Kacha Azéma is the executive creative director of Skidmore Studio, a strategic creative studio focused on helping consumer-facing companies grow through innovative design and branding services. Host Olga Stella talks with Kacha about brand adaptation and how design can help businesses through trying times.

Links for reference: Skidmore Studio, Detroit Design Network, Bon Bon Bon, Stroh's, Aretha Franklin Amphitheatre, Ellis Island Tea, Learnings from the first week of social distancing

Olga: [00:00:00] Kasha. I'm so glad to be talking to you today, especially now, as everybody's working through the COVID-19 situation. It seems like there's an even greater place for designers to help businesses and people adapt to uncertain circumstances. I know a lot of times you've probably experienced this where clients treat design like a luxury and not an essential part of the strategy. I'm really hoping we can talk a little bit about that today.

Kasha: [00:00:23] This is a weird time. In the general grand scheme, the grand arc of business thought in the world. It seems to be changing by the minute, but I think that's been the biggest challenge. Immediately, as soon as the crisis kind of came up, what we do as creative services.

Even within an organization becomes luxury. Your marketing team or your communications team, your communications, not so much right now, you have to communicate, but the spending of those dollars goes in question right away. So what we've seen is that this is the time to rethink how you're working with people who are bringing ideas to you because that's the purpose of a creative team.

When you have an internal creative team, or you hire a creative team, you're saying, Hey, listen, you guys have skills and abilities to just think creatively, to solve problems. So help us solve problems. And right now we're encouraging at Skidmore studio, all of our clients rethink what is that we can do for you.

We're not going to help you if we sit around waiting for you to tell us what you'd like us to do, we're going to help you. If we can come to be a part of imaginative conversations. For you to help solve the problems that you've got going on. And I'm hoping that in this crazy time of helping each other, which is like a gift from heaven, like, Oh, we all get to walk around and help each other all day long, cause we're all in this bad spot together in business.

We can learn, Hey, there are new ways for us to work together to help solve these cool problems.

Olga: [00:01:48] How are you finding the brands that you work with are thinking about those challenges right now? Are they starting to define those problems? Are they still trying to figure out how they're going to communicate to their customers and wherever they're at?

Kasha: [00:02:01] Yeah. It's been interesting, like the timeline change of their thoughts. Even by David, it started right away with, Oh no, what should we do? Should we do anything? And in terms of outbound communications, and then it became a, no, we still need to do work. Let's do the work, and then it became, well, wait a second.

And we often had to bring these ideas to our clients. Hey, hang on a second. Those messages we need to, we can change those so that we can be relevant to this time. Oh yeah. Okay, great. And then we're doing that now we're starting to see the shift towards the longer term. Okay, we're going to be in this for two, three, four or more weeks.

How do we shift our messaging in our customer communications over that time? And then relative to whom, because to existing customers is one way to communicate and to share brand or marketing messages to new and customer acquisition is really weird. Who wants to be marketed to right now? We need help, not marketing, not finding out about new, I'm not looking for new brands. I'm looking to make sure my needs are met. So how do we actually introduce? And we have a couple of brands right now, but we're introducing new brands that are helpful and bring value to people. And it's not because we're taking advantage of the situation, but it's because they didn't know that those brands existed.

And they can now take advantage of those brands. But that messaging has to be about how we can help you? We're here to help, this is a service that's available. And then of course, you know, no gouging, right? Let's be fair and understand that people are in a time of need.

Olga: [00:03:27] I know my inbox is full of messages from brands, and I think finding that balance between just the, Hey, we're still working or operation is open to some kind of blatant sales technique, I think is there's a big continuum there in terms of the types of messages that brands can be sharing.

If you were advising a brand right now, is it just really about being helpful? How do you help a brand? Navigate what that continuum of messages might be.

Kasha: [00:03:55] There's like two key words had been in my head for almost a couple of weeks now. Help and be positive just like verbs. These are the things that should be at the forefront of our mind, but we can't just blanketly help and blanketly be positive cause that's just, it's Pollyanna if we're just positive for no good reason. If it's just Willy nilly throwing, Hey, we're here to help, like what are we really here to do? We practice at the studio. Just human-centered design is always about and is only about the people who we're here to serve our product or our service, whatever it is.

So I've been encouraging our brands to think very specifically, which audience are we talking to right now and what is it that's going to help them and be positive for them. You may suddenly find instead of having three key audiences or two key audiences, you now you have seven. You have

customer sets or even new consumer sets for whom you could be relevant that you didn't think about in hyper-targeting those messages.

That's a difficult spot for a brand to walk through because at the end of the day, brands are good at making their widgets and creating their services; that's what they're there for. They've learned how to optimize doing widget creation. They don't know how to communicate and they don't know how to get their message out.

So we're here to help. Just to point out and nudge, Hey, who specifically are we talking to? What is their pain and their felt need? How can we address their specific help with positivity and optimism that we're going to get through this? We're going to get through it together. Things are going to be good.

And that takes some conversation, but it's easy once you've sparked and you're like, Oh yeah, well, clearly that's how we should do it. Okay. And then it just was reframing. Okay. How do I do my work today with the ideas of being helpful and positive to specific people?

Olga: [00:05:36] That's great. I mean, I think that's exactly something that we all need to take at heart because it's such an uncertain time should here you need to be guided by something. And I've been inspired by some of the work that Skidmore has done in terms of helping businesses craft that internal brand and company culture, in these kinds of times.

How does that internal culture, that internal brand end up coming through in these kinds of messages?

Kasha: [00:06:00] It's funny because if we'd done this a week ago or two weeks ago, we'd have completely different topics to talk about. At this time, we're getting so much information from our employers.

That's our community. That's our pod, that's our little group, our tribe of people, and we trust our employers, and we trust our teammates to be sharing good information with us. So. As an organization, what we call employer branding or the way you are perceived by your employees or by, um, recruit suits you're trying to attract into your organization.

Your employer brand is under a microscope under a really fine lens. How are they helping me? What are they doing for me? Because we're hearing that this organization is doing this for their employees. This organization is doing this for their employees. These teammates are doing this thing over here.

Then we all turn around and look in, where do they go? Okay, well, what am I getting? Am I getting the quality of employment like help during this time of crisis that I need? So message to employers. The help and positive message. Again is like super easy to get wrong. How can we help you? Okay, great, you can help me.

We're going to be positive. Everything's great. You know, we're still doing our work. Okay, fine. But then there's like a level of honesty we need to share as a team, what's really going on? How

are we going to rethink and navigate this crisis? How are we going to recover? And start thinking ahead about the recovery time and build or shift our business.

And then, more importantly, I think about those teams that are typically focused on employer brand new, which like your HR team and your C suite team, like your CEOs, your CMOs, CFOs, those people, how do they inspire their teams to think differently and to do differently. With their own organization because when I'm helping in a time of crisis, it's not business communications as usual.

It's a very different relationship with my employees. With my teammates and then teammates, a teammate, what can we do differently? And we have to ask and like put into practice these little rhythms and these ideas that will help us kind of work better and have more fun and enjoy this experience. You know, dare I say, enjoy this experience together.

So like, for example, Skidmore, we've been doing what we call homeroom every morning 9:30 AM we get on a group video chat, and it takes 10 minutes and we share one piece of gratitude, and we talk about for 20 seconds, just our thoughts on the topic of the day, whatever the topic is that somebody nominates, but it's a great way to.

Keep the team aligned. If Drew or the president has something to share, he'll share it. If there's something new that we need to know about. And it just keeps us in those rhythms of seeing each other in a part of each other. So like that's just a really small example and I'm encouraging, you know, our clients and other organizations that, you know, we're friends with, like, Hey, keep those same rhythms in place and think really imaginatively.

In doing differently with your teammates and your employees?

Olga: [00:08:49] Yeah. I mean this is such a disruptive time. I don't think a lot of us thought about working from home as this great luxury or something that just millennials wanted. And now we're all working from home. And it's a huge adaptation to, you know, how to maintain team, how to maintain your productivity and just kind of social connection, right.

With others. Cause it's actually pretty isolating to be. Working from home all the time.

Kasha: [00:09:14] It is super isolating

Olga: [00:09:17] even when you have your whole family with you,

Kasha: [00:09:19] but the interestingly is that's not your work family. Like in your mind, you go to work with a group of people, whether you like them or not, hopefully you like them, right?

Like any family, you have family relationships there that help you pursue the goals that you have as a team together. But I think that as creatives, designers, we have an opportunity to lead by example. It is coming to our minds faster than the rest of the population, just because of how we're wired to come up with ideas about like: "Hey, we'd like to do this. Hey, we'd like to do that."

This would make our work a little bit better or easier. So designers, creatives. Throw those out there to your team. See if they can be adopted. Try things out that might make people feel

uncomfortable. But you know what's probably gonna happen is they're going to feel like, "Hey, that was a cool idea."

We should try some more of that.

Olga: [00:10:03] I feel like that's probably where a lot of brands are going to have to adapt. Even if all of this settles down in the next couple of weeks, there are going to be lingering impacts for months, maybe longer. And I think this pandemic is a kind of a shock to the system about the kinds of unknowns that are out there.

How are you starting to think about—especially for entertainment-focus brands or brands that really rely on human interaction—large group gatherings, you know, going somewhere. What's sparking in your mind around creative solutions, creative ways forward for businesses like that? The adjustment is going to be pretty dramatic.

Kasha: [00:10:44] man.

I feel for those organizations that create events, or it's a place where people come together, because we're going to be very hesitant to do that for quite some time. But, at the end of the day, I keep thinking it's pretty simple for our entertainment clients—they are content creators.

They make content now that happens to be consumed in a very physical, real world. But it *is* content. So how could they—and we're starting to have these conversations—how might we repackage the content? To deliver it to individuals, to deliver to small groups, to deliver it online, to deliver it in educational ways rather than just entertainment ways.

At the end of the day, it is just good, interesting content, and people need entertainment. They need education, they need that stuff. It's a repackaging. The problem with the repackaging is it takes effort. So we are all doing the calculations right now. How much time do we have to repackage, or are we going to be able to take that amount of time?

Can we afford that? Is this going to last long enough? It's worth the investment? Even if it isn't, should we just go ahead and do it anyway so that we have it available? We can do it both ways. We can do it kind of one-on-one and full group. So those are the calculations that seem to be going. And to be honest, I just got to say, I'm finding that these are very early conversations right now.

How could we approach this and, before we commit, how can we make small steps in considering these ideas? And again, that's where I see designers and creatives able to open the mind to like, "Hey, what if we could do this? What if we could do that?" And there's never been a better time for designers and creatives to bring out the ideation and to bring out the crazy and go like, "Hey, this is nuts, but what if." And right now we're all super open.

Olga: [00:12:30] cause this is not.

Kasha: [00:12:34] We need people who can inspire us. So let's go be inspiring.

Olga: [00:12:38] And I think, this is not just changing brands, but maybe it's changing us too. And so there's two parts of this equation. You know, how's the brand going to respond as a business, but also what about the consumer? Is their behavior changing? Are they online more? Are they craving a different kind of social connection? What are your thoughts about—and, maybe it's too early—but in terms of those kinds of consumer behavioral changes that might be underway?

Kasha: [00:13:04] I'm excited about this time, you know, kind of bifurcating my brain and my emotions.

You know, on the one side, this is tragic. It's emotionally trying. We all feel sadness every day as we explore what this means for ourselves, our communities, our families. Kind of setting that aside for a second, I started looking at the positivity. The creativity that is coming out of this is extraordinary.

I'm seeing so many individuals be creative in ways that I never thought they would have. They're making little videos to entertain themselves and their friends. Some guy with a sock puppet and he's like munching cars as they go down the street.

Olga: [00:13:46] That was one of my favorites. That's the best. Yes.

Kasha: [00:13:50] That guy or gal, whoever did that, that's inspiring. That's the kind of creativity that I'm excited about. This tragedy. It fosters a great time of creativity, and a great momentum and a swing of doing things I hadn't done before. My friend's got a Christmas tree up in his house and he's not decorating Christmas decorations—he's adding a new paper ring with his kids for every day of the quarantine. And it's like, that doesn't mean anything, but it does create some moment of how do we mark the passing of time? How do we do that in a way that engages our family and rallies us around something? An idea, when we're in a spirit of creativity, in response to a tragedy, we all then necessarily must change, because this is something, the cultural zeitgeists we're all feeling these creative ways of looking at the world.

Therefore, when we turn around and we start interacting with commerce and the economy, we start buying and selling goods. Well, suddenly that changes. I'm not a consumer necessarily of content. I can also just realize that can also be a creator of content. I'm not just a consumer of goods and services.

I just participated in helping make face masks, and that wasn't that hard. I can contribute to the world that necessarily changes and adjust what commerce is doing because commerce has suddenly realized that the people have a creative power of their own. We've all kind of awoken to that. So I don't know what's going to happen.

I just think that the smart among us will recognize that sea change of perception and go, *Okay, great. How do we now add rocket boosters to each other? How do we help creativity at the individual level, different speaking for brands? How do individuals regroup together and reform in new ways? To offer and create new things?* We're going to see new businesses, new ideas, new endeavors launched out of this tragic time.

Olga: [00:15:39] Maybe in Detroit, we're a little bit more used to the uncertainty. This is a city that's seen a lot of ups and downs, a lot of cataclysmic shifts. And times when maybe the rest of the country really has. I know in this case we're all in it together as a country and as a world. If you maybe want to reflect a little bit on some of the times that you've helped brands really pivot and adapt, because I think that's what we're talking about: the way that design and creativity really can help brands pivot and adapt.

Kasha: [00:16:10] Those are the exciting moments. When a brand recognizes that opportunity and says, okay, how can I change and shift to react to this opportunity and let's take it well for a second. You know, relative to this current crisis, Detroit as a city in Michigan is a state of makers.

We've been bootstrapping and making things. For a hundred plus years. So that's in our DNA. I'm excited to see what we're going to make as a city and as a state because it's a part of us, we just craft stuff. We make stuff, we help other people by bringing goods and things to the world. So that'll be interesting.

And that's an interesting pivot for what will come out business wise, but for brands that have recognized that moment, let's go kind of pre-crisis, which is back before we all had this on our minds. This is one story I love. We have a chocolatier here in Detroit: Bon Bon Bon. They make world-class chocolates and they're just a wonderful team and group of people.

It's so personal. When you go to the **Bon Bon Bon** store, you pick out your chocolates from the window display case and there's all these beautiful little ornamented little rectangle square things that just look delicious. And the person behind the counter takes each one of them and packages them in this rough, gritty—but clean—cardboard box and wraps this paper tape around it and then puts a rubber band around that and they create this very industrial chic package and you walk away with it and you know, the chocolates are in there, but it's just as much fun to bring it home and reopen that package as it was to see them go in in the first place.

So Bon Bon Bon is like, *okay, we really need to improve the website experience cause I can order them on the website. But. Frankly, I can't deliver that same experience on the website.* So we took that challenge with them. They were a client of ours a couple of years ago.

So, how do we translate the in store experience online to the website? So we really tried to. Make it as real as possible. The textures of the cardboard—this is all digital. I can't touch and feel or scratch and sniff my computer screen, but as much as possible, we wanted to take the texture of the cardboard and what it feels like to pick one bon at a time—so, there's no bulk ordering.

You actually go through on the website and you pick them in the same visual ways you do in the store and then. In the ordering. When you go to get your box, there's this wonderful photograph of this little girl and she's holding, maybe it's a six inch box. If we only had six bons or she could be holding a 30 inch box If you've ordered 30 bons. There's a different photo for each size of box, and they show you that when you check out, these are your bons, they're coming to you, and then it literally arrives on your doorstep, and it looks just like the photo you just saw.

So that whole connection and translating from physical to digital, it just took Bon Bon Bon saying we have to invest in keeping what's really special about us because anybody can make chocolates. I mean, that's not true, but theoretically chocolates can be made by anyone. But what's the experience that is completely unique to this chocolate tier and translate it from the physical to the digital. What's the most important thing ? Human centered that humans and people really love about this and let's make sure that that translates. So that pivot was really cool to see them shift that online experience.=

Olga: [00:19:31] I mean, that's a really great example and it is relevant pre-crisis and now it's an in store experience and how it turns into an online experience and with some thoughtful design and human centered thinking, you can really achieve that. When you work with clients, do you find that they're coming to you and they've already.

They say, Oh, I want a website. I want the digital material. I want this beautiful magazine. Or are they working with you to kind of help define their problem? So that the right solutions come out of it. And you have, what does that client relationship look like to try to get the right solutions?

Kasha: [00:20:08] I definitely think, I know from experience, the right solutions come from a collaboration around a problem and not an execution of a request.

So we have an ongoing problem and we have had an ongoing problem for tens of years, for decades. In our industry where over 50 years we trained as creative services. We trained clients to have a specific ask and we would deliver on the ask and the best creative services professionals. Always knew that that wasn't the right way, and they always positioned themselves as, we're here to solve problems collaboratively with you, but let's be honest with ourselves, they were very, I didn't have always been very few and far between because as a whole, our industry has tricked itself into believing, well, let's just make sure we solve for the ask, or let's respond to the RFP.

You know, the RFP is one of the worst things that can happen to our industry or even to a client in a creative relationship because the client has predefined the problem and the solution and there is no opportunity there to find the new, the better of the different, because now it's reduced to checking boxes and making sure that everything has been answered as asked and as defined.

First off, I really hope that this crisis in the spirit of mass creativity continues to foster in business. The same idea, mass creativity where we can just look at each other and go *I got a problem. I don't know how to solve it, but you guys are smart (at least you told me you're smart) and we're contracted to work together, now, please solve it for me. And you know, let's see what we can come up with.* That's where the best work comes from. That's where I hope the business to creative industries, that those relationships start to continue moving towards as a result of this time. And more importantly, I wanna encourage our peers in the design and creative community when we receive the RFP.

When we receive a specific ask, I think our answer should always be yes. It should be yes and yes, and what else could we do? And I was looking into this audience and this audience segment.

I saw some things I felt like it could be addressed. How might we address that? And you know what's going to happen?

Clients are many times going to say, well, no budget for that out of scope. They're going to say that three or four times, but we're going to keep, please peers, keep asking those questions, keep digging in, and then we're going to continue to build relationships where. Clients and partners really at that point start saying, well, you know, you gave me some interesting ideas about this thing over here, and there's this other thing over here.

What do you think about that? And they'll start inviting us into those conversations. That's the goal that we have at the studio. We seek to be a part of partnerships that simply say, Hey, we sense this problem. We know you can help solve it. Let's work together, get to that solution.

Kasha: [00:23:14] So it's super easy to define success simply by metrics. And of course we should, there should be some oftentimes level of this many new sales or this mentioned gauge mint or whatever your, your metric of choice is.

But the best relationships are when creative gets out of its own way and stops simply making it pretty or making it sound good, but works to solve business problems. This is where creatives have to put on a new hat and they have to go, *Hey, I'm not just here to make it look good or make it sound pretty. I'm here to solve a business problem.* When a creative invests on the client's side of the table in the actual business challenges that they're trying to solve for. Client always, always appreciates that. And then we can collaboratively identify, okay, what is the right result to get out of this? What is the thing we're going to measure?

What is success going to be like for us? So for example, our creative briefs always have at the bottom, the last question, how will we measure success on this project? And we're defining in the brief, not just what should be done and how we should approach it and what the creative outcomes are expected, but rather what business results are going to be driven.

Because business hire creatives to advance its economic interest, to do more business, to be more economically, financially successful. So we need to be in tune with that, and the best partnerships are the ones that are attuned to business problems and solving to deliver actual business results.

Olga: [00:24:41] I know you worked on **Ellis Island Tea**. Would you say that that might be an example of this kind of at its best?

Kasha: [00:24:47] Yeah. Ellis and now has been such a great partner to work with. When we first started working with her, it was very much of the like, Hey. I think we need to redo how we come at the world. Our packaging specifically on this bottle, and she had been getting some input from some advisers that her labeling was keeping her from success on the shelf and getting the trials, the first trials that she needed.

And so she came to us and we approached it as, okay, business, what are you trying to accomplish? Well, I am trying to accomplish more sales with buyers. She was focused on the

buyers at retail, those who are purchasing large quantities to put on their store shelves. So we knew the buyers were the ones who needed to believe in the product.

And then ultimately, of course, it had to be attractive to the consumer, but we solved the buyer's problem that he or she would look at it and go, a, this looks like a product that would fit on my shelves. B. It's positioned itself as something different. I'm not just putting more of the same on my shelf. I have something unique and special.

We created unique positioning for her. The Island escape, this Jamaican ice tea idea, and then see, this is, I guess I'd say maybe it's contemporary. It's forward thinking. It feels like now. Those were obvious things that a buyer could look at and go, huh, this is legit brand. I want to get this on my shelf.

Then the consumer sees, I'm like, Oh, that's new and different. I want to try that out. We're all kind of bored with the ready to drink tea aisle. Oh, well, I haven't seen Jamaica and I see before, let me try that out. But it wasn't about making the bottle look better. Right. That's what you're getting at. It's, it wasn't a, Hey, make this prettier.

It was, Hey, let's be more successful with buyers because when we do that, we get more tea on shelves. Ultimately sales grow. That took a collaborative conversation with Nila. What are we really trying to get at?

Olga: [00:26:32] Any other examples like that? I know you've worked with some other iconic Detroit companies and also national brands.

Kasha: [00:26:45] Yeah. Solving the problems together. We have a client in the container industry. They make the containers that products go in, and so that's a challenging industry to be in. Because at the end of the day, once the products are out of that container, that container is frankly garbage. It gets thrown away.

They make that stuff. Well, somebody has to make it cause we need to be able to put the products into the container so that they can sell at a retail location. And so we've been addressing, for example, how do we improve and change the perception of the material that the container is made out of.

So the goal isn't about selling more of the product. The goal is about helping consumers understand what to do with the material afterward, or where the material came from in the first place. And how do we help not only our client that makes the containers, but the brands that put their products into those containers?

How do we create more synergy around this continued idea of recycling these containers? This container came from recycled material. So that's been an interesting challenge. That is really fun to take on because we all know, you know, we need to do something good and we need to be positive with the container world that we're a part of and we need instruction and guidance to do that.

Cause it's easy to say, well, recycle. Okay, yeah, but how and where did this come from? How do I know I'm making the right choice about the right products, which came in the best containers that are good for me or good for the environment or whatever my mental calculations are. Those are the, again, the questions that I want to encourage brands.

To ask their creatives helped me identify the best results, or at least come with a set of results they're trying to obtain and creatives need to get on board with, okay, what are the business results that need to be driven here? And also. How do I participate in identifying interesting and different kinds of results that can really get at driving business solutions?

Olga: [00:28:39] Well, this is why we love that Skidmore Studio is one of our **Detroit Design Network** members, Kasha, because you are always working so hard to bring value to your clients. I mean, it's been such an interesting conversation and a real, I think, respite from the current situation. I've really enjoyed talking with you today.

Thank you so much for joining us.

Kasha: [00:28:58] Thank you. You're welcome. I hope so and good luck everyone. Stay healthy, stay positive. Help each other, and please reach out to a friend or neighbor if you need some help.

Olga: [00:29:07] That's right. Stay positive and help. That's the message for today.

Kasha: [00:29:11] That is it. You got it.