

Join Julie Livingston, founder and president of WantLeverage Communications and host of PR Patter, a series of talks focusing on relevant topics in marketing and public relations today, in conversation with Christina Hagopian, Creative Director at Hagopian, Inc., which is a creative agency that specializes in brand strategy, graphic design, e-commerce, email marketing, and developing exciting brand experiences for leading luxury and lifestyle brands.

Livingston and Hagopian discuss how to build strong creative partnerships with brands and companies, integrating your agency with a brand and a team, deep listening to find out what a brand really needs, and how brand identity evolves over time.

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–Julie Livingston

“What makes both a good client and a good agency partnership? I think it really is that word: partnership. You know, when you think of a relationship, having that trust, that's when the collaboration starts to be magical. Having that space and time to do good work together creates the trust between you two.”

“Creatives and creative agencies become invaluable when they become trusted advisors and strategic partners– when you become integrated with their brand, with their vision, with you know, their brand's identity and having that evolve over time.”

“Project management is not a sexy part of creating, but it's so necessary. I've often felt having the right project plan and empowering the internal team to make decisions, and making sure that there's maybe two to three maximum decision makers on a team is best.”

“We do a lot in the discovery phase. It's a pure education process and a crash course in their brand. We're looking at their strategy documents, or creating them ourselves. We're looking at their competitive set, making sure that we're differentiating from them. We're looking at their whole industry and making sure we are standing out among them and doing what every agency should do. And when that happens and they're downloading all of that information for us, that's when the partnership really starts to happen.”

“Sometimes when a client comes to us with a problem, they think they know this, they think they have the solution, they think they know what they need. If you really start to listen and you really start to ask, well, why is this a problem? Or, how is this translating to your business results? You have to peel back the layers of the onion.”

–Christina Hagopian

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### **Edited Transcript:**

Julie Livingston:

Morning everyone, and happy Wednesday. It's time for another edition of PR Patter. I'm Julie Livingston, president of WantLeverage Communications. You know, over three decades I have led marketing and communications teams for different organizations as well as running WantLeverage Communications, and I have a virtual team of creatives that I work with. One of the things that is so important is having a great creative partner. I'm so delighted today to welcome Christina Hagopian. Christina is Creative Director of Hagopian, Inc. She's a creative director and has been running her award-winning creative agency for two decades now. Amazing. Christina and her talented team specialize in brand strategy, graphic design, developing e-commerce sites, doing stellar email marketing that looks fantastic and really gains traction for you and developing exciting brand experience experiences for leading luxury and lifestyle brands. Her clients have included PepsiCo, Lancome, Mercedes-Benz, Burberry, London, and Madison Square Garden. How do you like that? Wow. That's an amazing list, Christina.

Christina Hagopian:  
Thank you.

Julie Livingston:  
Welcome to today's broadcast. In your business you've worked with so many different kinds of companies and, and I want to mention the nonprofit work that you've done as well as luxury and lifestyle brands. What makes a great working relationship with a creative team like yours? There are just some that are magic and others that are hard, and I've had both experiences, but I'd like to know from you, from your perspective, as the creative director of an agency, what makes it work? What makes the magic happen?

Christina Hagopian:  
I've been on both of those teams, Julie and I often think about what is the common thread? What makes both a good client and a good agency partnership? I think it really is that word "partnership." When you think of a relationship, having that trust, that's when the collaboration really starts to be magical. Having that space and time to go do good work together and the trust between you two.

Julie Livingston:  
You just mentioned something that I know comes up constantly and that is time.

Christina Hagopian:  
Yes.

Julie Livingston:  
How many times have you gotten the last minute call, like, we need this tomorrow. And you really do need time to strategize and think something through to deliver the best work. Talk about that for a minute now, how time constraints play into this whole equation.

Christina Hagopian:

You know, they always have that Venn diagram of good time, money, and it's true. You know, there has to be that marinating process and that time for strategy. It's not only execution. You need that time for planning. I always think about the best projects and what they've allowed for that time. That's when you can be that real creative force together where that client dialogue starts to happen and you start to brew— what about this and what about this? And bringing in that time to bake really creates that stronger bond.

Julie Livingston:

But what happens when you don't have the time?

Christina Hagopian:

Look, we will always push and make a deadline We make it happen. That's 20 years of experience that we've been able to do, no matter what time you give us. But what makes good partnerships, what makes good projects— there have been the anomaly of like, wow, we just pulled that out of a hat. But at the end of the day, that's...

Julie Livingston:

Not optimal.

Christina Hagopian:

But it really needs that marinating time, I think, and time for strategy and dialogue.

Julie Livingston:

I love that term, “marinating time.” Years and years ago I had the great pleasure of seeing Billy Joel talk about his creative process, and he used that word exactly. He said, I like to let the ideas for my songs marinate and really give it time to develop into something fantastic. So true.

Christina Hagopian:

It's so true. I mean, I've thought and I read a lot about, you know, the artist's way or how creatives are creative, right? It's having that space and time to go for a walk too. You know, it's that it's that time between the subconscious and conscious that real creativity happens. When that is rushed, then sometimes you need to step back and look at it and really have that moment to review together as a team. It does take time.

Julie Livingston:

We're not talking about years, right? We're talking about a reasonable professional amount of time to get something together. How do creative agencies make themselves invaluable to clients? What do you find are the magic things that you do that really ignite a great partnership with a company?

Christina Hagopian:

I think creatives and creative agencies become invaluable when they become trusted advisors and strategic partners, and when they're not just seen as the beautiful fires of things.

Julie Livingston:

When you could kind of act like more of an insider as opposed to an outsider.

Christina Hagopian:

Absolutely. When you become integrated with their brand, with their vision, with you know, their brand's identity and having that evolve over time... I've had clients where they'll call us or email us and show them something that they're working on, even if we're not touching it and for our quote, brand approval. That means so much to us because it means that they've trusted us—when they go out on their own to do something that they still see us as the brand advisory. I think that's when you become invaluable, when you're ingrained in their DNA.

Julie Livingston:

From my experience being the client, on the client side with a creative partner, I think once you develop that trust and you let a creative agency kind of in so that they really integrate into your team, they also have an opportunity to learn so much more about your organization and or the brand. Because you're including them in meetings, you're sharing really vital information that will help them to do a better job.

Christina Hagopian:

I agree with all of that.

Julie Livingston:

It's all of those little nuances, right. That you may not think about when you're dealing with an outsider, an outside consultant. When you are under one roof, in a sense, yes. That's where it happens. I know that I feel that with my clients now and I consult on public relations and LinkedIn marketing, and when I have that trust developed with a client and they can consider me as an insider, wow. There are so many takeaways for me as a resource. They're giving me great stuff. It's proprietary, right? It's not anything I share, but it really helps to inform my work for them on a much higher level.

Christina Hagopian:

Absolutely. It's, that give and take back and forth that's so important.

Julie Livingston:

How can clients be better partners to creative agencies? What do clients need to know so that they can work more effectively with organizations like yours?

Christina Hagopian:

Well, we've talked about the time aspect.

Christina Hagopian:

I know project management is not a sexy part of creating. But it's so necessary. I've often felt that having the right project plan and empowering that internal team to make decisions, making sure that there's maybe two to three maximum decision makers on a team. I find that when they

have to go back to their internal team and there's maybe five, 10 decision makers, that's when the waters get very muddy. That's when all the creative concepts start to water down and it starts to become, how many cooks in the kitchen can we throw in, and stir the pot. So we try to make sure that there's two to three key decision makers on both the client side.

Julie Livingston:

Great. So you established that upfront as much as you can.

Christina Hagopian:

Always.

Julie Livingston:

We all know that can change, right.

Christina Hagopian:

Yes, especially with the large clients where they're global brands and they need to have buy-in by several key levels, but we believe that trust in that team and not having them second guess themselves to go back and forth is really important.

Julie Livingston:

I would imagine also in addition to having to identify the key decision makers, contact information, also setting up tools like having a Dropbox or, you know, absolutely. Having those, the systems in place to share large graphic files in your case are really critical.

Christina Hagopian:

Absolutely. Having an asset library that everyone can access and having it very organized and so it just becomes a machine. But you know, and then you, you're not spending the time organizing, you're spending the time on creativity.

Julie Livingston:

Can you share a few stories of a hundred thousand feet level, don't have to mention client names... Sure. But share some stories about scenarios when things went magically and when things were a little, little difficult. Because I think there'll be lessons in there for everyone watching.

Christina Hagopian:

Absolutely. Let me think. So we'd created a brand recently for a men's wear line where the owner and the CEO had a very clear vision of what he wanted for the brand, where he was going to take it, who his audience was. We were able to take that strategy and run and he didn't second guess his decisions. He was able to make those decisions really quickly. He looked at something and said, that one's it. And we ran and he trusted us to go and build. And when that happens, it's magic because that's when the most beautiful creativity happens. He's not trying to mush three concepts together, or Frankenstein pieces as we call them. You know, he said, this is the solid winner. And we moved forward with all the pieces to the puzzle.

Christina Hagopian:

I think it's one of our most beautiful identities. Wow. Because of that. You know, when I look back at some of the areas where it was like, God, we earned every dollar on that one, it was when there's a lot of second guessing, there's a lot of changes, there's a lot of, I'm not sure, let's go back to that one. That's when, or the, or the multiple decision makers coming in. You know, I have different words and phrases for what happens to it that aren't as kosher, but you know, it really does start to muddy the waters as we say. It's not the best creative in the end.

Julie Livingston:

What do you find is the best way for your clients to share brand information at the onset of a program? How do you structure that kind of initial conversation?

Christina Hagopian:

We do a lot in the discovery phase. You know, it's a pure educational process and a crash course in their brand. We're looking at their strategy documents or creating them ourselves. We're looking at their competitive set, making sure that we're differentiating from them. We're looking at their whole industry and making sure that we are standing out among them and really making what every agency should do. When that happens and they're downloading that information to us, that's when the partnership really starts to happen. Because we become part of, and every agency should become part of the brand's internal team. We're really just an extension of that. And that's when the real partnership happens.

Julie Livingston:

And what kinds of things can go awry in that process? I've experienced this in leading marketing communications teams. I have found that in those unfortunate moments when my internal partners don't provide all the information.

Christina Hagopian:

Yes. And then you get the surprise, oh, we didn't know that part.

Julie Livingston:

We didn't want that. We really wanted this.

Christina Hagopian:

Yes, yes. Well, we do a lot of creative briefs, so that's great. Before we even set a pixel to the, the pen, the paper, or the screen there is a lot of alignment there. So in that we try to eliminate all those surprises. They'll know what their first logo set will be based on that strategy and the creative brief or at least the overall look and feel of it and the strategy behind it. That helps that first review to never be a real surprise. Or, they're equally invested in that outcome and they're a part of that decision-making process. They already have buy-in before they see something. I think that's really important, that the client is involved in all of those decisions so that they are co-creators and then we're just guiding them. We're guiding their vision to be the best that it can be. That's when it's real, a real success.

Julie Livingston:

It sounds like when you create, the fact that you've created this framework, this very strong framework to guide the process from discovery through every step of the way, that that's really helpful in keeping things on track.

Christina Hagopian:

We very rarely, if ever, will deliver something without a creative brief for a complex project for our web project, for a brand project, for email. We have wire frames so that everything is all outlined before we show creative. It's really the best way.

Julie Livingston:

That's really critical. I agree with you. I was talking to a colleague of mine, Deb Maek, who just recently wrote a book called *Hate-Based*, on collaboration. Her research is pretty fascinating stuff. I have to look at that. It sounds like collaboration is such a big part of, you know, what you do and what makes a great creative partner. What makes that relationship really work?

Christina Hagopian:

I would definitely wanna take a look at that book. I also love the book *Make It Bigger* by Paula Cher.

Julie Livingston:

Oh, she's amazing.

Christina Hagopian:

She talks about how every client wants to make their logo bigger. But it's about that client relationship and that client dialogue. Actually, that entire book is about this very subject. So it's a great reference.

Julie Livingston:

Let me ask you this. In leading marketing communications teams, I've had a lot of my internal clients come to me with competitive examples and they'll say, we want something like this. How do you respond to that?

Christina Hagopian:

I think that's a natural thing to do. We like to have them gather logos and websites that they like as a baseline of their aesthetic vision. We're not in the business of copying and no agency should. We like to say, okay, this is a good inspiration piece and now we're going to create something unique and memorable. I mean, especially for a brand, you have to make it trademarkable. There can't be anything that's being borrowed. That's very important to us. So we always try to guide them but it's really incredible to have that background because that gives us a baseline of what they like.

Julie Livingston:

As you said, you have to always remind people like you, you don't wanna replicate exactly what this, you want to, you've got to work in collaboration with your creative partner to identify what your point of differences are, what your competitive advantages are. So that can be demonstrated in whatever kind of creative project you've enlisted them to do for you.

Christina Hagopian:

Absolutely. It has to be original or we're beyond business.

Julie Livingston:

How do you test the efficacy of any of the programs that you developed?

Christina Hagopian:

Well, the wonderful thing about email especially or web is that, you know, everything is clickable, and trackable and measurable. How are subject lines performing? How are buttons performing? How is, how are visuals performing based off of clicks, and in terms of a brand, how the brand messaging is and how memorable is it? How is it reacting to your audience and how, especially for e-commerce, how is it converting? All those things are so measurable now in what we do that success is a feeling of how it's looking and feeling. Everyone is very excited about it. How is it performing? We're not here just to beautify things. We're here for results.

Julie Livingston:

I love that. I think you know, even smart branding people and marketing people need to often be reminded of that.

Christina Hagopian:

Yes, absolutely. The one good thing is the, usually the CMO levels or the CEO levels that they want, they want to see that. That's our, that's our head on the line of every project— how is it performing?

Julie Livingston:

Tell me about communication and collaboration and how you kind of have to read between the lines of when you're communicating back and forth with a client during this process?

Christina Hagopian:

I think it's asking the right questions and also taking the right time to listen. Sometimes when a client comes to us with a problem, they think they know this, they think they have the solution, this is what I need. But if you really start to listen and you really start to ask, well, why is this a problem? Or why, how is this translating to your business results? You start to peel back the layers of the onion. It's like, wait a second. Maybe it should be this, or maybe this is, have you thought about X? And then when that starts to happen real solutions arise and emerge from that. And I think that listening and Q&A portion where there might be a give and take, or there might be some discoveries that happen. And that's also how you create your value too, because that's when you start to be a strategic partner where you're making them question or think about things in a different way.

Julie Livingston:

So it's really that, that deeper kind of listening. And responsiveness.

Christina Hagopian:

And suggesting something that they had never thought about before.

Julie Livingston:

I love that. I mean, that's why you bring in a great creative partner for their insights. And you don't want to dictate what they have to do completely. That's what you're bringing them in for.

Christina Hagopian:

This is why we're not five. You know, you don't, you're not putting your order in and getting it out. There's that back and forth about what it should be and you know, having a real strategic partner about it. And I think that's the big difference.

Julie Livingston:

Well, Christina, this has been a fantastic conversation. Thank you so much. For people who are interested in contacting Christina Hagopian, reach out to her on LinkedIn. Her website is [hagopianinc.com](http://hagopianinc.com). Check out her beautiful portfolio of work, and I hope you'll come back sometime, and we can talk about another topic related to the creative process and being a creative partner.

Christina Hagopian:

Thank you, Julie. It was so nice to be here. And thank you for thinking of me.