

20_RFG_Lynn Blashford.mp3

Billie Loewen [00:00:02] Hi! Welcome to Room for Growth.

Billy Fischer [00:00:04] A WillowTree podcast about growth marketing hosted by Billy Lohan and me Billy Fisher.

Billie Loewen [00:00:09] Whether you're an industry expert or just getting started...

Billy Fischer [00:00:12] ...there's plenty of room to grow.

Billie Loewen [00:00:14] Share this episode with your favorite coworker. Follow us wherever you enjoy podcasts and reach out if you'd like to join the show.

Billy Fischer [00:00:20] You ready, Billie?

Billie Loewen [00:00:21] I'm ready, Billy.

Billy Fischer [00:00:22] Let's go.

Billie Loewen [00:00:23] Let's f***** grow.

Billy Fischer [00:00:28] Hello, everyone. Welcome to Room for Growth. Today, you are stuck with just Billy with a "Y". But, thanks for joining. I'm really excited about the guest that we have on today — Lynn Blashford, who is the Chief Marketing Officer at White Castle. I live in Columbus, Ohio, and I feel like we take White Castle for granted because it's the home of the headquarters of White Castle. There are generally a decent amount of White Castle locations located around us. But, when I started to become more aware of their geographic outreach and and locations, I learned that not every state has a White Castle. It also turns out that people are nuts for White Castle. .

Billy Fischer [00:01:12] So I'm excited to ask Lynn some questions around how the heck they have built this cult brand over the past few years. When I say the past few years ... It's one of the oldest chains in America — literally, the first burger chain in America. I think there's maybe some things we'll ask Lynn about in terms of its history. It's pretty incredible. But it got me thinking about what it takes to build a cult-like brand ... that's almost become a buzzword that we say and we aspire to do it. It's that "go viral" aspiration that was popular in marketing five, ten years ago, and so many brands try to do this. When we ask our guests Billie's favorite question — the opportunity to do what she calls "talk positive trash" or shout out to a brand that they love — often, people point towards a cult-like brand. Nike has been the most common brand that we have had mentioned. So there are certainly brands like Nike and Disney that have historically been able to do this. I think a lot of people would forget a White Castle where they have they opened a location. On the West Coast, there were people camping for days to get into the White Castle. People have their Valentine's Day dinner at White Castle. They have officiated weddings at White Castle.

Billy Fischer [00:02:31] I was also thinking about — and maybe new brands — a lot of the brands that we start to think about as cult-like are a mix of brands that are just really popular right now. And you wonder, will they stand the test of time to become a cult-like brand? Chick-fil-A is one that jumps out at me where it's currently certainly very popular. Is it a cult-like brand? I don't know. I'd be curious what you all think. So maybe when we post this episode on LinkedIn, I would love to hear some comments, if you're a listener, of what cult-like brands I'm not thinking of. Abbey, our producer of the podcast, mentioned some new ones — Glossier, which I purchased last year for my daughter for Christmas. So certainly, that tells me it's cult-like. So, in today's environment, does cult-like also equal trendy because TikTok? That's something that that I wonder.

Billy Fischer [00:03:18] But to build a true cult-like brand that stands the test of time and generates just true brand love where people are wearing the shirts, sleeping overnight to taste or test a new product or get their hands on a new product. To me, that starts to flirt with a cult-like

brand experience. And April, one of previous guests from CKE had referenced the book "Cultish" that she was reading. It gets into really this mindset. I've not had the chance to read that, but certainly something that I want to ask Lynn about.

Billy Fischer [00:03:52] Also, Lynn and the White Castle team have gone on a journey over the past few years that I think so many in marketing — whether you're in QSR, retail or whatever — have had to go through, which is taking their current tech stack — which was pretty good for a period of time, but as customers's expectations, consumer expectations have changed rapidly — they had to go through the path of making some changes and some adjustments on what they use for customer engagement, what they use for customer loyalty. Because the game has continued to change and the bar keeps going up and up and up. And so and of course, technology continues to advance. So they've experienced some of that over the past few years — and I think are in the midst of that — that we can ask Lynn about. So, I'm really excited to share Lynn Blashford, who's the Chief Marketing Officer at White Castle with you today and start to talk a little bit about what it takes to to build and maintain a cult brand.

Billy Fischer [00:04:51] Okay. So today's guest is Lynn Blashford, who is the CMO of White Castle. For the few who didn't know, White Castle is a family-owned, 100 year-old chain that is credited as being the first fast food chain in the country. They have 350+ locations and are headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, where I am. Lynn is a talented marketer and a beloved leader at White Castle, and over the last 11 years, she has helped digitize the historic and infamous White Castle brand. Before she joined White Castle, Lynn worked in field marketing and sales at Donatos Pizza as Senior Director of Field Sales. Lynn, welcome to Room for Growth. Thanks for joining us.

Billy Fischer [00:05:30] Hi, Billy. It's nice to see you. I've got to update you on some of those files. Yeah. White Castle is now 101 because we started in 1921 and we're the first fast food hamburger chain.

Billy Fischer [00:05:45] First fast food hamburger. Do you have any idea what the first fast food chain was?

Billy Fischer [00:05:49] Well, actually, A&W has been around a little longer as a root beer stand.

Billy Fischer [00:05:55] I love fast food because it's something that we all experience. Almost everybody has grown up and has some special memory of going to ... You know, some location with their grandfather or whomever. So, what a fun industry to work in. You've worked in the food space for a long time. I'm curious, how did you get started in this industry and and what made you stay?

Billy Fischer [00:06:19] Oh, my goodness. So, yeah, we're talking over 30 years ago. I think some of what it was that I actually started working in restaurants in college. Food is fun. You know, as a college student, it allowed you to eat free. So that might have been the path down the career that began in the restaurant industry. Then, on the corporate side, I think the other piece that really interested me ... I went to the University of Kentucky and a lot of the classes that really intrigued me were those around consumer behavior. And to this day, you utilize that observation of humanity in everything we do as a marketer. So, the combination of food and consumer behavior just led me to mostly restaurants, retail and some CPG.

Billy Fischer [00:07:10] Awesome. And naturally, you had to take your Kentucky blue and then go to a brand that has that blue, or go or close to Kentucky blue in that. So that's convenient.

Lynn Blashford [00:07:18] Yeah. So my wardrobe color was utilized that way.

Billy Fischer [00:07:24] And in your role as chief marketing officer ... You know, when I think about White Castle, one of the things I admire about White Castle is that you seem to always be pushing the envelope and leaning in to things that sometimes might feel risky, or that are just really kind of new and innovative. One example that pops up in my head is Flippy, the robot from couple of years ago. This has maybe become more normal now, but you were the first to jump on and start innovating around robotics within the store to help with some staffing shortages. And I saw you

speaking one time on a partnership with Wu-Tang. And this is well before the Travis Scott Burger — you were doing partnerships with folks like Wu-Tang. So it's that kind of leaning in that I think you're a little bit ahead and maybe don't always get the credit that is deserved for being this really, really innovative brand. Because some of the big national chains steal the limelight. What's the philosophy? How do you approach taking on risks and how do you evaluate some of these things?

Lynn Blashford [00:08:29] You know, I think it goes back to the lineage for White Castle and being an innovator — literally in pioneering an industry and being family-owned — that there was an element of some innovation that was occurring throughout the decades. Moving 35 years ago, taking our product into grocery was innovative. When we went out to other manufacturers to say, "Can you do this and help us? We're seeing people come into our restaurants and pack up cases of sliders and taking them across the country. We think it would be great to get in a go-to-grocery so that people could buy sliders from coast to coast." And they turned down Bill Ingram, who was our third president. So we decided to do it ourselves, and we started manufacturing. You know, we manufacture our own meat patties, our own buns, we make our own frozen food sliders just like we cook them in the Castle that go into the freezer section.

Lynn Blashford [00:09:21] And I think that innovative spirit is carried through to Lisa Ingram, who's our current President and CEO and the great-granddaughter of the founder. Being a family-owned company, it allows you to move. I should say that because of the size that we are, too, we can be pretty agile and move pretty quickly. So when you think about Impossible Foods and bringing the Impossible Foods slider in with Wu-Tang Clan as our spokespeople and we sell robotics because we have a very flat organization. So there are not a lot of tiers that we have to go through for decision-making. The leadership in the company — we're all very close. We're not siloed at all, so we can make decisions pretty quickly. We found that partners enjoy working with us because of that, and every business venture we look at as a true partnership. That's the other piece, too. Let's go into this with shared learning and how we make each other better. Even if robotics are going to take their equipment to other brands, even if Impossible then launches with bigger brands than us. But, we look for ways that being first can actually give you some edge, because then every time they talk about you in the press, using Impossible or robotics as an example, they'll talk about us as being one of the first to partner with them.

Billy Fischer [00:10:38] Yeah, that's that's amazing. There are a lot of lessons in there. And as I was talking in the intro, you know ... I take it for granted because I'll be within probably five, 10 minutes of a White Castle at any time here in Ohio. So I often forget about the packaged goods product for folks in different areas of the country who don't have a White Castle location. That's their only way. And I think a lot of brands take the licensing approach where somebody else will handle that product. But that's part of your responsibilities: you're not just marketing a QSR brand, you are marketing a CPG brand at the same time. That's got to bring some challenges, I would think.

Lynn Blashford [00:11:20] It brings challenges, but a lot of benefits. Because, it gives us the cost learning of when our restaurant customers are buying the retail product to stock in their freezer. And then vice versa, the retail customers — many of which have started their experience maybe with a Castle visit — and the memories they have and that taste, which is so distinctive, that they now enjoy wherever they are. So there are some benefits to the crossover of the business.

Billy Fischer [00:11:48] Lynn, a lot of our listeners are niche growth marketers who are focused on CRM messaging, CDP, and so I always like to try to wire in the content of our podcast to help solve some of the problems and challenges that they're dealing with every day. So I want to talk a little bit about loyalty and how you think about the overall topic of loyalty — something we talk a lot about. But before I get there, let's talk about a cult brand. I was mentioning in the intro that when you open a new store, new markets, it's almost hard to believe: people are staying the night, waiting in lines forever. It's insane. It's just, you know, the true signs of a cult brand. What do you think are the biggest differences between what makes up a cult brand — which I would put White Castle in that category — versus, you know, just a fad?

Lynn Blashford [00:12:41] When we think of a cult-like brand, for us, we look at it as probably defined more from the dedicated, devoted, passionate cravers we have around the brand. We

might even shy away from the terminology around "cult," because that can have an indication that it's a narrow appeal or a narrow niche of a consumer. So the cult-likeness of it is something that we attach to, and we're so grateful for those people who have that devotion for our product and the brand. But at the same time, we want to make sure it's broad and appealing enough that we can have a good business model around the brand. The other benefit of some of the cult-likeness, kind of playing off your terminology, is the fact that other people become very curious. Because they're interested in, "What makes these cravers so crazy about, you know, staying in line for four hours.?" Our location in Orlando, still on the weekend, may be an hours-long wait. People just can't wait to get in there and satisfy their craving because the product is so distinguishable, too, and there's really nothing else like it in the market. So I think we benefit from that and we benefit from the generations who have passed down that love of the brand. Like you said, being around 101 years, they're from generation to generation. They share that passion within families and households.

Billy Fischer [00:14:15] Yeah, that's awesome. I guess the word "cult" does have a little bit of a negative tone to it, and so just insanely loyal would be the way that I think about it. And, I know you think about loyalty programs all the time and for your "Cravers" you're always working on delivering a great loyalty program for them — generally, at a high level. You know, I think this is a big trend right now where I continue to read, and hear, and you see things in the news about Dunkin had a challenging loyalty launch. And so I think there's a lot of this going on in the marketing space right now. So generally, when somebody is getting started on building a loyalty program, are there some core elements that you think about that make up a good loyalty program?

Lynn Blashford [00:14:57] You have to start with what your customers want. What are they looking for? What is this reciprocal relationship that's going to occur so that they understand there's some value return? I think at the core for us: it really started with that strategy. What are the components that we want to be able to provide value to those who sign up for loyalty? We've got 101 years of loyalty, actually with many customers. This was just taking it in some ways to a more digital mobile experience, and you can't provide value to them then they're not going to utilize a loyalty program at all. So for us, it started with what's the strategy? What do we want to kind of value? Do we want to provide to our customers?

Billy Fischer [00:15:45] Yeah. And what do you think it is that makes the Craver so unique? I was mentioning ... Just like amazing ... the not only the Arizona store opening, but people do Valentine's Day dinner at a White Castle, or have their wedding at a White Castle. So these Cravers have a little bit of a unique element to them. What do you think makes your consumer so unique at White Castle?

Lynn Blashford [00:16:07] I think part of it has been our team members over the years. We've had some of the lowest turnover in the restaurant industry. They've come to know their local White Castle as a place where they're familiar with the team members that work there and vice versa. And they've celebrated moments through their generations and through the decades from growing up to wherever they're at in life now. Or, maybe it was late nights in college somewhere, or after some late night fun that they were having. And those are moments that they remember. We know when things stick in the memory, it can manifest itself in something that you want to go back to again and again. When you couple that with a product — not to be too repetitive — but when you couple that with a product that is really distinctive in taste, then I think it's a magic combination for us.

Billy Fischer [00:17:00] Yeah, that's awesome. So when you are looking at your loyalty program and the tactics that you're investing in and trial-and-error, what are some of the things that you see are the biggest indicators and how are you measuring success of a loyalty program?

Lynn Blashford [00:17:15] I want to be really forthcoming and say that we've had some trial-and-error in our loyalty program as we moved. So we've had online ordering, we've had other components of CRM for a long, long time. Moving to an actual loyalty platform about three years ago, we started with an organization actually that was out of New Zealand, and we did that at the time because we did not want to be like every other chain that was launching loyalty. We were really looking for something that was going to be different, distinctive, you know, how do we take

it? Let's look five years beyond. Let's look a few years beyond and not do just a traditional points program which felt just so transactional in nature. And so one of our learnings was, who knew a pandemic would come along? And our partner in New Zealand struggled. I mean, a small island lost developers, could not hire, they could not travel to us in order to have strategy meetings which the occasional in-person one, you really benefit from that kind of work. And we're going to be moving away from that partner. We've done a search recently and I know WillowTree is one of our partners and has given us advice along the way.

Lynn Blashford [00:18:32] So I want to let people know we don't get everything right all the time. But I think it's important that you take away and you learn from that. And then as you move forward, you carry that forward and say, "How do we do it better?" Over the last three years, you know, consumers now expect some visibility to seeing how they are transacting with you and what is that reward at the end of a path forward, in some ways. So they want to see what kind of progress they're making. The landscape has changed. So we're going to re-evaluate what is the best way to relaunch a loyalty program in 2023.

Billy Fischer [00:19:10] Good, thanks for sharing. You and I talked about this before the pandemic. So, you know, technology has been growing at a rate that's been pretty wild. And, we've both been able to be a part of this. It's kind of it's fun, it's challenging and it's crazy all at the same time. And then the pandemic happened and there was this period of fear where we're like, "Oh, no," and naturally we're all worried about our families and the world. And then in the business space we were like, "What's going to happen?" Well, all of a sudden after that scary period, now we're trying to move towards some level of normalcy. The whole entire consumer expectation and the landscape of consumers who are using delivery and drive-thru and pick-up at a rate like we had never seen before was wild.

Billy Fischer [00:19:58] It just introduced this consumer behavior change out of nowhere. And in the midst of that, I call it a digital arms race where restaurants and chains are investing like crazy in these experiences. So the bar just continues to go up. I think a lot of brands are sharing in some of your learnings. And that's why I think that, okay, looking forward to 2023, what should our loyalty program be? That's something that I'm hearing and reading about a lot. It's a really big challenge. At the heart of that is technology, as you mentioned, you know, and so this only makes it even more complicated. It's not just about creating great ideas and great programs. It's the technology and the reliability behind that. If you don't mind sharing what that journey has been like for y'all over the past few years at White Castle, and how did you mature the technical capabilities that you deliver to consumers?

Lynn Blashford [00:20:55] Where our loyalty program might have had some missteps ... I feel like we really benefited from the fact that marketing operations and our technology team here at White Castle all work so closely together that even pre-pandemic, we've had online ordering for about eight years. We've had a mobile app for years. We were with every delivery partner pre-pandemic. So the infrastructure was set there so that when the consumer did start to turn to a more digital experience or a drive-thru-only experience, we were able to keep our drive-thrus open. We were well ahead of the game. So I credit our team here internally for knowing that this was a path that we were getting ready for in the future. We had no idea it was going to accelerate for the amount of business that it did, but we were ready, so that was a big win for us.

Lynn Blashford [00:21:52] As we look forward to 2023, I think some of it's going to be around our relaunch or refresh of our loyalty program. In a way, what we're going to offer and I really rely upon ... I'm going to call out Susan Carroll-Boser, our head of technology here: we work hand-in-hand every day, and we start with the strategy of, what do we want to achieve? What's the customer experience we're looking for holistically? Whether it be online, offline, or wherever they are. And then it's her team, she and her team, who really do a great job of networking within multiple industries and coming back with what's the technology solution. As a marketer, I will not profess to be a technical expert in any way, but we partner internally with those who are. And I think that's where we've gotten to where we've gotten so far.

Billy Fischer [00:22:46] Yeah, that's that's awesome. That's another topic for another podcast of how IT and marketing should and can work together, because I think gone are the days where you can get away with siloed organizations and anyone who's delivering something.

Lynn Blashford [00:23:02] Anybody who is working like that is is is going to be well behind. I want to say, too, that our leader, Lisa Ingram, she's a big believer in technology as being something that can help propel us into the future. She's been a great advocate for what we're doing in marketing on the technology side and in the operations, the structure of the restaurant. So she's out there talking about innovation because it's been her lineage to continue that path.

Billy Fischer [00:23:35] You've talked a little bit about loyalty and I even saw that in that kind of grouping of cool stuff that you guys are always willing to try, there was a beer pairing that you did recently with a craft brewer, a great IPA to pair with your sliders. What can we expect from White Castle? Any cool things that that you have coming up that you're really excited about?

Lynn Blashford [00:23:58] I think we're excited about how we continue to ... Those are some licensed products that you mentioned. That was, again, another strategy that we embarked upon several years ago to say, "What other brands are out there, what manufactures?" The PUMA sneaker launch that we did was a whole new world that we love. And to your point about the IPA brewer group called Evil Genius, we were purposeful in finding other industries that are also — we'll call it "cult-like," like the "sneakerhead" world — and they embrace that name, so we have permission to say it. But what it does, is it brings our brand to other passionate consumers in other industries. We did a DGK skateboard and skatewear — again, a different consumer group that is really passionate about what they do, the sport they have. So I think for us, we're always looking for other similar passionate bands.

Billy Fischer [00:24:59] Awesome. Well, you know, Lynn, I could talk to you forever about some of these fun marketing programs. We always like to leave our guests with a few fun questions that are still dialed into their day-to-day. But I'm curious, we've talked so much about loyalty. Do you have a favorite loyalty program of a brand that you interact with that you're just like ... I always talk about Delta. Delta Airlines is my go-to one that I just love and nobody could ever convince me otherwise. Are there any of those for you?

Lynn Blashford [00:25:32] You know, I might be classified as a little more of a brand switcher. I do like to shop around, but using your Delta example, I kind of go to the other extreme because I don't fly enough, for example. But when I think about, what are the products or the brands that I use most frequently? It's grocery. So when you think about it, they were some of the very first loyalty programs — the grocery retailers. And there was something in my shopping cart weekly. I could see the benefit of lower price structures, and they've gotten so good at personalizing offers to you — whether it be in the digital format or even still to this day, you know, they'll mail: "We see you shop this product. Here's some free ones for you." So I think in some ways that helps. Especially in these inflationary times, I think I'm going to rely on my grocery retailer loyalty programs.

Billy Fischer [00:26:25] That's a great example because I've read some stats that, yes, some of the leading grocery chains are seeing 90% of purchases being loyalty users, which is unbelievable. And I think it's because they've done such a good job at creating a benefit to sign up. You almost have to be crazy if you're shopping at a certain chain to not sign up for their program. And then you mention personalization, which is a thing that we're talking a lot about. That's like much more than, "Hi Lynn." That's no longer going to cut it. They need to know if you're gluten-free, if you have certain brand preferences. That's the new stage of customer expectations. That requires a lot of investments on really great technical platforms in order to deliver that level of personalization. So I love that. What's the best or potentially the worst? You've worked with some great leaders — but what's the best or potentially worst career advice that you've received that you often think about and hold on to?

Lynn Blashford [00:27:23] Some of the best advice that I've received was to listen first. I think I've used that in my career. Early on, you probably want to sort of make a name for yourself, and really talk up and think about, "How can I impress my boss young in my career?" And I had a boss at one time that said, "You know, stop and listen more and hold your thoughts until you've really formulated them. And then when you speak — I feel like it's the old H&R Block — people will listen. So I've carried that through because not only is it about your team members or your department, it's really about the customer. So it's that listening first, from the customer

perspective that I've just carried through in some ways. And it's curating all that information together that you get — whether it's listening to your data team, listening to the customer service group. And I think as marketers, we have to curate that and filter it in a way that helps us with our strategy and where we're going.

Billy Fischer [00:28:27] Yeah, that's awesome. I'm always wired to move quickly. And so I have to remind myself sometimes, "Okay, let's pause and process this information before," because I always just want to like, "Oh, that's a really good nugget. Let's go!"

Lynn Blashford [00:28:42] You have to stop yourself sometimes.

Billy Fischer [00:28:44] And then, my co-host Billie is not joining us today, but she always has this question that we laugh about. We like to invite our guests to talk positive trash about a brand they love. So somebody that's doing something really interesting in marketing: who do you love and why?

Lynn Blashford [00:29:01] I know a lot of people use this example, but I think they're a perfect example of longevity. And that's Dove — the Unilever products, what the Dove brand has. And you think back because they're a real campaign with real beauty that started in 2004. So I have a real love for brands that stick to what they do and do it best, and watch them evolve versus switching agencies every few years. Switching campaigns, I guess I'm just kind of a stickler for ... I like seeing people do things good and sticking with that — if that's your lane and that's what you do, well, that's okay. And I know as marketers, we're always looking for the next big thing or how to change around.

Lynn Blashford [00:29:45] Dove to me has evolved their campaign. They do fantastic videos. They've taken it into the digital world with body image and self esteem. They've gone all in. I love the video that they did just a year-and-a-half ago: it was a reverse selfie, because young women put so many filters on and change what they do when they're taking their selfies. And Dove reversed it and started with this beautiful image, and reverse back to the real person. And I think they've done it in a way that connects with women of all ages and they've expanded their product line, and that's the other piece, too, right? It's not just about what you do. It's that they're smart about their merchandizing. They're smart about their media. They bring it all together in real, holistic campaigns and ones that have resonated with a lot of women and men.

Billy Fischer [00:30:36] And they were really early. You said 2004? Yeah, well ahead of ... You know, that's almost become a common marketing strategy for lifestyle brands in today's environment. But they are well ahead of the curve. That's a great example. I was glad that you mentioned. We so often hear the same brands repeated, and that's a new one, and then such a good one. So thanks for sharing. Well, then, you know, for our listeners, if you've not had a slider, go to the White Castle website and find your local White Castle to pick up a Crave Case and experience a slider — even if it's on your bucket list or not, it is time.

Lynn Blashford [00:31:18] ...or the freezer aisle if you're not close to a restaurant!

Billy Fischer [00:31:22] So, if you're in California I think that's the state that currently, that's the best option for them. So yeah, head to the freezer. I told you, I always forget, because it's so easy for me to go get a get a Crave Case. But we really appreciate your time and we look forward to watching what's to come with the great White Castle brand. And thanks for sharing some insights with us today.

Lynn Blashford [00:31:42] Thank you, Billy. Great talking to you.

Billy Fischer [00:31:44] Thank you, Lynn.