

Flying Solo podcast - Zoe Aitken

*Automated transcript

Hi everybody. I'm Cec Busby, editor of Flying Solo. Welcome to our weekly podcast where we step inside the minds and lives of soloists and small business owners.

Now, if you want to know the heartbeat behind business innovation, today's guest sings a compelling tune.

Zoe Aitken is a customer engagement and innovation specialist who has spent the past couple of decades helping businesses both big and small embed customer-centric innovation into their day-to-day. She's the head of consulting at Inventium, where she helps businesses implement innovative practices, and she's a passionate advocate for putting customers at the heart of the business.

Cec Busby [00:00:00]:

Zoe, thank you so much for joining me on the show today. I can't wait to pick your brain around customer engagement and innovation and growth mindset, all of those good things. Thank you for being here today.

Zoe Aitken [00:00:16]:

Thanks for having me.

Cec Busby [00:00:18]:

Now, let's get started. So where did your passion for customer engagement and innovation come from?

Zoe Aitken [00:00:30]:

Well, probably, actually very early on in my career. I've always been passionate about making sure that the customer's voice is heard. So it's just been a very early passion early on in my marketing career and it led me through market research and into consumer insights roles as well. So I spent a big part of my career kind of being the advocate of the consumer in large corporates and making sure that they always took on board the perspective of the consumer in making any big decisions. So it's always been a passion of mine and certainly moving into the space of innovation, it's even more important, I guess, that we make sure that we start with the consumer or the customer and make sure that we understand the why of what we're doing and what we're trying to solve for. So, yeah, it is a huge passion point of mine. It's interesting. I'm not sure exactly where it stemmed from, but it has always been there.

Cec Busby [00:01:19]:

Yeah. So in those early days, were you kind of like the voice howling into the wind?

Zoe Aitken [00:01:27]:

It's interesting. I remember early in my career, we were sitting with an advertising agency, actually, and they were presenting a couple of ideas on how to sell - I worked at an automotive company - and how to sell one of the cars that we were trying to promote at the time. And I remember we're all in the room and all of us had different opinions on which idea was the best idea. And often it came down to which idea the advertising agency was able to sell the most compellingly. But I remember I said to my boss at the time, it was very early in my career, and I said, but shouldn't we be thinking about the customer and actually what's most important to them and what they're wanting to hear and learn and understand? Isn't that the perspective we should be taking when we're deciding, rather than which one they're selling the best to us? And I guess that I kind of listen to that internal voice and really that internal voice has kind of guided my career decisions in a lot of ways, to kind of lead me to more customer focused, customer centric type roles. I feel like there is definitely momentum in that area now, much more so than when I started out in my career. Certainly lots of organizations now realize that in order to be profitable, they need to be customer centric. So yeah, it's catching on.

Cec Busby [00:02:41]:

Does it really need to start from that very first moment? Say, I've got a great idea for a business like, how do I know I'm actually addressing the customer's problems? Should that really be what I'm focusing on and not like, oh, I've got this great idea for this new doohickey that's going to do amazing things?

Zoe Aitken [00:03:01]:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's a really common misconception is that people think that innovation starts with an idea, that serendipitous moment where you just have this spark of creative genius and you come up with this amazing idea. But it doesn't. Innovation does not start with an idea. It actually starts with a customer problem. And it's really about picking the right customer problem, the problem that customers are really looking for and searching for some sort of solution. So we always say to our clients, when you want to be innovative, look at what problems your customers have that don't have adequate solutions because that's where there's an opportunity to innovate. So rather than just jumping straight into coming up with fabulous ideas, really think about what you're trying to solve for your customers.

Cec Busby [00:03:48]:

So how do we validate that? How do we make sure that the customer is at the heart of that idea?

Zoe Aitken [00:03:55]:

Yes, so obviously there's lots of ways. I honestly think there's no replacement for going and speaking to your customers. So we say from the very outset, go out, have these

conversations with your customers. Make sure that you're really empathizing with them and understanding what's going on in their world, what's most important to them in the context of what you offer, what are their current frustrations, what might be some of the barriers that are standing in the way of them being able to access some of the current offers that are out there? So it's really about understanding their current frustrations and ultimately ladder it back to their current needs, really, of what are their needs, what are their motivations, what are they trying to solve by engaging with your organization or your business and using your products and services? And that's where the real nuggets sit. So I don't think there's any avoiding the fact that you really have to go and have customer conversations. Data can get you only so far and it can perhaps help guide you to the opportunity space. But really, you get your rich insights for innovation when it comes to those customer conversations.

Cec Busby [00:05:00]:

What if we've gone out and we've spoken to our customers, but it's kind of not really meshing with the idea that we had?

Zoe Aitken [00:05:10]:

Yeah, that's a common conundrum, really, is if you go in really passionate about your idea. And I think we can almost get into these kind of conversations where we're almost trying to convince our customers of our amazing idea, perhaps because we're attached to it or we see value in it. But really you need to be prepared when you're going into your customer conversations to detach from your idea and almost be willing and open to killing your ideas if it's not creating value for your customers or if it's not solving a relevant problem for them. So I think we always say don't get too attached to your ideas, get attached to the problem and get passionate and empathetic about the problem that you're trying to solve as opposed to how you solve it because that may change and evolve as you learn more about your customers and what works for them. So yeah, you can't go in kind of idea first, you need to go in with a curiosity first mindset if you like and really be open to learning and understanding and hearing things in their words. So yeah, I think it is really tough because sometimes we think we know the answer and we think we can know what's important to them and we also get really passionate about the solution. But yeah, it is a real skill to actually detach yourself from that and just be very open to learning from your customers.

Cec Busby [00:06:35]:

How can we then cultivate more of that curiosity mindset so that we aren't going in with these preconceived notions that our idea and our solution is the one that's the best, even when the customers we're talking to are going 'actually no'.

Zoe Aitken [00:06:52]:

Yeah, and I truly believe this comes down to building customer empathy from the outset rather than having your ideas already sorted. So I think sometimes we go into customer engagement too late. In the process, we go into speaking with our customers when we

already have an idea or solution in mind. We should be going and chatting with them much earlier. And if we are going and chatting with them much earlier, without solutions already in our head, then we're much more open to learning and understanding what's important to them. I think the moment we have ideas and solutions we almost try to guide them in that direction and lead them in that direction and to validate our ideas. So yes, I think it's where you engage with your customers and it needs to be very early in the process before you're even thinking about potential solutions. And I do think then that learning mindset is really and look, this is hard - when we're experts in our field, often we already do have preconceived ideas so it really is kind of training our mind to let that go, which is hard. And I think also a lot of us are successful in our jobs because we're solutions oriented whereas in this instance of innovation we actually have to go against that and really not be solutions oriented and actually just ruminate in the problem and really try and understand the problem, which is a space of discomfort for a lot of us. Like our minds, our brains, don't like the ambiguity when we don't have a solution or an answer in mind so it tries to rush to the solution. So we really are fighting against our brain, I guess and the physiology of our brain by sitting in this space of not knowing the answer. So it certainly is, it takes practice. But I do think, as I say, engaging with customers early, before we've even got to talking about solutions and ideas, is really critical or important to part of that process.

Cec Busby [00:08:43]:

What kind of questions should we be asking?

Zoe Aitken [00:08:47]:

Well, really it's about understanding just what's important to them, what's most important to them, what are they trying to accomplish by dealing with our organization? And I guess we also say frustrations are the seed capital of innovation. If someone's got a frustration, it suggests that there's an unmet need and an unmet need that's important enough to cause frustration. So frustrations are often a good way in. So really understanding what's important to them and what are their current frustrations, what are some of the things that aren't working for them at the moment? And then I guess the really important question once you do come up against a frustration is understanding why that's a frustration. Because the why is where the real insight sits, I guess. It helps you understand what is not being solved for them and therefore what their need is. So I think it's the laddering of the why to get behind the frustration and get to truly, as I say, what is their underlying need. That's ultimately what we want to try and get to.

Cec Busby [00:09:54]:

Yeah, and there always is a why. You've just gotta be patient enough to get that nugget.

Zoe Aitken [00:10:01]:

Absolutely. And also try and put our assumptions around what that why is aside, which can be really hard.

Cec Busby [00:10:11]:

So what is innovation? Or better yet, what's not innovation?

Zoe Aitken [00:10:17]:

Yeah, well, innovation at Inventium, actually we have a really simple definition for innovation, which is 'change that adds value'. And the reason we love that definition is a) because it's simple, b) because it's about adding value. It's not just change for change's sake. It's not just coming up with these weird and wacky new inventions if they're not creating any value at all for a customer group. So the adding value component is really important. The other thing is that it's not tech specific because I think there can be a perception out there that innovation is just about tech, technology and technology based solutions. But it doesn't have to be. Technology is often a big part of innovation and a big enabler of innovation, but it doesn't have to be about innovation. And then also when you say change that adds value, it relates to every single person in every single role. And when we're working with organizations and we're trying to kind of drive an innovation mindset across the entire organization, you want everyone to feel like they can be a part of it. So I think that kind of really relatable definition is important. What is it not? It's not just about coming up with weird and wacky things that aren't creating value. So this is why it's really important that you understand what value actually means for your customer, because it's critical to delivering innovation rather than just a weird and wacky invention.

Cec Busby [00:11:38]:

Yeah, so it always still comes back to that customer, bringing that customer in from the very beginning of the process so that you understand what they want.

Zoe Aitken [00:11:48]:

Exactly. Because to create value, if our definition is 'change that adds value', to create value, you need to know what is valuable to your customer. So yeah, it really does always ladder back to understanding them and what's important to them.

Cec Busby [00:12:01]:

And I liked how you said as well involving the team, because collaboration also has a role to play in innovation.

Zoe Aitken [00:12:13]:

Absolutely. And there's been a heap of research around the positive impact of diversity on creativity and innovation, and making sure that you've got diverse minds and diverse people involved in innovation really significantly increases the creativity of the solutions that you come up with. So you absolutely want people from all different areas and all different experiences involved in that innovation process, that really is critically important to the outcomes.

Cec Busby [00:12:43]:

So, I'm a small business owner, I've got like 9 million hats that I'm wearing, I'm juggling lots every single day. So what if I don't have time to innovate?

Zoe Aitken [00:12:55]:

Yeah, and look, it is actually the biggest barrier to innovation and something that we hear the most often amongst our clients is saying that they just don't have time to innovate. I also think it's a case of coming down to priorities and really, I know that business as usual is really important, but obviously if you want to drive longer term growth, innovation is really important to that. And I also reframe it to say, okay, innovation, yes, there's big, more disruptive type innovation opportunities and that's really important to step change your growth. But there's incremental innovation as well, which is stuff that we're probably doing day in, day out. And the most important - that's kind of incremental improvements to existing products and services or continuous improvement if you like. But the key to that is always keeping a finger on the pulse in terms of what's important to your customers because you can't maintain relevancy to your customers if you don't know what they want and need. So I think even for business as usual, it's still really important to just make sure that you are continually checking in with your customers, just as a standard way of operating to make sure that you know what's important to them. So I would say if you prioritize nothing else, you prioritize those customer conversations to make sure that you're continuing to know what's most important to them, what are the challenges that they're facing. And these conversations need to happen outside of the day to day transactional type of conversations that you're probably having with your customers. So often we will work with clients and just talking about specific projects; if we want to have a kind of innovation related conversation with them, we'll make sure that that's a separate conversation and really frame it that way to say, look, I just want to take a step back from the day to day to just understand what's going on in your world and understand what are some of the challenges you're facing and also talk about how we might be able to support you in that. So I think that's really critical to running any successful business.

Cec Busby [00:14:54]:

But is there something to be said for making innovation part of your business day to day? So it is something that's not really separate to the business because like you were saying, innovation isn't those creative sparks of genius. It's more focusing on the customers and the collective behaviours of your team. So, how can we make that innovation part of our day to day?

Zoe Aitken [00:15:23]:

Yeah, I think, well, I'm banging on about customer engagement, but I do think having those conversations should be part of your day to day, but also making sure that you've just got some really quick customer feedback loops in place as well. Okay. So that you make sure that you've got the mechanisms in place for your customers to be giving you feedback constantly

on what's working and what's not working, and that you've got ways to process that feedback and feed it back into what you're doing. So I think having those quick and effective customer feedback loops is really critically important to making sure that, as I say, you're continuing to deliver to their needs and expectations. I do also think it's a bit of a mindset shift and a way of working. And some of the organizations we've seen do innovation really well, they really have a culture and behaviours and values that support innovation. So they are less risk averse and they really encourage their team members to experiment with different ideas. They are out experimenting and getting feedback from customers and continually learning. I think having that learning mindset, learning from the customers, what's working, what's not, being able to then make those changes based on what they learn and get it back out there. I think also not having such a perfectionist mindset, in order to experiment, you sometimes need to go out with something that might not be the perfect solution the first time, but then you're open to learning and seeing what's working and what's not in order to make it better. But often there's this huge discomfort with going out with something as a first attempt that might not be perfect. But I do think that people, organizations that are really innovative are open to just getting something out there and learning. So I do think that learning mindset and a lot of those cultural aspects are really critically important to making innovation, I guess, more habitual across an organization.

Cec Busby [00:17:16]:

What about if you're working in a business and you do have that innovative mindset, but perhaps the business leader is more conservative and wants to just do things by the book. How can you kind of help them get into an innovation mindset?

Zoe Aitken [00:17:37]:

Yeah, and look, this is where it is quite tough because I've never seen an innovation program succeed where it doesn't have the advocacy and support of leaders. So leaders, absolutely, they need to be on board. And often a first step that we will take when we're working with a new client is to align and educate the leadership group because that is critically important. Because often if leaders don't see it as important, their teams then won't focus their energies and efforts on it. And so therefore it really does have a snowball effect. So the most important group to align and get on board are your leaders. And I guess it really is about educating them. But ultimately, the leaders need to see the importance in focusing on innovation before a program can really gain traction across the broader organization. And I think we often use that through education is our first step and really creating, for lack of a better expression, a burning platform and really getting a hunger in the leadership team to realize that actually innovation is really important to our organization or we will be left behind. And I guess one of the questions to ask to help fuel that conversation is, well, what will happen if we don't innovate? You know, what's the downside if we don't innovate and we don't focus on innovation, what can we lose and what's the downside of that? And really have that conversation; we've often found it's the big turning point.

Cec Busby [00:19:06]:

Do you think COVID, there was so much disruption through COVID, that that has actually been helpful for innovation because businesses are much more willing to innovate?

Zoe Aitken [00:19:20]:

It definitely has. So I think just because there was such a significant amount of change over such a short period of time that businesses had no choice but to change and evolve, and change the way they did things and change the way they delivered their products and services, and actually change their products and services, in order to evolve with their customers changing and evolving needs. So they had no choice but to innovate. And I think what we're seeing is that a lot of our clients have been really surprised by what they were able to achieve during that time. I guess it helped build their innovation confidence, if you like to say - look what we managed to achieve when we were forced to. I guess the trick now is to make sure now that we're kind of out the other side, largely, is that we don't just revert back to our old ways of working. And that is what I think a lot of organizations or our clients are trying to do, is how can we harness a lot of those behaviours and ways of working that we were almost forced into during the couple of years of COVID, how can we make sure that we can hold on to that and really embed that now into our ways of operating now so that we don't lose that? In some instances I have seen clients just go back and revert back to their ways of working previously prior to COVID. Others are really working hard to try and say, right, well, what worked? And really do a bit of an assessment and a review of saying, well, what changed, what enabled us to do that? And how can we actually more formally embed that into our ways of working now?

Cec Busby [00:20:52]:

And obviously remote work was one of those things that came out of COVID. How do you think when we're talking about innovation mindset and innovation in the day to day, how can businesses make sure that the people that are in their team that are not necessarily working with them physically day to day, that they are still on the same page with the innovation strategy?

Zoe Aitken [00:21:21]:

I think being really intentional with your communications is obviously even more important now with kind of hybrid ways of working. Some people in the office, some people at home. And I think you do need to be much more intentional and deliberate in your communications and to make sure that everyone's in sync and everyone's on the same page. And I think making sure that you're very clear in your communications is important. And I think also then, if you want to run like virtual ideation sessions, they can be done. And in fact, research has shown that they can be just as effective as in person ideation sessions, but you just need to be very planned in how you do them and make sure that you're effectively collaborating and using the right tools to do that and engaging people. But you can run really effective virtual ideation sessions as well. And I think since COVID, there have been some great platforms like Mirror and Mural that have launched that help with virtual ideation sessions. So there are more tools available now. You do have to be much more planned, much more intentional about engaging the team, but yeah, it absolutely is possible.

Cec Busby [00:22:30]:

So Inventium does the data collection for AFR's Most Innovative Company list. Are there any trends that you have seen emerging around innovation? Like if you look at the top companies, are there things that everyone kind of has in common or ways that they do things?

Zoe Aitken [00:22:51]:

Yeah, I think the ones that we've seen that are really successful is that innovation is habitual, innovation is cultural, innovation is embedded, innovation is supported by all of the leaders. We know that these things are really critical to success. That it can't just kind of be this bolt on afterthought. It really does have to be ingrained in your way of working. So a lot of really successful innovative organizations, their values, their behaviours, they all support innovation and an innovation led way of working. They invest in building capabilities around innovation. They have innovation strategy and they don't just, I think a lot of time innovation strategy is something that's not really thought about. Organizations think about their organizational strategy, but then are less intentional about their innovation strategy. Whereas really innovative organizations clearly outlined where they want to direct their innovation resources, and they have ways of working when it comes to innovation. They have embedded processes and governance around that as well. Because when you do scale up to a certain size, you do need process around it. I think if you're a startup, you can get away with not perhaps having those really well ingrained processes. But once you reach a certain size, you have to be more methodic with innovation in order for it to be more sustainable longer term. So a lot of organizations just spend time investing in that. And I think also just they know that innovation is not just a fad. It's something that you can't just focus on one quarter and expect immediate results around. It really is something that you can't just focus on one quarter and expect immediate results around. It is a journey that requires ongoing commitment and investment around and sometimes takes time to see returns. So I think it does require patience as well.

Cec Busby [00:24:44]:

So say I'm one of our listeners. I'm a micro business owner. I'm wanting to make innovation part of my day to day, how I do business. I want to grow from that place of innovation. What's the first step I should be taking? Is it that customer thing again?

Zoe Aitken [00:25:04]:

I was like, I hate to go back to it. It is. I will go back to it. It's just getting out and speaking to your customers. It's getting out of the building. You can't decide what's going to be your next big innovation from behind your desk. So get out, speak to your customers, get out of the building. Understand what is important to them, what are their motivations, what are their needs, what are their frustrations. And use that as your start point to identify where there might be some potential solutions.

Cec Busby [00:25:31]:

So say they come back to you with a few ideas. You can always run with them all, can't you? Like, you can test and learn.

Zoe Aitken [00:25:39]:

Test and learn in experimenting. So we kind of always say there's two really important customer check in points in any innovation process. The first one is understanding what you're trying to solve for, which is kind of as I talked about earlier, identifying what the customer problem is you're trying to solve. And then once you have a solution, it's going back out and experimenting on that solution to make sure that it is actually creating value for your customer in the way that you had intended it to. I think a lot of the time our first ideas are always wrong, and we can get too excited about our ideas and just jump straight into implementation. And often that can be a very costly mistake. So it's really about making sure that you're going in, checking in with your customers, running really lean, really quick experiments to make sure that it is working in the way that you intended and actually creating the value that you want it to create, before you then scale it up and put significant investment behind it.

Cec Busby [00:26:31]:

Yeah. Just don't blindly run with your idea that maybe is not the great idea you think it is.

Zoe Aitken [00:26:38]:

Exactly. We can get a bit carried away with our own ideas, which I understand, we get very passionate about them, but that's led to a lot of big failures, unfortunately.

Cec Busby [00:26:49]:

And should we always be looking at our data? Is that where we should make our decisions?

Zoe Aitken [00:26:57]:

Well, data is important, and I'm a big advocate of making sure that we have data to understand what is happening. I think that's what data can tell us. What are the trends? What's going up, what's going down? I think where some organizations make mistakes is that they then base their innovation decisions on the what, without understanding the why behind the data. Why is it going up, why is it going down? Why is that category growing? Why is that one declining? And I think the why is where the really meaningful insights are when it comes to innovation. And really, data is not very good at giving us the why. We can make some predictions about it, but ultimately we won't know. And this is where I think it comes back to having those customer conversations. You can't understand the why behind your data without speaking to your customers.

Cec Busby [00:27:48]:

Yeah. Forget about keeping your enemies close. Keep your customers close.

Zoe Aitken [00:27:52]:

Yeah, keep your customers close. Absolutely.

Cec Busby [00:27:55]:

It all right. Thank you so much, Zoe. It's been an absolute pleasure chatting to you today and getting all of your insights on innovation and customer engagement. I'm sure I'm going to be chatting to you again sometime soon because you're full of great insights.

Zoe Aitken [00:28:10]:

Yeah, thank you. I've loved it. Thanks for having me.

Cec Busby [00:28:13]:

Thank you.

Zoe Aitken [00:28:14]:

Bye bye.