Can Chobani’s CMO Slash CPG Marketing Stereotypes?

> It’s no secret that collaboration is essential to growth, but the how of it isn’t always so clear—and it’s the understanding of how that is a true competitive advantage. Join Adweek X, a uniquely formatted event on December 4 in LA, to unlock fresh perspectives, true collaboration and growth.

CPG marketing is on the precipice of change as technology bears down on the category, with retail media networks revealing more about consumer buying habits. Chobani’s global CMO Thomas Ranese is new to the category and technology-savvy, having previously led marketing at Uber and Google.

His plans include unexpected collaborations, retail media partnerships and data collection—modern marketing tactics that disrupt CPG advertising stereotypes. Some advertisers consider the category relatively outdated, given retailers’ sheer size and their historical reliance on in-store shopping, which can obfuscate advertising’s impact on sales.

When he resigned from the global CMO role at Uber last February, Ranese told Adweek he hoped to find a new opportunity better aligned with his interests. Within two weeks of joining Chobani this August, he was considering how Chobani, the challenger brand that disrupted the yogurt market in 2005 and eventually became its leader, could disrupt more categories.

Adweek spoke with Ranese about his new role and what’s next for the brand. “We’re actually so much more than a yogurt company, and people don’t know that,” the marketer said.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

How has your career changed over time?

I'm a theater kid-turned-policy wonk-turned-consultant, and then had a career in marketing. I bring a lot of those skills to how I think about myself as a marketer. The storytelling from the theater, the community building and customer advocacy from policy, and the business strategy and problem solving from consulting.

I've been in tech for the last nearly 15 years. I joined Google as it was building out the central global marketing team under Lorraine Twohill back in 2010. I had an incredible decade there helping to fuel growth for the brand, founded the Google Brand Studio, and then led our entry into the hardware category.

Most recently I was the global CMO at Uber, where I helped turn around the reputation and trust of the brand during Covid, did some really important social impact work and drove growth for Uber Eats.

You've worked in several industries. It's interesting, because there's a lot of convergence in advertising. How do you see that convergence playing out at Chobani, especially given your career's emphasis on technology?

One of the things that surprised me the most was how much Chobani actually feels more like a tech company than a CPG company. It's got a truly visionary founder with a product-led story, where innovation and design are at the core. It's very growth-oriented, it's disruptive to the category, and it's looking to be agile and move fast. These are all characteristics you associate much more with tech than you do CPG. … The really mission-driven ethos that's here is very

much at places like Google and Uber.

When it comes to tech, there's so many opportunities. As so much of the world is moving into online shopping, home delivery, and as these retail networks are being built by the grocers, what's the role that digital can play as we think about the entire marketing and shopping journey? It's a new field for all of us, really. I'm excited to see what I can bring from my experiences at Google and Uber to the table.

How did Chobani get on your radar?

I was looking for my next gig to be at the intersection of profit and purpose. These are two things I'm really passionate about. Profit, because companies that have scale and can generate a profit have impact and the ability to fund purpose-driven work. Purpose-driven businesses are good for profit.

On the other hand, I have a public policy background, I've been very mission driven in many of my career choices, and I can't think of a brand that's more mission driven than Chobani with these beliefs that good food can change the world.

Frankly, I don't think being purpose driven is just about being altruistic. It's about having a really clear, disruptive consumer value proposition. That's at the heart of the company—being able to provide simple, nutritious and natural ingredients at a good price.

On top of that, I'm really passionate about food. It's been one of my passions since I was a kid, and I started working at my dad's food business.

Is there anything you want to change about the way consumers perceive the Chobani brand, or are you trying to broaden their perception of what's already there?

Yes, and no. There's so much love for the Chobani brand, and I think we have to stoke that love and help people continue to

see what’s so wonderful about the brand and help more people see that. I don’t want to change that. There’s just incredible love and loyalty for Chobani and I want to build on that.

But the yes part is that we’re actually so much more than a yogurt company, and people don’t know that. We need to tell that story. Not just our mission, but [that] we want to do for the creamer category what we’ve done for Greek yogurt, and yogurt broadly. We’re just getting started.

What are you going to focus on first?

I’m still trying to figure out where they keep the yogurt around here. I’m trying every flavor I can possibly try. I’m on a roll with at least one new flavor every day.

The biggest agenda item is telling the story … to help people see that we’re much more than a yogurt company, not just in terms of moving into creamer and oat milk and other categories but also the mission and the purpose that fuels all of this. Making sure that people really can see that we bring such love and care and real passion to the things that we make [is important].

What changes will you make to the typical customer journey to accomplish your goals?

Everything’s on the table. My vision is to reimagine how we do marketing—and not just for CPG but across categories. As someone coming in from outside the CPG category, [I don’t want to] bring [just] tech thinking here, but to actually consider the best thinking from tech, CPG and other categories that we can leverage to build the next modern marketing organization.

If you just look at the trends in the category, shopping and marketing are no longer linear processes. In a very

traditional, physical retail category like grocery, it's still happening offline and online. Many people will say [consumers] don't actually shop in the store, but shop before you get to the store and you buy in the store.

What influences a customer's decision making and their loyalty to a certain brand? We have to think about the funnel holistically and in a very integrated way for all those reasons, and maybe even challenge the idea of brand vs. shopper marketing or upper funnel vs. lower funnel.

Earlier you mentioned retail media. How do you think Chobani's strategy might fit into the retail media ecosystem?

Being able to connect the consumer experience from our social media channels to the ads we buy off those networks, to the experiences [consumers] have on those networks, is going to be really important to get right and to maximize ROI.

Frankly, [retail media networks] should hopefully let us do some really innovative things in ways that are truly more personalized to the consumer. Retail hasn't been able to do these things historically because it has been so physical and offline. … Using data in effective ways off of the retail media networks, as well as on [those platforms], will ideally help all of us be more successful.

I also wonder what kind of innovation we can drive if we know what other brands people are buying in other categories. Maybe [there's even an opportunity] for partnerships with other brands in the CPG space—not just the retailers.

You built in-house creative teams at Google and at Uber. How are you thinking about Chobani's partnership strategy?

Chobani has, for the longest time, done the majority of our work through our in-house creative studio. That said, I think the model is a hybrid model.

We need to have the right balance between in-house creativity and brand leadership, and outside agency partnerships. I actually hesitate to use the word “agencies” or “creative partnerships.” It’s a range of everyone from the traditional agencies to artists and other creatives that can spark great ideas, to lots of freelancers and producers and operating partners who can help bring things to life. We need to, first of all, change the definition of partnership.

We just launched something with Graza, the extra virgin olive oil company, which is an incredible brand. It’s done a lot to make olive oil a lot more accessible to any home, and also was great for us because it showed people that Greek yogurt doesn’t necessarily need to be sweet, and it doesn’t necessarily just need to be for breakfast. There are lots of other savory ways you can use it for lunch and dinner.

Yes, advertising still plays a key role to amplify messages and, at moments, create the right conversations. But that’s just one piece of the puzzle. I think brands like Chobani that have the love and the relevance can do a lot more interesting things even beyond advertising. That’s something I’m super interested in exploring here.

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