyota Corolla because we sold that car five years later for the same thing we paid for that car. But you know, it was just, so I kind of stumbled into the luxury space and I found my net. So I stayed there for 10 years, five different jobs in those 10 years. And by far, my favorite role was my last one there where I was on the brand experience team and I was leading our customer journey efforts and our experiential marketing. And so that's where I found my niche.

Shawn (11:07):

Again, and a fascinating story, how we all get into it. You had your five jobs, I said, I'm in my fifth career now and my wife is like, let's not have a sixth career. Let's just have five careers. Right? So, so I totally get it. So let me ask you then though, all those current roles, and you just talked about your, your, you know, being on the brand experience team and at Mercedes. How did all of those roles prepare you for today?

Lisa (11:33):

Well, first of all, all of those jobs, once I got to Mercedes, I won't say I was getting ready to say I was blessed at all those roles. Having really amazing leaders and colleagues and team members, that's not a hundred percent true. But even when I didn't have necessarily a great leader, I was learning and I was always thinking, okay, you know, if I'm ever in the situation or have the privilege of leading other people, what am I gonna take away from this? That's the good or the bad. And then I would say once I got to Mercedes, and it was part of why I stayed there for as long as I did. It wasn't just the great jobs, I was working with really amazing people. My leaders were coaches, I was learning from them. My colleagues were super, super smart. So I was learning so much from them.

And Mercedes taught me a lot about the luxury market. It was my first time in the luxury market. Mercedes is a large company that is laser focused on knowing the consumer better than anyone else. You know, a lot of the belief was if you know your customer better than anyone else knows theirs, then we're gonna have a competitive advantage. I also realized quickly that when you have an actual physical product that you can market that is gonna get people excited and interesting or interested, that goes a long way to help drive, drive, no pun intended, to drive consumer engagement. And also it was the first time I'd worked for a heritage brand, you know, a legacy brand. And so it gave me a lot of respect for what came before and who had built the brand, but also a realization that you need to continually evolve the brand. So that was probably what I took from Mercedes.

Marriott, and that really set me up to go lead Marriott's luxury brands, hospitality and travel. You and I were chatting right before we started the recording that you and I both travel and you know, there's business travel and then there's travel because it's your passion. And for me, travel was always a passion point for me. I've always loved to

travel, explore new culture. So the chance to become the global brand leader for iconic luxury brands like Ritz Carlton and St. Regis, I was just beyond excited and it was the right time. You know, you're with a certain brand for a certain time. I felt like it was time to move. So as much as I love Mercedes, it was time to move into this new role. And those learning points were, were very, very different.

I realized quickly that what really differentiated the Ritz Carlton brand, because I started with Ritz Carlton and then I took over the St. Regis brand, was how much culture, internal culture, and I'm sure you experienced this at Disney, how much internal culture drives what kind of experience the guest is having. And that was probably the biggest takeaway I took. It also was super beneficial for me to learn what happens behind the scenes at hotels, and the business of hotels. You know, I had been on the client side of booking events and experience with hotels, and now I'm back on the client side. So now to be able to go and have conversations with hotel companies or leaders and to have eight years of experience knowing what's happening on the other side of, of the hotel business has been really, really beneficial.

Shawn (14:36):

That's also frightening for people. Let's be real like, you know, it's the same thing for me. Like my very first corporate job was at Disney, so, you know, and it was nine years of my life and I just thought that every company worked that way internally. And then I thought every company provided that experience in some type of way. And as we know that's not true. Even today, my wife and many of the team members here will say, please just stay calm because when you're not delivering it, because we know what's happening, right? I actually had that conversation on the phone yesterday with, with an organization in an industry that I knew a lot about and I'm like, I understand this is your policy, but I also know you could do this, this, this, and this.

Lisa (15:17):

A hundred percent. I think it's a balance. I think it gives you, first, knowledge is power, right? Which is why I'm such a believer in education and part of why I wanted to join a peer learning organization. I do, you know, education, it's interesting what happens along your own personal journey, right? Is now I'm back with an education organization.

So I think it, it gives you knowledge which is power and which helps drive what you need, especially when you're the type of, working for the type of organization or the individual that really wants perfection. And I also think it gives you a level of empathy, right? You also then understand why certain things are, are the way they are. So I think having both sides of that, that I think it quicks you and helps you.

Shawn (15:57):

Yeah, I love it. So we use this term at MOFI about being maverick-minded and human-obsessed. And so we're all about that. And for me, it's hard to believe that organizations can be successful without some of those traits in them. Can you tell us a story, personal story of when being maverick-minded made a positive impact on an organization you worked for or on a project you worked on?

Lisa (16:22):

Sure. Maybe I'll give a quick example because I don't really wanna spend a lot of time talking about COVID, but it's probably the most recent one. And I think for all of us creating experiences, we probably have a COVID-related example over the last two years, right? So for Tiger, we're an organization about community, you know, the core part of our, our business is bringing people together. And so we had spent, gosh, a year and a half, almost two years not being able to do that. And it was time for us to have our annual conference, which is our largest gathering, brings up anywhere from 700 to 800 people together, which obviously was not happening during COVID, but we were, our conference first of all was scheduled to be in Arizona, so it was open for business and we could do things outside and we obviously, the health of our members and our team, our internal team was of the utmost importance for us.

So we had a lot of long discussions about whether to have our, our conference or not, and we decided to take every single precaution we could to utilize the fact that we could be outside a good bit. We instituted a VAX policy to be able to come and we decided to move forward with it along with, you know, all the event restrictions that required. And I'm so glad we did. It was definitely, luckily it was not a spreader event. Everyone left healthy and it really brought together our community at a really critical time for people to come back together and, and kind of, you know, leap from there into a fresh start of being able to actually spend time face-to-face with each other again. So that's my

COVID story. Maybe in some ways more challenging is, you know, I mentioned working for heritage brands and really valuing the legacy they have, but at the same time I think it's super critical to also be, to really focus on where the brand needs to evolve.

And so when I joined Ritz Carlton, the brand color in the logo had not been updated ever. And all of a sudden our brand was sitting in, you know, this luxury brand, iconic brand was sitting in brand neighborhoods with other great brands but not luxury brands. So Pabst Blue Ribbon, Ford, Facebook and the logo looked really dated and that was trickling through to our internal culture with our ladies and gentlemen not wanting to hand their business cards to individuals, not wanting to give out gift bags. And it just had such a trickle effect into what the brand was standing for. And what we wanted to do was maintain how iconic the brand is and the legacy, but pull it forward and, and make it feel more modern and relevant. So, you know, anyone that's done brand work where it's about a logo, a mark, a color knows it's a really, really heavy lift. It may sound like it's not, but you're talking about changing everything from the signage to, you know, from the, the big items like architecture and signage to the smallest details like the gift bag that's given out. So we did it, we made the change. And I have to say, it makes me still so proud when I go stay at Ritz Carlton and the color palette and the logo, it looks very, very clean and modern, but it's still nodding to the great heritage of that brand. So those are two of my maverick moments.

Shawn (19:30):

I actually love the term because I don't know that I've ever heard anyone say the heritage brand or you know, that legacy brand. And I love that you're talking about that. I wanna turn to you giving some advice to our listeners now because I know that they're listening and they're going, wow like, listen to her career. So what's the best advice that you've ever received, Lisa, about leadership?

Lisa (19:54):

Oh, the best advice I've received about leadership, it actually ties into, to one of my favorite quotes, I don't even know who this quote comes from. I was listening to meditation one morning, which I try to do consistently, but I don't, but I'm trying, I really am trying. But the quote was, view the world with compassion and curiosity rather than

criticism. And I really try to lead my life that way, both professionally and personally. I think as leaders to be empathetic, to listen first, but also to give really, really direct feedback is, is super important. So, and I've had leaders that have modeled that, so that's not necessarily the best advice I've ever, well I guess it was good advice from my meditation teacher through the phone one morning. So yeah, that's, that's what I try to model as a leader for my team.

Shawn (20:39):

Okay, so say the quote one more time because it was, it was so beautiful.

Lisa (20:44):

View the world with compassion and curiosity rather than criticism.

Shawn (20:49):

Wow, wouldn't that be great if we did more of that right now?

Lisa (20:53):

Well I think it, yeah cause I think if you think about it, it almost can apply to everything and think if we made our decisions based on that. Yeah.

Shawn (21:01):

Yeah, that's beautiful. And what's your piece of advice to people who wanna do what we do in the experience space?

Lisa (21:07):

You know, it's interesting because I think so many people seeing it from the outside, I always tell people hosting the event is much different than attending the event. And I think so often our guests, our customers, you know, they, and they shouldn't know, right? What is happening behind the scenes. So I think if you're still young enough to be going to college or school of any type, first of all, if there are courses you can take, take it. You know, my alma mater now has a brand communication school and it didn't exist when I was there and if it had, I think I would've probably found my way maybe sooner than I did. And so I think if you have the opportunity to take courses, do that. I think if

you have the opportunity to intern with companies and organizations that you're passionate about, I think doing what we do for a living, if you do it for an organization or company that you believe in, that you're passionate about, it makes all the difference. And the other piece, I think if you have the opportunity, and this is whether, you know, you're, wherever you are in your career, you know, I think there are people that love the agency side or love the client side. And I think most of my career, I have needed agency partners just as much as I've needed great people on the client side. And in fact in, in my roles, I didn't allow our internal team to call the agency, the agency. I'm like, there are partners and we're at events. Our guests, our consumers don't know the difference. They're wearing our brand, they're part of our team. But I think there are certain people drawn to more of an agency type work style or a client side. So, and I did both of those. My very first job out of school was on the agency side, that first job when my parents said go get a job, uh, it was on the, it was on the agency side. And so I love my agency partners, but I'm definitely more of the client side kind of gal.

Shawn (22:57):

Great advice, great advice for people. Well thank you so much Lisa for this. But it has come to that point in our episode where we do these things called The Combustion Questions, which are three randomly selected questions and that I tell our listeners that are done by our human algorithm. And I do not see those questions and I am just now seeing those questions for the very first time. So Lisa, are you ready for your combustion questions?

Lisa (23:23):

I am ready for my combustion questions, I hope.

Shawn (23:27):

Yes. Question number one. If you could spend the day at any museum anywhere in the world, which museum would you go to?

Lisa (23:38):

That's a really good one and I love museums. I would probably go back to Madrid to The Prado. It's one of my favorite museums I've ever been to and I have not been back to Madrid in a million years and I'm going to New York this weekend and I'm gonna spend the weekend going to museums, but I would take the opportunity to go abroad.

Shawn (23:59):

There you go. Love it. Question number two, what's your favorite ice cream topping?

Lisa (24:07):

Topping? Caramel, salted caramel, ideally.

Shawn (24:12):

Why salted caramel? Because that's my favorite too.

Lisa (24:16):

I love the combination of sweet and salty. I just love it. I think that combo is, yeah, I just love it. Yeah. I would really take rum raisin ice cream over a topping there, Shawn, to be totally honest. But since that wasn't the question, I'm sticking with the question.

Shawn (24:33):

I love it. Alright, question number three. What do you think about neon signs?

Lisa (24:39):

I hate them. I hate them.

Shawn (24:42):

Why?

Lisa (24:42):

I really don't. Well I'm a, I like candlelight. So what's the antithesis to neon? Now, I do have a neon sign in my game room here. It's a vintage Miller light sign that I gave my husband for Christmas. So I do make exceptions. I guess because my mind goes to like Times Square and it being overwhelming. So I'm more, uh, subtlety.

Shawn (25:06):

Subtle. Love it. Love it. Well, thank you so much Lisa. Thank you for giving us this time and um, this wisdom to our listeners. And until we meet in person and talk again, again, thank you and be safe and be well.

Lisa (25:20):

Thank you, Shawn. It was a true pleasure.

Shawn (25:23):

Thanks 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 where you'll find ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution, or go to experienceevangelists.com to learn more about my mission to challenge leaders to blow up outdated, siloed systems and rebuild them with an aligned human-first approach. As always, stay safe, be well, and keep blowing shit up.