

The power of culture for high-growth companies

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Erika Whitmore:

Marcus Collins is an award-winning marketer and cultural translator serving as former chief strategy officer at Wieden+Kennedy, New York, and a marketing professor at Michigan's Ross School of Business, and as we'll talk about, a lot of great articles, as well as a new book coming out. So with that, Marcus, I do want you to give us a little bit of your background, because it's extensive, and I think it's important for our audience to hear.

Marcus Collins:

Well, the pleasure is all mine. I'm very glad to be here.

Erika Whitmore:

Thank you.

Marcus Collins:

I feel like I have the fortunate pleasure of having my feet in two different worlds. I sit in one foot in the world of practice, formerly as an advertiser predominantly, and one foot in the world of academia as a marketing professor. And occupying both worlds allowed me to bridge the academic-practitioner gap, to take these things that we rigorously interrogate as scholars, and apply it to the day-to-day life of a practitioner. And the hope is that having great rigor around the underlying physics of how the world operates will help us be a far more productive business practitioner in the work that I do with clients across the globe.

Erika Whitmore:

Awesome. Perfect. Well, you know this is where I want to start. We've got to start with the Swifties. And it sounds like you have worked with Beyonce, so maybe you can talk about that a little bit. But what is the Taylor Swift effect? What is that, and what does that mean from a community and from a culture perspective?

Marcus Collins:

So, the colloquial idea of the Taylor Swift effect is that Taylor's outsized popularity, is it such that whatever she does, when she does a thing, she goes through a thing, she watches a thing, that droves of people follow in her footsteps, that her influence is such that, because of her stature, that other people take action because she has? But when we look a little bit closer at what is actually at play, it's less about Taylor's influence on droves of people, but it's about the influence she has on people and their influence on other people. And it's a network effect that comes to bear, because of the influence that exists between the ties that we call friendships, relationships, between our social groups.

Erika Whitmore:

Yeah. Absolutely. And how did she do that, and how did that come to be? We're standing here on the other side of it and, seeing exactly what you're describing, that she can literally move GDP which is pretty amazing. Pretty amazing. You talk about that in your article. How did she do that?

Marcus Collins:

Taylor Swift focused where most artists, and arguably most business people, do not. Like most business people, artists typically focus on fans, people who listen to their music and buy their music, much like business people focus on customers, people who buy their product goods and product services. However, Taylor's approach was a bit more focused, that she focused on a community of people who she calls Swifties, people who not only like her music, but people who see the world the way she does, not unlike Beyonce and the BeyHive, Taylor and the Swifties, they see the world through some lens of feminism, of women's empowerment. And as a result, Taylor's music becomes the cultural production of what it means to be in this community, and that's who she's serving, that's what she writes songs for, that's who she owes up for, for those Swifties. Everyone else, we're just watching in the background, but it's those people that she's serving.

And I think that there's a lot to learn from that, because of her myopic focus on that collective of people, understanding the nuances, the idiosyncratic characteristics that make them tick, and serving them accordingly, she's been able to build a meaningful relationship with these people over time. Not one that's transactional. New music out, people buy the music. No, no, no. It's one that's far more... That's richer. The covalent bonds between her and her community are far tighter, far greater than someone who just has fans who listen to the music.

And as a result, because of her connection, there is an influence that happens between what she does and what her people do. And it's because of this first degree connection, if you will, that the influence that she yields over them is as great as it is. And since that community has built up in its size over time, the reverberation of their influence on their people is far greater than most artists, much like most companies, have privilege, had the benefit of experiencing.

Erika Whitmore:

And it's emotional. It's an extremely emotional connection.

Marcus Collins:

Yeah.

Erika Whitmore:

So, help us translate that. And we didn't practice this, Marcus, so this is zinger, so I apologize for that. What is a company or a handful of companies that have that similar connection with their community that the Swifties have with Taylor Swift?

Marcus Collins:

Sure. What we're talking about are brands that have transcended their category, brands that have moved beyond the value proposition of their product, and they operate at a ideological level, much like Taylor Swift's not just a pop star. She's an icon.

Erika Whitmore:

She's an icon. Yes. 100%.

Marcus Collins:

And what is an icon? An icon is representative of something else. So, she has transcended what it means to be an artist, much like Beyonce has transcended what it means to be an artist, and she represents something greater. So when we see Taylor Swift, we're looking at something else. We're seeing one thing stand in for another thing. And the companies, the brands that are signifying a company as it were, the most powerful brands, they too transcend their category, and they stand for something far greater than what they do. The brands that come to mind for me are like Patagonia. Patagonia sells outdoor wares, but Patagonia as a brand believes in mitigating our impact on the environment, right?

Erika Whitmore:

Yes. Right.

Marcus Collins:

Nike believes that every human body is an athlete and so happen to sell sneakers and apparel and technology and accessories but the why they exist, to help people realize their best athletic self, because they believe every human body is an athlete. So, what does Nike tell the world to do? Just do it.

Erika Whitmore:

Just do it. That's right.

Marcus Collins:

The only thing keeping you from realizing your best athletic self is you. Nike has transcended its category, transcended its value propositions in its products and focused on an ideology, a way of seeing the world, a belief system. And people who see the world similarly, not only buy Nike products, but they use the brand to signify their own identity, to signal who they are to the world, and then they share with people who are just like them, and they share with people who are just like them, and they share with people who are just like them, and so on and so on and so on. They activate a network effect accordingly.

Erika Whitmore:

I like that. They activate a network effect, which is what our companies need to do, so that they can become their own brands and transcend themselves.

Marcus Collins:

That's right.

Erika Whitmore:

So, really quick, what are a couple... If you were talking to a company, doesn't matter if it's tech, services, high growth, doing very well, their product or their service has been proven, so there's market fit, there's market need, what are some of the things that they can do to start to get them to that next level? Is it getting the right influencers? What is it? What are your top three pieces of advice?

Marcus Collins:

So, the idea about market fit and product need is intrinsically embedded in the product itself, is that the product performs. But when we're talking about brands, we're talking about something very different. Products are services and goods that we consume, that we waste away, but brands are something that are... It's cognitive, it exists in the mind. And brands by definition are identifiable signifiers that conjure up thoughts and feelings in the hearts and minds of people, relative to a company or product, institution, organization, entity, or the like. It's a vessel of meaning that conjures up affects and cognitions inside of us. So, while you may be killing it on the product side, you may be quite anemic on the brand side. And the real catch here is that there are some brands with parity products, one would arguably say inferior products, that as a company, they outperform companies with better products, because of what the brand means in the minds of people.

So, to your question, what can companies do? What are the three things you think about? The first thing to ask themselves is, what do we want to mean beyond what we do? How do we see the world? What's our point of view on the world? To transcend the category, we have to operate at the ideological level. Well, what is our ideology? What is our shared collective belief of reality, our communal view of reality?

So, we start there. What do we believe? If you're Nike, we believe every human body is an athlete. Awesome. Then, number two, you find the people who see the world similarly, what I would arguably say is the collective of the willing. Those are people that are more inclined to move, not because of what you are, but because of who they are.

Erika Whitmore:

Who you are. Yeah.

Marcus Collins:

So, they use the brand as a way to kind of peacock who they are in the world. And the more conspicuous the consumption is, the more public the consumption is, the more important ideological congruence becomes. So, they use your brand as a receipt of identity, right?

Erika Whitmore:

Right.

Marcus Collins:

And you see a brand like Nike who has such great market share and mass and scale. Who does Nike talk to? Not everybody. Nike talks to athletes, to footballers one way, basketball players another way, soccer players another way, gymnasts one way, swimmers another way, runners another way. And very specific nuanced characteristics of what it means to be a runner, to be a basketball player, to be a swimmer. And it's the aggregate that Nike's able to get scale, but they're talking specifically to athletes who see the world the way they do.

And they do such by the third thing, preaching the gospel. That is, they don't talk about what they do, they talk about why they do it. Or I write this in my book, I borrowed it from a gentleman named C.C. Chapman, a professor at Babson College. He says, "You start with the soul, and end with the sale."

Erika Whitmore:

I like that. I like that.

Marcus Collins:

Start with the soul. Start with the soul. What do you believe? Start with the soul, and end with the sale. We can go back to Nike just to round out the three. You have never seen an ad where Nike talks about how shock absorbent their sneakers are.

Erika Whitmore:

Never.

Marcus Collins:

How comfortable they are, where they source the leather. Never, ever, ever. Everything with Nike is about belief, about conviction. In fact, the agency where I was the chief strategy officer, Wieden+Kennedy, our founding client was Nike back in 1982.

Erika Whitmore:

Makes sense.

Marcus Collins:

In fact, Dan Wieden, the co-founder of Wieden+Kennedy, he invented the phrase, "Just do it." That came from Wieden+Kennedy.

Erika Whitmore:

Wow.

Marcus Collins:

And the idea is that Nike just preaches the gospel. In fact, everybody who works on Nike at Wieden+Kennedy knows two things. The first is that Phil Knight hates advertising. Phil Knight's the founder of Nike. But the second part is that, when you're working on Nike's work, you're not making ads, you're evangelizing the faith. You're preaching the gospel.

Erika Whitmore:

Makes sense.

Marcus Collins:

So for companies, you start with, who am I? How do I see the world? That is, what is my ideological point of view about the world? And then you identify who sees the world the way you do, and then you go preach the gospel. And when you do that, people will take your products, they'll take your marketing communications, and use them as a way to present themselves as an identity project, to present themselves to the world, not because of what you are, because of who they are. And they'll share with other people who are just like them, and people who are just like them, and so on and so on and so on.

Erika Whitmore:

Perfect. That is outstanding. Thank you, Marcus. I think that's going to resonate with our audience. That's huge. Okay. Another wonderful Forbes article that I wanted to make sure we talked about was Twitter, or X formerly known as Twitter. So, tell me your views on that one.

Marcus Collins:

This is an unfortunate case, truly, because Twitter as a platform provided so much social utility in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, of information, especially in some underdeveloped places. We've heard about civil unrest, not because the media was covering it, but because the democratization of information spread was facilitated by Twitter, which was awesome. Not only that, from a commerce perspective, this brand's awareness, just unbelievable. The saliency of Twitter across the globe, it's off the charts.

Erika Whitmore:

All you had to show was the bird. That's it.

Marcus Collins:

The bird, exactly. The bird. Right. It spanned across different generations, all the means through which we typically segment people through demography, there was great awareness of this thing. And changing the name from Twitter to X strips it of all of that value. Not only that, it strips it of the meaning that was imbued in the brand Twitter. Remember, brands are vessels of meaning. So we strip all the meaning from it and replace it with what?

Erika Whitmore:

An X.

Marcus Collins:

Nothing. An X, exactly. An X, that really the public had to negotiate and construct why it was even called X. There was no gospel, there was no Martin Luther nailing the letter on the church proclaiming a point of view about the world. So in absence of that, people still call Twitter “Twitter,” or say “Twitter X,” or “X, formerly known as Twitter,” because there is nothing there. And I think it’s done a great disservice to the many people who have built Twitter over the years, who have given it all the value in its coding, in how it has managed the brand, and people who’ve used it over the years as well. All that’s been stripped away for it, and for what? To satisfy one’s ego, it seems.

And like I write in the article, it seems that Elon Musk did everything he could to destroy this thing, by not just changing the name, but stripping it of all its meaning. And I think that when we think about brands, that’s how we need to think about a brand, not the mark, because the bird is the bird, but the bird signifies something. It stands in for something else. It’s iconic, it’s representative of something else, of an idea. And by and large, that idea, that meaning that Twitter once held seems to erode every single day.

Erika Whitmore:

Yeah. That’s just such an interesting story, and it’ll be just really interesting to see what happens in the next year, and how that evolves. So, I do want to make sure that we have a little bit of time to talk about your book, because I think it’s pretty exciting. And I want to make sure I get this title right, so you correct me if I got it wrong. For *The Culture: The Power Behind What We Buy, What We Do, And Who We Want To Be*. So tell me, as a person, what am I going to get from this? And then also as a follow-on, what are companies going to get from this? What are they going to walk away with after reading your book?

Marcus Collins:

The book makes a very clear argument that there is no external force more influential to human behavior than culture, full top. And when most people hear that, they go, “Yeah, that makes all the sense in the world. Totally.” But if you ask five people to define culture, you get 55 different answers, and that is a problem. Because if we can’t define a thing concretely, if we don’t have a good construct to define a thing, how in the world do we ever collectively work around it? How in the world are we able to extract the value that exists? How are we able to harness its power?

And for business folks, if we’re not able to tap into what the literature tells us is the most influential force of human behavior, then we are stunting our opportunities to grow our businesses. We also want people to adopt behavior. If that be the case, culture is the biggest cheat code that we have. The problem is that we don’t have a good Rosetta Stone to describe it, to talk about it, and therefore we’re not quite able to fully operationalize it.

So, the book provides that perspective. It provides some language, a construct that we can use to talk about it, but also it reveals the mechanisms by which culture moves, how it works. Because if we understand why the thing does the way it does, we are now empowered to leverage how we can harness its power. So, the book goes from know why to know how, why things are the way they are, and how can we leverage it. So for businesses, good Lord, we’re trying to get people to move, we’re trying to get people to adopt behavior, we’re trying to get our businesses to grow, and the only way it grows is by getting people to move. Therefore, if we use culture in our arsenal of things, then we are essentially attaching a rocket engine to our business, to drive it forward. On the other end, for people, we are constantly trying to influence people all the time, whether you’re an employee trying to get your boss to give you a promotion, whether you’re a parent trying to get your kids to eat peas.

Erika Whitmore:

Yep. Exactly.

Marcus Collins:

We're constantly trying to influence people, and culture becomes a way by which we do that. And the book goes into great detail, leveraging over a century's worth of data from people who are a million times smarter than me, using my work in academic scholarship, using my work as a practitioner over the years, and combining these things to provide a point of view about the world, and ultimately provide ways by which we can apply this point of view to our work.

Erika Whitmore:

Perfect. This has been wonderful, Marcus, but I do want to make sure you have just a few minutes to give our audience some parting words. So, this is wonderful, and I think that the book is going to be extremely helpful to all of us. Give us just a little bit more of a snippet. What can they do now? They're going to go buy the book, right? We're all going to have the book, we're going to read the book, but what can they do now that could help them start in the right direction?

Marcus Collins:

So, this is the most important thing that you can get out of the book, and really get out of all the work that I do, and it's this. The world is not objective, it's subjective. That is, the way we see the world ultimately informs the way the world shows up. That's why for some, a cow is leather, for others, it's a deity, and for some, it's dinner. Which one is it? It's all those things, depending on who you are. For some, a rug is decor, for others, a souvenir, and for some, it's a place of worship. Which one is it? It's all those things, depending on who you are.

So, what does that mean for us as individuals? What it means is that our worldview, our truth, isn't the only truth. It's not the objective truth. So, the truth that you have may be different from someone else's truth, but that doesn't mean that their truth is wrong, nor yours is wrong. So long as your truth doesn't mean their oppression, then these two truths can coexist. And I think that the more we understand that, the more civil we become. Lord knows we need more of that.

Erika Whitmore:

Lord knows we need that. Yes.

Marcus Collins:

Yes. From a business perspective, the idea is this, is that if people see the world differently than we do, but we want to connect with them, then we have to learn to see the world through other people's lenses. We have to set aside our own biases, our own ethnocentrism, and apprehend the world through other people's lenses. And I tell my students this way that, when we are observing the world, the socially phenomenal world, it's like watching a basketball game. If you have courtside seats, you see a completely different game than someone with nosebleed seats.

Erika Whitmore:

Absolutely. Yes.

Marcus Collins:

Even though we're watching the same thing, but it manifests differently based on your worldview. So, for business folks, if we want to get the best representation of reality, so that we can talk to the right people with the right context at the right time, we have to see the world through lenses, which means we have to sit in many, many, many, many seats in the arena. And that requires empathy. And I think that, just as society we could benefit from that, companies could benefit from that also.

Erika Whitmore:

Yes. Absolutely. 100%. And that is why, like Taylor Swift, we need to start with small groups, and build a community, and it takes time, and you have to care about each individual one.

Marcus Collins:

That's right.

Erika Whitmore:

Marcus, this has been outstanding. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this. I am really hoping, maybe I'm sending it out right now, that you'll be able to be one of our instructors at QuantumShift, so that's A KPMG program that we do in partnership with Ross School of Business. It's University of Michigan. Wonderful, wonderful program, it's about a week long, and it's for executives of high growth companies. So Marcus, just planting that seed there, hoping that your schedule will allow, although I know that might be a long shot, given especially your book and all the wonderful things you've done, I know your time is very highly sought after. So, thank you, Marcus, for being with us today, and just really appreciate it.

Marcus Collins:

Thank you much.

Erika Whitmore:

Awesome. Thank you.

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