

Marketers Are the Unsung Heroes of Technology Evolution

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Technologies don't reach critical mass on their own. Behind every innovation that breaks through to mainstream adoption, there are product marketers — positioning, messaging, translating, and championing — who rarely get credit. In this episode, Angelia McFarland welcomes longtime colleague Brian Whitaker, founder of Zettabyte Content, to explore the philosophy of product marketing and the discipline of 'humble audacity.'

SPEAKERS

Angelia McFarland

Co-host; tech marketing veteran and founder, EOP Media

Gina Rosenthal

Co-host; technologist, product marketer, and founder, Digital Sunshine Solutions

Brian Whitaker

Guest; founder and CEO, Zettabyte Content; 20-plus years in B2B technology marketing. Find him at zbcontent.com and on LinkedIn at Brian E. Whitaker.

TRANSCRIPT

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

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ANGELIA MCFARLAND

Welcome to the Tech Aunties podcast, where we're bringing you industry context and vision from myself, Angelia McFarland, and Gina Rosenthal. So today we are talking about marketers who I believe are the unsung heroes of technology evolution. Those technologies would never be at critical mass without great marketing professionals behind the scenes — positioning, promoting, creating messaging, giving feedback on user interfaces so people understand them. Today we have Brian Whitaker, founder and CEO of Zettabyte Content — an Austin-based content marketing consulting firm that helps B2B technology leaders tell their stories. Find him at zbcontent.com and on LinkedIn at Brian E. Whitaker. Brian, welcome.

BRIAN WHITAKER

Thanks, Angelia. From my European experience, I especially appreciate the reference to the 'Z.' Nice work.

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

Can you start by talking about your product marketing philosophy and how it's changed over the years?

BRIAN WHITAKER

When I started in product marketing — about 12 or 13 years ago now — it was seen as a cog in the great machine of bringing a product to market. Largely a function of taking inputs from engineering and product management and spitting out outputs: web copy, a solution brief, something like that. What I think has happened with my philosophy over the years is that it has become much more collaborative. It functions from a place of humility. And it relies on a kind of disciplined audacity.

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

I love those terms. Give us more about what you mean by humility and audacity.

BRIAN WHITAKER

On the humility side — one of the great gifts a product marketer can have is the knowledge that they need to remain continually curious. There are people in the room who know more about the product than I do. What I'm bringing is a breadth of vision that takes a broader view of how the product may manifest in the market. I have to make sure I'm never coming at situations from a position of certainty. The disciplined audacity concept — I hadn't really thought about it until I was mentoring young product marketers and saw them oscillating between sticking their necks out impulsively and then responding with timidity. What I started coaching them to do was be a little more subtle about their audacity. Not 100 miles an hour — maybe 50 instead of 30. Consistent. Predictable. Because the oscillation between timidity and going out on a limb was bad for their mental health and bad for the organization's mental health too.

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

Do you see the tendency toward timidity as a widespread problem in marketing departments?

BRIAN WHITAKER

Yes. In an ideal world, it's incumbent upon marketing leadership to support the audacity of their employees. In any collaborative process, there's a tendency toward regression to the mean. If you're an outlier, as you work through a collaborative process, there's a pull back toward the middle. Marketing leaders would be well advised to say to their teams: 'I'm looking for big ideas. I'm looking to stick our necks out — and I will defend those choices for the rest of the organization.' Not many organizations have marketing leaders with the security of position to do that.

BRIAN WHITAKER

I just had a conversation with a founder of a stealth startup. He said — and I apologize for slight profanity, but I'm quoting verbatim — 'We're going to overclock the hell out of it.' And I said that should be the tagline of your marketing. He said 'Oh no, we can't possibly do that.' And I said: 'You really can and should. Because in a sea of similar solutions, that is your one opportunity to authentically stand out in the market.'

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

What's your advice to your younger self?

BRIAN WHITAKER

Get into product marketing faster. I was in technology sales, then field marketing, then alliances marketing. Where I worked, product marketing was this shadowy organization in a building nobody went to. I jumped over there during the 2008 recession — I had a baby on the way and it looked like a safe place to be — and it proved to be the perfect home. I'm still doing it now. If I had known it existed, I would have made the jump sooner. For young people: the ones succeeding today are willing to jump in feet first and start swimming with limited structure. Being able to manage feelings of uncertainty and take calculated risks is what distinguishes the successful ones from the unsuccessful ones.

ANGELIA MCFARLAND

Thank you so much, Brian. Find him at zbcontent.com and on LinkedIn at Brian E. Whitaker. Thank you for joining us today on the Tech Aunties podcast. Until next time.