

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

Episode 90

CONDUCTING A SYMPHONY OF MARKETING SUCCESS

Host **Shawn Nason**
Guest **Ali Jawin**

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Shawn (00:01):

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, Ali Jawin is on a mission to demystify the processes that drive marketing success. Having built her career designing growth strategies and programs for digitally focused global organizations, she blends a bottom-line approach with a talent for igniting brand recognition through impactful marketing campaigns that deliver quantifiable results on a global scale. Ali is currently vice president of global marketing for The RepTrak Company where she's responsible for scaling the organization's global footprint and go-to-market strategy. She has deep expertise that spans growth marketing, marketing automation, and customer acquisition for both B2B and B2C organizations. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Ali.

Ali (01:39):

Thank you so much for having me.

Shawn (01:40):

It is so fun to have you on the podcast. I know Ali, we follow each other on LinkedIn and love our posts. And so I wanna ask you, you know, for a lot of people, marketing and reputation management seem more like dark magic than hard science and I think probably even more today than ever. So when you're sitting at a dinner party or at a social and someone asks you what you do, what do you tell them?

Ali (02:07):

It's such a good question because if I say I lead a global marketing department, I get a blank stare. It's not like, oh, I'm an orthodontist. So I tend to explain it in basically like

two ways. The first is that I see myself as a conductor and that my department is a symphony, that we get the score or the strategy that I've worked on with the rest of the executive leadership team. And then it's my job to go make sure that my department executes everything as they should be. And I'm going to really torture this analogy. But let's say that like creative is the strings and operations are the wins. I clearly don't know nothing about music, but they all have to work together at the same time. And one of the things I love about marketing is that it is so collaborative. Forget working with other departments, which they absolutely have to do to be successful.

Because marketing touches every single part of the organization. Get a good marketing campaign off the ground. I need to make sure that every person, every resource, every dollar is playing the same tune at the same time when they're meant to be, that people get their opportunity to shine. So I guess that's more on the management side, but the other thing I like to do, or I do, and it sounds so simple, but it's actually a lot harder, is use data to make decisions. Because while it seems that so much of marketing is dark magic, in so many areas, especially anything digital, there's actually the metrics there. If anything, I think marketers need to do a better job about not being afraid of math. Cause to be fair, no one went into marketing to do math. I, as one of the many people who eventually ended up in marketing went there cause I didn't think I need to do math, I was bad at math. It turned out I was just bad at calculating math. But there's excel for that. But basically using all of the data, I know if they just told me that in a school I would've had a very different career. I just can't get to the number. But if you give me the right numbers, there's so much about marketing that's, or like I say, there are only two things that are really hard about marketing, knowing what to do and then executing on that. But we generally have the data if we're not afraid to look at it, to tell us what the right thing to do is. And then there's my orchestra that I have to conduct to get it there. But really using data to make smart decisions.

Shawn (04:29):

I love that analogy. I'm a musician so that was my first career. So I love that analogy and I love how you brought it together because I don't know that I've ever heard it put that way. So thank you for that so much. So let's dig a little bit into your personal experience. So at MOFI we talk about this thing called the Experience Ecosystem™. Our, our

listeners are very familiar with it. I talk about it a lot. I say that I stole it from Disney because Disney does an amazing job at managing this ecosystem of a guest experience or experience in general. And you know, too many organization there's, there's really this big gap between brand as you know, brand management and actual experience that people are having. So in your opinion or in your advice, how can leaders close that gap? Because I, I'm guessing the answer isn't just to do more marketing.

Ali (05:23):

The answer is almost never to do more marketing. And I say that or not just to do more. I really am glad you asked that question because in, you know, RepTrak, uh, we would actually say that you're talking about the difference between brand and reputation because I mean reputation as a word, I don't know and I hear it, I think of you know, a Jane Bonnet, BBC, PBS drama with people in top hats and petty coats. But really, you know, when we think about reputation, it's that your brand is the promise that you make and your reputation is that people actually actually think you're living up to that promise, really your experience. So that disconnect is that you as a company are saying we're X, Y, and Z. But the public is saying, yeah, I don't buy that. And the only way you can really cross that bridge is to first of all know where are you falling short?

What are you putting out there into the market that isn't being seen as reliable? Are you not being seen as trustworthy? Are you not being seen as a good employer? And even further, why not? Are you not hiring fairly? Are you not compensating fairly? Would people welcome you to their neighborhoods? Unless you know where you're falling short, you're just going to do more. So I would say the first thing you need to figure out is where is that disconnect? You know, and there are bunches of ways that you could get there. I promise I'm not gonna pitch, but find out where that is. And laser focus there. Just spending more brand awareness dollars and trust me, I love a good brand awareness campaign that's not going to make the difference. People feel the lack of connection when there's a promise of the brand that's been broken, find out where that gap is. And it could be, it's a communication problem. Maybe you actually, you know, let's say people don't think you're being a fair employer, that you're not working hard enough to reduce weight within your company. Maybe you're actually doing an amazing

job and you're just not communicating that. You know, in this world, perception is reality. So you need to find out where that disconnect is before you can solve it. Otherwise you're just gonna spend money, bandwidth, effort and not fix that.

Shawn (07:31):

Okay. So let's take that down even a level farther. So what would you say the industries might learn from your industry around this whole concept?

Ali (07:42):

I would say that you are not communicating anywhere near enough. And on the off chance that you are, are you communicating in the way that people are going to listen? Because one thing I always even need to say to my company and anyone in my industry is that pre-COVID, people had the attention span of a goldfish. I don't know if there's anything less than an attention span of a goldfish, but whatever it is, that's where we are now post-COVID. Whether we like it or not, TikTok has influenced how we want to receive content. So you can't just put out a press release and expect people to read it or you can't do one digital ad. You need to be constantly communicating everywhere. Because you see one positive article per se on your company doing X, Y or Z, people will forget it. They need to see that again and again.

If you're gonna be sticky, you need to keep on communicating on the channels and in the language and never stop because the second you stop, another company is gonna come in there, probably your competitor. And it's this constant stream of communication. Also, no one's gonna open every email, no one's going to see every tweet gonna come in and out. So having that constant stream of consistent communication, I'd say the other things that it has to be authentic. One brand that I think has done a really good job right now is Kellogg's. Kellogg's. You know, it's really traditional brand out there. So for them to look more innovative, what were they gonna do? Instead they leaned into the new trend of plant-based and leading away from animal products. And they said we were the original plant-based company. So leading into that authenticity, their tradition to be show this new trendy area as opposed to trying to be someone who they weren't. So authenticity such a buzzword. But on the other hand people can sense if it's false, they know. So finding a way to communicate that's authentic and true to who you are is really important.

Shawn (09:40):

I hope our listeners were taking notes there because there were some great, great, great jewels and nuggets that you gave us. So, so let's go to your personal journey because I believe that most successful people in any industry will bring their whole selves to work. And you've got a PhD, we didn't even talk about this in your bio in philosophy and you're a classically trained ballet dancer. What role does that background play into your success today?

Ali (10:12):

So much. So I grew up as a ballet dancer. I danced professionally for an opera company at Lincoln Center. And more than anything it taught me grit. Cause ballet is so hard, it is so punishing physically or mentally when you're a teenager and the show always must go on. It does not matter if you don't feel like going to practice or if you don't feel like going to rehearsal, you might be exhausted, you might be on stage and your point, she was filling up with blood, but that show is going on, the curtain's going up so you're gonna smile and you are going to make it happen. And there have just been so many times in my career where it's like ugh, do I really wanna do this report or uh, but just sort of that determination of grit of I'm going to go sit here really has been so important.

And you know, on an extra personal note, and I'm sharing this to partly spread awareness, two months ago I was diagnosed with colon cancer and I was incredibly lucky that it was caught early and I'm going to be completely fine. But you know, there is no cancer battle that is super fun or that anyone looks forward to. And in a week and a half I have my first of two major life-changing surgeries, possibly chemo. And when everyone's like, well how are you still running our global company kickoff, which starts on Monday. It's like, well, the show must go on. It doesn't matter that this other stuff is happening. And even as I, you know, approach, you know this battle, it's like well the show must go on. I've got other plans, I have plans for my career, I have travel plans, I have family plans. So you know, just like I went to ballet class or rehearsal when I didn't feel like it, I'm just going to again, just that grit determination.

Well this is what we're go, you know, that's what we're gonna do. And well I have to say I did not finish my PhD in philosophy because I realized that almost any other career

was a better one. I started it, I left halfway through. But it's given me my sort of professional maxim of data, not drama that it was through, it was through that sort of really rigorous, logical training that I began to learn. Wow, when I make decisions I'm not always making them rationally. I am letting all of these biases in or is that really a logical statement? I'm making all of these assumptions, but does this follow from that did A cause B or did A happen and B happened but we don't know the relationship between there. And when you're running a large marketing team and you have a large budget or a P&L, you have to be really logical about what the data is telling you and just that rigor and how I think and having the confidence to say like no, this is what the data says, you can throw all the motion at me if you want, but can you refute what I'm saying? That made me such a strong leader and really propelled my careers in a way I would've never thought so, can't fully regret the PhD but yeah, decided I would be much more successful doing anything else.

Shawn (13:09):

Well I can't not go back to something that you shared with us. Ali, you and I haven't even talked about this, which is what's kind of interesting to me. 2022, April 15th, I was diagnosed with stage three colon cancer.

Ali (13:25):

No way.

Shawn (13:27):

And in December, finished my 12 rounds of protocol with chemo after surgery. And so I'm sitting here today championing for you, anything you need, please reach out. I've been through that journey and it's tough and you've got this and I hate those words and that situation. So the term I usually use now is go kick cancer's ass. So go kick it and we will be right there with you on that. So let's talk about your other experiences from your other career stops. How are those helping you navigate today in your current role?

Ali (14:08):

You know, I think it's always seeing that, well one, everything connects. Any experience that, like if you're having an experience right now and you're in a certain career and you

wanna make a change and you think that it's not, there's not a direct correlation, maybe it's not obvious, but it doesn't mean that it's not there. When I was in my PhD and realizing that if I want to pay the bills, I should probably find something else to do. I was thinking I'm actually not qualified to do anything. But as I started looking more and more, the reason I actually ended up in marketing was that I thought, wait, if marketing is trying to understand what the market wants and then giving that to them, well there's gotta be analysis in there and I can analyze anything. That's all I've been really trained to do outside of ballet.

And if you learn anything as a grad student, you can write a copy pretty quickly and decently. Maybe not the greatest in the world, but you can be a fast writer. And I ended up with a marketing job. So I think if you want to make a change, don't be afraid that because you don't have that direct experience, you probably do. You just might have to be a little bit creative. But I think given today's world, the economy, it's not like anyone goes to a company and stays for 40 years in the same role. I think everyone is very understanding that we grow, we learn, we have new interests. Just being able to tell sort of that narrative thread, here are the skills that I've learned and here's how they'll be appropriate here. We know if there are gaps that are fine, there's almost nothing that can't be taught, which is showing, you know, what if for this role I don't have this skill, but here's how I can learn it. People are so willing to hear that now.

Shawn (15:52):

Yeah, it's fascinating to me because I'm also one who did not finish their doctorate. I'm like 99% done, which is really scary. Like all I had to do was do the research portion of my dissertation and it would've been done. But it taught me so much. It taught me so many things that, and I tell people all the time, I'm in my fifth career so you, you can shift, you know, any way you want and and part of that comes around this concept that we talk about and I talk about a lot about being maverick-minded and human-obsessed. So I believe that's, you have to have a little bit of that to have some success. You have to be a little bit of a rebel sometimes. So RepTrak works with a number of big, big global brands. Is it possible for large corporations and those brands to be maverick-minded or do you think they get in trouble when they try?

Ali (16:48):

Can they? Yes, it is very, very hard though. And if you're going to do it, there's only one real way I've seen success and that's to get buy-in from the top. Because if you are trying to shake things up and there's no buy-in from senior leadership, you are not going to be successful. Because to be maverick-minded at a large company, you are going to break some things that have downstream effects and are going to cause problems. And even part of my marketing career was in operations and one thing I really learned there is when, you know, our CEO would say, oh can't you just change this one thing? And I'm like, yes, but there are gonna be two other things that breaks or actually there's probably gonna be four other things that breaks and I only know about the two of them.

And so as long as we're okay with those other two happening, that's fine. But if you don't have everyone on board from, I mean you're never gonna get everyone on board, but if you're trying to remake your sales process and your procurement team isn't on board, that's not going to work. And it's not that you need everyone on board, but you need a key sponsor either the CEO or someone at the top to buy into it and give you that protection cause no change happen, I mean, I've never seen major change happen in a pretty organized way. It's so hard. I mean again, RepTrak is a significantly smaller company, but I was brought in originally to essentially, you know, burn down the old fashioned marketing team and start up to start it again and had to burn it down with operations and build it up. And we're really proud of where we are today. But I could have never done that if I didn't have the CEO support, if I didn't have finances support. The CEO gave me the cover, finance gave me the budget. And that's at a small company. But at a large company, you know, if you can have an executive sponsor, not who will, not just sponsor you to your face but who will sponsor you when you're not in the room, then it can be done. But really make sure you have that and that they have skin in the game as well.

Cause someone who's only half on your side, then it's gonna be really, really challenging and you're gonna end up in hot water without the resources you need. And I'd say the other thing is that it's going to take time to see the results. There's going to be a matter of months, if not years, where it's messy while you're still figuring things out and making sure you're stacked for that or that you set expectations and treat your team well during it. Cause change is hard. Change is scary. No one likes disrupting, or I mean like disrupting the status quo, but a lot of people, if you've signed up for a large

company, that might be not be what your team signed up for. Really getting everyone on board, letting them know and that if this isn't what they want anymore, that's all right too. That this is a different way of working. But being very clear and understanding that this is going to be hard, it is going to be messy and get okay living there and if you're not then let's find you somewhere where you'll be happier.

Shawn (19:48):

We use that line disrupting the status quo. So I love it. So let's talk to the human obsession part because as much as I love marketing and marketers, I do think sometimes that that marketers get so caught on the data that they actually forget the human side of it. And so how might we create some more human obsession in the marketing industry moving more towards qualitative, right, than the quantitative data. What's your thoughts? What's your opinion on that?

Ali (20:18):

Well I'm so passionate about this and it's funny the timing of this conversation cause I'm getting ready for our global company kickoff where we say, here's what we did in 2022 and here's what we're doing in 2023. And the big theme for my team in 2023, sorry, 2022, aside from revenue numbers and all of those things was become a brand that people want to spend time with. And that was because we again, we're a B2B company, but I think like all marketers or at many companies, we were very boring and stiff and of the mind that the more fancy words we used and the more complicated we made things the smarter people would think we were and then more time they would wanna spend time with us. And I asked the company, you know, to give me, uh, or I, I had set up some experiments so I had some proof that this would work, plus I just knew I wasn't crazy.

I was like, this is gonna be wild people, we're gonna have some fun here and the way we're going to do that is that it's going to be 50% education, but 50% entertainment. Because if it's just, or as I like to say, no one likes to eat their vegetables, we would much all rather have dessert for dinner. So if we want to have people come spend time with us, we need to make it worth their while. And we developed a strategy which I can't take credit for, it was my head of content and a creative called the strawberry smoothie

strategy, which, and and of course we're marketers, there's a whole story where like you've gone to the gym, you've done a workout. So you've don't just wanna get like ice cream sundae and make all that hard work go to waste, but you also wanna have green juice because nobody actually likes green juice.

You want a strawberry smoothie, it tastes delicious. But you've got those vitamins, you've got the fiber, you've got the protein. So that's what our strategy was. So we had so many fun campaigns that were based on real value because if it's, you know, it's too much cotton candy, no one's gonna come back. So for example, last January we did a campaign called the Ultimate Reputation Guide, which might sound boring except it was Joan Jett themed. Because she has that song No One Gives a Damn About My Bad Reputation. So it was a punk rock themed campaign and it did so, so well. And then we started experimenting with shorter forms, quick slides, little videos. But every campaign had to have a visual element, an entertainment element. This summer we did one, the ultimate ESG guide and the tagline was ESG, it's not just for hippies anymore.

And it was like all flower power seventies. But really you have to understand that you're dealing with humans and so the lens, you actually read this, you're busy, you could be doing anything right now. You could be reading a newspaper, texting your friends, on TikTok, stock trading. What is going to make someone actually want to read this? It has to be fun, it has to be entertaining. And I know that's so uncomfortable for so many companies, but it, I'd be like, again, confidential, I can't, I have so much data to show that when you make it fun, people don't just come, they come back.

Shawn (23:22):

That's like if I had my pompoms, if I was sitting at my house right now. Alright, so here's some advice for our listeners, a couple questions that I wanna ask you. What's one thing every organization could do right now to improve its reputation?

Ali (23:41):

You know, the obvious thing I said earlier, maybe not obvious was you think you're communicating enough, you absolutely aren't. You need to communicate more onto all of your channels. But to add something new there, I would say you are not leveraging your employees enough. Especially if you're a large organization and you have

thousands of employees. Are they posting about their experiences on LinkedIn, on Facebook, on Twitter, on TikTok, your employees are your best underutilized brand representatives. They live and breathe it. So get them to do that. There's some brands I know that do it really, really well. And if you can't get your employees to do that, then I think that's a larger question of why, do they not like working at your company? Are they not proud to work at your company? And that might get you going down some different directions, but if they feel that way, the public is going to feel that way. So I'd say to sort of wrap up that messy answer, use your employees, get them to share more about your brand. You can either give them some stock ideas or even better have them do it organically and then if you see that they're not willing to do it, you know you have a different problem and go dig down there to whatever problem they're having or seeing. The public is seeing it as well.

Shawn (24:57):

Great answer. Love it. So what's your advice for people who want to do what you do?

Ali (25:04):

I'm not gonna say don't be afraid because if I have any Olympic superpower, it's a warrior, I am so good about worrying at things. People wonder like how I get so much done or I don't drop the ball. It's cause my mind has no limit on the number of things it can worry about at any given time. But don't let it get in the way because I mean, I think I've been afraid pretty much every point in my career. A really great moment was actually when I recently began at RepTrak. I had been hired to run half of marketing, demand gen and then through COVID and a bunch of other things, I suddenly find myself running the other half of marketing, content, PR, social, creative, areas that, you know, as I eventually thought I would get experience in but didn't have at the moment. And voila, now you're responsible. That was terrifying, but you know what, the show must go on. So I sort of jumped into it and making that jump from philosophy to marketing. Didn't really know anything or didn't know the details, but okay, just sort of going into it anyway, I've had so many veers in market as my interest and there've just been so many times where I haven't done something before and I've been absolutely terrified about that, but still did it anyway. So don't let your fear or lack of experience

hold you back if you have even a 30% confidence rate that you can achieve it or you know how you could tapping, go for it. You're always gonna be your own worst critic. So again, I'm not saying don't be afraid cause I'm always afraid and I'm always worrying. But don't let that hold you back.

Have that be motivating and if you're afraid of why something might not work, use that to your advantage. When I used to run these, you know, multimillion dollar field campaigns, the, one of the reasons they were so successful is I worried about every single little detail that could possibly go wrong. So then they didn't. And that's how I got a reputation for doing those very well. So yeah, don't let your own head get in the way of it. Acknowledge the fear, but use that to make you better at what you're doing, not get in your way.

Shawn (27:08):

Beautiful advice. Thank you. Well, so many great things today, but it's come to that point where we have come to The Combustion Questions, which are three randomly selected questions that our human algorithm provides to me. I have not seen those questions until just now, and so I'm going to read them to you, have fun with them. And are you ready for your combustion questions?

Ali (27:29):

Absolutely.

Shawn (27:31):

So combustion question number one, Ali, which non-work related app do you spend the most time on?

Ali (27:40):

Oh, that's a good question. Uh, this is very embarrassing, but it is going to be Instagram and here is why. One, it's the best way to keep up with friends, family, cousins. Well, it's actually been really fun for me is that it's how I still follow the ballet world so carefully. I grew up in Manhattan and I now live in Boston and there's so much dance world in New York that I, it's out on, I don't get to go to New York City ballet every day, or American

Ballet Theater, but through Instagram I still feel very connected to it. I still like to see the dancers who are up and coming and follow their careers and I don't know, I, I find a lot of joy from it. Though it's funny, if you were to ask my husband, he would absolutely say either rent the runway or the real, real. So had to throw that out there that when he eventually listens to this, he's gonna call me a liar. So those are two close follow ups.

Shawn (28:32):

Okay, awesome. Combustion question number two, iced tea, sweet, unsweet, or not at all?

Ali (28:39):

Unsweet, because I wanna save my sugar for wine.

Shawn (28:42):

Red or white?

Ali (28:43):

Depends on the mood. I mean, it's wine.

Shawn (28:45):

It's just wine. Ok, I love it.

Ali (28:47):

Yeah, I don't discriminate.

Shawn (28:49):

Yes. Okay, question number three. What do you think about crayons?

Ali (28:54):

Oh, I have not thought about crayons in a while, so I'm just gonna think about off the top of my head. You know what I like about them. I like that they're not too perfect, that you're not gonna get that fine precision. It's not about doing something perfectly, it's like a little messier and you know what, what in life is perfect or is exactly within the lines anyway, use that crayon and don't be afraid to go outside the lines a little bit.

Shawn (29:17):

Thank you. Thank you for today. Thank you for all these, this knowledge. I hope our listeners enjoyed it and um, until we can meet in person and I wanna know more about your journey, stay safe and be well my friend.

Ali (29:31):

Thank you so much. This was wonderful.

Shawn (29:34):

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.

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