

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 51: Marisa Thalberg

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. Today's guest is Marisa Thalberg, Chief Global Brand Officer at Taco Bell, and founder of Executive Moms.

Marisa: Hi, I'm Marisa Thalberg and I am the Chief Marketing Officer of Taco Bell.

Whitney: And also the founder and president of [Executive Moms](#) or is that still in operation?

Marisa: I am.

Whitney: Okay.

Marisa: Yeah, no thank you for mentioning that too because that remains very near and dear to my heart. I founded Executive Moms all the way back in 2002 and while I've ran it much more actively for about the first 13 years, it continues to be a website and platform about which I'm very proud.

Whitney: Could you just tell us quickly what was the genesis of that idea, before we hop onto your work at Taco Bell. I think some people will be very interested.

Marisa: Yeah, absolutely. I think like so many really great ideas that identify a big need gap in the world or in the marketplace, Executive Moms was definitely born out of a personal inside realization for me, soon after I became a mother for the first time myself. And I was living and working in New York City, which I tend to think of as a bastion of work-life and yet when I went to the one new mommy's luncheon they had at the time, and I do think the landscape has changed since then, it was a bit surprising to me that so many of the women self-identified as not going back to work.

And found this surprising on an economic level, but I also found it surprising on a, a desire level and I just wondered where were all the other working moms because I knew I was going back to work, both out of desire and necessity and I wanted to feel connected to people like that, I was new at this motherhood thing and I, yeah, I think I realized early on that just the power of just connection and recognizing that sense of, of, of common connection with other people, that really is so powerful.

And so, I asked around and asked lots of people in the media world, at the time, like what could I join and even editors and publishers of parenting magazines all had the same reactions, sort of slapping their heads saying, "I don't know why this doesn't exist, you need to go start it." And thus, I paradoxically solved my working mom issues by giving myself a second career and founded Executive Moms.

And I think the brand Executive Moms is one of the things that feels best to me about it because at that point, the only thing that was out there was really Working Mother

magazine, which was definitely a pioneer, but that name just sounded a little sad to me and I love the confidence of being able to be an executive, however you define that. And unabashedly, being a mom and how we women embrace that dichotomy every day.

So, um, it was really the right thing at the right time, remember this was pre social media, so there just weren't as many ways for people and certainly this group of women to find a sense of comradery and sometimes commiseration and definitely a sense of connection.

Whitney: So, for our listeners, if there are people that would like to join Executive Moms, what do they do? Where do they go?

Marisa: Um, well, the website is still active, it's executivemoms.com. And as I said, it's definitely less active now as, as my career trajectory's changed and life stages changed and there are other resources, but you can follow me on Twitter, [@executivemoms](https://twitter.com/executivemoms) is my handle, still to this day. You know, fortunately there's still a lot of content resources that are archived on the site and I think the need is being met in other ways now in the world too. And I consider that a good thing.

Whitney: Absolutely.

Alright, I know I had you digress a little bit from your day job, but I thought that that was interesting and powerful. So, let's go back to 1991 and you graduated from Brown University in American Civilization, how ... What did you think you were going to end up doing with that degree?

Marisa: Well, I, I remain a big believer in studying the Liberal Arts as a foundation to many careers, except perhaps the most specific or technical ones, because um, I do think ... One of the things we can all agree is, our world is changing so dynamically that I, I think the right foundational skills to equip any young person today, I have a daughter who's about to go to college, so it's very real for me, is the ability to think, the ability to analyze, the ability to connect dots and take in disparate pieces of information, because the fundamentals of careers are, are in a state of constant flux and change.

So, for me, it wasn't anything as particular as, "Oh, I studied American Civilization, I wanna go into a career about that." It was that I, you know, being, having the gift of a really privileged education, I think gifted me with a lot of those fundamental skills that I still use today. How to, you know, wrestle with different points of view, how to look at information in different ways and see things maybe people don't see and in some ways, to me, those are the skills I rely on most now all the way at where I am in the, you know, corporate ladder.

Whitney: So were you surprised when you ended up at ... Am I gonna pronounce it correctly or incorrectly? Saatchi & Saatchi or Saatchi & Saatchi?

Marisa: Saatchi & Saatchi. Yeah, I mean it's been a long time since I've been in the agency world, but back in that time period, there were some big agencies and they were very

prestigious, they were really hard um to get into. You ... I was recruited directly from campus at Brown and I think, you know, the, the, the parallel to your question, which I think we're seeing with a lot of young people today too, they recognize it even more today than my generation did, is the importance of, you know, mirroring your academic life with the real world practice of internships and discovery about what it's like to work.

And I was just very hungry for that, from the time I was even in high school, so I spent my summers and, and you know, the nice life lesson too is I wasn't connected, no one was you know, pulling strings for me, I was scrappy and I literally pounded the pavement of New York City with the Yellow Pages, believe it or not, and looked up com ... I was so audacious and naïve, but I looked up communication companies and started calling them (laughing) and said I wanted to intern. And I actually did get an internship that way, but I also life guarded and worked at the Gap to make money.

So, um, so I was hardworking and I do think that came through and I was, I was curious, I was interested, I wanted to see what it was like to work and be in these professional context, so it isn't accidental or just pure luck that I wound up in a big agency. I had really built a little resume, by the time I graduated, of different work experiences that were somehow all tied to communications and arts and, and um-

Whitney: ... So when they came to recruit on campus, you had a bit of a portfolio to share with them?

Marisa: I did. Yeah.

Whitney: As I look at your career, your LinkedIn profile, it seems like every two to four years, you've, you've disrupted yourself and gone onto a new role. Was that a deliberate strategy or has it been more of - you feel like to get to one point, it's time to try something new. Can you just talk about as you think about your career progression, any reflections?

Marisa: Well, I don't think it's actually quite true, I think it would be a good char ... categorization of the earlier part of my career where, you know, a three year tenure at an agency then moving to a different agency was, was pretty typical actually back then. So some of that was just the natural cadence when you're young and working in advertising and moving to have different experiences.

I did disrupt myself, to use your words, early on in my 20's, by leaving advertising to go be a television producer and that story was actually pretty interesting because even though my career was thriving and I was doing well, I was still wrestling with this idea that I wasn't in kind of the most creative side of the business world.

Even though I was good at what I was doing, I still had this very strong um, more creative spirit and television had this certain allure to me and I, I was thinking about how to connect the dots between what I was doing now and this other industry that interested me. And this was you know, back in the 90's when ah, cable business news was on the rise and I noticed that it was all being defined, even though they had to fill

hours and hours of programming with just financial news. And I thought, well, you know, I was reading the New York Times, you know again, different time, different era and the first section I also went to was the media and advertising section and I thought, "Wow, this has the most crossover appeal, like everyone watches commercials, everyone's exposed to marketing. Why isn't there any programming on this?"

So I wrote a programming proposal and I pitched them an idea cold and they said, I got a phone call saying, "Who are you?" And I didn't even know how to answer that, I said, "Well, I just had this idea." And make a long story a little shorter, that's how I wound up becoming a TV producer and I left advertising to go do that. I was still young enough that it wasn't the craziest thing in the world.

Whitney: So what did you-

Marisa: ... And I learned a lot.

Whitney: What did you produce? (laughing) It's a great story.

Marisa: I produced ... I went to Dow Jones Television, which huge investment at the time to buy the last public air space in New York and they had this big vision to become this 24 hour news, sports and oh yeah, life channel. Um, and so, I got to be a producer with zero experience on this two hour daily women's magazine show, so it was like producing The Today Show every day, except with much smaller staff.

And talk about being thrown into the deep end of the pool, I'm sure I had some colleagues that were a little ah, curious, maybe even a little resentful that I was here as a producer and they had been doing this for years, but you know, it, it ... An incredible life lesson in terms of again, how to draw connections and I realized it wasn't actually that different, in the sense that, if you're a good marketer, you're thinking about your consumer and you're curating content that will resonate with them and that's what producing television package was.

What I didn't know, of course, were the technical parts of the job, and that was the part I had to learn. And if you think about that as an analogy, whenever you make a move, whether it was leaving luxury beauty to come to Taco Bell, maybe those early experiences were emboldening, in the sense, that I knew that I would have to learn the technical, the industry parts of a new world, but I knew the fundamental skills I could bring to it were, were within me.

Whitney: Well, so Marisa, yeah, that's a pretty big jump, to go from Estee Lauder to Taco Bell. And also, I remember, you had gone from New York to Los Angeles, so how did you make that decision? How did they entice you to, to make that move?

Marisa: Well, I'd been, and to your earlier point, I'd actually had a really nice, long tenure at the Estee Lauder companies, about eight years, and especially because a big part of my role was to transform this company's amazing portfolio of 30 plus global prestige brands, it

was really a transformation job, moving these brands from traditional marketing into a digitally driven, more modern forms of consumer engagement and I loved it.

But towards the end I was starting to feel, um, like I was sort of on the other side of the bell curve of being really stimulated by it and feeling like I had, you know, that sort of big incremental things to continue to do and gain, so my ears were open, but I'd always resisted any um calls that were outside of New York because that was just one of our, you know, no flexibility rules was we weren't leaving New York.

But it was kind of a time in my life and with my husband, where we, we just opened our minds just, just a little bit, just, just enough that the door cracked and when Taco Bell first called me, my first thought was Taco Bell's a cool brand, even though, to be honest, being in New York City, I wasn't really a consumer of it.

And I was intrigued and I said, "Where are you?" And they said, "Irvine." And I said, "Where's Irvine?" Which shows my New York centric, ridiculousness and found out it was in Orange County, California and agreed to come out and have ultimately have a conversation and it just started to build on itself. And I just was entranced by the energy I felt there and the opportunity and the hardest part was simply feeling okay about relocating our whole family, um, it's always a really big decision is, get back to being an executive mom, it wasn't just an executive decision, it was a mom decision.

Um, but we did it and I'm really proud of how we all made the transition.

Whitney: Do you remember the moment when you were interviewing where you said, "I'm gonna do this. We're gonna do this." Do you remember what kind of flipped the switch for you?

Marisa: Well, to be honest, I flew out and you know, sometimes if you've ever been in a stage of your career where you're really actively looking, if ... I think it's a little like dating, when you're really looking, it feels like the prospects aren't good and fast enough to the way you want them and I felt like, my eyes and ears were open and, and ... But I wanted to take time ... This was so fast, so I flew out, I think I came home on a Thursday and Sunday night I got a phone call, to my surprise, saying, "You're the one we want." And I thought, "Oh my God, how do I slow this train? Because I'm not ready to make this kind of huge, life decision."

And so, so then we, we each took a few more ... We ... My whole family came out to sort of dip our toe in the waters, so the Pacific waters, so to speak, and um, and we just spent the next several weeks talking back and forth and shaping it. I ... I will tell you one seminal moment I remember where my daughter, my younger daughter who was, I guess, maybe eight years old at the time this was just starting, and I was lying in her bed, putting her to bed and I said something about flying to California for a day to interview for a job.

And I just, because I have very open relationship with my kids, but I realized it was selfish, it was like my own anxiety about it, that I was kind of downloading to her and to

my complete shock, 'cause I thought she would just, you know, how kids don't really take it in, she started to cry. She said, "I don't wanna move to Cal ..." And I thought, "Why did I do this to her?" That was so selfish. Chances of us moving are so slim, why do I have to create this anxiety with her? And I felt like I had a terrible parenting moment in that, in that moment.

I think, as it turns out, it actually was the best thing that my husband and I did for both of our kids, because they were so part of the decision making process and saw my agonizing over - is it right thing, is it not, - that there was no rug pulled out from under them, ever. It was not like a final decision had been made and then we told them. And so, they had the same, exactly the same amount of time that I had to process it and to wrestle with it and to mourn a little bit of the change, but to hopefully also get a little excited about it.

And you know, I hope to never have to pull a rug out from under them. So ...

Whitney: So terrible parenting moment was actually, unbeknownst to you, brilliant parenting moment. (laughing)

Marisa: Yeah, I think it was.

Whitney: In 2017, you were listed by Forbes as one of the world's most influential Chief Marketing Officers, for our listeners, what metrics do you think people are using to gauge how influential a CMO is?

Marisa: Wow, I don't know if I'd know how to answer that. It's incredibly flattering to be put in that very, you know, rarefied list, um, and I always feel um, probably people think it's false modesty, but my cheeks completely burn when these things happen. I'm so flattered, but you know, I genuinely have humility about what it means to be in this job and how much it is a function of having an amazing team.

And you know, I guess the good thing is you're the figurehead and the bad thing is your figurehead, so I take the responsibility that when things are rough, I have to own it, and then there is, you know, a certain recognition that goes with that, which is amazing, but I always feel a little bit superstitious and very humbled by it, so I don't know. I mean, I hope it's based on the strength of you know, the work that this brand is creating and the way we're burnishing the brand's reputation and our connection with consumers.

And I guess what I'm proudest of is this was already a very successful brand when I arrived, and in some ways that's more intimidating, intimidating than going to a brand or business that is struggling because you know you're there to try to fix and here, you know, it was a little like taking the Hippocratic oath, first do no harm and then how do you make it even better. It's harder.

Um, but the exciting thing for me coming in here was realizing, "Wow, it's this good already, but we have so much more upside and there's so many new ways we can think about the potential and the possibilities." And I get just geeky excited about that.

Whitney: So what's one of the things that you have been able to do that you get geeky excited about? You've looked at and been like, "Oh my goodness, we got to do this and this is so exciting."

Marisa: Well, some of it is above the water line and some of it is below the water line and to me that really is um, when you're a good leader, it's the invisible stuff that matters even more than the obviously visible stuff, so for me, the invisible, below the water line is how to really think um, how to really organize a strategy a little different, think about our vision, you know, really deeply analyze and think about how do we reframe where we're trying to go.

And then, of course, as a leader, the trick is getting everyone to follow along, how do you galvanize an organization around that and then how do assess your talent and see where you've got maybe some bright spots that haven't been fully maximized, if you have any areas that are bringing the organization down the people front. Do you make the tough decisions there, for the sake of the, the greater dynamic of the team. And I do take, maybe inordinate pride in the team that I have here at Taco Bell. So talented, but beyond that, um so, so much fun and so, so much more collaborative than I think we ever were before.

And I deeply believe that's enabling us to work with the success that we are, in a very, very challenging category and you know, larger economic environment, so for me that's a big um, a big ah accomplishment, if you will. And then the stuff that is, when I said I get geeky excited about is, take this brand that's a fast food restaurant brand and how do you propel it to be more of a lifestyle brand. And I think that started with redoing the brand identity, our logo for the first time in, believe or not, 25 years, a long time to not refresh how you look.

And that in turn, has unlocked thinking about the brand as a lifestyle and I think that culminated really beautifully at the end of 2017 in our [first ever fashion collaboration with Forever 21](#), which I think pretty much, you know, knocked people's socks off and we had every media outlet, really around the world, was writing about it and talking about it and ... And what I loved is that it wasn't gratuitous, it was unexpected but not gratuitous, so that's when something is really good, when, when it feels right, but people weren't naturally thinking about it already.

Because we are this kind of fast fashion of food brand, we innovate it constantly, we make it super accessible for the masses and again I think someone maybe who had always been in the industry might not have been able to bring that perspective to hey, to say, "Hey, you know what? We're really like a fast fashion brand, but in food. So then what possibilities does that open up? Who do we play with? In this bigger sandbox of brands."

And that's what I mean by getting excited about continuing to do what we've historically done well and being unrelenting about that, but then adding all these other things that just delight people.

Whitney: That's a great example. Do you remember who had that idea?

Marisa: I actually will say I had that ... That idea came from me, but so what? Because lots of people have lots of ideas and um, in this case, it never would have come to fruition if I didn't have other amazing people who are willing to carry the charge forward, to do the hard work, to have the meetings, to pound through and it looked like ... We didn't even what we were doing and we figured it out.

And you know what, in other cases some of the things that we've gotten famous for, whether it was our ... That, that [Snapchat, ah, Taco head lens](#), the Cinco de Mayo that basically made it into Snapchat's IPO, it was so famous. In that case, it was definitely not my idea and I, I have no problem saying my big accomplishment there was knowing when to say yes.

So, um that's part of leading in a team is, doesn't have to always be ... I do have a responsibility to have a vision and to keep figuring out the narrative that we're telling in the world, but it, it is not ah, one person sport.

Whitney: What I love about that when I asked you that question, I didn't think you were going to say it was your idea 'cause I wasn't trying to put you on the spot, but I love how you hesitated and thought, "Um, I don't know if I want to say this." At least that was the sense that I had. And um, recognizing, I can hear in your voice, just how, how much you like your team and how much you enjoy working with your team.

So I think as we start to wrap up, for people who think they want to be in marketing, um, coming out of college, what advice would you give them in terms of classes that they might want to take, places that they might want to work, subjects or people that they might want to look at or watch, any pieces of advice you would give in terms of helping people become subject matter experts?

Marisa: Well, I do believe there are, even within ah marketing, different types of marketing jobs and different facets of marketing. So I will probably answer this particular to what I love about marketing, but there are different, even with my own team, there's so many different profiles and personality types and forms of expertise, but I think when marketing is really making its biggest contribution, it is this amazing intersection of consumer psychology, which means the psychology of people, business, and really understanding kind of the economics of the business. And then culture.

And if you can bring those three things together, wrapped in an aptitude for storytelling, you could be a really good marketer. So that goes back to one of the first things you asked me in terms on educationally how to prepare, I don't want to denigrate people who are in marketing programs 'cause it certainly shows intent and appetite for a particular industry, I just don't think it's a fundamental.

Perhaps if you go onto a graduate level degree it makes a lot more sense, but I think in this day and age, like people who are - you have to show that you're engaged. I mean, it would be ridiculous, for example, for me to hire someone into a social media team who

isn't practicing social media, it would be ridiculous to hire someone into e-commerce or advertising that isn't a student of it, so be curious, be a student of it, have a point of view and then know how to think, to analyze and to communicate. And, and think about how those things come together, if you agree that it is this sort of intersection of business, psychology and culture.

That's what I love the most about it, it's so right brained and left brained and I think the people that are most ah, I don't know, the ones that are most turned onto it and you see they're just absolute stars under ... Innately possess a passion for all of that.

Whitney: Marisa, thank you so much. I appreciate your time, it was an absolute pleasure to hear a bit of your story and to listen to how your mind works and I know our listeners are going to enjoy it as well.

Marisa: Thank you so much for having me, I really appreciate it and keep doing what you're doing. (laughing)

Are any of you noticing that there's a pattern here with our guests? A few months ago I called out that a disproportionate number of my guests are first or second generation immigrants. Now, I'm noticing, or think I'm noticing a pattern around liberal arts degrees. In addition to Marisa Thalberg, [Maureen Chiquet](#), former CEO of Chanel, in [Episode 35](#), [Stacy London](#), former host of What Not to Wear, [Episode 7](#), and [Lee Caraher](#), CEO of Double Forte Marketing and PR, [Episode 24](#).

Perhaps I'm more attuned than most because I studied music, and my husband teaches at a liberal arts college - Southern Virginia University - but I thought what Marisa said was interesting. Her studies taught her how to wrestle with different points of view -- a skill is critical in her current position. Sure, she needs domain expertise. It's a pay-to-play to skill. Without it she wouldn't be where she is. So, it's necessary, but it's not sufficient. It's the intangible -- like her ability to see things from a different perspective -- that's allowing her to soar.

I loved how she talked about her team. Can you imagine working for someone like Marisa, or for [Nick Gray from Episode 50](#) who – these are people who can't say enough good things about their team. I'm going to bet – if I were a betting woman - that these are people make it possible for their employees to bring their dreams to work. Now, my analytical brain is thinking. Wouldn't it be fun to administer our [S-curve Locator diagnostic](#) and see if in fact, these are teams, where people are getting to disrupt themselves? To learn, leap and repeat? Marisa? Nick? Any interest?

Practical tip: In the moments when you think you are at your worst, your most vulnerable, like Marisa and her husband were, with their daughter. Do a reframe. This could very well be your best moment. This makes me think of a quote that Jim Emerick - [who interviewed me for his podcast yesterday](#), its the ChoinqueCast, you'll have to listen to find out where ChoinqueCast came from - shared with me. It's from the brilliant Brene Brown. "Who we are and how we engage with the world are much stronger predictors of how our children will do than what we know about parenting."

If you enjoyed this episode or any prior episodes, we hope you will leave a review, even one sentence, share your twitter handle, so that we can thank you.

And if you like Marisa already are or aspire to be a great boss, check out [Build an A Team](#), my book with Harvard Business Press that will be out on May 1st. You can pre-order it now. Download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Marisa Thalberg for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.