

Innovate or Die: PepsiCo's Mark Kirkham on the Duality of Marketing



Welcome to this episode of the Marketing Vanguard podcast, recorded at Cannes. Today, host Jenny Rooney speaks with Mark Kirkham, CMO of PepsiCo Beverages U.S., about the relentless pace of innovation in the beverage category, the art of balancing core brands with new acquisitions like Poppi, and why every challenge is an opportunity.

Discover how PepsiCo continues to cultivate world-class marketing talent, the role of AI in building capabilities versus outsourcing them, and why making “simple special” is the key to success

At PepsiCo, Mark Kirkham oversees iconic brands including Pepsi, Gatorade, Mountain Dew, and the company’s partnership with Starbucks. With 15 years at PepsiCo and previous experience at P&G’s Gillette division, Mark spent nine years leading international markets across the U.K. and Ireland.

He describes himself as a “pragmatic optimist” and is known

for building diverse, entrepreneurial teams within one of the world's largest consumer goods companies.

Episode highlights:

[00:00] Innovation as Survival – Mark sets the tone immediately: “In the beverage category, if you’re not innovating, you die.” That includes acquisitions like the brand’s recent purchase of prebiotic soda brand Poppi. He explains the critical balance: “You have to see every challenge as an opportunity, and every opportunity as a challenge.”

[03:30] The Core and More Philosophy – Mark elaborates on PepsiCo’s strategic approach: “What makes it special is the duality of how do you continue to drive your core while adding more. The larger the company, the larger the brands; your core is so important. And continuing to innovate on the core is actually hard.” This philosophy drives everything from product development to acquisition strategy.

[05:07] PepsiCo’s Talent Cultivation Legacy – Addressing PepsiCo’s reputation as a marketing talent factory, Mark emphasizes: “Legacy is probably the most important word in thinking about what do you leave behind, what did I do as a marketer, and your legacy is what defines you. We do challenge our talent to push the envelope, to try new things ... we learn by doing.”

[07:24] AI as Capability Building – Mark shares his perspective on artificial intelligence: “It’s as much about the tools as it is the capabilities to use them. Too many companies outsource capabilities, and what you need to do is in-source capabilities and then use the tools that allow you to do new and different things.”

[10:22] Turning Challenges Into Opportunities – Using Gatorade as an example, Mark explains: “Not everyone knows the origin story ... they don’t know why it’s so different. That’s why it

created the category.” This drives PepsiCo’s current creative strategy focused on the 1965 Florida Gators.

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