



Authenticity in Marketing with Michelle Brien

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 408

Michelle Brien: [00:00:00] If I had to define my approach to marketing, it would be sharing information that helps people to solve a problem or a challenge that they have.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:13] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:14] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:23] Effective marketing is integral to a learning business's success. But doing marketing well requires care and thought. In this episode, number 408, Celisa talks with Michelle Brien, vice president of marketing at Matchbox and quite possibly one of the nicest people you'll ever meet—someone who approaches life and work and learning with care and thought and authenticity.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:48] Celisa and Michelle talk about what marketing is and how Michelle defines it, the central role value plays in marketing, the rise of digital and content marketing, the potential for generative AI in marketing, and the fundamental importance of understanding your audience. Celisa and Michelle spoke in late March 2024.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:17] Tell folks a little bit more about the kind of work that you do.

Michelle Brien: [00:01:21] Sure. At Matchbox, it's interesting because we've just rebranded and launched a new focus, but our goal is to help associations to think more intentionally about how they can align online experiences that they might be creating for education, engagement, or revenue generation with their digital strategy to create what we're calling digital initiatives. I think a lot of organizations know that they need to have a digital strategy to remain relevant or to grow their businesses into the future, but not all of them are using digital or virtual as effectively as they could be. And so our intention is to try and help provide a platform and resources that combine strategy, technology, and people to extend the scope of their internal teams and make it easier for them to launch digital initiatives that would help to grow their

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potential audience for education programs, foster deeper engagement, or diversify their revenue sources.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:26] I know your title there at Matchbox involves marketing, and you've been working in marketing for a long time at various organizations, often for organizations that have a toe or maybe a whole foot in learning. And so, I'm just curious to know, did you know from an early age that marketing is what you wanted to focus on, or how did you come to be involved in marketing?

Michelle Brien: [00:02:49] No, absolutely not. As you say, I've always had a toe in the education side of things, and I've always sought roles that helped me or allowed me to support those who teach others, maybe in different ways, which is interesting. But no. I studied sociology and information studies as my undergraduate degree, and I completed the librarianship pathway—so completely different. I was lucky enough to win a scholarship for postgraduate education, and I spent a year working in the information studies department in the university and trying to figure out whether I would do arts management or marketing. Those are the two courses that I had drilled down to. Eventually, I opted for marketing because it offered better career prospects.

Michelle Brien: [00:03:37] It's very difficult to get a job in arts management, especially somewhere like in Ireland, where it's a smaller pool of museums and galleries and things to pick from. The program that I chose in marketing was a really interesting one. I know you'll be interested because I had an active learning structure. We wore suits and went into an office and worked in an office, and we spent about 40 percent of our time in lectures and learning and about 60 percent of our time actively working on projects for clients that the university would bring in, and we would run the whole project, from researching it to putting together a proposal, a plan, and then executing that, whether it be for market research or promoting something or that sort of thing. It was a really interesting way to learn, so I think that might have been one of the reasons why I chose it.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:30] I love that you noted that you put on suits. It's this immersive learning, right?

Michelle Brien: [00:04:35] Oh, yes.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:35] You have to dress for the part.

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Michelle Brien: [00:04:37] That was very much it. I was always a little bit of a fish out of water because I'm not really a suit kind of person, and I didn't really want to go into FMCG [fast-moving consumer goods] marketing, which is where everybody else was very clearly pointing their career at. I always knew I wanted to do something different. For me, the part of marketing that speaks to me is understanding people and the creative elements—so combining the sociology and information aspects from my undergraduate studies, understanding people and then creatively communicating to help them solve their problems.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:10] I noticed on your LinkedIn profile—when I was preparing for our conversation—that you talk about brand, product, and content marketing. You talk about these different flavors of marketing, but I thought it could be interesting for you to explain to us what you think of when you think of marketing. How do you define marketing?

Michelle Brien: [00:05:34] I'm glad that you shared that question with me before the interview, because I had to step back and think about how I would define marketing. It's been a while since I studied, and, though I keep up with changes and things, I think a lot of people, when they think of marketing, they would define it as the process or activities that you do to promote and sell products or services, and I don't really like to think about marketing that way. So I went and looked up a definition, and I looked around until I found one that was more in line with the way I approach it. And I found it with the American Marketing Association, which is interesting. So I'll read it for you. They define it as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” That sits so much better with me. I really like that.

Michelle Brien: [00:06:26] If I had to define my approach to marketing, it would be sharing information that helps people to solve a problem or a challenge that they have. Like I said, I'm drawn to the creative and strategic aspects. For me, a way to market something effectively is to tell the story—not just the case study of like, “What's the latest success story with our brand or our product?” kind of thing—but to tell the story of what the challenge is and to help the person that I'm trying to communicate to understand or gain a different perspective on that challenge, how they might provide something that's helpful that might actually help them to solve it. That's what I seek to do when I'm thinking about marketing and how I approach it.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:09] I definitely appreciate that AMA definition because it is broader than promotion, and marketing is broader than promotion. Also it landed with me that they use value in there, that it's this idea of creating value, communicating value, and sharing value.

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Michelle Brien: [00:07:24] Yes, that's something that's really important to me too: the value piece. I try to be guided by authenticity and integrity in what I do. We've all been on the end of various different marketing practices that may not sit well with us, so I don't like to then visit those on other people. I like to be able to provide value and think that whatever I'm doing in my work is going to help somebody, and that's what I aim for.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:48] When you think about marketing, in that definition that you found that resonated with you, or if you think about marketing activities in general, in your experience or in the way you think about it, is there anything that's different about marketing when the marketing is tied to learning products and services or things that are focused on trying to help individuals gain skills, knowledge, or know-how?

Michelle Brien: [00:08:14] That's an interesting one. For many, many years, I was doing marketing for a learning management system, and that was selling to learning businesses that were providing continuing education to their members or professionals in their industry. It was very interesting because it struck me how different their audiences were and so then how different each of their needs were. There wasn't really a one-size-fits-all approach, and that's where I began to focus on understanding the challenges and understanding the needs, not just of the people who would be my customers but who their customers would be. That is the challenge, really—that you're not just providing a product or service to your client but potentially their clients or people that they interact with as well. A learning business being able to understand what the different challenges of their potential customers are but also others in the wider industry—and that could be potential customers or in connected industries that they might need to interact with—is a really big challenge. But one, if they can solve it and focus on bringing that into their marketing themselves, then they'll be very successful.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:36] That idea of understanding the audience that you serve and their challenges, their opportunities resonates with what you were saying around authenticity. Part of being authentic is when you really understand what are those needs and challenges of that audience. And then how can you respond and provide value that helps them with those needs and challenges?

Michelle Brien: [00:09:53] Yes, exactly.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:01] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them understand market

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realities and potential, to connect better with existing customers and find new ones, and to make smart investment decisions around product development and portfolio management. Drawing on our expertise in lifelong learning, market assessment, and strategy formulation, we can help you achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact. Learn more at tagoras.com/more.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:38] You've been working in marketing for many years, so I would be curious to get your perspective around the changes that you might have seen over those years of work in marketing. How has marketing evolved, if it has?

Michelle Brien: [00:10:53] It definitely has. It has been very interesting to watch marketing evolve and to realize the importance of continuing education, especially in a career like marketing. Studying in information studies and learning about the knowledge economy and how we were coming into this era when I was leaving college, it was really interesting. Marketing is about harnessing knowledge and sharing it and using it effectively to communicate. And then there are so many different aspects that have developed as the ways that we communicate have changed and the technologies that we use to communicate have changed. If you look at even training that people do nowadays, when I was learning, when I was training in marketing, I would have had a much more general scope to research, to promotional activities, and all of the different aspects of marketing.

Michelle Brien: [00:11:48] But, nowadays, in more recent times, a lot of marketing programs have honed in on very specific things. So you might do a degree, a full degree, in digital marketing—which didn't exist when I was doing my marketing training—and that digital marketing might focus on things like SEO or pay-per-click. And, even as I say that, I'm realizing to myself, that person who did that in the last five or ten years is now also realizing that education is almost obsolete to them because Google has changed so many rules around SEO and how we can use it, and pay-per-click is something that works effectively for certain products or services but not necessarily for all. So it's really changed over the years.

Michelle Brien: [00:12:29] One of the things that I have noticed very recently and sits really well with me and is something that I've tried to educate myself on is the move for marketing and sales—to be honest—and customer success to move to more of a RevUP's model, where they're all working together rather than against each other. The kind of marketing that generated hundreds of leads to pass to sales, no matter the quality, never sat well with me as a process, and, thankfully, it's not something that I ever got too deeply involved in.

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Michelle Brien: [00:13:03] But there were many companies where that was the key metric for marketing—how many leads did you deliver—as opposed to what were the quality of those leads, and how many of those were sales able to convert, so that we know what the most effective marketing activities are to actually support the generation of business, and then for sales to get on board and not just close all business but business that is a really good fit, so that then, when customer success gets involved, you build a trusting and lasting relationship with that customer, and then you don't lose that customer when they realize that what they were sold didn't fit what they were looking for in the first place. I love that emphasis on providing value and integrity through the whole process and that move of marketing, sales, and client success to come together towards RevUPs.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:52] That ties back to value again. Part of why that works, when those partners come together, is because there's this idea of, "Okay, where is the value, and then how can we all help realize that and make sure that it is valuable for everyone involved?" I like that perspective. One other thing that occurred to me when you were talking about some of the changes in marketing was the rise of content marketing, which is still with us. I feel like content marketing and learning are closely tied because the goal of so much of content marketing is really education. You're educating a consumer about something, and, in the case of learning businesses, you're educating them about education, which creates this virtuous cycle, where the content marketing and the learning can feed together very nicely and fit together in a tight way. Any comments about content marketing from your side? I know it's something you've engaged in a lot, and that gets back to value too because that's providing value.

Michelle Brien: [00:14:53] Yes, absolutely. That's exactly as it is. To me, the main point of content marketing is to provide value. I think it's really important that you engage in content marketing with that aim, to provide value, and not to provide content purely for the sake of generating clicks. I do think it's an interesting one because, again, there are lots of changes coming into content marketing, at the moment, with discussion about generative AI and that sort of thing. And that's something where the marketers who are going to be successful are the ones who harness those tools in a way that brings out the human element to deliver value.

Michelle Brien: [00:15:35] So, for me, it's not about quantity over quality. It's about even these tools that are making it easier to generate content, that's great, but let's use it to make the aspects of the generation that lead to efficiency better as opposed to the quality. If you're using generative AI to get you past that blank canvas thing, that's great, but making sure to always review and make sure that you have looked over this and you've understood what the customer needs, what's the purpose of this, and how is it going to help? And then a human is

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the one that actually finalizes and delivers. That's where I think content marketing is going to undergo a lot of changes in the next few months and years, and it'll be interesting to see how that plays out and who comes out on top.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:19] Talk a little bit about what Matchbox does periodically with AI. It's my understanding that you guys gather together periodically to talk about how AI might be impacting your work, and maybe some of what you just shared around your thoughts might have come from some of those internal discussions you all have been having.

Michelle Brien: [00:16:38] I'm not going to lie—I'm the AI skeptic in Matchbox, and I'm the one who really has to be convinced. It's probably a big part of my librarianship training and that need to always seek and validate your sources to make sure that they are authentic, that they can be trusted, and that sort of thing. I think that has led a little bit to my skepticism in approaching AI. But, I have to admit, the learning days have been fantastic, and they have changed my perspective. I know you'll appreciate the structure of the day. The first one that we did was very much independent learning, and we had a presentation about what's the difference between automation, AI, and generative AI, and what are some of the things that we should consider. And then we all went away and looked for different tools and things that would help us understand how AI would work in our roles, and we came together at the end of the day.

Michelle Brien: [00:17:30] This time, we felt we needed to focus it even more, so we started the day with a welcome from our CEO, who gave us the goal of we wanted to see could we use AI to save us two hours in our work week. That was the focus goal that we approached it with. We did watch a presentation about AI that helped to ground us in it, and then we did a design thinking session. We had a series of questions that one of the team members had put together in a document, and we spent almost an hour because we were all contributing so many ideas into it, in this document, and answering the questions. They were prompting us to think about what are some of the ways that we could make our work more efficient in the different roles across the company? And what are some of the things that we might want to consider if we were implementing AI in different areas? And that sort of thing.

Michelle Brien: [00:18:24] We came out of this session with this huge document with lots of ideas and thoughts in it, and then, in the second part of that, we were discussing it, and we broke out into breakout rooms, and each breakout room did something different. Some people took the document and fed it into ChatGPT and asked it to summarize it and pull out the key learnings. And then other people took it and fed it into ChatGPT but asked it very specific

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questions about parts of it, so that it would pull out more, different things. Each group came out with very different results, and it was really interesting to share those. But, yes, I think my eureka moment actually, in the whole day, came from realizing that ChatGPT is a conversational tool, and I was still approaching it like Google, where I would give it prompts and ask it for information, and then I would add to those prompts or do a series of prompts to build on that information to try and get what I was looking for, but sometimes it was still missing something.

Michelle Brien: [00:19:20] One of the teams suggested to me to ask ChatGPT to tell me what other information it needed in order to give me a more complete answer. That blew my mind. Because I knew it was a conversational tool, but I had never actually engaged in a two-way conversation with ChatGPT and never thought to ask it to ask me a question. If you have to create a business plan, a proposal, or something like that, you can feed ChatGPT the information that you want and ask it to help you to structure it and give you the headings and things. But asking it to tell you what you're missing in your prompt then does give you a better outcome. So it does improve both the efficiency and the quality, which, yes, it's a scary thought, but kind of cool. So I'm definitely going to think a little bit more about how I can work with ChatGPT as we go forward.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:14] Sounds like you're becoming a little bit less skeptical as you go through these learning days.

Michelle Brien: [00:20:18] Just a little. But that's what it's all about. I learned that I wasn't using it effectively, and now I can actually take from that and move on and grow. I'm always open to learning more—but will always maintain that small skepticism in the back of my mind.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:45] I would love to get your thoughts on what goes into successful marketing. What are some of the key factors based on your experience? I'm thinking in particular about learning businesses and what they might need to do or know in order to ensure that they're successfully marketing what they're offering. Any advice that you might have, based on your years of experience?

Michelle Brien: [00:21:08] Yes, it definitely starts with understanding your audience. Thinking back to some of the learning businesses that I would have worked with when I was on the LMS [learning management system] side of things, being able to understand your audience will help you to better promote your programs. For example, I'm thinking of a learning business that was in the insurance space, and they provided training and accreditation for people across all

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aspects, in all different kinds of roles in the insurance industry. They had an amazing program that they put together. It was a subscription program, so it gave access to all of their content over the course of the subscription and allowed people to choose from various different career paths that they could take. But people weren't taking it up, and they started looking at what was wrong with their messaging and what they could do to make it better.

Michelle Brien: [00:22:01] They came up with a marketing program that created videos of people who were at the top of their career in those different roles within the industry, and they talked about how much the education that they had received had helped them in making their choices in where to specialize or how to move through their career. And they used those videos then to promote the education programs to younger professionals or people coming into the industry, people who are trying to choose their specialization, and they saw a huge increase in the uptake of their programs. It really does come back to understanding who your audience is, what their needs are, what they're trying to get from what you might be able to offer, and how you can help them to achieve that, and then creating messaging that helps to show them not just what you provide but what the benefit is to them—where they can get to or what they can achieve by engaging with your education program.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:01] That makes a ton of sense, focusing again back on value, and that value which has to be grounded in what are the actual needs of the audience that you serve or aim to serve. We always love to ask guests who come on the podcast about their own lifelong learning habits, and so I'd be curious to know what are some of your sources, habits, or practices that you use to inform how you continue to learn and grow?

Michelle Brien: [00:23:30] Yes, sure. To be honest, I try to engage in a lot of different kinds of learning. I haven't done a structured training program in a little while, but I actively follow people on LinkedIn in the marketing space, especially on the RevUP side of things, to look at where things are going and what I can learn from them. And there are so many people that share free learning resources and share ideas, and so I try to make the most of those. The other aspects, I would say, of learning is, for me, not just learning about marketing but also learning about the community that I work in and how better to understand it. For example, I try to follow a lot of the people in the association or learning business areas to see what's important to them and what I can learn about them.

Michelle Brien: [00:24:22] Some fantastic books, as well, that I've recently ordered. Michael Tatonetti, *Pricing for Associations*, has just come out with a new book about pricing and value for associations. Amanda Kaiser's *Elevating Engagement*—really trying to understand where that

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comes from. And so I would have to say a big part of my learning about the community that I'm working in and a part of comes from looking for the people who amplify the voices of other people in that community. So the Leading Learning Podcast is probably one of the first tools that I looked to when I joined the association community years ago. And also people like Deirdre Reid. Or Association Forum, Associations Now from ASAE. People who gather the voices and stories from the community and share them. I try and learn a lot from those.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:19] Michelle Brien is vice president of marketing at Matchbox. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode408, you'll find links to the Matchbox Web site and Michelle's profile on LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:33] At leadinglearning.com/episode408, you'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast. Jeff and I would be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as those subscriptions give us some insight into the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:47] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Those ratings and reviews help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:00] And please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At leadinglearning.com/episode408, there are links to find us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:11] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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