

#143 Tiffany Sauder

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SPEAKERS

Tiffany Sauder, Matt Hunckler



Tiffany Sauder 00:00

When we come in and create a brand, we're not making it, we're extracting it. And we're making it so that it can be repeated over and over again so that it can become big and amplify and have scale.



Matt Hunckler 00:22

Welcome to the powderkeg podcast, the show that plugs you into the massive opportunities in startups and tech hubs beyond Silicon Valley that are exploding with potential. I'm your host, Matt Hunckler. And I'm really excited about today's show, because I get to introduce you to one of the leading experts in one of the most important elements of any company, your brand. I'm talking with Tiffany Souder, President and CEO of Indianapolis based marketing agency, element three. We'll get into more of that in today's show. But first, I want to tell you about something because if you want to discover even more interesting companies, stories and strategies, W reached your full potential. You can get the inside scoop on everything with powder cakes hand curated newsletter, the spark delivered to your inbox each week with the tech news and opportunities outside of Silicon Valley that you really ought to know. Just go to powder keg comm sign up right on the homepage. It's absolutely free. And each Thursday, you'll get an email directly from me with the most important stories, trends and companies in tech. It's curated by some of the most connected people in tech hubs between the coasts with insights you're not going to find anywhere else. So again, that's powderkeg.com that's P O W D E R K E G.

Powderkeg, that's all one word dotcom Okay, today's guest is Tiffany Sauder. Tiffany is the CEO of element three or E three, which is a full service marketing consultancy in Indianapolis, and after taking over in 2006. She's transformed anything from a small creative shop into one of the factors is growing marketing consultancies in the Midwest, Tiffany has received awards like IB J's 40 under 40 Junior achievements best and brightest and krannert Burton Entrepreneurship Award. Under Tiffany's leadership, the element three team has appeared on Inc 5006 consecutive times from 2014 to 2019. Claim spots on the IB j fast 25 fastest growing businesses in 2014 and 2015, and one HubSpot agency of the year back in 2012. They are super innovative and Tiffany is one of the smartest people that I turned to for my own branding advice. And today's episode with Tiffany we're going to talk about how to start building a unique brand for your startup or scale up or even enterprise company. The minimum brand identity that every company really needs to have. Why employer branding is a necessity for any fast growing organization and how to approach that differently than your brand. proven strategies for creating and scaling an effective and employer brand, how a strong support system can push you to realize your full potential and lots of other great entrepreneurial nuggets in here. I recorded this back in February of 2019. So we get into a lot of great strategies for building your employer brand, because we were just launching some things that Powder Keg at the time. This is super relevant to any company really at any stage. So I hope you enjoy this conversation with Tiffany and gain as many kind of insights and takeaways as I did. Here's my conversation with special guest, Tiffany Sauder. Where were you in 2006. When you decided to start element three, how did you get to this moment in time when you decided I'm going to start a branding and marketing agency?



Tiffany Sauder 03:42

Well, I don't know if you've had those things in life that like you kind of look back and they picked you more than you picked it. I grew up in a like real crazy entrepreneurial home. My dad has never worked for anyone else a day in his life, which is very normal to me growing up but now as an adult, I look back at that. Think that's pretty crazy.



Matt Hunckler 04:00

It's a little different. What was his business?



Tiffany Sauder 04:03

So he farmed when I was little. And then when I was in third grade, he started a pallet company like, you know, that use fork trucks to move inventory and



Matt Hunckler 04:13

make furniture out of



Tiffany Sauder 04:14

Yeah, precisely, and barn doors and all that kind of stuff. And so he grew that to be the largest east of the Mississippi primarily focused on pharmaceutical and food. So if you think about those industries are fairly inelastic in demand. So he was real strategic about that. So I grew up doing business he things people talk about, like my dad threw baseballs with me or you know, in my like, my dad taught us financial literacy. We started companies and we were like sixth and seventh grade. Did you enjoy it? We loved it. We sold mulch on the roadside was our first business. So if you think about, you know, pallets, it makes a bunch of scrap wood and so they would grind that into a like consistent mix and then color it.



Matt Hunckler 04:58

Do you remember some of the biggest lessons you learn from selling mulch on the side of the road?



Tiffany Sauder 05:03

Well, honestly, the biggest one that has carried through is it. I was in I think seventh grade, and my sister was in fifth. And we started it and everybody thought we were too little to do it real. And so like farmers, because we lived in rural environment, farmers would come with their pickup trucks, and we were driving a bobcat and they would be like, you know, Hey, honey, you want me to do that for you? And we're like, No, dad won't let other people drive it. And so then we would do it, we would load it. And I think that from a young age, the idea of like creating credibility and and owning your space before somebody else would give it to you. I think that's one of the of course there was all the financial things and he made us like file our own taxes and all this kind of stuff, but I think being able to handle yourself and be able to like Own your space because everybody thought we were too little. And but we never hit like never wants to we hit a pickup truck. Never once did we like mess something up. So I think that if I look back and take one really big thing away, and I mean, I was 2425 year old, 25 years old when I started Elementary, and nobody thought that I should. And I think that that sort of internal Moxie is a real part of being an entrepreneur. Yeah, absolutely. which you've I mean, you've seen that.



Matt Hunckler 06:21

Well, I certainly haven't had an Inc 5000 fastest growing company five years in a row. So different level of Moxie, maybe. But that's why you're in here today. I'm really excited to learn from you. And I'm even learning from young Tiffany. So Own your space, how would you own your space when you're selling mulch by the side of the road?



Tiffany Sauder 06:44

Well, I mean, we had to market it and and, you know, create relationships with the grocer and make sure that he was willing for it, you know, for us to put our stuff there and at the post office, you know, sort of centers of gravity of where in small towns where people are at where things are at And then just like today while there weren't online reviews and you know my word so long ago 93 there were still reviews word of mouth and your reputation all was really important and so, you know, we we grew into kind of a little big deal and we you know, as kids we'd make 678 grand a summer which was a killing Oh, yeah. So



Matt Hunckler 07:26

did you save your money or did you spend



Tiffany Sauder 07:28

Okay, so I would spend mine in my sister would save hers and then I would like kind of get some hers to somehow cuz I was older.



Matt Hunckler 07:36

Sure, entrepreneur. Yeah.



Tiffany Sauder 07:37

And I think today too, like I am very much. I'm a growth oriented entrepreneur. So the idea of like, kind of putting my chips all back on the table is a real easy thing for me like betting on tomorrow. And and then so I have to surround myself with people who are thoughtful savers or a little bit more are constrained and making sure I'm being judicious. But even then I'd be like, yeah, let's throw it all back into inventory. Let's get four more colors or let's get three more loads and see if we can sell through it. And I see that today too in my energy of like, yeah, like, let's see, let's throw it all back and let's see what we

can do with it.



Matt Hunckler 08:17

I love it. So take me back to 2006 where did the idea come from?



Tiffany Sauder 08:22

Um, so it wasn't so much an idea i right out of I went to Craner I got a degree in finance at Purdue. Yep. And I was a small town kid with like, big city dreams. And so the idea of, you know, coming to Indianapolis, which is a really big city to me at that time, and getting a job at a place like Lilly or a big company in a business card was just something that I was like, there's just no way that will happen to me. But I before my senior year, I got an internship at Lilly and then got an offer and it was awesome. Loved it. But what I realized is that like all things that grass is now not always greener on the other side. And I had an amazing experience and Lily's an incredible company and big companies know how to teach dumb kids things, you know, they have the resources to train.



Matt Hunckler 09:16

You weren't a very dumb kid though.



Tiffany Sauder 09:17

No, but you don't know how to work like in I think small comm I would encourage my kids go work for a big company, they have the infrastructure to teach you, where small companies don't always have the infrastructure to teach and train. So an awesome experience, but I realized this is a regulated environment and have an I, I had only been around small business for the most part. And so I didn't understand the sort of heaviness of bureaucracy. And I don't really mean that I think we use that in a negative sense a lot. There's just a lot of order in a big company. And I was used to like, going with, like obvious decisions and in a big company, it's difficult to get things done in any kind of agile way because for good purpose. There's order to decision making, right? It doesn't work doesn't scale if it's crazy.



Matt Hunckler 10:05

But it sounds like you've been talking to Meg on my team.



Tiffany Sauder 10:09

And the but in a regulated environment on top of that the FDA has to approve a change. So the idea of using just like, common sense doesn't translate quickly. And again, for good reason. I'm not like ragging on it. But I just realized, this doesn't fit my energy. I I'm super experiential in the way that I learn. Um, because I grew up an entrepreneurial home failure was not really a big deal. So anyway, so from that, I realized I kind of need to something else. My dad had just had me read the book.



10:43

Oh, my word. I just blanked on it. The E myth?



Matt Hunckler 10:46

Yeah. That was one of the like, gateway books for me.



10:49

Yeah. Okay. So



Matt Hunckler 10:50

yeah, it's taught very heavily at Kelley School of Business and their entrepreneurship program. And so I read that book my sophomore year after I transferred from Purdue And that it just changed my life started a company that summer.



11:04

Yes. So what was your big takeaway from it? And then I'll say my



Matt Hunckler 11:07

work on the business not in the business.



Tiffany Sauder 11:09

Yeah. And so I basically bought a very tiny company from people who only knew how to

work in the business. Gotcha. Um, and it was a husband and wife team. Like most they just kind of hit their ceiling pretty early. There's was not quite enough money to go around. Everybody's a little bit frustrated.



11:25

What was the business



Tiffany Sauder 11:26

that it was a precursor to element three, really a little design shop. There was maybe four people a couple freelancers and a cat that puked.



11:34

you inherited the cat?



11:35

Yeah. My chagrin. I just not a pet person.



11:40

As an aside, I think there are people people pet people and plant people interested in I am a people people. I don't know which I am.



11:47

I like all of those. You do.



11:49

Even plants? Yeah.



Matt Hunckler 11:50

I can't take care of them for me. Okay.



Tiffany Sauder 11:52

See, that's what I'm saying. It's not why you already but it's not a priority. No. Same. So I like plants. I think they're pretty I'm glad I live in a world where they But I'm not going to spend my energy caring for them. Sure. I'd rather put it towards people



Matt Hunckler 12:04

anyway. Like that.



12:07

Um, so



Matt Hunckler 12:09

I don't know which one I am because I love Hank, do



Tiffany Sauder 12:11

you have a dog? Do you go home at lunch to like do things for him? No. I'll see



Matt Hunckler 12:18

if I need to. Yeah, then you need to. But yeah, no, I'm okay. Like I'm a people, people.



12:25

I'm a people, people.



12:28

I've met pet people first people.



Matt Hunckler 12:31

Yeah. Yeah. Oh, for sure. Yes. Everyone knows they're not Yeah.



Tiffany Sauder 12:36

Yeah. So anyway, I had my dad had me read the E myth, I realized that there's people who have businesses that really never were meant to have businesses, not because they're not smart. It's just not their skill set. I ran into this husband and wife team to make a long story short, and I just felt the sense that I was supposed to kind of take a run at buying this thing. It was worth nothing. They had about 300 thousand dollars in revenue, they had a small loan that they owed to one of their parents, I talked to my dad and I was like, Hey, I kind of think we should buy this company. He had some other investments that could benefit from marketing. And so it wasn't like, we were buying something completely unrelated to the world. So for \$30,000, we assume their debt. And it was tough. That was the quote, unquote, transaction. So at a couple months before my 25th birthday, we'd bought this company. And I actually wasn't the president at the beginning. I was just going to work there. And then about a year and I went and talked to my dad, not to pitch him on me being president, but I was just like, I have some concerns. I think maybe you should investigate. And he was like, sounds like you know what to do. Why don't you just run it? And so that was, you know, that's a different podcast about how do you take over from founders? They were 20 years my senior. I didn't know marketing really. And so that, you know, kind of created a trend. Addition of



Matt Hunckler 14:00

swords, so on, how do you have the confidence to step into that role? And I mean, it sounds like you had an amazing support system behind you with your dad, your whole family history of entrepreneurship, to allow you that opportunity to step into that. And then once you have the opportunity, yeah, clearly, you've taken full advantage of it. The growth that you've seen,



Tiffany Sauder 14:21

I've stepped into it, but I you know, this too, there's people you don't get here by yourself. And it's the idea of like, I would have quit on my own. Yeah, I like I I actually didn't have what it took. But somebody believed in me enough to push me through and to my potential, but I didn't see it then. And I'm sure you feel that same way. Yeah.



Matt Hunckler 14:41

Who, who are some of those?



Tiffany Sauder 14:44

So there's guides along the way, there's three people want to certainly my dad, he's notorious for saying the end is only the end if you want it to be the end.



Matt Hunckler 14:51

Like that. It's actually so true.



Tiffany Sauder 14:54

It's just the end because people stop.



Matt Hunckler 14:55

Yeah. Yeah. But I mean, that's in startups and funded startups. It's this Same thing, yeah, you've only failed once you quit working on the project,



Tiffany Sauder 15:03

once you decide it's the end.



Matt Hunckler 15:05

And you know, in a world where a failure is sometimes glorified on the negative end of the spectrum, but also like, as long as you're learning something from that failure and taking it into the next thing, kind of going back to your point around, not being afraid to fail. It's such an important aspect of his entrepreneurial journey. It's totally so your dad and my dad, the second



Tiffany Sauder 15:27

one. So Marcia stone, she worked with me for about 10 years and we're going to start talking about brand and she's really my, the person who taught me brand from the practitioners perspective. I think the things we do in marketing often are not learned in the classroom. Yeah, you really have to, it's almost like an apprenticeship of sorts. Absolutely.



Matt Hunckler 15:43

Um, so her background.



Tiffany Sauder 15:46

She was one of the fanciest titles she had was the North American creative director of what was then Bates worldwide. Oh, wow. So she basically flew all over the country and helped their creative shops across the country. Like inspire creativity and have the best ideation practices, all that kind of stuff. But she worked on brands like Mercedes Benz and Jeep and Archer cookies and Harley Davidson and all these sort of iconic awesome brands. And she studied with some really big brand thinkers out of Europe and just did some really cool stuff. So she was here in Indianapolis because her husband is a tenured professor at Ball State and architecture program. Wow, she's a really big deal. Huge. And so here she finds herself, you know, kind of in her mind, a country bumpkin. And what I see is the big city and we find each other I'm about 2627 years old, she just stepped away from big agency or world



Matt Hunckler 16:44

How'd you find each other?



Tiffany Sauder 16:46

We we kind of got network to one another. So the truth of the matter is, I was like, I don't know what I'm doing. I was running this agency, and I didn't know the words of I didn't know, in other words, so I knew I needed to find a mentor and so she and I met on Friday afternoons, and in broad ripple for about six months, and I would bring to her like the things I saw the things I'd heard questions I had. And it was a place for me to just be like, super vulnerable with my stupidity. And she taught me the business and she taught me the things and she taught me how it all worked. And I think she saw in me that my brain was like a quick study. She just had to tell me once and so then about six to nine months into arm, her mentoring me, she's like, Hey, I'm kind of tired of being on my own. What would you think about me coming to work for you? And like, my face exploded? I was like, yeah. So we probably worked on about 100 brand projects together, wow. Over the course of about maybe seven or eight years, and she really taught me the practice of it, the combination of the discipline of the research, and also the intuition of how you find the answer. And so Marsha was one of them. The third one, I would say is a gentleman His name is Tony rice. And he was one of my really early big company clients. He was a guy who He in a leadership team ran several different companies for a private equity group.

You know, they were kind of like they would Kamikaze again for five years and turn around and, you know, move on to the next one. Yep. And he trusted me and my team with some really big, huge, like high stakes projects. And I remember being like, we do not have any credibility that we can pull this off, but he just sees that we can and so you kind of need somebody to give you a shot bigger than you deserve. And he just saw that we could, even though we'd never demonstrated we could, yeah, if that makes sense. So I think people who just saw patterns of thinking and a sense of personal ownership to delivering that took bets on me that were big and unnecessary and unwarranted in a lot of ways. That gave me a chance to kind of like ladder up.



Matt Hunckler 18:51

So I want to I want to dive into the brand, practice a little bit. Six months of Fridays and broader apple cider. Um, like a really great six months. First of all, especially if you're talking brand with someone with as much experience as that mentor did, what were some of the biggest lessons that you learned, just in those early conversations and learning the practice of branding?



Tiffany Sauder 19:15

Well, I think that, um, I think what you have to figure out when you're a brand thinker and helping to create strategies is how do you strike the balance between how much is rooted in the truth of today for that company? And how much is like betting on the future of tomorrow, and what they want the company to become or the market they wanted to enter? So I think that certainly one



Matt Hunckler 19:39

talk to me more about that. How would a startup for instance, that's, let's say they just hit product market fit, they just raise their seed round of funding? How do they strike that balance between what's rooted in the present and what the future



Tiffany Sauder 19:56

could be? Well, I think that what you have to make sure you You're doing is that the brand, at its best is actually almost wholly unrelated to the product. And getting past the thing you sell, and saying whether we're a soup kitchen, or we're a technology company, and I'm being a little extreme to make the point. We that we found the nucleus of who we are. And this at its values, its core is more a, this is what we're about. And so that might look

like something like customer obsession. Let's say that that's what the brand is about. Well, we can demonstrate that to different markets through a product that we bring them. But if we are customer obsessed, obsessed, we may think about what are the application might be, what are the frustrations that people have when they're trying to buy the thing we sell them and how do we make the comparison process easier for them. I know technology's big on the like little checkbox thing, but sure That would be one encouragement. The other thing that I would say that Marcia taught me is that when you're going through research for as long as you possibly can suspend conclusion, and try to look at the data, purely. And I would, I would ask him like, what do you see him? What do you think like as research is coming in? And she's like, I don't know yet? I don't know yet. I don't know yet. And I would get so bugged. But what she was able to do inside her, like brain is create the discipline of I want to look at each piece of information as if it's the first thing I'm seeing.



Matt Hunckler 21:36

First. That's discipline.



Tiffany Sauder 21:38

And then you step back and start to say, Now, what are the patterns I'm seeing, but often in research, particularly qualitative research, which is maybe you want to talk about that? Maybe not. That's my bias for brand is the qualitative research is focused on



Matt Hunckler 21:54

interviews.



Tiffany Sauder 21:55

Yeah, I think quantitative research can get a little dicey, but it also has This place. But yeah, qualitative research is that you can start, you can start forcing conclusion before you've looked through the entire data set. And she just had profound discipline in that, hmm. And in terms of,



Matt Hunckler 22:14

let's say you're starting to see some patterns emerge. Or maybe you're not supposed to see patterns emerge based on what you're saying and suspend conclusion.

But let's say you've looked at enough, I'm using air quotes right now, this is not a video podcast. Let's say you've looked at enough and you start to get a feel for at least directionally where you want to go. I know that there's some brand marketers that are sort of like until you've got kind of like, your brand lens, don't touch the brand, don't do anything to it. Whereas in the startup world, a lot of times there's this sort of like iterative nature to brand where it's sort of like, you know, company will raise a million bucks, 2 million bucks. I'm pursuing a problem. And really to start, like that problem is their brand. We're solving this problem. And that's sort of like directionally where they're going. But it's not quite, you know, we are customer obsessed even. I mean, that would be very specific. It's more like, we're building products to solve this problem. There's sort of probably a gray in between. But how do you sort of like find that balance between the sort of like more traditional, like, if you watch Mad Men, and it's sort of like the big reveal, this is how we're going to talk about everything, versus in the startup world, where you don't really even know what the product is because you don't have full product market fit. But brand is still important. How do you talk to entrepreneurs who are in it? It doesn't have to be startup, it could even be at more of a scaling Stage Company. How do you talk to them about brand and suspending conclusion?



Tiffany Sauder 23:57

Yeah, there is definitely a place of time where it's too early. Really to go through a formal brand exercise, and, and you should feel if someone is listening to this and they're really at startup Ground Zero, trying to figure out product market fit and grinding through that process, making it up is totally fine. And you are and this is what using intuition. Yeah. Because you're not you're, I always say, who's the closest person on the planet to the answer? Probably you, you know, you the person who's got this



Matt Hunckler 24:25

idea, their investors hope so. Yeah,



Tiffany Sauder 24:27

you the person who's at you know, imagining that this thing is going to solve a problem in the marketplace that people may or may not be noticing right now. And so somebody's got to be like, the one closest to the answer and on the planet. And so I'm just going to pick it and it is iterative and you and that's okay. I think that the place I see startups go wrong, is that just because you want it to be the answer doesn't mean that it is and make sure that it's authentic to the thing you can be and deliver. And I think in an age of a lot of

just social pressure of, you know, the way social media plays up what tech companies should be your tech leaders or even advertising or women in business or young people in business, like, make sure it's like actually your jam. And that would be the thing that I would just continue to because especially when you know that you're kind of faking it to make it because you're just scrapping everything together. It is really tempting to become a chameleon to what you think the thing needs you to be. And that it just won't last. How do you stay on path? Well, I think if it's true, it's easier. You know, I mean, maybe that's such the like, obvious answer. But I also think there's always this tension between the product in the maybe I've made this set a better way. The scale and inertia behind a business growth and the brand staying on pace with one another, it seems like the brand is either a little ahead or a little behind. And in that, I guess again, I would just say, looking at a hundreds of companies, that's a normal thing. And nobody is able to kind of keep perfect tension across that growth. I'm also using my hands right now to try to explain this to me that nobody is able to keep perfect tension in that string, you know, as you kind of go up the growth curve. And that's pretty normal. I'll add this one of the biggest things I actually see founders leaders struggle with, it's, there's like three steps one is defining the thing, what is the brand? And they're actually I would, I would say like, they're decent at that. The thing they really suck at and this is what I think the brand process helps tease out is how do you start in a way that people understand it, and the message can scale. And so I think if I'm really honest with myself about what these big formal brand projects bring to the table, it's not usually a surprise. It's a tool of like, that's what I've been trying to say. And it gives us a platform and information to be able to help that leader or that leadership team or that, you know, product team, be able to say no, how do you weave this through everything, so that you make it more true, because it's already true, right? We come in and create a brand, we're not making it, we're extracting it. And we're making it so that it can be repeated over and over again so that it can become big and amplify and half scale. And so I think maybe my brain is connecting back to your original question, which is like if you're small and agile and nimble and you don't have the resources and you're still trying to figure it out. Well, it's easier to kind of keep that nucleus close because you are both creative And executing almost in the same motion. It's that when it gets bigger that gets so hard and that dissonance starts to create a lot of problems for cultures and organizations and markets and industry all those kinds of things.



Matt Hunckler 28:14

What What is like Minimum Viable brand lens? Like what would you suggest even even a startup have at least documented and not necessarily a formal branding process, but maybe a formal brandings process? to kind of say, every company should have at least like what's the what is the one word that you would associate with that company and the three ways that they wonder sometimes like building blocks so



28:42

that's a great question. I haven't thought about that way before but I will work to answer I think why make



Matt Hunckler 28:48

up the acronym because startups love Okay, MVP, minimum viable brain? Yeah,



28:52

yeah, that's a good idea. That's a white paper. Um, so I think one is definitely your values.



Tiffany Sauder 28:59

That is a Core PCE and if you don't know how to say those recruit like your closest people to extract to you what they see and experience so values who you believe your target customer is and a composite of the things competing for their time and money, not just the thing or selling them I think that's a sometimes a blind spot I see people make is they think the only thing occupying the brain space is the thing they're selling this customer and then the third one that I would say is a mood board. Like go to, you know, Half Price Books and buy a bunch of magazines and get out your paste and scissors and a big piece of poster board and pull out the imagery, the language the words that you want your brand to feel like and when you think about it being its best self like what clothes is it going to wear And that starts to create at least aligned inspiration for people who are making for your brand. And that could be sales, pitch language, your PowerPoints, onboarding materials for employees or an ad in a, you know, at a tradeshow it can suspend across all those things. attitudinally How do you want this thing to show up? That would be that would be the other piece.



Matt Hunckler 30:22

I love that mood board. We don't have a mood board or Powder Keg yet. Maybe we'll do that. No, what I'm doing tomorrow is me picture. Yeah, totally. I will totally send you the picture of our mood board.



Tiffany Sauder 30:34

I don't know what you want it to feel like Yes, yeah, it's intuitive. And so that's what

founders have to do is how do I take what's intuitive to me and make it so others can participate in it? Yeah. And that is really what the brand process is all about. We want to take what intuitively are consumers wanting from you? What do you intuitively want to make in the world as a founder, that that's really what the prot the process does.



Matt Hunckler 30:58

I love that. I'm excited. To do it, I get messy this weekend. Let's transition a little bit and get a little bit more specific with brand. Because there's obviously an emerging opportunity, particularly in tech around employer brand, because recruiting is quickly becoming, if not already is the number one issue for tech companies. In fact, when we did the US tech census, in 2018, across all the cities, we surveyed thousands of people in these tech communities, we found that the number one pain point at these companies is retaining and recruiting the right talent to help them grow and scale. And they just can't do it fast enough. It's expensive. It's hard to find the right culture fit going back to values, and employer branding. I know as a tool, an employer brand can be a tool to help attract and retain that right talent. When did you start to see that sort of theme emerge around employer brand How do you even define employer brand internally at element three,



Tiffany Sauder 32:01

yes, I think that that would be another one of those situations where like it kind of found us. We started to find about three years after we created corporate brands, that the HR team or the leadership team would come back around and say, Hey, we're starting to see that there's an application for this, how do we take this market message and start to make it relevant internally? And so we started to understand it, we started to look at Well, how does the process map to that? How do we make sure the core components and and I think it's the exact same thing, how we think about it is that, you know, we want to make sure that we are certainly representing the best of that company in who they are, what they can give their employee. But the other thing that we're doing is that we're articulating it so that it can be repeated. And not just those who connect to the CEO get charged up in goosebumps by the cause, but also the midline. Directors and the managers and, and are all speaking the same thing and understand what the ethos of the whole place is about. And I think that what employees want today that especially I don't know how much this plays in the tech space, but when I see it look at more traditional corporations that are run and led by kind of past generations, the idea of a defined purpose, and it being much bigger than the thing you're making is something that, you know, the new employee generation is really asking for.



Matt Hunckler 33:33

definitely true, that tech companies large and small.



Tiffany Sauder 33:37

And so I actually think the challenge is, how does this idea of purpose not become so benign, that they all sound the same? Because just like integrity used to be a corporate value, and now we roll our eyes. I think we we run the risk of some of that with the sort of purpose language that it's like, we want to change the world and how do we be really specific pointed about that. And the other thing I really encourage people think about, it's about more than just giving back. Right? The like altruism of it is important, but, but it's bigger than just corporate social responsibility. It's got to be more specific than that.



Matt Hunckler 34:15

So I totally buy into the idea of employer brand and employer branding. Let's take a step back and say, maybe I'm not. Maybe I just bought into the idea of it. Where do I start in terms of creating an employer brand strategy? If I want to retain my talent, while also creating a magnet to attract more of the right kind of people? Where do I even start with a strategy? What's the first step?



Tiffany Sauder 34:42

Yeah, I think that it's making sure that the first the leadership team is aligned to seeing it all the way through. And I would, one of the things when we are in like the sales process for this is if I'm working with somebody on HR and talent is to say you need to make sure that your CEO is not only just politically on board But he's willing to spend money on it. Because it's not enough to come up with the answer. You have to continually fund this. Yeah. Otherwise, you get a really big black guy. And companies aren't used to spending money on this yet, if we're really honest with ourselves, there's invisible money being spent against it in the turnover and employee loss. And, you know, we know intuitively it's expensive and stuff turn when people turn over, but it doesn't show up necessarily as a line item on our p&l right now. Right? So one is to make sure that your, your like, your heart is really into it and that you're willing to spend money and sort of see it through. The other is to start with a baseline. Where are you right now and I know Powder Keg is thinking hard about this of, you know, what does engagement look like in our employee base? Where are we and what are the things that our employees would say we're doing a good job and a bad job at from a leadership and culture person. But I think there's such tight symbiotic relationship between culture and leadership. And so that would be the next thing I would

do is make sure that you have a decent baseline and then it goes really looks at how do we create some real answers to Who are we and what do we want it to feel like and look like to be an employee here and not just task orientation, but the core of it, what do we want to attract?



Matt Hunckler 36:28

So it's sort of the same thing as with the brand you figure out what you've got, you're just trying to figure out what is the one Guiding Light What



Tiffany Sauder 36:38

are you gonna do better than anybody else and that's where it's like you got to be able to like, ship against that like you have to be able to really do it in a crescendoed way that nobody else is going to do that in our world. Element threes quite a core Why is about writing bold stories and I talked a little bit in the earlier like the people who have given me opportunities to do things I just straight up wasn't ready for is what gave me a results not typical life. Right? Yeah. And not everybody is born into an entrepreneurial family with a dad who's a little bit crazy. And so to be able to create an environment where people can come and they can live a bold thing, and that might not look like running a company for them, but being totally cool if they have side hustles like, in allowing them to bring that into our environment and not with secrecy, but to say like, That's so cool. Like, what do you what are you working on? Because I think the more they're pursuing the better they're going to be for me, too.



Matt Hunckler 37:40

I loved your I was in the element three offices last time and I loved your like the bathroom minutes. Oh, yeah, better there. I can't remember what the information dump. Yeah, the information that I remember was good branding. I was like, Man, that's good. I just love that shit. You should know. That's awesome. I absolutely love that. It was just clear that like, your team kind of took that on it as an initiative. It's probably not a KPI driven activity. But I, I just got a taste for the culture just being being in the restroom for a minute.



Tiffany Sauder 38:12

Yeah. And so that like initiative of like ask for forgiveness and not permission is totally part of our culture and we reward that all over the place. So that's an idea of writing a bold story, like step out and do the thing. And if it doesn't work, it's okay. Nobody's gonna be

mad. So that that's what I mean. And the last thing the last step of that is like just like we create branding elements and tribal norms and things for people to grab hold on and put stickers on their laptop covers for external brands. We have to do that same thing for internal brands and we have to make icons you know, we have silly elephant and we call ourselves three years, but it creates a sense of like team and if you look at collegiate environments or you know, athletic, professional teams, there is a psychology to colors and mascots and cheers that activates the human soul. And we have to look to that as inspiration as we build internal cultures, because people will paint their bodies and grownups do crazy things, to be a fan. And we want to root for something as people, we want to be part of something that matters. And we want to know that we contribute to that thing, being positive in that thing winning. And so as employees, employers, we have to see ourselves as being team makers in a way that I don't think we've totally had to do in the past.



Matt Hunckler 39:36

I love that. And we've had Alexis Ohanian, the co-founder of Reddit, I, one of our events here in Indianapolis few years ago. And one of the things that he wrote about in his book was just every one of his companies that he's had it. One of the first things he does is he creates a mascot for it. So it's at Hipmunk. It's the Hipmunk chipmunk at Reddit. It's the Reddit alien and then you Like, you know, you're really onto something when people like tattooing, like people that you don't even know, are tattooing your mascot, like on their forearm or on their chest or on their back. And that always stuck with me as you know, of course, in the startup world is where the startup T, you see your startup t out in the wild, you know, people are repping your brand, very much like a sports team would. But I love that idea of a mascot. We don't have a mascot yet at Powder Keg. But we do make jokes that that Casey should dress up as a giant keg like a powder keg at one of our events. But we haven't gone quite that far yet because it hasn't really gone through any sort of process to vet that yet. But in terms of that, moving in that direction of sports team and leading a team with an employer brand and employer brand strategy, what are sort of those next steps to kind of bring it to life so you've you've gotten a baseline you've sort of identified pulled out maybe those core elements, and you've already talked about some of those ways you could bring them to life. But you talked about this being a long term investment, what are the best companies do really, really well, once they've defined their employer brand,



Tiffany Sauder 41:15

they teach it and train it. Like it's the most important thing for anybody to know. Um, I think that incorporating it into your employee employee onboarding. And one of the

things I feel like I'm wrapping it up, which is not my goal, but one of the things that we've done that has been really successful is all new hires meet with me for an hour to hear the history of the company and where the brand came from, and to understand the stories that built our values. And keeping that while alive, helps bring a whole different sense of understanding to people instead of just memorizing it. So that would be one teach all new employees because they're fresh and excited and want to like be superheroes for you. I love that you're using Your own example. So please make more examples would be great. Okay, so that would be one. The other thing that I would do is make sure that as you promote managers and directors into it that they understand how to take all performance, feedback and how to get people to be better at their jobs, tie it back to your values, because whatever is happening in their jobs and using sample element three, we do lots of projects, right? People pay us money to do things that we spend time on. And one of our values is business first, which means understand the business impact of your decisions. And midway through a project, we took some resources off, we put new ones on and I sat down and I said, Hey, I'm super frustrated with this, because you violated a business first value. Do you understand about 50% of this project profit was just eaten up in that one second decision that you made to swap these out. So all I mean, every single time you're frustrated as a leader, it's because there's a value That was violated your work a job setting your values. Yeah, I mean, awesome come standard is another one. So if you just totally laid an egg in front of a client you didn't prepare, you miss manage your time, you did not show up awesome come standard, and we need to talk about that. So that would be another activate around them. And then another idea that I have is that make a peer recognition program where your people are taking hold of the value so that it's not just coming top down. And making sure that you're publishing the usage or being kind of randomized in the way that you select which ones are featured, so that people understand you're watching all of that and then that when you can kind of help create a current. It starts to really catch hold and like you said the information dump was not something that we It was not an executive idea. It was not You know two thirds of what's on there is not true. Which is just spectacularly hilarious. But transparency is a big is a value of ours and so obviously like truth in jest all the time, so most of the jokes in there are like rooted in some kind of like, everybody's been dying to say that but nobody had the guts to



Matt Hunckler 44:18

kind of love it.



44:19

Um,



Tiffany Sauder 44:21

so that would be the third one. So, teach it to new hires, train it to your leaders and reward and give your people a chance to reward and recognize one another through the lens of your values and your brand.



Matt Hunckler 44:32

What are some of the companies that have done a remarkable job of building a great employer brand like what what are some of your favorites that you love and they don't even need to be past clients? Yeah, just ones that you've seen just doing amazing.



Tiffany Sauder 44:43

I'm a godfather for me in this space is HubSpot. I just think that Katie Burke has done an incredible job of everything from inclusion and diversity to sort of being really proactive from the way that she promotes women in business, and just how authentically engaged that leadership team is in their culture. I just think they do a world class job. It's just really not forced, because it's really real. So that would be one that I would look at. And there's I mean, if you look at some of the, I mean, gigantic consulting firms like Accenture, I mean, they have I mean, that was somebody on their, their C suite, their entire job as the employee experience. And they think really hard about everything from recruiting all the way through Alumni Engagement. And I mean, they're just like they're world class at it.



Matt Hunckler 45:36

Yeah. Yeah. Those are great ones to check out. In terms of your, your next steps with element three, like what are you most excited about right now with the business? And where are you drawing most of your inspiration from? This year? Even the books you've read or podcasts that



Tiffany Sauder 45:55

Yeah, so I'm I am Um, so we're about seven People right now and my role is changing from being kind of a player coach to just being a coach and really getting comfortable with what does it look like to hold you know people wholesale accountable for the things that we're have asked them to do. And it's more natural for me to be like in the trenches with everyone instead of No, this is your job and it sounds hard to hold you accountable to do that thing. So yeah, and total transparency that is that's something I'm like working through and, and being good and gracious in that, but also being firm and clear, because

we have it's different when you're not the underdog sort of scrapping your way to the top like, I think I was more comfortable with, like, everybody's counting us out, like, but watch me do it anyway. That like totally fuels me and once you're, I mean, you're never really on top. But once there's the illusion of you're kind of the market leader, you have, it's just a different way that you inspire yourself a different way that you need to lead your team. And, you know, in Indianapolis, there's not been an agency that's been over. And it's kind of a tragedy that we're the largest agency in Indiana, and we're only 65 or 70 people. I mean, this market, this state, this region can support a 200 person agency, we just haven't proven we can do that in Indianapolis. And so in some ways, I feel like it's uncharted territory from here. And the way that we recruit talent from outside the state to come in we know we've talked a lot about talent is a big piece for us. And how do I scale culture through my next line leaders that future the next 70 people will be totally determined on how strong my mid level directors are actually has very little to do with how good I am. So changing it from me doing good work? Do I understand what we do? Do I know how to log into the systems? Do you know? Do I know? Am I ready for the client presentation? That was what my life looked like five years ago. And now it's our, excuse me? Are our strategies aligned? Are my people on pace to their commitments? And does the next level down understand why we're doing the things that we're doing so that they can perpetuate and promote and continue to get that in a real homogenous way to the organization



Matt Hunckler 48:29

and doesn't employ your brand change? employer brand strategy? Does that change where you are right now when you're going from player coach to more of just a coach and relying more on your mid level leaders?



Tiffany Sauder 48:45

I think that it, it changes in the sense that you have to have ways of making it. So here's an example. So we've a best co are our values. That's the acronym, a wall of acronyms, so I won't go through them. But best coast spells are values. We've always had definitions to our values. And we've always had new employee onboarding. But over the last year or two, for some reason, these values just got completely misunderstood. And I was super irritated about that. And what I realized is what we need is we actually need we have this thing now. It's called our core values speech. And it is written out all of the backstory and the things that happened to get us there. And so that has to exist as an artifact now that were 70 people, but at 20 people, that didn't matter, because I was just talking to everyone. Yeah. So I think, you know, we talked about structure and the discipline of that. I think that's what starts to change. I don't think it's that the answer changes. But I do think

it's that you have to be more intentional and you can't, you can't reinvent it as much in your head. Once you get bigger as a leader. You have to say no, I'm gonna plant on this and I have to say over and over and over and over and over and over and over. And, and then they might hear it, you know, right. So I think startup entrepreneurs tend to like to reinvent things sometimes for their own good sometimes for the markets good. And I think that's a place where I've had to find discipline that's a little bit boring to me if I'm being wrong. Sure. I want to like make it a little different because it would be fun, right, but it's not relevant. It doesn't change the answer. And so I think there's a discipline around that, that has come over as we've gotten bigger. And I think that now that we're a little bit bigger, I see an important part of, of giving back to our community in different ways and showing up in the way that I think market leaders should, you know, like, take some responsibility and don't just take right



50:44

um, so I think that's another place my head and harder going



Matt Hunckler 51:25

Okay, that's it for today's show. Thank you so much for listening. Also huge thanks to Tiffany Souter of element three. Make sure you go check her out at [element three.com](https://elementthree.com). And for links to Tiffany's social profiles, as well as the other people, companies and resources mentioned in this episode, head on over to [powder keg calm](https://powderkeg.com) and check out the show notes. If you're currently in the market for finding a new role, Powder Keg can connect you with some awesome tech companies between the coasts that are growing like crazy. Right now you can apply for our free matches platform at [Powder Keg comm slash jobs matches](https://powderkeg.com) has a specialized focus on tech hubs out there The valley so you can easily navigate this opportunity packed landscape for potential. Our job matching platform leverages thousands of participants, employers and teams within our ecosystem to get you connected directly to decision makers shortcutting the hiring process Apply today for matches at [Powder Keg comm slash jobs](https://powderkeg.com). And be among the first to hear the stories about entrepreneurs, investors, and other tech leaders outside of Silicon Valley. Make sure you give us a subscribe on iTunes at [Powder Keg comm slash iTunes](https://powderkeg.com). If you drop a review for us while you were there, I would be forever indebted to you. If you've already left a review, I just want to say thank you thank you again. We will catch you next time on the powder keg podcast.