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Lipstick Economy - Ep005 Transcript: Sharon Brawner

00:04 Sharon Brawner: When you walk through this museum and you hear the music, you connect immediately to the memories that are surrounding that music. When we're looking at what we're doing and how we present it, we really try to make sure that it's an emotional connection that you find. That's what music does for people, and I think that's another reason why it's so special.

00:26 Melinda Hudgins Noblitt: That was Sharon Brawner, senior vice president of sales and marketing at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum right here in Nashville.

Sharon is responsible for all marketing strategies, earned income areas, including ticket sales, restaurant, catering, retail, the fabulous Hatch Show Print, historic RCA Studio B, and CMA theater. Additionally, she oversees the information and technology team.

You're listening to the Lipstick Economy podcast, where we talk about marketing to women through the stories of leaders – leaders who are making a difference through their insight, strategy, diversity and creative thinking.

The lipstick economy is comprised of the 100 million women in the U.S. who make 85 percent of all consumer purchases.

01:09 Jamie Dunham: This podcast is made possible by Asurion, a global technology solutions company committed to diversifying the tech industry. I'm Jamie Dunham, founder of Brand Wise, a marketing firm focused on creating cultural relevancy for brands.

01:25 Melinda: And I'm Melinda Hudgins Noblitt, a recruitment marketing leader with Asurion.

01:29 Jamie: So, let's jump in.

01:34 Jamie and Melinda: Welcome, Sharon.

01:35 Sharon: Well, thanks, ladies. It's so good to be here.

01:38 Jamie: You know, the Country Music Hall of Fame is almost as sacred as the Ryman to country music fans. What makes it so special?

01:44 Sharon: Well, I think there's a lot of things, obviously, that make the museum very special. I have to start with the Hall of Fame members themselves. You know, three quarters of our name is the Hall of Fame. It's the pinnacle accolade that you can receive in this music.

And like anybody who wants to see the greatest of anything, that makes it special to start with. I mean, if you're a baseball fan, you're gonna go to Cooperstown. If you're a football fan, you're gonna go to Canton, Ohio. And on down the line.

So, that's a part of what makes the museum special, because we hold the legacies of the best of this music. And we take that honor very seriously.

Beyond that, I think it's because we tell the whole story. You know, the Ryman is a sacred place, as you said, and it holds a very special place in country music history and it continues to be a musical icon.

Our job is to tell the whole story of country music. And so when you find yourself to be a fan of this genre, whatever piece and part you enjoy, whether that's bluegrass, Americana, folk, hillbilly, rockabilly, you name it – whatever way you want to talk about country music, we tell all of that story.

So, we talk a lot about the fact that it's the big tent of country music. It's the big name of the genre. All the other parts fit up underneath that tent. And so I think that people look to our beacon to say, "If they find it important, it must be significant."

And so, therefore, I think that's why it holds a special place for people and they put it on their "I have to make this pilgrimage" list. And that's important to us, to uphold that and be honorable to that.

03:24 Jamie: That's so great. You know, Nashville has changed, obviously, over the past few years.

03:29 Sharon: That would be the understatement of the day. Yes, ma'am.

03:34 Jamie: And that beautiful building where – the Country Music Hall of Fame has seemed to be part of our newer landscape here in Nashville. But now it's become a tourist destination, this pilgrimage that you're talking about. How's that change what you do on a day to day basis?

03:52 Sharon: Well, it's interesting. You know, we were asked by the mayor at the time – which would have been Bredesen, who went on to be governor of Tennessee when the previous museum, of course, was held on Music Row. And it started there in 1967, and it got added on and added on up there in its humble beginnings. And it was kind of outgrowing itself already at that point.

And of course, you know, Mayor Bredesen at that time wanted to bring the focus to downtown to turn that entire thing around and felt that the Hall of Fame could be, again, this anchor to what he called "south of Broadway." And now we refer to it as "the SoBro district," right?

04:30 Jamie: And it has been.

04:35 Sharon: And so that was a big gamble for this museum, a real big gamble. And it was a whole lot of debt we were going to take on to build this building. And so they launched a capital campaign, just enough to get it started. And off it went.

And so, you know, we were kind of all by ourselves there for a minute. Then, Bridgestone popped up and then the Schermerhorn and then down the street, the Frist. All of that kind of came all in one fell swoop.

But it definitely wasn't, "Okay. It's here, so now everybody's going to come." Cause right after we opened in May of 2001, then September 11th happened. And I joined the team a month later. And so things were not too rosy at that point.

And so we all wondered how we were going to possibly pay off this huge capital investment without all the throngs of folks that we had hoped for at that point. And we certainly weren't the city we are now.

And so with the hustle and the bustle now, fast forward, right? It's kinda like a great hit song, and it makes an artist. And it's like, "Wow. They were an overnight sensation." No, no, no, no. It took years actually.

And so I think the museum sits in that same space. It took us a hot minute to get to this place where now we're doing 1.2 million people a year and growing, and we have been now for many years.

So, we've made a lot of big decisions along the way to get there, like rotating exhibition schedules, the absolute craziness level of public performances, Q&A sessions, panel discussions – opportunities to sort of what I call "look behind the curtain" and understand the business in a way that only we get those interviews on a regular recurring basis.

It's one of the reasons why having the museum based in Nashville – even back in 1965, when they were talking about starting this museum – I don't know if you know the history behind that, but there was talk at that time that they were going to go to New York for The World's Fair and talk about country music. They were going to get a temporary display.

And once they realized what that was going to cost, they were like, "Well, that's not a very smart idea. We just need to build a permanent place, a permanent place where people will come and understand that this is an important part of American history." Really smart folks back in the 1960s, and they said, "We gotta do it in Nashville."

So, if you take that and you pop that over and think about the Cleveland Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, a lot of people go, "Why is it in Cleveland?" You know, rock and roll music is not known for Cleveland, Ohio, for heaven's sake. It's more New York or LA, right?

And of course there is a historic reason that it's founded in Cleveland, but there's not an artist community to back it in Cleveland.

07:12 Jamie: Right.

07:13 Sharon: We do. And so that has allowed us to really capitalize all along. And now that folks have turned their eyes toward this city, they understand they're going to get the authentic look behind the curtain, and we can tell them those stories. So, that's a really long answer, but it all comes around full circle.

07:32 Jamie: So, I'm just wondering – thinking about that and how that ended up sort of creating the museum as we know it today, what's been the effect of the Ken Burns Country Music special on your world?

07:46 Sharon: Right now? You know, we already feel it. Folks are starting to come into the museum and asking – for example, there's one of the earlier episodes in the Ken Burns documentary that really focuses on Jimmy Rogers. Jimmy Rogers was in the first Hall of Fame class. It was Jimmy Rogers, Hank Williams and Fred Rose. And so, you know, a lot of people go, “Fred Rose? Who's Fred Rose?”

08:09 Jamie: Yeah. We know him.

08:10 Sharon: I know you do. Yes. So and now a lot more people do.

But because of that – he's a hall of fame member, and we do have artifacts on Jimmy. And they come in asking, “We want to learn more about Jimmy Rogers. What do you have?” Or, “We want to learn more about Hank Williams,” or, “We want to learn more about Johnny Cash.”

They come in saying, “I saw the Ken Burns documentary. Do you have that guitar that was on the Ken Burns documentary?” And in some cases we do, and in other cases we don't. And we're able to say, “We don't have it here. It's actually at the Bristol Museum,” or, “That's actually on loan to The Rock-A-Billy Museum,” or, you know, that kind of thing.

And so it's been a wonderful effect. Our staff is excited to talk about this documentary. We've all watched it. We've all talked about it. We use it as a training tool inside the museum.

And what's interesting about that documentary is that, you know, Ken, because he is Ken, came to our building to do a lot of research, did a lot with our collection, which was wonderful. And, of course, as you may know, we received an entire copy of every interview that he collected in that. He added it to our collection.

09:16 Jamie: Oh, that's great.

09:17 Sharon: Oh, it was fantastic. And photographs as well. He interviewed, I think, 40 some odd Hall of Famers, some of which are unfortunately no longer with us.

So, that adds to our oral history collection. So, he's a great supporter of history, clearly, and understood that this stuff needed to belong with us to add to our collection. Beyond that, we're selling his book and the DVD sets faster than they can keep us supplied.

And so I think that for some folks, they've watched it. They come to our museum. It just drives it home that much more, and they want to seek more information. So, it's been a good effect so far, and I have my fingers crossed that next year is going to be an even bigger attending year.

09:58 Jamie: Yeah. That's great.

10:00 Melinda: So, I'd love to know about the folks – you mentioned 1.2 million visitors per year, right, and growing. So, I'm curious to know about what does that audience look like? Is that an equal 50/50 male, female audience?

Here, obviously, we're talking about marketing to women, so just curious to know what your audience looks like and how you kind of target women when it comes around to it.

10:19 Sharon: Absolutely. It is pretty close, 50/50. I will say that it has started to skew a little heavier to women, even more so right now. I think we all know that women are the decision makers, particularly when it comes to what the family is going to do if they're on vacation.

The majority of our guests are tourists. You know, it's a big initiative, to be honest, that we have in 2020 and moving forward that right now – 98 percent of the people who come to our building are tourists.

I only have 2 percent locals. And we define a local here in Nashville as Davidson County and all of the counties that touch it. That's how we define a local.

So, once you get outside the doughnut, as I call it, then any other middle Tennesseans or Tennesseans become tourists, if you will. So, it's an issue. And isn't it, though, always the case that people don't do whatever's in their own backyard?

11:16 Jamie: Exactly.

11:17 Sharon: That's always the case. My husband is from here, born and raised. Never been to the Grand Ole Opry. And I'm like, "We can't get married until we get this fixed. This would not be good, not for my career or you personally."

So, anyway, but to your point about how do we market to women, you know, we certainly make sure that we do think about the fact that they are that decision maker. Our subject matter – we work very hard to make sure that it is very much for everybody.

It's to the music enthusiasts, and women are more inclined to listen to music of any genre – except for hip hop. It's more skewed to men. But this particular genre is very heavy to women. You have been around at Music Fest. It's mostly women.

12:01 Jamie: Yeah.

12:02 Sharon: And so women tend to travel more. They buy more concert tickets. They buy more music. They're much more fan loyal to their artist or genre.

So, we know that that's just a built-in automatic audience. And then, now, as we begin to build our local initiatives, which are going to come out in 2020, we're going to be doing that here locally as well.

And our intention is also to build our family market. The Taylor Swift Education Center, which was a part of our expansion in 2014 – we have really grown our educational staff, like by 35 percent. And so now we have a force of folks – by the way, which I think all but two are women.

And it's a growing need. We know that our interaction with the local school system has really been a great thing. Metro Public Schools really embraces what we do, how we bring literacy into it.

We hit all of the STEAM and STEM curriculum needs that they have. We work with the school system to build curriculum specifically to meet their needs and train them on how to present it.

Our Words & Music program, which is the oldest program we've had in the museum's history, has 43 years of existence.

13:16 Jamie: Oh, gosh.

13:17 Sharon: It's going into classrooms, working with these teachers to teach students how to write songs. And so you're dealing with literacy. You're dealing with great writing skills and how to express yourself through this particular forum. And a lot of people don't even know that we do this kind of work.

13:34 Jamie: Oh, no. I didn't know it.

13:36 Sharon: Because people look at us and think, "Ah, it's a tourist attraction." It's a really good one, but they don't understand all these other pieces.

So, as the head of marketing, this drives me crazy. And it's, "How do I get that across to folks so that they will come to understand locally, yeah, you need to go?" Oh, of course. Yeah, check it off your list, but you really need to understand that you can come and interact with this regularly.

And you should support it, too, because of the work we're doing to save this history, to save these artifacts, to make them around for all time.

14:09 Jamie: Right.

14:10 Sharon: Because there is no one else who has this collection. To that too, we refer to ourselves internally – we do not market this, but we do say we're the Smithsonian of this music. And we say that with great pride, because we have over 2 million items in our collection, and that's growing every day.

And when the Smithsonian, truly, in D.C. wanted to salute country music in the nation's capital – I think that was the summer of 2006 or 2008. Don't quote me cause I don't remember. I've been there 18 years, so it's a hard time for me to remember.

But when the Smithsonian wanted to salute this music, they called us and said, “We need your expertise,” and we did.

14:53 Jamie: You know, I have been to a place that had a display where music showed how the different influences all kind of touch on each other. And maybe with the exception of hip hop, almost everything goes back to some form of country music or gospel music and they were all blended together.

15:11 Sharon: That's right. It's why there's so many different little nuances in the music. Like I was saying earlier, you know, when you say country music – well, there's the gospel.

15:22 Jamie: Right. Folk, Americana.

15:23 Sharon: Exactly. All of them. There are all these little spinoffs, if you will. But it's all connected to country.

But to your point, especially in its early days, the story that we tell at the museum every day – yes, we have rotating exhibitions, but we also have at the core, which is the history, the chronology of this music.

And so some of the earliest artifacts that we have are instruments from the late 1800s, where people were making a banjo, where they were making guitars using skins from animals to, you know, use the hides to make these things. And then the strings, of course, from some internal parts of an animal. That would actually make the first strings of these instruments.

It's a pretty fascinating story. And it also came from a tremendous amount of black influence from African American slave music. And so that folk roots deep-seated music also has a huge influence here. And a lot of people don't know that.

You know, we look at this music, and it is predominantly seen as white music. Think about it. There aren't very many artists in this industry that are from people of color, but there is a huge influence from people of color and all different nationalities of color.

And so when you look at Tejano music and how that bleeds – I mean, I can keep going. It's pretty fascinating.

And people come into our museum every day. We see it in our comment book. “I came in really not liking country music, but everybody said I had to come here. And I came, and I really do like country music. I like this part of country music, and I didn't realize what all was here.” That's pretty cool.

17:03 Jamie: That's a great tribute.

17:04 Sharon: Yeah.

17:04 Melinda: I think that's a good point. Just as a side note, you mentioned the Tejano music, and my grandparents are from Mexico. So, my mom grew up listening to a lot of that music, but she was always drawn to the Texas Tornados and Freddy Fender.

17:17 Sharon: Oh, yeah.

17:17 Melinda: And she still will quote them, and she loves that old kind of Texas Mexican music.

17:22 Sharon: Yes.

17:22 Melinda: And I never would have thought to put that in the country music category, because in my mind, that was separate, right? Like you mentioned, its own kind of sub-genre.

17:29 Sharon: Right.

17:30 Melinda: But I think that's a really good point in thinking you do – cause I can imagine myself walking into the museum and saying, “Oh well, I'm here. You know, let's see,” but then really being drawn in and saying, “Oh, okay, yeah. You're right. I do like this section of it.”

17:44 Jamie: So, when you're planning exhibitions, do you take into account specific target audiences? I mean, is there – you're looking for – is it artists and kind of who their fan base is, or do you go out looking for exhibitions that fit your target?

18:01 Sharon: The way that we really look at our rotating exhibition schedule or limited engagement, whichever way you want to look at it – the way we really go about that is we have a whole list of criteria that we look at when we're looking at the topics.

You know, do we need to target this particular artist or story? Cause not everything's artist-driven, because we don't really have enough in our collection. So, it's a collecting initiative, right?

18:24 Jamie: Oh, right.

18:25 Sharon: So, how do we make sure that we've got this story locked up in the collection so that, as time goes by, the folks way after me will know that they have it?

So, there's that. Can there be accompanying products, like a book that goes even deeper on the subject or maybe even a historic album? So, we think about those things.

We look at how much this person or this part of the history of the music impacts things today. We look at that. Again, there's a full list, but the simplest thing that we do, and we talk about this a lot, is we look at the depth and texture of the music and then a balance.

So, we talk about that all the time. It has to have depth and texture and balance. So, we look at a whole year at a time. We look at, “Do we have enough women represented? Do we have men represented? Is there a group? Is it legendary? Iconic? Is it a particular time or era?”

And then, of course, contemporary. One of the things that when I first got to the museum, you know – I think, again, the perception is, “Oh, it’s a museum. It must be all the old stuff.” Well, that couldn’t be further from the truth.

19:39 Jamie: Right.

19:40 Sharon: And so even when the museum first opened, it went all the way to the 90s. Because it opened in 2001, but most people thought, “Oh, it’s just all the old stuff. It’s probably just to the 60s or something.”

So, we had to really work hard to get people to understand, “No, we’re going to keep telling the story as it’s happening.” You know, when is something history? That’s a good question, isn’t it?

So, we knew we could keep it current to some extent. I mean, you can’t have it up to the moment. We’re not there to be the news, but we are here to give reflection even to what something happened last year.

Which, I think 4 years ago was when we opened for the first time the exhibit called American Currents. Well, it means it’s the current people who are making the music now. So, we look at, “Just the last year, who’s broken out? Who had a monumental moment? What was a pivotal shift in the music?”

For example, this is one of my favorites. I was there when it happened. CMA awards 3 years ago – Chris Stapleton and Justin Timberlake.

20:41 Jamie: Oh my gosh, my favorite.

20:43 Sharon: They did that duet at the CMA awards, right?

20:46 Jamie: Yeah. Oh my gosh, it was great.

20:47 Sharon: I mean, hair was standing up on the back of my neck. I’m like, “This is a moment.

20:52 Jamie: Yeah. Tennessee Whiskey, for those people who don’t know.

20:54 Sharon: “This is a shift. Holy jeez.” That performance was magical, and it was electrifying in the Bridgestone Arena that night. And I was like, “That is a shift in the music right there.”

21:05 Jamie: Right.

21:06 Sharon: And it was, and so that moment was captured in our American Currents exhibit the very next year. So, that’s just an example of it.

So, depth, texture and balance is really important as we look at our rotating exhibition schedule. Because, as I said earlier, in the middle of all of those is the core exhibition, which is the chronology of the history and how the music has changed.

21:26 Jamie: Right. And that's a delicate balance.

21:28 Sharon: Yes, it is.

21:28 Jamie: Because whether we're talking about an art museum or we're talking about the Country Music Hall of Fame, the tension between a museum and having things that are current that appeal to all ages as they're coming in – it's a hard thing to achieve the right balance.

21:45 Sharon: It really is. Because, again, people come in. Some will be like, "I'm coming here because I love Dottie West." We'll just use her for an example. And of course we only have one or two items right now that happen to be on display about Dottie.

But because the items that we use every day to tell this chronology story – well, they have to be rotated. Those things have to be allowed to rest. You can't keep them out all the time. And when you have 2 million items and growing, only 10 or 15 percent of what we even have is on display at any one time.

22:17 Jamie: Yeah. That's true.

22:18 Sharon: So, we have to rotate that. We need to let them rest, because that's the proper thing to do from an archival and storage perspective.

But it's also we need to shake up how we tell the story. So, we might have an exhibit case in the chronology story that's about Back in the Saddle Again, when the singing cowboy phenomenon really hit big, right?

Well, there are lots of different artifacts to tell that story, not just the same five or six. Does that make sense?

22:45 Jamie: Yes. Absolutely.

22:46 Sharon: So, people come in and go, "Well, why don't you have anything out on Roy Orbison?" Well, we did a couple of years ago.

You know, we have to keep it fresh, because that's one of the other things we don't have in our mix is – like I was saying earlier about locals, we also don't have great repeat visitation. People look at it and go, "Well, I did that. I don't need to go back." Yes, you do.

23:06 Melinda: Are there some exhibits that have been more popular than others?

23:10 Sharon: I mean, I think so. You know, from an attendance perspective, we just keep growing and growing and growing, right? So, as long as that happens, great. I think that there can be stronger fan bases from time to time depending on who it is.

But at the same time, there are people who are – like, right now, we just opened recently the Felice and Boudleaux Bryant exhibit. Now, a lot of folks listening to this podcast might go, "Who is that?" But they were the most prolific songwriting duo in the history of this music.

23:45 Jamie: Yeah. And if you watched the Ken Burns special, it spells it out.

23:47 Sharon: You would know that. That's right. And so they actually – they were quite a pair, and they were a force. And not only were they a great songwriting force, their love story is amazing.

And so some people connect with that part of their story as much as they do with the music that they wrote. And people come because they love the memories of the music that they made.

When I first started working at the museum, I asked one of my salespeople, “How do you sell this place? What is it that you say?” And I was expecting a very different thing than what he told me.

And he said, “I sell that we are in the memories business.” And I said, “Really?” And he said, “When you walk through this museum and you hear the music, any part of it, you connect immediately to the memories that are surrounding that music.”

You said it just a minute ago about, I think, your grandmother.

24:41 Melinda: My mom.

24:41 Sharon: Oh, your mother. Okay. And so you listened to this music, and so you're going to gravitate to it because it's going to conjure up those memories and those emotions that come from when you hear that song or that particular type of music.

So, it's the same thing we do now, right? If you're a music person, if you're in a great mood, what do you do? You turn on the radio, you find some, “I'm ready to be excited. It's Friday afternoon. I'm done for the week. I want to hear Travis Tritt, TROUBLE,” or whatever your song is that gets you fired up for that time.

Or if you're sad, music can be very comforting. Or maybe you need to cry. You know you're in a bad spot and, “I need the – I just need to cry and get it over with.” And music does that for people.

So, I think that's why, again, when we're looking at what we're doing and how we present it, we really try to make sure that it's an emotional connection that you find.

And you do. I've walked the museum numerous times, and I'll hear music and it reminds me of when I was a kid or when I was in a certain time period in my life. That's what music does for people. And I think that's another reason why it's so special.

25:43 Jamie: That's well said.

25:44 Melinda: I think so too. So, in addition to all of the great exhibits, the museum, the theater, the events that you all plan that are taking place in your venue, if you will, you also rent out that space, right, for other events to take place?

25:55 Sharon: Yes, we do.

25:56 Melinda: So, I'm really interested in knowing – are those folks who just love the idea of being in such an iconic building, or are they past attendees and visitors to the exhibits? So, do you know some of that background information of those folks who are planning their events, whether it's a wedding or it's an award ceremony? You mentioned lots of, you know, Q&As and kind of peeling back the curtains a little bit.

26:17 Sharon: Sure. Well, you know, when I started at the museum, the events business was one that – they built this beautiful museum. They knew that renting the facility could be a good revenue stream for them, but they didn't really understand how to do that.

They're museum folks. And so I came from the hotel industry, and understanding how to do that was definitely part of my expertise. And because the facility is beautiful – I mean, you've both, I hope, have been in the rotunda.

26:45 Melinda: We have, yes.

26:45 Sharon: I mean, come on, it's the Hall of Fame. And there's only one. And that room is beautiful, and it also is emotional, right? It just has that gravitas about it. So, we went about doing all of these things to not only make money, but we knew too that it was a way to draw people in that might not come otherwise.

So, we saw it as a PR tool, if you will. So, go back to that local again. So, you'll come to someone's wedding or wedding reception, maybe never having been to the building before, but now I'm in there and it's like, "Wow, this place is amazing."

And, of course, as a part of your event you might be having – maybe it's even a corporate event, okay? Maybe it's a corporate rollout or something, and they want to do it at an iconic place in Nashville. What can be more iconic than our building? And they pick it for that reason.

There's lots of motivations as to why people utilize our building. But they come in there and they have their event, and we always make sure you need to have a gallery experience. You need to let your guests roll through our galleries as a part of their evening with you, because you didn't come here just because of this beautiful room. It's because of who we are.

And if they don't get to see the exhibits, you've cheated them out of an experience. And so we make that a part of the package. Now, not everybody does it. But about 85 percent of them do, and they may not have been in there before.

So, on the flip of that, you asked me the question, "Do people come, and then say, 'I'm going to do an event here?'"

28:13 Melinda: Right.

28:14 Sharon: Yes, ma'am. That definitely happens.

From a convention perspective and corporate – you know, the Convention & Visitors Corporation – of course, we're a big part of the site visit when they're bringing in a major convention to the city, showcasing our spaces along with all the others in the city.

The Music City Center right next door is now our neighbor, and we do certainly do a lot of business with them. And of course with the Omni Hotel, since we are connected on three floors to the hotel, we do a lot of business back and forth.

But our events business has grown year over year over year. We took in our own food and beverage back in 2009. Most museums don't own and operate their own food and beverage situations. I have an executive chef, two sous chefs, a whole line staff of cooks and dishwashers and servers, barbacks, the whole nine yards just like a hotel.

And I don't know of another museum in the country that does that. So, we see it as a real revenue generator, but also another memory maker.

29:12 Melinda: Yeah. You're definitely selling the experience, right? We've talked about that, Jamie and I, and with other guests and really marketing – how it's transformed over the years and now this concept of experiential marketing is so valuable.

29:23 Sharon: Yes, it is.

29:24 Melinda: And you mentioned that, you know, in the business of selling memories, I think that those go hand in hand for sure.

29:29 Sharon: Sure do.

29:30 Jamie: So, what happens when something like the NFL draft comes in?

29:34 Melinda: This is a great question.

29:36 Sharon: I get really excited.

29:40 Melinda: These mega events that we now see come into Nashville – how does that change your day-to-day business?

29:46 Sharon: Well, you know, it's interesting. There's two parts to that, so don't let me get too far off my point here. But yes, when the NFL draft is announced, yes, I get very excited, because I know what that's gonna mean to the city and potentially to our building.

It's no different than even Music Fest, when it's every year and everybody's like, "Oh my gosh, I bet you are so crazy busy because it's Music Fest." Actually, I'm not. It depends on how the event is structured is why I bring this up.

So Music Fest's obviously by the CMA, which is, you know, a sister organization. We are not the CMA, which a lot of people think we are, but we're not.

They keep their folks so busy, so engaged, that there is no room for anything else for you to do. Because you're trying to get all you can out of this experience, because you paid X, Y, Z number of hundreds of dollars to come to this event.

You know, folks think about the big concert at night. Yes, that's true. But during the day, my gosh, there is a plethora of stuff to do, and it's free. It's all free. It's out there, and it's available.

So, why would you come over anywhere and spend any money when you got all this other stuff you can do for free? So, people are shocked by that when I tell them it's not even in the top 25 weeks out of the year. And there's only 52 in a year, so it's not even in my top half.

So, that's an interesting phenomenon, right? Well, now, let's flip over to the NFL. So, because of how the city saw to do that, they want them to experience the entire city. So, they had a few events, but with lots of time to go see Nashville.

31:25 Melinda: Lots of free time built in. Yeah.

31:26 Sharon: So, do you see the difference?

31:28 Jamie: Absolutely.

31:28 Sharon: So, it's interesting too, cause when you have NCAA for example – I'm a huge college basketball fan. Yes, I'm from Kentucky, so I bleed blue by the way.

And so the Blue Mist, as we call it, if Kentucky comes rolling into town. And they don't come to the museum. They're here to watch basketball. And it's one game right after another, right, when you're in the SEC tournament or the NCAA or whatever. They've come to watch basketball.

And if they're not in the arena, they're in a bar or a restaurant that has basketball. We get a few, don't get me wrong, but it is not what you would think off the surface.

On the flip, if I take sports – keeps going to the sports role. Go to the Music City Bowl. I sat on the board of the Music City Bowl when it was started. And so because of how that happens, we know those teams are announced early, right? You know who's coming to your bowl. And because of that, I can target right to that person.

They're going to one event, maybe two or three that surround it now cause they keep building on that, but the family is coming because their player's on the field or their cheerleader's on the sideline or whatever the case may be.

Or they're an alumni, and they're going to come here and they're gonna make this a whole event to come to Nashville.

32:43 Jamie: Right. So, that's that typical three day we talk about.

32:46 Sharon: You got it. You got it. And so if I can talk to them in advance to say, "Hey, when you're coming, make sure you leave time for us," they do. They do.

Same thing when it's a college football weekend and Vanderbilt's got a home game. I get that opposing team every time cause the only reason they're coming into town is for that game. So, now they're going to make a whole weekend out of it.

33:04 Jamie: Right.

33:05 Sharon: So, it really depends on what the event is and how it's structured as to when I get excited or when I kind of go, "Well that's really cool, and I hope, you know, we get some residual out of it."

But when you go beyond that – going back to the draft, one of the biggest impacts the draft had on us was with Hatch Show Print. Did you see all the Hatch special-made?

33:24 Jamie: Oh, yes.

33:25 Sharon: So, they came to us and asked us to make these specific posters for every single team, and they were using it as a part of their marketing and how they were positioning it in Nashville.

And the folks who came to the draft, they were all like, "How do I get one of those? How do I get one of those?" And we kept asking them, "Can we sell them?" And of course when you're working with the NFL, they understand how to do licensing really well.

And we said, "People are going to want to buy these." And they didn't think that. And then they figured out they did. So, they came back and they worked with us really well on a licensing agreement. And we have sold a lot of those posters, hundreds of thousands of them.

34:01 Jamie: So, for people who don't know what Hatch Show Print is, it's something that's close to my heart. I love it.

34:05 Sharon: Yeah.

34:07 Jamie: But explain a little bit about the history of Hatch Show.

34:11 Sharon: It just turned 140 years old this year.

34:13 Jamie: Oh, wow.

34:14 Sharon: April this year, it was 140 years old. It's the oldest continuously operating letterpress print shop in the world. And so it is really special. The wood blocks that are there – we have some that are over 100 years old that were used, you know, with different presidents over the years.

You know, there's a particular set of blocks that are an iconic baseball player that are very valuable because of the style in which they were carved and the time period they were carved. We have some that we've retired, because they really don't need to be pressed anymore, but they're historically important.

And then we have metal type and then we have lino type as well. But that letterpress process, you know, goes right back to Gutenberg, right? So, I mean, it's the same thing. So, beyond the letters themselves, once they started to carve images, then it started to become something more.

And that's when it became advertising. So, it was in the earliest forms of advertising, and that's when you were doing carnivals and vodvills and all of these other things. And then it became refrigerators. And then it became country music artists and their shows on the road.

And so a lot of people come and want the Triple Johnny, as we call it, which is a triple image of Johnny Cash, very iconic one of Dolly Parton, Elvis Presley – a lot of those. But now at its stage in its history, it's becoming more about lifestyle, you know, the image that Hatch gives you because of the wood and its authenticity and rustic elements.

Because of that, it's found its place now in people's homes in a way that the posters before were just sort of maybe in your music room or maybe they were in an office, but now it's becoming, "I have a huge show print in my formal living room because it's art."

It's gone beyond an advertisement or information. It's gone into an art form, and it is beautiful and it's specific to Hatch. A lot of people can make things look like it's letterpress, and you can in this digital age.

But when you do it and it's authentic, you find that every time the ink rolls over those blocks, it makes a different look every time. And so that's what makes it really special.

36:31 Jamie: Yeah. That is special.

36:32 Sharon: Yeah.

36:32 Jamie: I have one of those Hank Williams myself.

36:34 Sharon: Do you? Okay.

36:36 Jamie: So, I know that. So, tell us about a special moment that you've had that was really meaningful to you since you've been at the Country Music. I know there's been thousands of them, but there's bound to be one that stands out.

36:47 Sharon: Well, yeah. My, it's hard to pick them to be honest. But I guess from a True Blue fan perspective, I'll go with that story. I have lots of them, but I'm a huge George Strait fan. Always have been.

36:59 Jamie: Me too.

36:59 Sharon: When he was inducted into the museum, it was before we expanded. And so the annual Medallion Ceremony where we induct the new Hall of Famers was held back then in the Ford Theater, which is only 213 seats. Only 213.

We're going to see George on that night be inducted into the Hall of Fame. I was not a senior vice president at that point. I wasn't even a vice president. I would think – I might have maybe been a senior director. I don't remember to be honest.

But so staff didn't get to go into the theater obviously, but we all work it, and we were doing our various, many jobs on that night to make sure it was a wonderful experience. And I was standing out in the conservatory while the show was going on and then we would have a big reception afterwards, and we were all working to get the conservatory ready.

And another colleague of mine who was a vice president at the time came out in the middle of the show and she said, "Hey, I need you." And I said, "Okay." And I started following her. We're going toward the theater and I said, "What do you need me to do?"

And she said, "I have a seat for you." And I said, "You have a seat for me?" And she said, "George is about to be inducted. It's the next segment, and we have a seat for you." I was like, "Oh my gosh." And it wasn't just a seat, it was a seat. I was third row dead center.

And I just sat there like, "Am I really here? Am I really here? How did I get this job? How could I be here right now having this moment when I have seen George Strait 17 times in concert?"

I sat at the top of what was the Astrodome, which is no longer here. And I have sat, you know, in decent proximity in a show, and now I'm three rows away from my hero and I'm going to watch him be a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame. And that was like, "Wow."

38:46 Jamie: That's so great.

38:47 Sharon: Yeah. It was a big pay off.

38:50 Jamie: So, you know, we're here to talk a little bit about marketing. So, tell us some of the ways that you market the Country Music Hall of Fame.

38:58 Sharon: Well, it never changes how we approach this. You know, I have so many great things to work with given that we have the exhibitions that we do – the name, as we've talked about with the Hall of Fame members. Now, all this great live performance and programming.

And I mean, goodness gracious, I have so much great product to work with, right? My hardest job is sometimes, "What do I talk about?" Cause I have too much to talk about.

So, some people would look at that as a negative. I, on the other hand, look at that as a positive, but I have to harness this into a focus so that we can actually develop an audience, like I was talking about earlier, with the locals.

And so I've got to make sure that the tourism still feeds us every day while I come over here and start to develop a new audience.

We have diversified our revenue streams. Diversifying your audience is the number one thing on my mind right now given digital and what we can do in digital. We can target very specifically

to those kinds of audiences. And the other benefit I have – not only do I have all this great product, but up underneath all of that is content. I have content coming out my ears.

40:07 Jamie: Which, people would die to have the kind of content you have.

40:08 Sharon: Of course. I have more than I know what to do with. And so we're in these discussions right now about, "How do we really take our content and discern which audience do we want to talk to first?" Because we want to try and talk to all of them, and you just can't do that and do it well.

So, right now, I have identified recently a couple of different things we're going to target. So, from a radio perspective, you know, terrestrial will still always be out there. We're going to do that on a local level.

But from a satellite radio perspective, XM has been a fantastic partner. They really understand who we are, we trust them with our things and they love our performances and programs. So, I'm working right now with them on three or four signature things that we do, one of which would be Medallion, because that's a private event, invitation only.

And we can post-show edit and produce that and make sure it's just perfect rather than a live show. We could do that, but we want it to be just perfect, right? So, we've done that with them a few times, and so we're going to take that already designed, happening in the museum content and we're going to put that, in certain cases, out on XM.

Another one we've identified is Spotify. We know that we need to really target that younger market. We can come up with some pretty cool content. And they're looking for it. I think I may have mentioned that earlier, and we know we've got it.

So, how do we partner together? Maybe co-produce some things together. We've got the expertise, you have the airwaves, let's put that together and off we go. And so that gives us a target audience pretty nicely there with Spotify.

Beyond that, we're in the throes of developing our own blog that would be hosted on our website. So, you can see the digital thing is all we're talking about.

I still got to do all the traditional stuff, right? I got to have billboards in the city because most people make their decision to come to the museum three days out, two days out, day of.

So, I need outdoor. I got to have print. I gotta have all this stuff – in The Scene. You know, all the places you've got to be in the city of Nashville. So, all that still has to keep going while we're over here trying to figure out how to target these audiences.

So, we use every medium. I mean, email marketing is huge for us. Growing that database. We just redid our entire website. And that meant four websites, because you have one for the museum, B, Hatch and the CMA Theater.

So, no matter which venue might draw you to us, you'll find us. And you can cross from any of those websites to the other. And so trying to get people to understand we all belong together, we're all one big family of brands if you will, is the strategy that I use there.

Social, clearly, is a big one. And again, it's all about showcasing a little snippet of that content so that you're engaged enough then to click right over and go to our website to get in deeper.

So, you know, growing those online audiences as much as we are the physical in-the-building audiences. The City of Nashville is helping us grow that physical audience and what all is happening in our city. And we're happy that we're right in the middle of it all.

43:16 Jamie: Yeah. And you are right in the middle. How much of your audience is international?

43:22 Sharon: You know, it floats between 15 and 18 percent, which is quite a bit.

43:26 Jamie: That is, isn't it?

43:27 Sharon: And you know, we have audio tour guides in like eight languages so that we can really speak to the international visitor. We also are aligning more languages soon to align with the local population.

So, we know that Kurdish and Arabic, much less Spanish of course, but we already have that addressed. But we're now taking printed pieces and putting them into these languages so that more of the local audience would come to explore us.

That goes right in alignment with an initiative we started, I guess, 2 years ago now called Community Counts. Good grief, time flies. And so we rolled that out. Are you familiar with that by chance, Community Counts?

44:08 Jamie: I have heard a little bit about it. Yeah.

44:10 Sharon: And so it's where we made every school-aged child 18 and under that lives in Davidson and that donut I was talking about earlier – they can come for free, every student. We've never been in a position to do that.

44:24 Jamie: That's so great.

44:25 Sharon: Yeah. It's really, really awesome. "Now, okay, I can get my child in for free. Now, what do I do about Mom and Dad?" Maybe those folks might not be able to afford that or maybe they're not in a position to come or don't know if there's going to be anything there that interests them.

But their child went or their child went on a field trip, and now they want to go back. So, we wanted to make it available also in that same way. So, what we did is we partnered with the Nashville Public Library System.

And so if your child comes in and says, "Hey, I went on this great field trip, Mom, and I want to go back." And Mom and Dad say, "Well, I don't know that we can afford \$26 per person to go, even though you're free."

But now you can go to the library. You check out a pass for the Community Counts pass and Mom and Dad can come for free. And then if you want a membership, if you are a family that works with financial assistance, you can buy a membership for \$5.

45:18 Jamie: Oh, that's great.

45:19 Sharon: Yeah. So, those are the kind of things we're trying to do in the community so that locals understand we really are here for you. No matter if you are an affluent person here in our city or in our surrounding area or if you're a person who is in need of assistance, we want this museum to be available to you and to encourage people to come and explore.

45:38 Melinda: Now, how does the Troubadours group fit into all of this picture?

45:42 Sharon: Okay, that's a pretty new group for us. Now, this is over in the development side of our world. And I just market the Troubadours, because that's considered a membership. And so membership rolls up underneath our contributed side, because a portion of every person's membership goes to our contribution side.

So, you actually get it as a tax benefit. And so as a Troubadour society member, that's kind of like our YP, you know, young professionals angle. So, I think the age limit is 40, so that counts me out. But anyway, that's okay.

And it's growing. It's up to 800 plus people now. So, I think we rolled it out maybe 4 years ago or so. And this is really an engaged group of people. They are of this younger audience that are looking for something that they can call their thing, that is their cultural contribution to our city.

They're on fire. They really get into what we're doing. They want to help us fundraise. They want more people to understand what we're doing and starting to tell more people, like I say, kind of spread the gospel of the Country Music Hall of Fame.

And so it's been a very successful program for us. And a lot of the people who work in our building are actually members of it so that they can support the museum in a different way and network. And so that's really good for them.

46:59 Melinda: That's so cool.

47:00 Jamie: That's proof of it working, right?

47:02 Sharon: Indeed. Yeah. It's a good thing.

47:03 Jamie: That's great.

47:04 Melinda: So, we ask each of our guests this question. So, it's more of a fun one, but what was your first job, and what did you learn in that role that you can now apply or have applied over in your professional career?

47:16 Sharon: Well, that's interesting. I mean, I can answer that a couple of ways. I mean, technically the first job that I was ever paid for was working in my daddy's shop. My dad worked on cars, and so he taught me how to do some things on a car. And I actually got paid for that job.

But in a normal sense, the first job I had was at 14. I went to work as a hostess in a restaurant at a Holiday Inn in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. And so little did I know that I would wind up spending 13 years in the hotel industry, but I rode to work with my daddy's sister.

She lived right next door, my Aunt Betty. And she took me to work, cause obviously at 14 I couldn't drive. But mom and dad – you know, as soon as I was old enough to work, it was, “You need to get a part time job, you know, especially in the summer.” I didn't work during school of course.

And so it was perfect. And she had been a waitress. She was a waitress her whole life. And she said, “Well hun,” that's what she always called me. “Hun, we need a hostess cashier. Do you know how to run a cash register?”

And I said, “No, ma'am.” She said, “Well, your daddy can show you how to do that.” And I said, “All right.” And she said, “If you'll apply for the job, I think you can get it.” So, Daddy taught me how to count back change, because back then you actually had to count it. There wasn't a computer that told you how. I didn't think I was ever going to catch on, but I did.

And, you know, it taught me a lot about great customer service. It taught me how to read people's body language to understand if they were having a bad day, I could make it better just by being kind, making good eye contact and being Southern and being respectful.

And I appreciated knowing that I could earn a paycheck pretty early on. And it instilled a great sense of work ethic, because I watched my aunt work really hard all her life. She was a single mother for many years, and she worked two jobs to make it all work.

And that came out winding up being a part of my life. Unfortunately, I was a single mother for 10 years, and I remembered a lot of things that my Aunt Betty showed me back in those days. So, a lot of things I learned at 14 that I didn't even understand, I was learning at the time.

And the hotel industry became a great part of my life, and I loved it. And I owe that to her for introducing me to it.

49:36 Jamie: That's awesome. Everybody needs an Aunt Betty. They do.

49:38 Sharon: Everybody needs an Aunt Betty. Yeah.

49:41 Melinda: Well, thank you again for coming on the show and joining us.

49:45 Sharon: Sure. I hope I gave you some info that you can utilize and that your listeners will appreciate.

49:49 Jamie: Absolutely. And I can't wait till my next trip.

49:54 Sharon: Well, come on back over. We always got something new going on.

49:57 Jamie: All right. Thank you, Sharon.

49:58 Sharon: Thank you.

50:03 Melinda: Thanks for being a part of the Lipstick Economy today. To hear more stories like this, go to lipstickeconomypodcast.com. And if you're interested in learning more about team Asurion, visit careers.asurion.com.