

Masters of Scale: Rapid Response Transcript – Colleen DeCourcy

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COLLEEN DeCOURCY: There is a thing that being still does to you that is very different. For a creative person, that's a real journey, mentally, emotionally, finding stimulus. Something like this happens, and you're just shoved into five, eight years into the future. And you shake yourself off, and you stand up and you're like, "Oh, we're here." Advertising is about being in the eye of culture, and there's never been really, in my lifetime, a more interesting moment in culture.

Brand by its very definition is something that holds a strong set of opinions about something that would attract someone. This is not a moment to have no opinions, but this is also not a moment for everybody everywhere to weigh in on everything.

Most clients aren't asking us right now to solve their deepest business problem. What they're asking us is: How can we retain a connection to our consumers, our people?

What's at stake for my business is relevance. Amidst everything that's going on, survival cannot be the mode of operation. What's next is developing the ability to work in ambiguity. You move in reaction to the world. You point your creativity at every problem that comes your way. If you really believe that great creativity can solve anything, you start pointing that in places that you maybe didn't use to. You got to be all in.

BOB SAFIAN: That's Colleen DeCourcy, president of Wieden+Kennedy, the renown creative ad agency for Nike, McDonald's, Delta, and many more.

The ad industry has seen revenues squeezed in 2020, as marketers cut back budgets. At the same time, brands are facing new cultural pressures to speak out, and take a point of view.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of The Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response. I wanted to talk to Colleen because she's found her business in the heart of the back-and-forth over what to say, when to say it, and whether to say anything at all.

Colleen, who was named Creative Leader of the Decade by Adweek, has a keen sense of both the responsibility and opportunity of creative responses.

She's also articulate about dramatic changes underway in the ad industry, a heightened ambiguity in business models, planning, and talent management that echoes shifts underway for all of us.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Colleen DeCourcy, president of ad agency, Wieden+Kennedy. Colleen, thanks for joining us.

DeCOURCY: Thanks for having me, Bob. I'm excited to talk to you.

SAFIAN: I'm coming to you from my home in New York. You're coming from your home in New York, but of course, you also have a home on the other side of the country in Portland. Wieden+Kennedy has offices all over the world. You generally travel around a lot.

DeCOURCY: I do.

SAFIAN: This year, you've been hunkered down in New York. So how has that been, having to be away from all of your people?

DeCOURCY: Oh, wow. There's almost two parts to that question. The "how has it been" has been just a shock to the mind and body to be still for seven months. I came home from Portland for my birthday the beginning of March and, of course, never got to go back, so my watch and all my things are on the West Coast. So there is a thing that being still does to you that is very different, that's been about 10 or 15 years since I've done it. For a creative person, that's a real journey, mentally, emotionally, finding stimulus.

But then there is the fact that half of my workforce is in Portland, Oregon, and I am not. This year in 2020, all the woes of the entire country, in one form or another, have come to Portland's front door.

COVID started early with Seattle. Then there is the social activism. Then we had armed militia. I had people literally out all night protesting and then in the morning on Zooms looking tired, a little beaten, project-managing things for clients, and nobody sort of spoke of the space between the two. And then the forest fires. I mean, it just doesn't stop.

So it's been, in some ways, heartbreaking. In other ways, I have tried to use it as my moment to have a distanced view, to be able to see clear and look at the entire chessboard, as they say, and not be right in the middle of the emotion. But the team that actually manages that office and all the people in it, I think have had one of the hardest professional years of their lives.

SAFIAN: How do you help them manage all of those external factors and then also get them to do their jobs, which is part of what your responsibility is?

DeCOURCY: In some ways, it's just an amped-up version of what I am always supposed to do with them, which is offer them a point of view that isn't in the heat of the moment. It's perspective is what I think top leadership is supposed to bring. Perspective, a vision,

inspiration. You just have to be really extra careful that you're very, very aware of what's going on for those people close-up, or you can be tone deaf.

SAFIAN: And this space that you find yourself in, this time that you have in a different way because you're not traveling so much, how have you used that?

DeCOURCY: I'm not sure if this is a challenge for all leaders during crisis, but I think it probably is, is that the momentum of the event pushes you at this rapid speed, which in many ways is really great. When things like that happen in our business, and I am also moving myself, things can get pretty wild. You're hoping that you're catching all the nuances and the signs and that you're thinking things through.

To have this moment to be the thing that is still while everything rushes by you, I think is a bit of a gift in leadership, if there could be one out of this year. I'm learning to intentionally slow my reaction times, to give fewer answers, more of them right, if I can. I think all of our leadership is different during this time, in that the way I look at things is a little more measured.

SAFIAN: You and I worked together –

DeCOURCY: We did.

SAFIAN: – a while ago when I was at Fast Company, and my impression of you was always that you loved change.

DeCOURCY: I do.

SAFIAN: I mean, you loved change and being the agent of change. And this year, of course, there's so much change. But it's almost like, in reaction to it, do you become less change-focused because you are managing instead of driving the change?

DeCOURCY: I think the thing to love about change is momentum. Momentum feels great. Momentum is just such a wonderful gift to anybody who is trying to create anything, and you can get addicted to momentum a little bit. But I also think that there is something in people who like change, people who like to be agents of change, is that they like to be in opposition to the status quo.

And so when all things are going nuts, I have found that I can draw an interesting energy off of being in opposition to that movement.

I was in China and Japan. We were doing our global tour right before all of this happened, which is a ridiculous kind of swing of movement where you visit every office that you've got in three weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. You drop out of the air, and you see everybody, and you talk to everybody, and you look at the numbers, and you look at the work.

And so to come off of such a rapid acceleration, where we were truly celebrating the best year in our history, top line, bottom line, work, growth, even emotional growth of the agency, transitions we'd made on important things like race and gender, to come off of that into a dead stop, it's been an interesting feeling for someone that likes movement and change. It really has.

SAFIAN: A lot of businesses have cut back on advertising with their revenues down. At the same time, there are other businesses who are probably more desperate than ever for some sort of guidance through a period that they're trying to figure out how they fit into. When you look at 2020 as a year for the industry, for Wieden+Kennedy, is it a good year? Is it a bad year?

DeCOURCY: It's been a good year, and it's been a bad year. It is no leap to say that there were drastic changes underway in the advertising industry, technology, media, targeting, everything, digital versus traditional.

And then a change in the type of people, the inclusivity of the business, which was always a very clubby, very male-dominated, very white-dominated industry. Because when you're trying to think of new ideas, it's fastest if you have people all around you who agree with you, who see it the way you do. There's less friction on getting to an answer. And that kind of propelled a phase of advertising that I think went from the '60s to the 2000s.

So the good year part of this is those changes can be really glacial. And then something like this happens, and you're just shoved into five, eight years into the future. And you shake yourself off, and you stand up and you're like, "Oh, we're here." There's no more change agenting. You have been changed. So that has been an incredible bonus, I think.

The other bonus has been that advertising is about culture. It's about being in the eye of culture, and there's never been really, in my lifetime, a more interesting moment in culture.

In a negative way, it has upset the balance of how our business works. You have interviewed more than a handful of our clients. Their businesses changed in ways that they were not prepared for. And that impacts us as well. So I'm no worse off than anyone else, but we have lost people. People we love, we have lost people to layoffs. Many of us have lost family members and friends to COVID. When we all come back and see each other, again, we will not be the same people. And I think that opportunity, whether it's good or bad, will all be in what we make of it.

SAFIAN: What do you think about the advertising business has permanently shifted as a result of COVID?

DeCOURCY: The way we do things is going to be massively different. One of the crunches we were feeling was this democratization of the tools of creation, right? Everybody has a camera, everybody's on TikTok, everybody has a moment. When you're trying to grab attention in such a tense and fragmented society, where everyone's a creator, you no longer own creative, you no longer own communication. And you don't own the tools of mass communication because that's not the way it works. So there's that.

I think there was about 10 years where the industry was pushing back on that and making a case for why this was still the ultimate way to do things, and I think that's been shattered. I think that the industry cliché of flying to New Zealand to shoot this car ad, I don't think you are going to see a ton of that. I don't think sets will be the spectacle that they used to.

Our industry has flipped upside down in the way it utilizes and monetizes a workforce. So if you look at the rise of the holding company model of advertising, where one company owned several different nameplates of agencies, so that there is an aggregate of money that moves up. That's kind of the way it was structured. From the eighties on, it grew into billing against staff and hours.

Now, what we're seeing with COVID is people want fewer bodies, more senior faster. Their problems are not stopping coming. They have problems of pandemic proportions, and creativity is something that they think they can apply to those problems and get results and we think so, too. But that's not something you put an infrastructure around, it's something you put brains against. And so there's a purity, I believe, in that other space. And it's a space that Wieden+Kennedy has always played in. So I am relieved to see that that has come our way.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: So much of Wieden's special gift has been the creative stuff. And for creatives that have long relied on being in-person for collaborating and brainstorming, how is remote trying to do the things that have always made Wieden special? Does it work? Or are you like, "I can't wait to get back to the office." Or like, "No, we don't need the office. We can do everything by Zoom."

DeCOURCY: It's all those things. Our founder used to say, "The people make the culture, it's the culture that makes the work." And that was the necessary component. We're built on that belief. To create a culture so sticky, it would hurt your very soul to leave. Creative work is often inspired by the activity and the thoughts of others. I would say this time has been kind of like the stages of grief. There have been moments in the bargaining phase where we've been like, "No, no, but this is good, right? This is good." And it is, in that we can now work with people in places that we never had offices. We are not dependent on a great talent needing to move to New York City or to Portland or to Shanghai or to Delhi or to Tokyo. We can work with them wherever they are. And then

someone will say, "Maybe we don't even need offices." And all of our hearts will just sink.

We're here for each other, we come to work for each other. We also still work in something called mass media. Even though there may be less of it than there used to, we are one of the remaining holdouts of mass media. And that finger on the pulse of mass relies on being submerged into a lot of different people's points of view. We're missing that. For the creative people at the agency, who are looking at blank sheets of paper and making things every day, there is an absence of input.

You're not going on the subway to work. You're not seeing what's going on in your grocery store. Some days you're really reaching. And just when I think we've gotten to a place where we have squeezed all the toothpaste out of this tube, my Lord, we need to go back to work, something will happen, and everyone will get revved up again and inspired one way or the other. And so, it's a day-by-day thing. I think our business will be made better by the realization that we can include more people, but we look forward to the day that we can be together again.

SAFIAN: You mentioned the cultural environment. And I can imagine that the brands that you work with are sort of coming to you guys for different kinds of adjustments or advice. How do you manage that relationship between what they're looking for, for their business, and what this environment is now, which is really delicate? Do brands have to take a stand?

DeCOURCY: Well, first of all, I'll start off by saying a brand by its very definition is something that holds a strong set of opinions about something that would attract someone. So this is not a moment to have no opinions, but this is also not a moment for everybody everywhere to weigh in on everything. It makes sense to me when Nike, when we launched the Colin Kaepernick work. Because we have a history of being buoyed up by Black athletes. The relationship that that company has is so deep. The brand position of that company was always that it was never Nike speaking, it was always the voice of an athlete. Whether it's Tiger Woods, whether it's Serena Williams, whether it's Bo Knows. All of those moments in advertising that we've been working on with them were the perspective and the experience of an athlete.

And so this was a moment and experience that made sense to me. There were real stages, I think, of advertising in COVID. The first one really was when people had bought media. So we had clients with airtime when all this was going on around them, and this was a mass channel. It's like the old days when the TV would go, "Emergency broadcast." Except these were ad spots.

SAFIAN: And they don't have anything to put in that space?

DeCOURCY: Well, even if they did, the conversations were things like, "Can we show a guy running through the airport, with his suitcase, ready to board a flight? Can we show

fans drinking Bud Light in a stadium?" How does that go down? Even the stuff you have in the can? How does that feel in that moment? So I think most brands used that time to try and say something calming. It was almost like a public service. For people like McDonald's, it was, "We're still here. You know where to find us."

For clients like Uber, it was, "For God's sake, please don't get in a car and go anywhere right now. We're unselling you our brand for the moment." By and large, it was people saying, "We're all here together. Remember you're not alone." Brands had this airspace and it seemed like the right public service to fill it. Then this thing wasn't stopping, we were all still inside and we still had to make work. We did things like, send cameras to directors and have them film in their homes. Give cameras to citizens, teach stars how to shoot themselves with their phones. It was all this aggregate gathered content that provided a proof of life. You weren't seeing people on the streets. You weren't seeing them in your home, but we were all still here.

Once you hit the third wave, it really was, "hang in there, do not despair, this will end," and brands were wrapping around that. And I think the fourth one, though this week I'm having questions again about some work we've made, should it go out in the world, is the ... let's get at it, let's move, let's go. Because we were opening back up again, and so it was the ability for a stimulus to be provided to the general capitalist engine that we all live inside of, which is that frightening moment when you open the door and step outside on your way to work, getting on the subway, getting in an Uber, whatever it is. But now we're not sure.

SAFIAN: Yeah.

DeCOURCY: Are we open? Are we closed? Most clients aren't asking us right now to solve their deepest business problem. What they're asking us is: How can we retain a connection to our consumers, our people? The people that we used to see every day. The people that count on us, or include them in our lives. How do we not just go dark? What can we add? It's been hard to be massively original because all of our experiences are so close. I think it's tough to be a CMO right now.

SAFIAN: And in the midst of all of this, there is a political division that's become increasingly apparent in the country.

DeCOURCY: Yeah.

SAFIAN: Do brands talk about having a role in pulling people together? Do brands talk about, well, that camp is my constituency and the other camp isn't, and I have to choose where my customers sit?

DeCOURCY: Yeah. Yes, pre-COVID, we had done work with Nike that was highly effective because a very big company had gotten very bigger and seemed to become

something maybe more corporate. And when we stood with Kaepernick, some people hated us, but our people remembered who we were. And that was highly effective and good for everyone, the brand, the stock, Colin. You head into COVID and you've got brands saying, "My God, where's the government? We should be doing things. We are so big. We're the size of countries. Should we be taking a hand in this?"

And it's also been an interesting thing to look at, what was advertising? At its core, advertising was to get attention, to create preference and distinction, using the tools necessary. Well, when you're in an environment where truth has just flown out the window, the audacity of what people will say to get attention is at an all-time high. It's very hard for brands to get attention for, this will last six days in the fridge. It's like, "Eh. I'm not paying attention to your product right now." And so it drives people to try and take a stand.

What I honestly believe in, what I think people are starting to see is: there is a need to find things that we have in common again. Where are we all emotionally in the world? What are we feeling? What do we want to rebuild with? And I think that's the place that we're sort of advising most people to go right now.

I try and ask my own people to remember that we have a responsibility with this media. We try and talk to our clients about what they're trying to achieve. And to pull people away from the instinct to just go wherever they get the most attention. Because if your brand is getting the most attention because of its political stance, not for its product, I promise you that is a very short-term game. Be a good company, be a corporate citizen, care about the environment you work in. But I think that cause advertising is highly in danger of becoming what celebrity advertising was in the '80s and '90s, which is rather than finding the truth in your own brand, you just attach it to somebody who gets a lot of attention. I think that's a short road. I really do.

SAFIAN: I was talking with someone who runs a hotel company and asking about what kinds of people is it okay to have at your hotel. And on the one hand, yes, he'll have Democrats at the hotel, he'll have Republicans at the hotel, that's fine. But then the question is: well, what if there's a convention of anti-vaccine folks? Would you let them be at your hotel? If there are a group of Holocaust deniers, do you allow them to be at your hotel? And these things aren't necessarily advertising, but they are saying things about your brand. Are you having conversations at that level with organizations? Do they want to look at it, or do they run away from it?

DeCOURCY: I think in these moments most CMOs are very happy that there's usually more than one version of their product in market. I can be the hotel that chooses to not have the Holocaust deniers, or the anti-vaxxers, because that's my brand. And there's a hotel down the street that does.

Now, I know that sounds increasingly divisive, and there are definitely companies where that should just not ever enter into it. I don't think it matters who's driving through a fast food drive-through. I think it matters if you're asking people to walk into a lobby and be with 500 people, wearing something or chanting something that makes you feel unsafe. And I think those are the spaces brands are trying to figure out.

Everybody wants their market cap to be as big as possible, but you need to protect your consumers. Once you forge a bond, you need to have that respect. And so I think it really depends on the level of intimacy required in any given situation. I don't care who else is buying Lysol, I really don't. I do care who else is staying in the room next to me at the Howard Johnson's. And that is just the reality of life. Never ever before have brands had to walk this line so carefully.

SAFIAN: In your role as a leader at Wieden, do you guys have discussions about what clients you wouldn't take?

DeCOURCY: Yeah, we do.

SAFIAN: Is there business you won't take? How do you decide?

DeCOURCY: We do, it is one of the things that I love the very most. Honestly, if I had to pick just one thing that I loved about Wieden+Kennedy's culture, it would be that we believe in a culture of debate. That it's: Nothing is ever not someone's business.

In the moment that we're in, it's really easy to take a set of data and make a decision on a company, are they good or bad? Is Coca-Cola good or bad? It depends on what's interesting to you. I think the way that we look at it is, is there an opportunity in our relationship for us to have a hand in making it better? Does a company overtly not give a shit about people, and only want to make money? We're not great with those. I don't think I'd ever get a weapons of mass destruction company through Wieden+Kennedy filters. Nor would I want to, and that's why I work at Wieden+Kennedy. But we do try and really look closely at, is there harm being created? Can we do more service by staying away from them, or by leaning in? And those conversations are long and arduous and never-ending for us. And I'm glad about that.

SAFIAN: So when you look ahead at Wieden+Kennedy's business, where do you see it going from here? What's next?

DeCOURCY: What's next is developing the ability to work in ambiguity. So for Wieden+Kennedy, that means you move in reaction to the world. You point your creativity at every problem that comes your way. If you really believe that great creativity can solve anything, you start pointing that in places that you maybe didn't use to. You start figuring out if you're going to own the term, "I'm a creative," you got to be all in. You got to be in on solutions like phone music, hold music, to questions that you've asked me

like, "Do you keep people away from your hotel whose ideas you don't believe in?" How many problems can we solve with our creativity?

So when you start to look at business in that way, it means that most infrastructure is useful in short spurts and not useful most of the time because you don't know what you're pointing your creativity at next. So that means that your workforce changes from one that used to know its lane, i.e., "I'm a producer. I'm an account person. I do editing. I'm a writer." To a place where it's like, "Well, what are we going to do for this client? I don't know. Why don't we pop a store up? Why don't we build a basketball court? Why don't we create a hotel? What if they made a new veggie burger?"

And so your infrastructure becomes the best possible talent you can get that can work in ambiguous situations, that is held together and bound together through a code of ethics and a culture that you want to belong to. And I think that the biggest threat to that kind of business is that COVID has made it so that people are more distanced from their office cultures than ever and more and more creative talent goes freelance. So my future is running a nimble business that has its unfair share of the best talent when it comes to creative thinking. And the pandemic says, "You don't have to work for just one person. You can work for a lot of people." It's like, "No, no, no, no, no. My business is built on holding the best collection of people."

And so I think that the next few years is going to be really about deciding what does that mean? What is that trade? What do you provide someone to ask for loyalty in return? And how do you make people lateral thinkers? So it really changes so much.

SAFIAN: So what do you feel like is at stake in this moment right now?

DeCOURCY: I think that what's at stake for my business is relevance. I think that amidst everything that's going on, survival cannot be the mode of operation. And yet it is the tactics that we're all having to employ. When you look at survival, surviving something means to get through it and still be here and the inference is unchanged. And relevance says that can't happen.

There are a few things that the founder of Wieden+Kennedy, one of them, Dan Wieden, has said that kind of get passed around the company, we call them "Wiedenisms." And the one that I have held closest to me through this time is that: "Of all the forces upon you, chaos is truly the only one that wants you to grow." And that's what I think is at stake, pulling that personal growth, that professional growth, that financial growth, the cultural growth out of chaos is what's at stake. And if we don't do it, we won't be here, because we're an independent company that is not publicly traded. It is in no one's interest to pump money into us to keep us alive, but ours.

What's at stake in general for all of us is: do we still believe there is power in a collective point of view in culture of any kind? One of the things I've despaired of lately and said to

our head of strategy, he said, "It's harder to sell great work right now." And I said, "Yeah, well maybe people are afraid. There's a lot going on for them." And I went home and I slept on it, and I got up and I phoned him. And I said, "No, it's harder to sell great work because who needs great when you have precision targeting? What was great for? Great was what got you attention."

So this targeting of information, this divisiveness of culture, this moment of the unbreaking of changing the way that we move forward in representation and race and gender and money and all of it, out of that, I think what's at stake is do we believe there is any value and power in a collective voice? I think there is. We just have to figure out how to get there.

SAFIAN: Yeah. It is a fascinating time we're in. I may have less in common with my neighbor and more in common with someone who lives in Shanghai, right? It's very hard to sort of find your tribe and find those messages that move across.

DeCOURCY: It is. And Bob, the pieces of evidence that I see of that happen around things that used to be so core to our business. Olympics, Super Bowl. I can't tell you how confused people are about advertising at the Super Bowl. The largest single audience that you'll get on any single night in the country, what do you say to them? You just try not to offend anybody? That doesn't work. So it's so clear that it doesn't matter that we share a country or a street right now. It seems like everyone's afraid to say, "Hey, what's the one common thread we all feel right now?" And I don't know if it's anger or fear, but both of them aren't helpful.

SAFIAN: Well, we hope at some point it's compassion, because that's certainly what we all need.

DeCOURCY: We sure do. RBG said America's a pendulum, and it will swing back and forth. Right now I think we're all just swinging wildly on the end of a rope, dizzy. The idea of an American narrative is broken. And brands spend a lot of time talking about storytelling, and companies talk about their narrative and their legacy. And I think that I would love to make a plea that people really look hard at what that means right now. The only thing that people have not given up on in this country right now is capitalism. So let's put something behind it.

SAFIAN: Well, Colleen, thank you. Thanks for sharing and being open.

DeCOURCY: So good to see you, Bob. Thank you so much for asking me to be with you today.