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Lenox Powell:

I'm Lenox Powell, the host and producer of The Outperform Podcast. On these episodes I talk with acceleration partners, team members, industry partners and clients to bring you a behind the scenes perspective on what the world's leading brands are doing to outperform in their business and marketing partnerships.

Lenox Powell:

Hello and welcome to the Outperform Podcast. Many of you listening may have taken a marketing course or two in college. Often these courses tend to be fairly broad. They tend to cover a variety of marketing related topics from communication and advertising to public relations, branding and social media. However, other topics that tend to be highly relevant and applicable such as affiliate and partner marketing are typically not taught in most universities. As a leading provider of these services for brands, we've seen firsthand where the consequences are of this knowledge shortfall. To discuss this topic with me in more detail and shine a light on why it's so important for universities to be teaching affiliate marketing as part of their business in marketing coursework is Veronica Gauthier, a senior director of key accounts here at Acceleration Partners. Welcome Veronica.

Veronica Gauthier:

Thank you for having me Lenox.

Lenox Powell:

You've worked in the marketing world for quite a few years now and have developed an impressive breadth and depth of knowledge about performance based marketing. How much of what you know now, particularly in terms of the affiliate model did you learn in your university classes?

Veronica Gauthier:

So interestingly enough, I really stumbled into affiliate marketing by chance and most of what I learned was really on the job, which I think was pretty common for most people who got into affiliate marketing when I did, which was early 2008. There wasn't a ton of information or resources available back then, so most of us just had to figure it out as we went. I took a somewhat unconventional path, then after I was pretty well into my career and later on in my adulthood I decided to go back to school. And I actually enrolled in one of the largest universities in the country, I think they have just shy of 70,000 students, to complete my bachelor's degree with a concentration in marketing.

Veronica Gauthier:

And I remember and going back to school and thinking, oh like this should be a breeze, right? There should be tons of relevant courses and who knows, maybe I'll even learn a thing or two that I missed along the way since I kind of had to pick things up as I went. And as I was looking through the list of the different electives because you had to have so many in order to graduate, I was actually pretty shocked with the limited options that were available, not just for affiliate because I don't think I expected there to be any specifically on affiliate because I knew it was still a bit niche at the time, but I was expecting to see a bit more of even digital marketing.

Veronica Gauthier:

But there was only one option. And so obviously I opted into that thinking that who knows, maybe I'll learn a thing or two. And I was actually pretty disappointed. There wasn't a ton of content covered that was really relevant for me. But more importantly we spent very little time on affiliate. I think there was maybe 30 minutes of a particular lecture carved out with some associated activities. So not much at all did I really get out of my college classes.

Lenox Powell:

That must've been both a fascinating and frustrating experience for you, especially since you already had an established career in affiliate and understood the potential benefits it offers brands.

Veronica Gauthier:

Exactly and no disrespect whatsoever to the professor. She didn't know what she didn't know and I know that even prior to starting her lecture, she spoke a little bit to some of the challenges that she had as a professor teaching on the subject matter. And one of the things that she emphasized was in her experience when she attempted to teach any material on affiliate, by the time she had her hands on any particular books or resources that were available, by the time that they were published and she brought them to her classroom, it was already outdated. Because the channel was just evolving and changing so quickly and it was just so fast paced. She wasn't somebody who was in it day to day. And so I think even from her perspective, there was challenges. And I know for me as a student in that class, had I not known what I had already known of affiliate, I definitely would've walked away feeling like affiliate wasn't really exciting.

Veronica Gauthier:

And like there really wasn't a ton, especially an entire career that could be built from that particular marketing channel, which is still the complete opposite of the reality that we face. And it certainly left me feeling like it was such a disservice to the other students who were sitting in that class and taking that course because they were getting these marketing degrees, but yet they weren't really sufficiently educated on what the different opportunities were, especially given the timeline and where we were because digital marketing and affiliate in particular, it's just a big piece of the marketing mix. And so there's definitely a lack of education there and with such a high demand in our industry for people with that knowledge, it was definitely a little frustrating and disappointing to see how little there was available to students.

Lenox Powell:

Yeah, I'm sure it took quite a bit of self restraint, [inaudible 00:06:45] constantly raising your hand and being like, excuse me, that's not correct.

Veronica Gauthier:

It did. It did. It was definitely one of those things where I had to bite my tongue because I didn't want to over contribute. Especially as I mentioned, I was a bit older and pretty well on my way in my career and so I was trying to also be mindful and to also let the professor do her job as well. So definitely an interesting experience for sure.

Lenox Powell:

How did that experience, like you sitting in that classroom and you hearing the professor kind of skim over the subject of affiliate, how did that influence you?

Veronica Gauthier:

Yeah, so I think for me, I walked away from that experience thinking wow, there is such a tremendous opportunity and just so much that is being left on the table. And part of me felt like I really wanted to do something about it. I've always had the desire to help other people and I remember earlier on in my life I didn't really know how I wanted to do that. At one point I thought, oh maybe I'll be a nurse. And then I quickly realized no, healthcare is not for me. And then I thought, oh, well maybe I'll be a teacher. And then I was like, no, it's not exciting enough. Like I need more. And so funny enough, we were presented with an opportunity prior to one of APs company offsites to complete the survey that Bob, our CEO and founder had sent around to the entire company.

Veronica Gauthier:

And basically it asked us to share some of our life goals. And it stretched the gamut. I mean, there were some people that wanted to grow up and be pilots and other people that wanted to pay for all of their kids to go to college. And there was just a ton of different things that were submitted. And I happened to submit one of my goals, was to actually lecture on the affiliate subject matter. And I think part of the reason that I really wanted to do that was because of that feeling and because of what I felt as I sat in that classroom and I wanted to help educate other people about A, the fact that I am very passionate and I love my career and I felt like it was just such a disservice. And B, to kind of help fill that void that I always had of wanting to help others and teach others and share knowledge, which I feel is so powerful.

Veronica Gauthier:

And so I was fortunate enough to be one of the AP team members who was, basically my wish or my goal was helped to be made a reality by Bob and the AP team and they were able to get an invitation for me to guest lecture at MIT and I was speaking on the topic of how we use data in the affiliate industry.

Lenox Powell:

That is really cool. Walk us through that experience of speaking at MIT. Were they familiar with affiliate or was it a completely new concept to them?

Veronica Gauthier:

Absolutely, it was very interesting. So as you can imagine, the majority of the students that attend MIT have an underlying interest in some sort of field or career that involves technology. I particularly spoke to a group of undergraduate students who were enrolled in the Sloan School of Management at MIT, so they had a bit more of a concentration on going more into the management or business side of things.

Veronica Gauthier:

And so I presented my subject matter to that group of students and they had tons of questions. They were very engaged. I was a little nervous going into it because for somebody like myself who's been in affiliate since 2008, some of the things that I feel are so basic and elementary are actually not as easy as I think in my head. So trying to ensure that I was articulating and bringing forth concepts in a way that were easily digestible because that was very important to me. I wanted to make sure that they left that class by understanding what affiliate was and what an impact it had on me personally and my career. But also for many of the brands that leverage the channel. And I think that they were also very surprised to see some of the brands that I presented up on the board who leveraged the affiliate channel and who we get to work with and me personally, who I get to work with day in and day out.

Lenox Powell:

What were some of the questions that they asked you?

Veronica Gauthier:

Sure, so I got I think a full range of questions. I think it kind of evolved. It started with a high curiosity to understand how did I get started in affiliate? How did I stumble upon it back in 2008, and what kind of brought me into wanting to stay in this space? And so they had a lot of questions about the progression of my career path and just what led me to where I am today as I stood before them. They had a lot of questions around how does affiliate work? What are the different technology platforms? How are you tracking this? What is your role in all of this as the agency partner? What are the different brands that do these different services, right? Like who are the technology providers and these SAS platforms and these networks?

Veronica Gauthier:

So they were very curious just to understand this entire ecosystem that I presented to them and I was fascinated at how engaged they were. I guess I was a little nervous that I wouldn't get that level of engagement, but I think that just spoke volumes to me because it said to me that if we present this to the right group of students, that we are going to be much more successful in attracting college graduates to the affiliate career path.

Lenox Powell:

And those are all very good questions.

Veronica Gauthier:

They are.

Lenox Powell:

You and I actually did an episode a few years ago actually when you were still Veronica Morales, I think it was, but the title was How To Avoid PTSD In Your Affiliate Management Agency Relationship. And there, that's such a great episode. I highly recommend anybody listen to it. We'll add it in our show notes, but that's actually where you take more of a deep dive into your background and how you got into affiliate and some of the challenges that you've experienced working with clients and having some kind of the push pull between that agency relationship and really how to get the most out of it. So little pitch for that previous episode that we did.

Veronica Gauthier:

Absolutely.

Lenox Powell:

But having been in both the students seat and the teaching seat, in retrospect, how do you think it would have helped you or accelerated your career growth to have learned the fundamentals of affiliate when you were at university, kind of the first time, first go around?

Veronica Gauthier:

When I think back to where I was in my early adulthood, when I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up, I knew that I wanted something, as I mentioned, that was just ever-changing, challenging, innovative. And I remember being younger and when I looked at the list of the different career paths, the typical ones that you see even as a high school student, affiliate definitely was not on that list. And I am pretty confident that it is still not on that list because when I talked to my ninth grader about what her interests are and some of the things that she may think she wants to dip her toe in or what do you want to be when you grow up? Again, affiliate is still a concept that young adults and young students, they just still don't fully understand.

Veronica Gauthier:

And so I think that when I look back and I think of the younger version of myself, had somebody presented it to me in a way that I was able to digest and to understand, I think that that would have helped to push me in the direction to something like affiliate marketing. Because it met all of the criteria that I had on my list of things that interested me and things that I wanted to do. There may have been less stumbling into it and a little bit more intention behind some of the folks have taken this career path because most people today will tell you that they stumbled into it.

Veronica Gauthier:

So I think that is the biggest takeaway and the thing that I think back to is that I think there could be a little bit more intent behind our decisions for those of us who do choose to take this career path because it offers so much. And I think that bringing that to the university level and even the high school level, to be quite honest, I think it's critical. I think it also helps open the door of opportunity beyond what you typically see on a career list of different jobs that you can have when you graduate college or even high school when they start to introduce the concept.

Lenox Powell:

Kind of circling back to bridging that gap between the doing and the teaching elements. We actually now have an internal program here at Acceleration Partners where team members go into college classes and they provide an introductory overview on affiliate. How do you see this initiative helping improve the level of education that universities are providing to their marketing students?

Veronica Gauthier:

Yeah, and I have to tell you, when I saw this being circulated internally, I personally got so excited about it. I think I was one of the first people that was like, oh, sign me up, like I want to do this. Because I had such a wonderful experience at MIT and I definitely think that as I mentioned, there was such high engagement, more so than I expected. So I think that while most of these students can certainly learn

the tactical elements of the job on the job, I think most of us do learn best by doing. So that's totally fine. I think that there is certainly an opportunity to really educate our future affiliate marketers on the overall affiliate model and the ecosystem because we're seeing so many brands invest more and more of their dollars on the performance side of marketing. And that is where so many people are turning to, and it's not your traditional marketing ecosystem anymore.

Veronica Gauthier:

And so I think conceptually there's so much more there that can be taught outside of just the tactical elements of it. And affiliate is growing so fast, as I mentioned, it's still just on this super rapid growth trajectory. I think every day something's changing and something is new or something is different and there's just constant evolution. And so the lack of education, I think it's a major oversight in higher education institutions, which again, I experienced firsthand. So the fact that AP team members are taking their time to go into these universities and to educate our future affiliate marketers on the basic affiliate 101. But also to paint this picture for them that helps them understand what can this really offer them in the real world? What is this career path look like? What are the benefits? And some of the things that we all get so excited about to make that a bit more easily digestible for those who are interested in this type of career path.

Veronica Gauthier:

And I think oftentimes the universities that our team members are going into are the alma maters of these employees. Or there's people like me who, I am just so passionate and excited and I love the opportunity to teach and to share the knowledge. And I love what I do so much. So just going in there and giving these presentations to any group of students who's willing to listen. I just think that that is such an awesome opportunity and I'm so happy that we're doing that and I'm super excited and I know so far there's been really great feedback from the groups that have been able to go in and to share their knowledge with these different classrooms.

Lenox Powell:

And you've done a great job kind of painting that picture for the value, the benefit this kind of information offers students. How do you see this initiative, kind of AP team members going into universities, explaining the affiliate one-on-one? How do you see that initiative helping universities improve their level of education that they are providing to their marketing students?

Veronica Gauthier:

As I mentioned to the example of the professor who was teaching the digital marketing course that I took, it is very challenging for them. Most of these professors are ... Affiliate is not their area of expertise. It's not what they're doing day in and day out. And because of the rapid pace in which the industry is changing, it makes it really hard for them. And I think that being able to take that load off of the professor, to be able to bring in professionals and team members who are doing this every day, this is what they wake up and do every day. I think that it is going to help to improve just the knowledge that's being shared with their students. And usually that's the goal of the institution is to ensure that they are educating the students with the most relevant and valuable knowledge to equip them. So that when they do leave the university and enter the job force, that's the goal.

Veronica Gauthier:

They want their students to be able to find employment and to be readily employed and in order to do that, they have to ensure that the content that they're pushing out is relevant and timely. And I think just being able to do both of those things, take the load off of the professor, while also ensuring that their students are equipped with relevant and timely information so that they can enter the workforce and find employment. I think it's definitely something that will benefit the university, the professors and everyone involved.

Veronica Gauthier:

But I think on the flip side, it's also really great for our industry. I know for me personally as a hiring manager, it is very, very difficult to find experienced affiliate marketers and I think that the demand is certainly a much higher than the supply. And so the more people that we can educate and more interest that we could bring to the space, there are jobs waiting for these people. We just have to do a better job at ensuring that they know that these opportunities exist. And I think that that has been one of the missing pieces and I experienced it firsthand. I was just a little bit ... I was more fortunate because I had already had an established career, but I know so many of the people that sat in that room were so curious. Even the other students who sat beside me as I was a student, they were all curious because I had this knowledge and I had already had this career.

Veronica Gauthier:

Many of them were much younger than me, but they all had questions for me and I feel like if we could do a better job of investing the time to educate them and make sure that they are well informed, I think it will benefit everyone, the university, us as an industry and those of us who struggle to find experienced marketers to join our teams.

Lenox Powell:

What's so great to me about this conversation is hearing the micro and the macro perspective on this and I just so appreciate you sharing your personal story, both how you learned about affiliate marketing and that career path. But also what you did not learn about it in college. And you've been in this industry for quite a while now and are incredibly knowledgeable about affiliate and you even were when you were finishing your degree as you've shared. I just think of all those students who may have walked away from that same class that you were in with the perspective that affiliates, it's not really viable. It's not really a smart model. If I get hired somewhere, I may not really want to do anything with it or offer it to my company. I mean, wow, so unfortunate. Like what a missed opportunity.

Lenox Powell:

So what I hope that listeners take away from this episode, especially those people who may have the ability to influence some of the content offered within university level marketing courses, is there is a massive educational gap that needs to be filled here. And especially if we want students exactly what you said, getting a marketing degree that enables them to leave college on a strong footing and equipped with information that will help lead to a really bright career ahead. I mean, that's really the whole purpose of even us talking about this. So I just really appreciate you being on.

Veronica Gauthier:

Absolutely. Thank you so much. I appreciate you having me.

Lenox Powell:

And for everybody listening, you can find links to everything we have discussed in the show notes for this podcast episode on the Acceleration Partners website, [www.accelerationpartners.com](http://www.accelerationpartners.com). Until next time, as always, thank you for listening and keep outperforming.