

Legacy in the Making

PLAYBOY

In a little more than 60 years, Playboy, founded in 1953, has become one of the world's most famous brands: iconic for its bunny logo, its playmates and, of course, its founder, Hugh Hefner. In that same time frame, Playboy has grown from being a men's lifestyle magazine into a global enterprise, publishing print and digital content as well as retailing a myriad of branded and licensed products such as clothing and fragrances. So, how does a longstanding, legendary brand that once broke conventions stay vital in changing times? How does Playboy take its provocative history and rekindle it into something meaningful now? The Legacy Lab sat down with **Scott Flanders**, chief executive officer, and **Robin Zucker**, senior vice president of marketing and digital, to get their take on what they are doing in real time to not live off Playboy's past but to add to its legacy in the making.



express how he felt would capture the Zeitgeist of the moment. When he published the first edition of the magazine, it famously featured Marilyn Monroe as the centerfold. Hef did not put a date on it because he did not know if it would be the only publication. He didn't put a volume on it because he didn't know if there would be a second one. But then, *Playboy* obviously captured something of social significance.

Since the start, the brand has always been about personal liberty. And one thing that we have seen emerge, coincident with *Playboy's* launch, is much interest in a sort of semi-alternative, free-spirited lifestyle. Not everyone wants to buy into the image of being an investment banker, even though they attend an Ivy League school. They don't want to follow any script. They don't want to feel constrained. For *Playboy*, that plays well for us because that's also our MO—to not let someone else write the script for your life, whatever it is.

Look at what we have achieved over the past many decades. *Playboy* has a 97 percent global unaided

What is *Playboy's* origin story?

SCOTT FLANDERS: If you go back 60 years to the founding of the company, you had a founder who captured the spirit of the sexual revolution. Hugh Hefner was a repressed teenager who grew up

in a puritanical, Midwestern household. Hefner imagined a different life for himself, wrote the part, stepped into it and lived it. He really was a playboy.

Hef, as Hefner is commonly referred, did not imagine that his need to

awareness—and yet, our reputation is bigger than our revenue. Ours is a small business with a massive global brand. It's similar to Ferrari. Ferrari is a tiny company. In 1999, they made 400 cars. Now, it's grown a lot. But like Ferrari, *Playboy* is a brand that punches way above its weight.

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What's the challenge for *Playboy* now?

SF: The challenge we face is that *Playboy* hasn't really been seen as relevant, as the navigator of social, political, sexual, economic change and progressiveness that it once was. Years ago, Hef's broadcast show, *After Dark*, was the first program on TV where a black performer and a white performer were filmed on the same stage, at the same time. Hef came along at

a time when speaking radical sh*t about women having the right to control their reproduction so that they can make their own choices was taboo. But that's 20 years minimum in our past. And so, more recently, what we had to do was to find a way to get back to our origins.

I analogize it to carving an ice sculpture of an elephant for an Indian wedding. You start with a big block of ice, and then you chip away everything that's not an elephant. And what you hope to have at the end is an elephant. That's what we had to do. That's what we're still doing right now. We are chipping away at what really isn't consistent with Hef's original vision. It is graphic, but our editorial director made this statement the other day when we were talking about authenticity. He said, 'The problem with millennials is that they smell inauthenticity like a fart in a car.' It's true.

To get back to relevance, what we have to do is to get rid of everything that isn't true to Hef's vision. If you go back to the start of *Playboy*, we see images of Hef in a tuxedo. He treated, and continues to treat, women with respect. And that core imagery is not what the *Playboy* fan thinks of when they think of hardcore pornography. So, to restart, we had to really curtail that business even though, when I arrived, a significant amount of the profits of the company came from the adult TV business.

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What role does *Playboy* play in culture today?

SF: As I like to tell people, we're not curing cancer at *Playboy*. We're giving people a little aspirin for the headaches of their lives. We're bringing a little fun, a little adventure, a little provocation and, hopefully, a lot of sexiness. And everyone's life can benefit from having more of that.

What we are is a brand that you can trust to guide you on how to be attractive to the opposite sex: where to go, what to wear, what drink to order, what music to listen to, what your apartment should look like, what foods are cool and hip right now, what movies you will want to be able to talk about, and maybe even a little bit of literature for those who want to start looking for a wife. *Playboy* is about the good life.

One of my favorite lines of Hef's is, 'Life should be lived with a little style.' The fact is that *Playboy* is a

fantasy: Men want to be THAT guy, and women want to be with THAT guy. We are, in part, educators of men wanting to be attractive to women.

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How are you bringing the *Playboy* perspective to life beyond the printed page?

ROBIN ZUCKER: From a marketing perspective, we always ask, ‘What’s the shareable story?’ We think in terms of our audience. We think in terms of their existing channels and their emerging ones. We are a publisher, but we think a lot in terms of content creation. For example, *Playboy* is about entertainment-related content. Nightlife is core to our DNA. There are obviously the girls, so we have Playmates. Sex and culture is a big content vertical for us, and humor too. For us, the shareable

story begins around what’s buzzing—content first told and shared from the *Playboy* perspective.

In total, across audiences, channels and content, we communicate an overarching lifestyle message: a man’s guide to living life to the fullest. I mean, maybe it’s YOLO before YOLO existed. It’s about Hef and how he’s lived.

What’s been the biggest change you’ve made at *Playboy*? And what did you learn from it?

SF: When I came here six years ago, *Playboy* had already moved into porn, which was never the vision of the founder.

In fact, in the ’70s, Hef even resisted going bottomless. His team, at the time, came to him and made the case that *Penthouse* and *Hustler* were capturing massive circulation, and that *Playboy* also had to go bottomless. With the benefit of hindsight, they should never have done that. Next, when adult TV became a huge business, with pay-per-view and subscription channels, *Playboy* also saw that as an opportunity, even though what it did was take the brand down a path that really wasn’t consistent with Hef’s celebration of women.

I came into a business that was making most of its money in the adult TV business. It was sex acts on television under the *Playboy* brand name. And that was never any part of what Hef was about. So I would say the biggest misstep the company made was

following in the path of competitors who went far more explicit.

As I said earlier, we had to start chipping away at those things that weren’t consistent with Hef’s vision. We had to curtail the adult TV business, the porn, even though it was highly profitable. We had to take the company private. As a public company, there was no way I would have been given permission by the shareholder base to shave off what was half of our revenues and most of our profits.

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Today, who is your brand’s target audience?

SF: It’s okay to grow up with your audience, but even your most loyal fans don’t want you to grow old like them. You are harvesting a melting ice cube if you allow your brand to perpetually grow old. At *Playboy*,

even our longstanding magazine readers want to live the good life: the life of the modern playboy. So, we are taking our cues for the evolution of our brand in total, including the magazine, from the success of our digital and social audience: the millennial male audience.

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RZ: In August 2014, we relaunched Playboy.com. We grew our global audience by 400 percent to more than 16 million monthly visitors. We reduced the median age from 47 to 30 years. And one third of all visitors come back every day. *Playboy* now has a bigger audience than it has ever had in its more than 60-year history. The success we had first in digital, and then in social, has had a deep impact on our current brand thinking and on our behavior too. We are programming everything around the millennial male. This includes a reimagining of our flagship product, the magazine, in a way that reclaims our standing as a bold and culturally relevant voice.

SF: We have to get everything aligned with the millennial male mind-set that we want to reach, to

reflect a more modern sensibility, or we're going to fade into irrelevance.

What's been your brand's biggest success, and what did you learn from it?

RZ: My role has really been about new-audience development. Where is our audience? How do we engage them? And then figuring out what the valuable opportunities are for the brand as they come up.

The audience that we want to reach has moved to social media, which continues to grow at a very rapid pace. And even with a small amount of investment, we can really engage this new audience in social spaces. So, early on, we started shifting our assets to social. And we continue to focus on changing and evolving with the times. Our content approach is all about being in the know and being relevant: what's trending and what's buzzing. Finding common ground between our emerging audience and our evolving brand is what is driving us forward fast.

SF: As our social audience grew under Robin and her team, and showed deep engagement, it made me more wistful that I didn't own Playboy.com to control the experience. Years before, the website had been losing eight figures a year, so the management at the time made the call to license it. Licensing brought in hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. But, what happened was that our new fans would go to Playboy.com,

and it was a feeder site to lots of hardcore subscription pornography sites. Fans would enter Playboy.com, and they would discover an experience completely inconsistent with their social media experience. So we went to the board and said, 'We need to take the website back and forgo the revenue.'

The board agreed and took a chance. We have shifted what the website was all about, and now it's about enabling someone to live the good life, a better life. Which is, I think, what we've always stood for. It's not about nudity.

RZ: The change worked. We didn't say, 'We've licensed the site and it's not the right thing, but it's just going to play out the way it is.' We said, 'We can make this better.' So I think everything we're doing today is just that—creating a better site and empowering our male millennial audience to lead a better life.

How has the *Playboy* brand not only come to life, but also evolved across all of its different social and digital channels?

RZ: I think every brand has to think about constantly writing its history, and I think that the nature of social media enables brands to do that. We can all have a website and speak at people. But when *Playboy* posts an article on Facebook, there's a much bigger conversation that happens.

Overall, whether in social media or beyond, our approach to brand

evolution and relevance depends on the platform and the audience. When we think about our millennial audience, our digital footprint is a component of our evolution. The magazine is a component of it. We're launching a bar and that's also a component of it. In the recent past, we also launched a Snapchat because we want to get to an even younger audience. But, Snapchat is very different than all of our other channels. It's more behind the scenes. It's very real time. It's a much younger audience that it reaches, so we keep it very PG, not even PG-13.

There's always the overarching theme of the 'shareable story'—the story we initiate that our audience passes forward. But the story that we tell shifts, it evolves, depending upon the channel. When we tell our story on Instagram, it is more lifestyle-focused than how it might be on Facebook. Twitter is more news-oriented and in the moment, and so on.

What do you want *Playboy's* modern legacy to be?

SF: We are now right in the heart of having decided to really progress the magazine, making it non-nude. Nudity was provocative when Hef was first leading this brand. But today, you're one mouse click away from every sex act imaginable. Nudity is no longer provocative. It can even be seen as noisy and gratuitous. When I first floated the idea, the overwhelming reaction I got from the ones who

love the brand is that we should do it—that we should take the magazine non-nude. *Playboy* is so much bigger than baring genitalia. Removing nudity does not change our identity. The evidence of that is the audience we've developed in social media, and now with *Playboy.com*. The new audience, in new channels, is so far in excess of the audience that we ever reached in print. While we still feature sexy women, lifestyle and nightlife and all the other things that we've long focused on, *Playboy* is not all about nudity.

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Ultimately, I want this brand to be a part of the social conversation. I want *Playboy* to be seen as relevant now as it was in the '60s and '70s.

We're not there yet. So even though our audience is bigger than it has ever been in absolute numbers, and maybe even as a percentage of the population in terms of total impressions that we're generating today versus what we were generating back then, we are not as influential as we once were.

The problem today is capturing the real passion that Hef was able to capture when people felt suppressed—because people today don't feel suppressed. Typically, research says millennials feel anxious and sort of insecure, uncertain and undirected. But they really don't all feel that way. They're not really that angry. They don't feel like there's some huge cause that they need to right the wrongs of in society. I'm talking, primarily, about millennials in the United States. Globally, there's a different story there. So, connecting around areas of social relevance persists as part of our brand's contemporary challenge.

Looking ahead, I would like to set *Playboy* on a path where it's seen as a more critical part of the conversation. Not just following, but once again setting the agenda of the important issues of the day. I look to the past and see it, and I can imagine what that might look like moving forward. Part of that opportunity, I feel, is bringing people into our social and digital experience and giving them a platform to take part in a conversation that doesn't otherwise exist.

What advice do you have for others working on building a successful brand legacy of their own?

SF: The world is moving and changing at a fast speed, and I see brands that are really struggling to keep up. All the time and money should be spent by advertisers and brand builders on how to cause conversations to happen about our brands. Some of the conversation we will spark is going to be unfavorable. But if you are not a part of the conversation, you're going to be roadkill. We all need to get more comfortable with change.

A lot of executives say, 'I don't want to put our brand out there because someone is going to say something bad.' But, they're going to say it anyway. You might as well be listening and actually be a part of the conversation. That's what happens on social media all the time. Even if someone does say something negative on our channels, we find that we don't necessarily have to police it, because the community is doing it for us. Something negative gets said, and it gives all your fans a chance to weigh in—in the positive. And the fans are the ones who are buying your products anyway. It's not your detractors. So, who cares about them? Bring it on. Come on. Let's fill up that comment page with more negative stuff. We've got to encourage people to make fun of our brands, because doing so makes us relevant.

The other important thing is to remove everything that's not consistent with your core. What is the core foundation of what you want your brand to represent? And rigorously remove that which is inconsistent with it, even if you feel like you're cutting off an arm of profitability. I look at the media landscape today, and I've never seen anything more competitive and faster changing. You can go from the penthouse to the outhouse so fast today with one massive misstep. You've got to never get distracted from delivering against whatever it is that causes your audience to engage with the core of your brand.

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Now in its 62nd year, Playboy continues to show that taking big risks to persevere can pay off big too. In the modern era, the brand bravely walked away from business units that were profitable but ultimately denigrating to the Playboy brand name. By staying true to its founder's vision, the reigning CEO and senior leadership team have been able to identify what is right—and what is not—for Playboy moving forward. By understanding their new millennial audience, the brand, in total, has been able to start connecting in more relevant ways with much more relevant content: mobilizing the next generation around the modern Playboy lifestyle and activating them to be real participants in living it and perpetuating it. Playboy has a longstanding history of being bold. And continuing to make bold moves, as a business, is helping to ensure that the brand won't just be losing relevance by living off its past, but rather, regaining relevance by adding new pages to its growing legacy in the making.

BY MARK MILLER

Mark Miller is the Chief Strategy Officer at Team One, an ad agency with global expertise and proprietary research in premium categories and aspirational consumers.