Benoit Vatere’s Case for Keeping Liquid Death Dangerous at Scale

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How can you sell water in a can successfully, without making it a gimmick?

In this live episode of Marketing Vanguard from Brandweek Atlanta, host Jenny Rooney sits down with Benoit Vatere, chief media officer at Liquid Death, to explore how he, as a non-traditional entrepreneur with an engineering background, is scaling a cult beverage brand through unconventional media strategy, retail partnerships and aggressive upper-funnel investment while protecting the brand’s core mystique.

What you’ll learn:

- How to shift from DTC obsession to retail-first strategy
- The frequency-over-reach principle for mental availability
- How to build a tech stack that bridges awareness to retail conversion
- Why a CEO-CMO creates organizational competitive advantage
- The conquest strategy in competitive categories

- How to maintain brand mystique while scaling

With a background as an entrepreneur and engineer who spent 25 years building ad tech products in Los Angeles, Benoit brings unique expertise in bridging creator marketing, retail commerce and consumer conversion.

His work at Liquid Death demonstrates how data-driven media strategy, disciplined creative positioning and deep retailer partnerships can scale challenger brands into category leaders while maintaining distinctive brand equity.

Episode Highlights:

[05:20] Build a Full-Funnel Media Strategy That Converts Awareness Into Retail Trial – Benoit emphasizes that the chief media officer's primary responsibility is constructing a complete funnel that transforms entertainment-driven creative content into measurable retail conversions. For CMOs managing large-scale CPG brands, this approach directly addresses the challenge of translating brand awareness into actual purchase behavior without relying on direct-to-consumer channels. His method involves taking breakthrough creative content, building frequency and mental availability, then strategically deploying retail media and in-store activations to drive trial among light buyers rather than exclusively targeting heavy users.

[08:25] Position Retail Media Networks as Strategic Technology Partners – Benoit challenges the widespread industry narrative that retail media networks are commoditized, low-impact channels by reframing them as sophisticated technology platforms controlled by increasingly powerful media companies. CMOs often dismiss retail media as a tax or mandatory spend without strategic value, missing the fundamental reality that Amazon, Walmart and other retailers now control audience data, conversion points and operating systems for connected TVs. Benoit's strategy involves building genuine partnerships with

retailer media teams, challenging their limitations by proving capabilities they claim don’t exist, and leveraging their first-party data and conversion proximity for mid-to-lower funnel dominance.

[11:20] Rejecting Social-Led Media Strategy Could be a Game-Changer – Benoit makes a contrarian but data-backed argument against allocating significant paid media budgets to social platforms, citing a fundamental flaw: social networks prevent brands from controlling message frequency, which is essential for building mental availability in upper-funnel awareness campaigns. The challenge intensifies when targeting audiences beyond core demographics (like Midwestern moms shopping at Walmart), who are far less likely to encounter organic social content and therefore require paid media in traditional broadcast channels. Benoit suggests a more aggressive counter solution – investment in TV, radio, podcasts and audio – channels that provide explicit frequency control and reach audiences in their natural media consumption moments (driving to stores, listening to music).

[19:07] Protect Brand Mystique by Rejecting Lucrative Misaligned Partnerships – Benoit and CEO Mike Varvarato have built institutional discipline around saying “no” to partnerships, sponsorships and collaborations that contradict brand identity, even when they come with significant financial or reach upside – a practice virtually no large public company can execute without shareholder pressure. For CMOs managing established brands that have lost mystique and credibility through over-extension (celebrity endorsements, category misalignments, tonal inconsistency), this principle is both aspirational and immediately actionable: every partnership opportunity should pass through a brand filter that asks, “Would our audience expect this from us, or would it feel inauthentic?”

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