



 **GRIN**
GETS REAL

Podcast Transcript

Episode 33 | Carla Johnson

Remaining Innovative in Marketing



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INTRO | Katya:

Welcome to the GRIN Gets Real Podcast, the show for people who want to maximize their marketing potential. My name is Katya and I'm your host on this exciting journey as we talk to our experts who join us from influencer marketing to ecommerce strategy and everything in between.

Each episode will feature industry experts that share their insights and provide actionable tips to help you achieve your marketing goals. So put your AirPods in, turn up the volume and get ready for our guest, Carla Johnson.

Katya:

Carla, welcome to the GRIN Gets Real Podcast. I'm super excited to have you on as my guest today to talk about all things innovation.

Carla:

Thank you. It's my favorite topic. I'm delighted to be here.

Katya:

I love to get guests that have that favorite topic that we can really dig in. But let's get started with just sharing who you are and what your experience is in this space.

Carla:

You know, it's interesting when it comes to innovation, and people say, "How did you get into it?" And I say it found me kind of by default, you know, like a lot of us, especially if we've been in marketing for a long time. And after a while we go, "Is this really what I want to do?" And what I looked at as I looked back through my career and the stuff that I love to do and was most successful at, and made the biggest difference to the companies I worked with and for, is that I helped them rethink the work that they do and the impact that they can have. And a lot of that is really about innovative thinking, about critical thinking, about using more creative approaches to how we look at the work that we do. And I started out working for architects, and they're very much about designing experiences. And I really see marketing as that same thing.

Katya:

I love it. Well, I want to kind of get down to the basics. Because when I hear the word innovation — I come from the Silicon Valley, so it feels like innovation is that buzzword that everybody uses — but what does it actually mean? And more specifically, what's the role of innovation as it pertains to marketing?

Carla:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think in Silicon Valley, there is more of a specific definition or expectation of innovation, and it's very product driven. It's very engineering driven.

What I want people to understand is that innovation is really everybody's business. It's not the research team's, it's not the product development team's, it's not the data analyst's team, it's not the management consulting's team. It's something that everybody has to identify with, own, and be willing to do. But when we think about that, that sounds like a big order, especially when we look at some of these traditional definitions of innovation that are very product driven. And when I look at the companies and the people that have successfully delivered innovation over long periods of time, I find that they have a very simple approach to it and they are very clear in defining it because you can't expect people to do something unless they understand what it is. I think that is particularly important for marketers.

So I define innovation as the ability to consistently come up with new, great, and reliable ideas. A simple sentence, but there are some really important words in there.

First is a new idea. And for marketers we sometimes think that a new idea has to be a “whaaat?!” never been done before, out of this world kind of thing. And there is always that magic innovation word of disruption. And for some companies it just means they took something they saw in another industry and applied it in a new way to the work that they do. I like to talk about the McDonalds drive thru because their inspiration for that came from a Formula 1 pitstop. Was it completely new? No. But had it ever been done in the fast food industry before? Also no. So it was a new idea.

I’ll admit this is a little bit more subjective, but I go back to David Ogilvy when he says, “A great idea is one that makes you jealous that you didn’t think of it yourself.” When I talk about a great idea, you see the hair raising up on my arm — you get excited and you can’t wait to see what happens with it.

But even an idea that’s new isn’t enough. An idea that’s great, or even new and great, isn’t enough. We have to have that third characteristic and that’s a reliable idea. And a reliable idea is an idea that makes you money. One of the things that I hear that just drives me crazy is that “ideas are the easy part, it’s the execution that’s really hard.” And I believe that the execution is really hard because it wasn’t a truly great idea to start with — it didn’t have all three of these characteristics.

Now the ability to consistently deliver ideas that are new, great and reliable is what truly makes a person, a team, or a company innovative. because it’s not about doing it once and going “Tada, i did it,” mic drop and I’m done for the rest of my career. It’s about the ability to consistently deliver just like any great performer. You think about musicians, you think about athletes — it’s the consistency in that high level of performance. It’s the same with marketers and innovation.

Katya:

I agree. So much of what you said spoke to me, but also very specifically, you know, that idea that you wish that you had. I can't even tell you how many times I literally say, "Oh, my God, I love that idea. I hate that that wasn't my idea." It seems so obvious when they say it and like the spark comes from, and I'm always the first one to be like, "Hey, I'll be the first one to throw out the first bad idea just to get the ball rolling."

I also really appreciate that you said it's not just one person's job. It's kind of everybody's job. But what does that look like from a team perspective? As a manager, how can I foster innovation in my team without it being like people stomping on each other?

Carla:

It's about giving people structure and process so they have freedom. One of the things I start off with when I do my workshop is I say, "OK let's set a specific objective about what we are creating ideas toward. What do we want to accomplish?" Because I can tell you every manager has had people show up to their door, or on their Zoom or in their inbox with an idea that the person thinks is amazing and the manager is going, "There is nothing here. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't help us make our numbers. It doesn't help the business. There is no objective that it works toward." So the first thing is that you have to point people in a focused direction. Clearly articulate the objective. it's a fill in the blank — kind of like a mad libs of objective statements. Why is it that we are generating these ideas? What is the outcome that you want to have? Is it to increase customer retention? Is it to increase leads by 10%? What is that outcome that you want?

And then under what constraints? As marketers we always have constraints. A lot of them are time and budget, but sometimes it's the dynamics, perhaps the distributed workforce, it's teams that are working virtually now, or whatever those are. I would say we all have at least two constraints, and if you get too many it's really going to hold back those ideas. But focusing the energy and the excitement in a particular direction is really helpful.

I think that another thing that is really important for managers is to understand they need to give feedback. This is a skill that both they

and their team need to develop and the more that you can have that feedback, the more people can understand expectations. They understand how everybody works and works differently.

I have the six archetypes of innovators that I have developed over the years because I have realized that not everybody comes to the table in the same way. For me, I'm a provocateur. I'm always pushing the status quo and I'm always the one in the meeting going, "Yeah, but wait a minute, you didn't think about this!" Then there is the strategist in the meeting going, "Can we just get something out the door?" Because that's what they are so great at, is execution. And there are four different ones focused around storytelling, empathy, being able to lead fearlessly, and integrate. These all matter, but what happens as a leader, and often as a team member, is that we have this perception of the one type of innovator and what that looks like. But in reality, it takes a lot of different angles to look at an idea and how to actually implement it. That's why it's not just something that an innovation group does, it's really important to get the marketers involved because we have a lot of these different views and perspectives on how ideas actually become a reality.

Katya:

I think you hit the nail on the head. I know that I have this one person in mind, the one who's innovative. Everybody else I feel falls under creative. Like, hey, you have really creative ideas versus having innovative ideas. So for me, innovation kind of falls on the entrepreneurs. And I am very keen on (and I'm definitely not an entrepreneur, I'm an executor). Because I don't have a million ideas, so is there that difference between being innovative and being creative? Or should I just be bucketing it all?

Carla:

I don't think people can be truly innovative unless they have a creative element to them. But again, I think it's the stereotype of what that looks like. I guarantee you that even the idea of innovation — if you take that and adjust it a little bit and say "Am I an innovative thinker?" So then it's not about the output, it's about the process. And if you are a creative thinker, it leads to innovative thinking. There are a lot of characteristics that lead to innovative thinking — critical thinking, curiosity — and when you start to break down this expectation that we have, like you said, of

this stereotypical innovator, then people start to see, "I do have these characteristics. I am curious." And you may be more strategic, but that doesn't mean you aren't an innovative thinker.

Those are the elements that are really important when we think about the statement, "Ideas are the easy part, its execution (that's the hard part)." Well if we are a little more strategic, or empathetic, or these different characteristics of the archetypes bring to the table, if we bring all of that together, then together we are more innovative thinkers as people and as teams. And that is ultimately what delivers that kind of work as marketers.

Katya:

Now, you have already said a couple of times now "critical thinking." I'd love to unpack what that means. Because I often feel this is something that's missed, right? Like, critical thinking is so vital, and I sometimes don't always see it in action.

Carla: I'm going to say it a little less politically correct. I'm just going to call the elephant in the room. Marketers are lazy! Marketers are lazy when it comes to thinking. I can say it because I'm the guest and you're the host. And you are a much nicer person in general, I can tell.

But that's data or technology and this reliance on data. What do the numbers say? And measurement. It has (all) made us lazy as marketers. And that means that we're not critical thinkers. I've been in meetings with marketers where they say, "Well, the data tells us ..." And I say, "Put it down and use some common sense!" Like, think through that. Does that seem like it's a good decision? It's thinking about your thinking is what critical thinking is. And so many times marketers don't think. Part of it is the over reliance on technology, it's become a crutch. Some of it is because we just run so hard so fast, in so many different directions. And a lot of it is like I said, it's a habit of being lazy. "It's not my job, it's somebody else's job." You know, all these different reasons. But it's not as hard as it seems. And the outcome is so much different. And I think there's a lot of times where we push that responsibility to somebody else to say, "I can't do it, I can't get it done" and make excuses when really, if we just said, "Come on people, let's let's think about what just

happened, what was just said.”

One of the things that I love from the world of IT that I wish marketers would do more of – and I did this a lot when I worked in the architecture profession early in my career – is critiques or retrospectives (architects call it critiques). IT people – especially anybody involved in Agile – they call it retrospective, where you take time to step back as a team and say, “OK, what worked here and why? And what didn’t and why?” And it’s not about pointing fingers or beating your own chest. It’s about really being thoughtful about the work that we do. And again, the impact that we can have, because if you just keep that flywheel going that’s full of a lack of focus and a lack of direction and everything, it’s no wonder that marketers are so frustrated, not to mention overworked.

Katya:

Yes, I will be very PC about the overworked. I love what it is that I do. And I think that you are so right. Critical thinking I think is a key that is missed. I’d love to see that in team settings when it’s executed. To me, it’s like watching magic happen. Like, “Ha, we’ve got the freedom!” But you need to be able to have that freedom to be able to play in that space. When you’re running so hard. It’s like you’re kind of working on a ticketed system in work and in life. So it leaves it to be a challenge to really think innovatively.

Carla:

It can be. But I think one of the things about innovative thinking or innovation (that is another stereotype) is that it’s time consuming. It’s expensive. It’s complex. If you practice the characteristics of innovative thinking, just 10 or 15 minutes a day. It’s amazing what can happen to you as a marketer or even as a team. In a matter of weeks, it can happen that fast that you’ll see a difference.

Katya:

We did this exercise a couple of years ago at GRIN where as a company, we were all posed one question: If you had a magic wand. You can make anything happen. What would you make happen? Anything. And then we broke out in groups. And I tell you, it was so much fun to be able to think out loud cross-departmentally. I think as marketers we often get tagged, rightfully so, as probably the more creative. Engineers definitely have their own stereotype. Salespeople

have their own stereotype. But to me, it also leads back to that team stuff that we were talking about earlier. When you let all the minds think, we bring in all of these perspectives, and I feel like — and probably I am overspeaking here — but I also feel like probably that is where the most innovative thoughts come into play, because you've got now multiple perspectives. And everybody's kind of free thinking, I love it.

Carla:

Yes! And I do customer journey workshops that involve both sales and marketing teams. And I tell you, at the end of the day, you can tell absolute magic just happened. Because they look at everything from a new perspective. And as a marketer, you're starting to rethink some of those things that you were so adamant about, that salespeople should be using or doing or whatever. And the salespeople now start to say, "Oh, I get why you're always asking me for (whatever that may be)."

I mean, I remember being early in my career, and I was in marketing. And at the time, in architecture, they call it "business development," not sales. But I said I wanted to do business development, because I thought I was going to be really good at it. Because I was creating all of this amazing marketing stuff that the sales people never use, and I'm like, "I'll show them!"

I remember sitting down across the table from a customer the first time and going, "I now realize why everything I've been doing is complete crap." But unless you literally can have those conversations or be put into those situations, it's really hard to see. But once you start to scrape away your preconceived ideas of what should happen, and start to see what can happen, just like your experience in being in a room and working with people from other departments, it really is a completely different experience.

Katya:

Yeah, it's so true. I think when you put yourself in a box, you have to think outside of the box. But if you just don't put yourself inside of a box, then everything is possible.

I do want to touch on one thing. I watched one of your speeches at a content marketing event. And one of the things that you spoke about

was "compare and contrast." And I don't know if you remember that, but you dove into focusing on education, not dissention. And I don't know if you could touch on that a little bit. What does that mean?

Carla:

So I don't remember that specific presentation. But I think one of the things that we do as marketers is that we compare the work that we are doing, even between marketing teams. There is the brand team, there is the content team, there are all these different teams. And the word "compare" is just filled with judgement. Then if you move that up the ladder and it's marketing compared to IT, compared to finance, etc. Then you move it to a company perspective, you know, it's our company compared to somebody else, compared to somebody else. The whole idea behind comparing is that somebody is going to come out wrong. But if you instead use the idea of contrast, it's what's different and maybe what's the opportunity that's in that gap. So what's different between the content team and the brand team? And what is that opportunity there? And then you start to do that with different departments. When we start to look at the contrast between marketing and finance, well, there are different things (they do differently), but when you start to look at the details, there is a lot that is intertwined that we can learn from each other. Then you start to look at that with other companies in your industry, and instead of preparing and asking how you measure up, let's contrast, and then it really gives you an opportunity to see how you can stand out differently.

Katya:

Yeah, I love that.

Now, I want to be more innovative. I have picked up that I need to have the freedom to be able to think (whether it's 10-15 minutes a day). I have to also think critically in order to put myself there. It's also not a one-woman show, right? Everybody should be involved in something like that. But is there a framework that I can unpack and give to everybody? What else can I set up? Or we can share insights to anybody who's listening on what we can do. Or how we can do it.

Carla:

Yeah, absolutely. And when I was researching my book *Re: Think Innovation*, what I looked at was how the world's most prolific

innovators consistently come up with these ideas. And my question was, “Is there a process that people can learn to be innovative themselves?” And it turns out that whether these prolific, highly successful innovators realized it or not, they all followed a very simple five-step formula. And that’s the framework I created that I call the Perpetual Innovation Process. It is about that consistency of coming up with the ideas, like a flywheel that is perpetually in motion. It’s the same thing with innovative ideas, and it starts out with observing the world around you because inspiration for great ideas has to come from somewhere.

Then the next step is to distill what it is that you are observing — looking for patterns. And those first two steps are really things that our brain does really naturally if we just give it those 15 minutes a day to do so.

Now the third step is where the magic happens, and it’s being able to relate those patterns that you recognize into the work that you do. It’s then and only then that you start to generate ideas and then pitch them. What typically happens with marketers is that we say we need a new idea for a campaign, for a strategy, for next year’s plan. Let’s get on a Zoom call, let’s get in a conference room and let’s start generating ideas — let’s start brainstorming. And then they pitch those ideas and they are either completely and wildly crazy that nobody is going to say yes to, or they are essentially the same thing that we’ve always done and you’re like, “Yeah great, I’ve totally wasted another half day or a day on this thing that I knew wasn’t going to work.” And the reason is because we get stuck in this generate and pitch process but we never infuse inspiration into it.

I’ll give you an example of how this works — this is one of my favorites. Tim Washer is a standup comedian. You probably know Tim, he was a writer for Amy Poehler on Saturday Night Live for Weekend Update, he’s worked for Conan O’Brien, Steven Colbert, Bill Nye the Science Guy — he’s the funny guy who works with the funny guys.

So he worked at Cisco and there was a time when they had a new product launch coming out right around the first part of February.

Tim said he knew he didn't want to do another video of a talking head engineer talking about the features and benefits of this new awesome product. He happened to be at a comedy club in New York City about a week or so later and Ray Romano was on stage. And as a comedian watching a real master he said he sat there and observed everything that was going on in the room and how people leaned in and the laughter and the energy that came from this whole experience.

So that was Tim's observation and he distilled it into patterns, and it was things like humor, like building an immediate and emotional connection. Then he went to this third step about how he could relate those types of patterns he distilled – the humor, the deep emotional connection – into the work that he needed to do now for this product launch. That's how he generated the idea of creating a humorous Valentine's Day video that was the foundation of the product launch.

It starts out with old-style black and white, and it asks, "How do you say 'I love you' to the woman in your life?" Well there's three ways: You give them flowers, you give them candy, you carve your hearts into a tree. But now there is a fourth: It's the Cisco ASR-9000 router.

It was so fantastic because it was so ridiculous. But it got people to laugh. Can you imagine what would happen if you are a husband and come home and give your wife a Cisco router for Valentine's Day? it was so over-the-top, but what Tim found is that it got people to laugh. It had the same effect on an audience in a comedy club as it did for Cisco's customers. The salespeople said, "We play this video and immediately it creates a deep emotional connection, it gets people to laugh. We are hearing customers tell us things we have wanted to know for years, they've just never told us.

So that is an example of how to use this process and draw inspiration from something that seems wildly unrelated, but highly applicable when you use this thought process and framework.

Katya:

What a great example! It's true. I love to hear also how ideas are birthed, you know, and turn into things. I work with someone who calls them

avocado trees. She's like, "I need to plant an avocado tree. Let's plant the seed. Let's make it grow. Let's make it happen. Let's make it something." Which is, I think, really huge.

I also think that your book is incredibly timely as well, too. And I don't know if you're talking about this at all when it comes to like rethinking and innovating, especially in these times for brands who were normally kind of just brick and mortar and then the pandemic happened, and then they had to almost like reframe and rethink how they're going to be doing business here on out. And I think that that's happening a lot. Would you say like now more than ever, everybody's got to be thinking about innovating and rethinking the way that you're doing things?

Carla:

Absolutely. And that's why I always go back to "innovation is everybody's business." Especially in this last year and a half, if you only relied on the product or service line development group, holy smokes, the number of companies that would be out of business — including Fortune 500 with 1,000 or 1,500 employees. Because what they understand is that innovation is about finding opportunities and solving problems. That requires innovative thinking. And if everybody is just depending on that one innovation department, their shoulders are only so broad. This isn't just about what you sell. It's about how you do business. It's about how you build those relationships with customers.

I have one client in Europe who said that because they had gone through my training and COVID hit, they understood very quickly how to talk differently to customers, and build that immediate rapport. And it was all around an attitude of service, and how we can come together and help everybody through this time. And they ended up selling so much more product, but it was because they started to rethink the work that they did, and how they could make an impact on their customers. So it's not about making an impact as in, we want to make sure we always hit our numbers. What's the impact that you want to make on your industry, on your customers, on your employees? Because that's a really big part of it.

I saw an example the other day about what Burger King did during the pandemic when they could have said, "Make sure you buy from us." But

instead they said, "We just want to support all restaurants." And if you're thinking about dinner, sure, it'd be great if you came here, but look at Wendy's, look at McDonald's, look at Kentucky Fried Chicken. We really want to support the people in the companies in our industry. That is an incredible way to rethink the work that you do and how you make an impact.

Katya:

Yeah, I love that. We're all people at the end of it, of course, there are brands behind it. There are people behind the brands that build them up to what they are. And in the example that you gave with a UK brand, it sounds like he was an active practitioner of just kind of rethinking and re-innovating. Having that mindset of like, "OK, I have to kind of always be thinking." Do you think that there's an advantage for brands who are consistently doing this? And the advantage I'm thinking is that, for situations like the pandemic, it makes it easier for a brand who's always kind of rethinking and reimagining of it.

Carla:

Exactly. I talked about it as it's a performance, just like any other performance. If your favorite band never practiced on a daily basis, but just showed up for the concerts, how great do you think that they would perform? I mean, we just got done with the Olympics. If those Olympians never practiced, but just showed up on the blocks, or, you know, whatever their sport is, and said, "I'm ready!" Well, of course they couldn't perform. And that's the same thing with any company. It takes everybody in the company to understand that innovation is their business. And the more you have consistent and incremental application of innovative ideas in little ways, you're able to adjust so much quicker, because those muscles are ready and strong and nimble and ready to perform when you need it in a time of crisis. And people think that innovation has to be big, huge, and disruptive.

But I love this story that the now CEO — he used to be CMO of Park Mobile — Jeff Perkins talks about (they have innovation weeks) how there was a woman in finance who simply saw this opportunity, because they had one report that took 40 manual hours to do it every single month. And so she taught herself a programming language, she wrote a programming language, and it now takes 20 minutes and saves the entire department 39 hours and 40 minutes a month in really

grunt work. You know, that's the kind of stuff that sucks your soul at the end of the day. And you think, "Oh, I'm so exhausted." And you don't feel like you have purpose. You don't feel like you made progress. But now that person is freed up to do work that is so much more valuable. And if you've ever needed more people to do work that's more valuable to your company, it's now.

Katya:

I love that example as well, too. Especially because what you're getting back is you're getting time. And I think that time is not this tangible thing. And to be able to tie that time that you get back as being part of like, "Hey, we're rethinking and we're innovating. And this is what we get back from it." That's something special, and I think it is so key.

So I absolutely appreciate your time. I have one last question for you. And it is prediction time. What are some of the changes that you kind of see happening with brands or in marketing over the next one to two years?

Carla:

A lot of it is around innovation and marketers understanding that because they are already so connected to so many different departments in the company, that if innovation is to become everyone's business, they are a big part of the driver of it. We even see it in job titles now like VP of marketing and innovation. There is more focus on innovation as a skill and a mindset for marketers that has never been there before.

Katya:

Well, I can't wait to apply for that job because I'm hooked. I'm on it.

Well. Carla, thank you so much for joining me today. I hope to have you back on. I'm all keen on reading your book, as well, Re: Think Innovation. I've got it on my desk ready to go.

Carla:

Excellent. Well, thank you. I'm excited to hear what you think about it.

OUTRO | Katya:

During my chat today with Carla we dug into some key concepts from her recent book, Re: Think Innovation. The job of being and remaining innovative helps brands stay more nimble, but also solve problems for people. While we have archetypes of who is classified as a “innovative thinker,” it's really everyone's job on the team to think a little bigger. So it's more about approach than the label of who's responsible for that innovation. She also provided some great tips on how to ensure you, as a marketing manager, have a team of innovators. Remember, all the small things add up to big things. So it's less about inventing something brand new, it's about re-innovating something that already exists and reframing it.

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