



Authenticity and Revenue Acceleration with Brent Keltner

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 370

Brent Keltner: [00:00:00] Really, all selling is social. People are convinced when you can share examples of people exactly like them that you have made more successful.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:14] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:15] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:24] There are three goals at the heart of almost all learning businesses: reach, revenue, and impact. Generating revenue is essential in helping learning businesses reach the right audience and make an impact. In this episode, number 370, Celisa talks about revenue with Brent Keltner. Brent began his career as a PhD social scientist and spent 10 years conducting qualitative research interviews at Stanford University and the RAND Corporation. He's now president of Wanalytics, a go-to-market and sales acceleration consultancy, and author of *The Revenue Acceleration Playbook*. Brent and Celisa delve into what it means to design an authentic buyer journey, the importance of aligning and organizing content around value, personalizing buyer value, capturing the customer voice, and how to get effective social proof and testimonials, all with the ultimate goal of accelerating revenue for your learning business. Celisa and Brent spoke in June 2023.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:34] To start things off, I know that an authentic buyer journey is central to your work. So talk to us about what that is. What does an authentic buyer journey look like, or what does that mean?

Brent Keltner: [00:01:45] Two things. One, it means you start with a buyer or your customer, in the case of you have a relationship you're looking to extend, but you always start with their perspective and their why because your product only matters if you're talking about something they care about. Otherwise, if you don't already know that—and we have a lot of strategies around how to confirm within and across and after a call what is their why. If you haven't

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confirmed that and continue to reconfirm it, you're just pitching product at them. And, in the current market environment, people are overwhelmed with noise in e-mail, social, and chat. And so, if you're not talking about something they care about, 15 seconds, and they'll check right out. So an authentic buyer journey means we always start with the buyer or customer. And the second thing it means is that our goal is not to sell anything. Our goal is to look for fit, to look for fit on both sides. And so we think of very candid and direct conversations, which is qualifying on both sides. Is this a good use of our time? Is there something we can do together that is better for both of us? And, if not, let's move on. So it's about fit, and it's about starting with what your buyer is trying to solve for.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:04] I like that idea of the mutuality of it, that, on both sides, you're really looking for does this make sense? Can we help one another, in essence?

Brent Keltner: [00:03:12] Exactly.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:13] I know I've heard you talk about aligning and organizing content around value. And so I'm hoping you can explain a little bit more what that means.

Brent Keltner: [00:03:25] There's a great 2019 article from the Demand Gen Institute, and what they say is basically what your buyers care about is they want your content organized around use cases. They don't want it organized around your product. They want it organized around what problems does it solve for me? And then they want to hear peer stories. They want to hear from peers, peer references, peer name drops, peer testimonials, and how it worked for peers. So when you think about organizing content around value, think about not your product but think about problem-solution statements: "Many of our buyers have this problem, and here's how we solve it." And then think about content as pure social proof—really, all selling is social. People are convinced when you can share examples of people exactly like them that you have made more successful.

Brent Keltner: [00:04:19] And so, then, that's the first layer—solve a problem and use pure social proof. Basically, buyers, as they think about what is personal to them, it's they have a goal; they have a role. If you're selling into the learning space—and this is more on the corporate learning—but a chief learning officer has a different set of initiatives than an L&D staff. Somebody who's responsible for diversity and inclusion training or leadership training has a different set of goals than the business unit owner, has a different set of goals than the C suite and how they think about investments and human capital. So you have goals, but you have roles, and you want to see role peers, and then you have segments that you sell into, and

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the purpose of training investments varies quite a bit between manufacturing companies and financial service companies. And so, without overcomplicating it, the more you can think about social proof as sharing peer stories with peers, the more value your buyers are going to perceive.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:26] I'm curious to get your thoughts on content marketing. We hear so much about content marketing and its role. What do you feel like people tend to get wrong about content marketing? Or how does content marketing fit with what you're talking about around aligning content and value?

Brent Keltner: [00:05:44] There's a great article on Medium.com called "A Content Tsunami." That's it if you just Google it: Medium, content tsunami. And the author reviews a bunch of research, but the punch line is 90 percent of organizations are producing more and more content, but only less than a third actually have a journey around that content. So there's a lot of content production. There's no content strategy. My thought on it is start with a strategy. What is the story about value you're trying to tell around those goals or use cases around the roles? And then, honestly, less is more in terms of the content. If you do a customer story, you should have a LinkedIn post on it, a video snippet on it, and you should have a podcast around that story. Less is more because in a really, really busy environment, you have to share the same message in different formats and different media just to give people time to engage, and you build a lot of trust with the consistency of your message.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:53] Social proof and testimonials, those have already come up a couple of times in our conversation, and that's something we like to emphasize as well. But I'd be curious to get your thoughts or your recommendations on how do you go about getting really effective social proof, good testimonials that are going to help you make that case and help others see, yes, this is a good organization to work with, to buy their products.

Brent Keltner: [00:07:19] Well, the first thing is you got to ask. I don't know how much work you have done with marketing teams, but, having worked with marketing and sales teams across a bunch of organizations, including the learning organizations, it's amazing how many times you can sit there, and everybody's got...you're having an internal discussion about how we should position in the market. The question is, "Well, has anybody asked our customers where they're seeing the value?" It's like, "Oh, yeah, let's go do that." I'm being a little bit cheeky, but I think, usually, we don't capture our customer voice often because we don't ask. And so we say, if you think about most positioning frameworks, there are two kinds of dominant ones. One is around competitive positioning; that's the classic market. What am I

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doing differently than others? The other is what's the blue ocean or the big market problem I'm trying to solve?

Brent Keltner: [00:08:17] Well, neither of those have anything to do with your customer. They're both about your story. They're both hugely important. You want to differentiate, you want to tie to a big market challenge in a blue ocean, but you want to do it through the lens of how have your customers told you you provide value? And so we encourage organizations [to] just get in the habit. Every six months, it's six new interviews, it's eight new interviews, three a quarter, or whatever it is where you are then going around what are the primary goals we solve? Okay, there are certain personas that engage with that. Okay, can I go a little bit deeper on the persona? Okay, segments vary a little bit, so can I go a little bit deeper on the segments? It's asking your customers, based on those elements of personalization—goals, roles, and market segment—where are they seeing the value in your product? And then letting that voice honestly drive the uniqueness of your positioning and understanding the big problems you're trying to solve.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:19] I'm going to get really nuts and bolts here. How long do those interviews tend to take? Or how do you make the case to the customer to spend however many minutes of their time that you're asking, giving you feedback on their perspective of your product?

Brent Keltner: [00:09:33] Yes, great question. I'm glad you asked. Thirty minutes is usually enough. Sometimes, in a more exploratory mode, you might need a little bit longer, but this is what the outreach should look and sound like. Think about an e-mail. It's "Hey, Mr. or Mrs. Customer, we've had a great relationship. We've worked together for so long. We'd love to set a time to just see where you're finding the most value in our relationship." And then the next sentence is "And also things that we could improve, that could go better to deepen the partnership." So this isn't, hey, show up to say how great I am. It's a transparency call. So that's the basic design of the e-mail outreach, and what we encourage is a one-page set of questions. At the beginning is "Hey, tell me why you started with us? What problem are we solving? And what were the alternatives you considered?" Learn a ton there. The middle is you should have your hypotheses about the use cases you solve, and you should have a question for the three or four key things and ask them, "Are you seeing value in this area, that area, or that area around, you know, some leadership questions, in terms of efficacy? Are learners seeing themselves as higher efficacy, better team engagement, better leadership buy-in, or more persistence because people see a career ladder?"

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Brent Keltner: [00:10:59] Whatever your hypotheses are, ask them individually because, as you go across interviews, if you ask those three or four questions individually, you will pattern recognize. It's just natural. You've structured it that way. And then the last part is "Hey, and what else could we do better? What's the future look like?" And, if you've had a positive call, at the end you're going to say, "Hey, this has been great. Would you mind if we wrote some of this up into a story? Would you mind sharing some of this in our content sequence? Would you mind joining a podcast? Would you like to co-author a blog?" So it sets that up really, really well. And, look, we always say at the beginning, "We're going to interview it, so we don't have to scribe notes the whole time." So you've already got the recording, and then you can ask for permission to go forward into a success story or to the content series.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:55] Do you always feel like it's better to do a real-time interview? What are your thoughts on a survey, for example, in trying to collect some of this asynchronously through either responding to an e-mail or a survey that might go out to customers?

Brent Keltner: [00:12:10] I was trained at RAND as a qualitative/quantitative researcher, and you need both. The qualitative is what are our main pockets of value? But you may have some questions, like questions around phrasing or certain capabilities which are more valuable. Great. Now that you have actually, through interviews, figured out what are the points of momentum or the points of friction, great, go to a bigger survey. I would encourage you to think about...you'll get a much better response rate if there's some kind of incentive. And getting the report probably is not it or maybe after the fact. But just think about budgeting for 50 bucks, 25 bucks, or whatever to give people a cup of coffee for taking five minutes. You'll get a much higher engagement rate.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:02] And then, in terms of what you do with that information that you're getting from those interviews or potentially from a survey, do you find that it is more important to have it be that individual who's the avatar of whatever role you're looking to sell to versus being "78 percent of past participants in this learning experience saw pay raises" or whatever, in terms of story versus numbers? Or how do you think about that and what you can do with what you learn?

Brent Keltner: [00:13:34] You need both the story and the number, and the story comes first, and then the number. When you think about the buying journey in anything, we need an emotional hook first. And that's why they say stories sell. The journey is I have a pain. You tell me a story which gets me excited. You give me some kind of hero asset or numbers or a business case, which now helps me justify the way I feel emotionally. So both are important.

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You need the emotional resonance, so the stories that people can relate to, feels like peer social proof. And then they're going to have to sell that forward, and so the numbers are usually important to selling that forward. And then one other thing I'll think about. The reason to go into these calls with your hypotheses about value and then capture your customer's voice—honestly your customer's voice about how you capture value, just flip them, and they become your discovery questions. Because you know how the problems you solve, and good discovery is not open-ended. You're trying to guide them towards the problems you solve repeatably.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:57] We're grateful to WBT Systems for sponsoring the Leading Learning Podcast. TopClass LMS provides the tools for you to become the preferred provider in your market, delivering value to learners at every stage of their working life. WBT Systems' award-winning learning system enables delivery of impactful continuing education, professional development, and certification programs. The TopClass LMS team supports learning businesses in using integrated learning technology to gain greater understanding of learners' needs and behaviors, to enhance engagement, to aid recruitment and retention, and to create and grow non-dues revenue streams. WBT Systems will work with you to truly understand your preferences, needs, and challenges to ensure that your experience with TopClass LMS is as easy and problem-free as possible. Visit leadinglearning.com/topclass to learn how to generate value and growth for your learning business and to request a demo.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:59] Now, I know that you have the concept of value plays, and you have developed a number of these value plays. I'm hoping you can give us an example of what a value play is and, then, what that might look like in action for a learning business.

Brent Keltner: [00:16:14] Let's take Mainstay because it's clearest in my mind, and it's a chapter in the book. They are a conversational AI platform now working in the corporate learning space, and we started with them as higher ed, and it was really a platform to help colleges and universities with their admissions pipeline—so build a pipeline of applications, yield those applications so they enrolled, came through the summer, and then would stay in the first year. When we started working with them, they were focused on their capabilities. They would talk about how the personalization of communication was one-to-one with every student or that you can now have a real-time knowledge base and FAQs up to 800 with Georgia State. Or you can have this blended modality of either staff-based interaction or electronic interaction for students to choose. Transformational product. When you talk about your products, any product in my experience, your buyer very quickly is just going to hear wah, wah-wah, wah-wah. It's Charlie Brown. They will very quickly check out.

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Brent Keltner: [00:17:34] For them, it was as simple as “Okay, so what’s the buyer problem that solves?” Well, if you have a knowledge base of one-to-one communication blended modality, guess what? More of your applicants actually get their questions answered, so they come into your candidate pool. If you have a way of yielding and nudging them to complete elements of their application, you yield more of them. If you’re engaging with them in a personalized way through the summer, you reduce summer melt. So a value play is really about thinking about taking your individual capabilities, which matter because they solve a problem, and connecting them to some higher-level outcome that’s usually around revenue or cost. It could be a better user experience, or it could be around capital efficiency of your stock. But you’ll know you have a value play if there’s a problem-solution statement. You have this problem, which can be solved with this problem. If you just have a solution statement, you’re probably product pitching.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:38] It seems to me that you focus on B2B selling, that business-to-business selling. And so I’m curious to get your thoughts on do the approaches that you talk about, write about, and work with also apply to those B2C situations, or are they more appropriate for situations in which it’s higher volume or higher dollar-type selling?

Brent Keltner: [00:18:59] The approach 100-percent applies to the B2C space, and I’ll give you two quick examples. The playbooks are a little bit different. But we did some work with a company called Iron Tree, that is basically a landscaping and tree removal company. They built a differentiated value prop. Basically, in that market, you have low-cost providers that are always competing on price for residential consumers, and then you have industrial providers that are working with governments or big corporations, and they’ve found a market segment right in the middle for high-end retail consumers, where, basically, the Iron Tree guarantee [is] about the service experience that you are going to have. And so, for them, building content around that experience, including testimonials, including little diagnostics. Have you ever experienced this kind of thing with laborers that come to your house leaving tools all over? Clipping your bushes? Which of these? They’re just educating people about why they might want to invest. More expensive, 20 to 25 percent more expensive. So they’re educating buyers about value to help them differentiate, and then they build content. And they did have a field sales force.

Brent Keltner: [00:20:12] But I think of a company—we have a short snippet on a company called MeUndies in the next one, pure B2C. But if you think about most underwear selling, historically, in all the major big boxes, there’s a men’s section, a women’s section, and there’s a kid section. MeUndies figured out for a lot of people buying underwear is a different kind of

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experience. They built these paired men's and women's matches and also theme-based for adults. Basically, they said people have a different goal for buying. It's not about gender identity or age. There are these different goals, and they built their content strategy around that. They don't have a sales team, so now it's a content strategy that is positioning differentiated value. But, if you understand your buyer's why, there are always new opportunities to find differentiated value, even in a consumer space, and the content and the consumer side become a lot more important because you don't have individuals engaging in conversations, but the same approach works.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:23] So the same approach can work with B2B and B2C. I'm curious, though, are there certain characteristics or conditions that an organization needs to meet or have in place in order to apply these strategies that you're talking about?

Brent Keltner: [00:21:40] In a pure commodity market, if that's the commitment, we're just competing on price and volume. I've talked with some companies in the construction business, where [there] really wasn't a lot of alignment to the idea of building value plays. Their buyers are basically like, "How quickly and how cost-effectively can you get it there?" So if you're in a pure commodity market, this is not a great area to invest. When you think about this idea of authenticity or buyer centricity, it's positioning value to build an emotional connection, but don't forget the huge amount of value and trust you can build from honestly just listening to people, flipping the script from "It's about me and my product and my company" to "This is really all about you." And we work with sales teams, in particular, all the time. When they get good at asking those questions and really understanding what somebody is trying to solve for, and then they put it in a follow-up e-mail, they're shocked. I'm still shocked that they're shocked. They're shocked when they get an e-mail back immediately that says, "Thank you so much for a great conversation" or "Thanks for sharing this so I can share it with our boss." When you listen to people, what they're trying to accomplish, it will differentiate you from 75 percent of the people they're interacting with, and you cannot overestimate the value in that, in building buyer and customer engagement.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:04] I think there's an implied second part to listening in what you just shared. It's listening, but then doing something with what you hear, and not just listening and then going back to the pitch that you already had.

Brent Keltner: [00:23:19] Yes, 100 percent. You asked, "What is an authentic buyer journey?" To us, it means starting with the buyer. But, then, the second thing is looking for fit. When we work with prospecting or sales, or anytime you're interacting with a buyer, this idea that I'm

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asking you back is [that] I'm attuned enough to hear what you're valuing, but then I'm asking you back, "So this is what I understand you're valuing. What are your next steps in terms of seeing that [there] is a possibility for us to work together? Who else are you going to talk to? What are you going to evaluate?" So this idea [of] "What will you do about it?" when we're trying to sell or market (marketers are better at it), this idea that we need reciprocal commitments. We need to look for fit. There are actions on both sides that tell us that we are working towards something that is good for both of us, as you said.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:12] You have such deep experience in marketing, sales, and all of this, and we are also in a particular moment in time where artificial intelligence is really taking off. So I feel like I can't not ask what your thoughts are on what AI might mean for sales and marketing in the months, maybe years ahead.

Brent Keltner: [00:24:33] Look, I think it's an awesome tool. I think anybody who's rejecting ChatGPT or the others out of the box is nuts because there are two things it can do for you just out of the gate. You'll get your blogs written a lot faster. If you think you can get a blog content and be done, you're nuts. But first draft that's 70 percent of the way there, that you can then personalize to your content or your team? 100 percent. The other thing is, in prospecting these days, we have seen with our clients, if you put in a personalization postulate—a phrase we borrowed from a team we did some work with about six months ago, but just something personal about them—the industry average is just under 1 percent conversion to a meeting rate. We've seen that go to 3, 5, or 10 percent of people responding and being open to meeting by putting something personal in there about what you see on their LinkedIn posts. You can get AI to source those much quicker. Again, you need to do a little bit of tailoring. In our own campaigns, we literally build an Excel sheet before we upload it to Apollo. One of the columns is "personalization postulate," and we spend time figuring out on their Web site and in their LinkedIn posts, are they talking around their mission, so we can build an e-mail that starts with our personalization postulate and then connects it to our value prop? AI can just do that a heck of a lot quicker and get you those first drafts.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:12] Yes, definitely sounds like you're in the camp of AI can be a great support, help you move more quickly, do some of the initial legwork for you. And then, of course, you have to add to it.

Brent Keltner: [00:26:22] Honestly, you win the closer you get to hearing what your buyer said and being able to recap it. It's like, "Oh, yeah, it's about me"—the buyer saying it's about me—"They listened. They actually cared enough to listen. They're looking to solve my problem."

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Boom, you just elevated yourself way above your competitors. AI can't do any of that. They can frame it, but they're not going to get precise enough.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:50] We're talking on the Leading Learning Podcast, so one thing we always like to ask guests is about their own approach to their lifelong learning. I'd be curious to know what sources, practices, or habits you have that help you continue to learn.

Brent Keltner: [00:27:06] Yes. One main one, I started about 10 years ago, when my son was five, doing karate with my kids. I am very much a high-drive individual, and my sports choices were I was a wrestler, I was as a rugby player, I was a marathoner. So I just knew how to drive through stuff. Karate is a finesse sport. It's minimal effort for maximum impact. It's been awesome to do it with my kids, but it also just reshaped my mind in a more strategic direction. And I've written a bunch of posts about my karate journey. I was awful at it. I didn't have the mindset, and I don't have great physical balance. I was bottom 30 percent. But I'd learn from everybody. My son had a better natural aptitude, and a lot of the women in the class were much better. I had no ego. So I would learn from everybody. Ten years later, I'm a second-degree black belt and pretty darn good at it. That's been a pretty powerful lifelong learning experience for me.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:28] Brent Keltner is the author of *The Revenue Acceleration Playbook* and president of Wanalytics, a go-to-market and sales acceleration consultancy. In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode370, you'll find links where you can learn more about Brent's work and his book and get free access to the first chapter.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:48] Jeff and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable, because ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:02] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note or on social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode370, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:18] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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