How International Marketing Works with Amy Scissons

Introduction

[0:09] Rajiv Parikh: Hey, everybody. Welcome to another episode of CENTER STAGE.

I'm Rajiv, your host. And today I'm conducting a Zoom interview with Amy Scissons, CMO from Mercer.

Welcome to the show, Amy.

[0:21] Amy Scissons: Thanks, Rajiv. Nice to be here.

Rajiv: Yeah, thanks for taking the time.

So, Amy, you're the CMO, Chief Marketing Officer, at Mercer. Tell us a little bit about what Mercer does.

[0:33] Amy: So, Mercer is an HR consulting firm. We also have an investment and retirement arm to our work that we do.

Our philosophy is that we're really here to help the health, wealth, and careers of communities, people, employers, etcetera.

We like to get involved in health issues. We like to talk about aging populations and what that means for retirement adequacy. And we love to get talking about, you know, what is the future of work?

[1:05] Rajiv: Love it, love it. Yeah, the future of work is definitely a trending topic now.

The company was established in 1945, 10,000 employees—a very large company that's been around for a long time.

You've been there for four years, is that correct?

[1:19] Amy: That's correct.

Rajiv: Okay, so tell us about your journey at Mercer. You're the CMO. Give us a little bit of perspective and insight into your world as CMO there.

Amy: Sure. So, I'm the CMO of what's called the international region for Mercer that runs across 100 cities, 41

countries—everything outside of the US and Canada.

And the whole journey around my work at Mercer has really been mostly bringing the global sense of Mercer to the US and Canada, and also making sure that we're serving clients across all the different countries.

I tend to take a very diverse view of the world simply because I'm used to thinking outside of America and in the US.

And I like to think about, you know, how do we bring teams together, these big virtual teams that have to come and really start to build that purpose-led brand out in local markets and make it relevant for our clients and our communities in places like Brazil and Argentina and China and India.

So, it's been a really interesting journey in the sense that it's forced me to think outside of my world, but it's been a fantastic learning opportunity.

[2:30] Rajiv: Sounds amazing.

So, I'd love to learn a little bit more. Let's take a use case of China or India. How do you go about doing that?

I mean, you're in New York, you're responsible for international. Canada and US are not your territory. So how do you go about doing that? Give us an example of what that looks like.

[2:48] Amy: Well, let me give you an example, actually, of something we did pretty recently in South Africa.

South Africa is a very interesting market for us. It's a growing place. It's fairly new to Mercer.

And so, how we approached it was we established a joint venture with another firm called Alexander Forbes, which helped us start to think about how can we bring the best of health, wealth, and career to all of Africa instead of just South Africa.

So, we developed out a very interesting Pan-African solution that allowed us to bring their brokerage business and our brokerage business together.

So, we could turn to multinationals and say, look, for instance, many multinationals in China are looking to expand their workforces into places like Africa.

And they would come to us and say, Mercer, can you help us understand what this means for us?

And how do we make sure that we have the right people, the right infrastructure, that we have the support in place so that we can compete in the marketplace?

And how do we really develop out those organizations that are going to drive growth?

Most CEOs and most organizations now are very focused around people because they understand that that's really the fuel for growth.

And also, too, as we start to automate and start thinking about digital transformation, how do we bring together both the artificial intelligence elements of our world together with the human aspect?

And what does that look like, and how do they interact?

[4:09] Amy: So, it's fairly interesting, and we get to tackle really broad, interesting topics, but we also tend to look at it from a market-first viewpoint. So, we take a quick look at what's happening in the market.

We talk to clients and potential prospects about what is relevant. And we take that conversation forward and then develop our solutions around that.

[4:29] Rajiv: So, I'd love to talk to you about the future of work and artificial intelligence, AI.

Section 1: AI, Cultural Bias & Diverse Perspectives

[4:34] Rajiv: You recently wrote an article about AI. I'd love to hear your perspective and point of view about that.

Amy: Sure, absolutely.

So, we start to look at the way technology is advancing around things like artificial intelligence. There's a whole human and people aspect to this that oftentimes gets overlooked.

And so, my perspective was looking at, well, are we looking at cultural bias and people bias as we start to develop these new technologies?

And that whole idea is around thinking about the person or the team who really was behind the development of that piece of machine learning, or how we move forward in thinking about the new technology.

It's interesting. The vast majority of developers that are working on AI are men and they're based in the US, which means that what is being coded is really coming through their eyes.

And so, the whole concept is, when we start thinking about new technology and AI, we really need to make sure that we have diverse teams in place so that we have those diverse perspectives as we solve the problem and as we start to develop the new technology.

[5:42] Rajiv: So, I completely agree, but how do you go about doing that, given the fact that it's 85% male, mostly in the US, mostly Caucasian? How do you sort of diversify the pool?

Amy: I think what you have to do is you have to intentionally force the team to go outside to pull in those perspectives.

So, it can either be done ahead of time during the information gathering as you start to develop it out, or it can be a sort of forced inclusion of other voices, right?

Making sure that you have one virtual member on the team that's sitting in India, for example, or making sure that you have a woman that's at least overseeing or ensuring that that perspective is included.

[6:24] Rajiv: Okay.

And this is relevant to your "Voice on Growth," I believe, stance that you have on cultural bias and artificial intelligence.

Section 2: Voice on Growth

[6:32] Rajiv: Tell us a little bit more about what Voice on Growth is.

Amy: So, Voice on Growth is one of my favorite things to talk about, so thanks for raising that.

It's a new content platform that we developed, and it's probably the largest content platform that Mercer has.

And the whole intention around Voice on Growth was, as we started to develop new thought leadership and content for our international audience, I realized that most of it was being developed from New York.

And again, to that whole point of diversity of thought and ideas, was to say, well, why don't we have our local consultants write about local issues?

And so what we started to do was tease out what's happening in the marketplace, what's relevant, what matters to a multinational in China versus what's happening to a group or a multinational based out of Argentina.

And it's fascinating because what we started to see was there was a lot of cross-pollination of themes and ideas.

So we started to realize that, wait a minute, there's a pension gap in Brazil, and we're also seeing the same kind of problems in Japan.

And there was a lot of really interesting cross-pollination of themes and ideas.

[7:43] And so we were floored by how quickly people started to join and subscribe and share ideas. It's really blown into this fantastic publication. And now we're saying, well, hey, maybe we can turn this into a product.

And so we're on the journey now of thinking about how we can productize this and how we can really turn this into something that can grow even more.

[8:05] Rajiv: And in terms of—so that's fascinating that there are similar trends happening across the globe. You're seeing different perspectives, different cultures, and different points of view.

So, for those of you interested in learning more about this, you can go to Voice on Growth dot Mercer dot com, and we'll put that in our notes in the video as well. And you can check it out there.

Amy, can anybody contribute on this platform, or how does that work?

[8:28] Amy: Absolutely.

We're more than happy to take articles and suggestions—all about starting the conversation, continuing the conversation.

Anything that relates to health, wealth, career, retirement, investing, and innovation is fair game.

[8:44] Rajiv: Let's go back to—I want to dig a little bit deeper on your responsibilities as CMO for Mercer because, you know, again, you're out...

Section 3: Personal Journey

[8:50] Rajiv: Your purview is international.

Also, let me just backtrack for a second. I noticed you also were a founder with a company in Barcelona, and you have some education in Paris. So, tell us a little bit about your personal journey and how you got to where you got to.

[9:04] Amy: Well, my personal journey is very interesting. It's taken me all over the place.

So, I'm originally from Calgary, AB. I studied in Montreal, and one of the things that I wanted to do when I took my MBA was study in Paris.

I went to Paris, and I started working for a dot-com there, which took me to California. I did product marketing and a ton of work around that, which I loved.

And then I got married and moved to Barcelona. My husband is Spanish.

I worked with BBDO for many years, doing some consulting for them, and then I had the itch to start my own company.

So, I created an activewear company that we actually manufactured and distributed, and we had points of sale. We did that for a few years with quite a bit of success.

And then we were offered a fantastic opportunity to move to New York, which brought me right into the hub and center of the financial world.

[10:04] Rajiv: And is the activewear company still active, or no longer?

Amy: No, we shut it down.

Rajiv: Okay, gotcha. So, you're in New York, in the hub of the financial world. And so let's go back to your responsibilities as CMO.

Section 4: Leading a Distributed Marketing Team

[10:18] Rajiv: Give us a little bit more insight in terms of your typical week. Do you have a typical week? What does your team look like? How do you sort of manage a distributed team?

Give some advice and pro tips for our audience out there.

[10:33] Amy: So, it's an interesting situation because 99% of my team is not in New York. They're in Mexico, Brazil, Turkey.

Rajiv: And how big is your team?

Amy: I have over 100 marketers.

And it's very interesting because I sort of see my world in three different ways.

One is around the team and supporting the team and creating what I like to think of as the next generation of marketers, strategic marketers. I'm constantly challenging them to get away from the day-to-day and the tactics and start to think about, you know, how are you driving business revenue growth?

So, I see that as a big part of what I do, which is coaching, mentoring, and really taking care of the team.

The second piece that I love to do is around making sure that the brand is coming alive locally and making sure that those marketers are being very, very forward-thinking about what the brand means and how we take it to market.

We're a very purpose-led company in the sense that we're very focused on how we're providing value to the community and to people as well.

So, I'm very focused on making sure that my team brings that to life in very unusual ways that make sense to the local market, whatever that looks like.

And then the third piece of it is really around new products, new solutions. How do we create alpha in generating new revenue for the company and looking at it sort of as a portfolio?

[12:01] Amy: So, one of the things I always recommend to people that step into an international role like mine is to say you need to think about it as a portfolio. Which of the countries are growing fastest? And there's a different way to market in those markets.

And then there are those sort of bread-and-butter big countries that we know we need to absolutely continue to grow. It's

going to be slower growth, but it's going to be consistent over time.

[12:24] Rajiv: Exactly. Okay. So, very interesting.

So, I'm curious to learn about your approach to the brand and how you're going into these local markets.

Section 5: Localizing the Mercer Brand

[12:33] Rajiv: You have 100 marketers all over the world. In terms of consistency and the nuances of how you represent Mercer in different markets, how do you go about doing that?

Again, give me an example from one of your team members in terms of, here's Mercer as sort of the HQ brand, but when we go to a local market, there are nuances around how we present the brand. So, what does that look like?

[12:57] Amy: We tend to think about the brand in terms of what it means to our clients and how we're adding value to the community.

So, what I've seen that works really, really well in Asia is where we start to partner with our clients to say, when you're thinking about a healthy workforce, what are you developing and what are you trying to create?

Let's co-create that together, and let's talk about it in the community and in the media about how we're doing this together.

[13:28] Rajiv: So, listening to the client is super important, taking that intel, and then sort of formulating a go-to-market around community and spreading that knowledge within that community. Super important.

[13:39] Amy: Exactly. And just making sure that it's true to the brand, right?

And so, we always have to take a step back and say, is this true to our brand? Is this true to our brand philosophy?

And if not, we definitely are not going to do that.

[13:52] Rajiv: So, let's talk about purpose-driven companies. Why is that so important these days?

Amy: I think that, you know, it's interesting, especially in the consulting world, where companies are looking for a trusted partner that has the same philosophy and values that we have and that they have.

And so, it's really making sure that we're presenting—we believe that we need to set the stage and move things forward in a way and bring our clients along with us on that journey.

We want to make sure that, as we think about purpose, it's coming through in

how we're co-creating and how we're working with our clients.

So, I think that clients are choosing—there are a couple of few points that I would highlight.

One, clients are careful about who they want to work with. They could choose many different partners, and we want to make sure that we're sharing with them ideas of ways in which we're actually adding value to the community.

Section 6: Thought Leadership, Data & Localized Content

[14:49] Amy: The second point is that, as we start to think about our thought leadership, what's happening in the market, trends, and so on, clients need to learn from us.

If we're a brand that represents learning and new ideas, then they're more likely to want to work with us. Those are the two main areas I would focus on.

Rajiv: And so, let's talk about thought leadership and trends. What are you seeing in terms of the trends when it comes to marketing? Where is the future of marketing going?

[15:18] Amy: It's interesting because there are a couple of things happening in the marketing world. One is around technology, because it's becoming more and more complex and difficult to execute. Marketers are having to become much more tech-savvy and much more knowledgeable about automation tools and digital tools. It's difficult being a marketer these days.

You have to be technology-savvy, you have to be close to the business and really understand how you're driving value, and at the same time, you have to be creative and someone who can really bring a brand alive.

[15:52] Rajiv: The left brain and right brain, right? You've got to merge the two.

Amy: Exactly. So, it's tricky. In terms of where things are going, I think it's those three elements. And then you layer on data.

I think marketers need to be smarter about how they take data, create innovation off the back of that, and improve the customer experience.

For instance, on our side, we've built an algorithm that helps us understand how we retain our clients, which clients tend to stay with us the longest, and why they're staying with us the longest. It also helps us identify clients who are at risk based on the algorithm.

The data has been hugely illuminating. We've started to realize, for instance, that clients who are most engaged with our content tend to stay with us the longest.

So, a very easy piece to fix, if you start to see clients who are not engaging with your content, is to start having conversations with them and say, "Hey, I'd love to get this piece of research in front of you so we can have a conversation."

And that's changed the way we've gone to market with some of our bigger clients.

[16:54] Rajiv: I love it. I love the fact that the data can provide that kind of valuable insight in terms of churn and retention when it comes to your clients.

And in terms of content, you work in so many countries. How many countries are you guys in?

[17:12] Amy: We're in 41 countries in international and 43 globally.

Rajiv: So, when it comes to content and localization, how do you go about creating relevant content that matters to those customers across all these different countries?

Is there a playbook that's similar and you just craft it accordingly, or do you customize it? Is it a bespoke solution?

[17:35] Amy: We do a combination.

Anything that we call primary research, where it's original research we've surveyed and we've come up with findings and insights, tends to go directly into translation, providing we have a data cut at a local market.

For instance, if we talk about the UAE, do we have a large enough data set where we can have meaningful insights around what's happening in that country? That's one thing.

The second piece we look at is the opinion pieces about what's happening in the market. Those need to come from the local market.

What we'll tend to do is come up with some overarching themes, and then we'll pull in what's happening in the local market, whether that's regulation or changes in politics or policy, and we'll layer that in to customize the piece.

So, there's a combination. Either it's original and it's been cut to customize, it's coming from the local market because of that relevant piece, or it's entirely local and we try to find connection points with other countries.

[18:41] Rajiv: Gotcha. That makes a lot of sense.

I want to go back to purpose. You've mentioned health, wealth, and career a few times.

Section 7: Purpose & Work-Life Balance

[18:50] Rajiv: What can you tell us about Mercer's purpose?

Amy: Mercer's purpose is fascinating because we're really about outcomes: better outcomes for people, better outcomes for communities, and better outcomes for companies. That's our main purpose.

Rajiv: So, let's talk about work-life balance. You have 100 people on your team all over the globe. What's your secret to managing work-life balance?

[19:21] Amy: It's not easy. I have to be really honest. I can be pretty real about it.

It isn't always on. And there's a reason why it's always on, because you've got people working across every time zone. For me, Asia's morning is my morning, right?

My philosophy is that I need to make sure the team is able to continue their momentum, continue to innovate, and drive things forward without having me slow them down.

So, to me, it's really about a couple of things. One is empowering the teams. I like to give them frameworks or things like, "Is the house burning? No. Is anybody hurt? No. Then please proceed." There's no blood, so you keep going. Exactly. No Band-Aid required, so we're all good here.

It's about having a few guiding principles and empowering the teams, and also using technology. I can't say enough about being able to be there through Zoom. That has helped me enormously.

And then the last piece is that I'm really structured. I really believe that my team shouldn't have to work New York hours because they're on the other side of the world.

So, I give them a couple of days a week where I say, "My calendar is yours on Monday and Wednesday evenings, but don't even think about calling me on Tuesday, Thursday, or Friday."

I think just creating that structure makes things a lot easier.

[20:43] Rajiv: Awesome. That actually makes a lot of sense.

Let's talk about culture for a second.

Section 8: Company Culture & Fostering Innovation

[20:48] Rajiv: I mean, having such a distributed team and being a multinational company, how do you make it a cohesive culture so that that's represented through Mercer and through the company?

[21:00] Amy: I mean, when we think about culture, we have a couple of guiding principles around that.

One is that we talk about how change is the constant, right? People need to be

ready to, and the people that are on the team need to, embrace change.

Once we kind of lay that out there, that things will continually evolve, we find that we naturally draw in people that like to be challenged and like to work in that ever-changing kind of environment.

We're also very much about a growth mindset and being an entrepreneur. So you can innovate in many ways. You can find a faster way to get from A to B.

You can be thinking about a new product to go to market, but you need to always be thinking about those things because that's what makes Mercer great.

And so I think when we bring those things together, we naturally draw the type of people that want to be part of that journey. And we continue to foster it.

[21:57] Rajiv: Love it. Fostering innovation. That's awesome. Love it.

Okay, I'm going to switch gears and just ask some fun questions. So, if you had a superpower, what would your superpower be?

[22:08] Amy: Oh man, I don't know if I have a superpower. I think my superpower's probably multitasking, although most people would tell me that's so anti-multitasking right now.

So I don't think—I don't—but I actually do think that's my superpower. The other piece, I think, is about just communicating very clearly.

And that's the one thing that has been so important, especially when you're working across time zones, cultures, and languages, is that you need to be super crystal clear and very precise about your message.

[22:40] Rajiv: Yep.

Amy: And I think that probably would be my other superpower.

Rajiv: Communication, great communication skills and multitasking. And in terms of communication skills and languages, how many languages do you speak?

Amy: I speak three languages: English, Spanish, and French.

Rajiv: Got it. Okay. And fluent in French and Spanish?

[23:00] Amy: I am more fluent in Spanish, believe it or not, but yes.

Rajiv: Nice, nice. Do you have any sort of daily rituals or habits that you do that keep you focused and productive?

[23:14] Amy: I take walks, and even if it's through the city of Manhattan where people are crazily running around me, I try to get out and have those midday breaks.

I find that it helps me to think. I think that a lot of people don't spend enough time just reflecting. So I try to every day take some time to reflect.

I also do a little bit of meditating, although I must admit I'm not very good at it.

[23:39] Rajiv: I mean, walking is a form of meditation, really. People do walking meditation.

Amy: So, I like to calendar half an hour off of my day to close my office door, turn off the lights, and have a little mind-releasing time.

Rajiv: Nice. That's awesome. That's great. That's great to hear.

Last question for me: what's the last book you read?

[24:03] Amy: So it's interesting. I'm reading a book with my son, which I'm feeling very inspired about.

It's called *Rebound* by Kwame Alexander, and it's a poem. I highly recommend everybody read this. It's a poem novella about an inner-city boy named Charlie that is using basketball to help him cope with loss. But the entire thing is in a poem, and it's beautiful.

[24:29] Rajiv: Okay, *Rebound*, *Rebound*. We got it. Well, we will add that to the notes as well for all of you.

That's all the questions I have. Amy, thank you so much for your time. Is there anything you'd like to share with us before we say goodbye?

[24:42] Amy: I think we covered it.

Rajiv: Okay. Thanks, everybody, for watching. This is Center Stage. I'm Rajiv, your host. Amy, thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it.

[END]