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Janice Hostager: 0:01

As a business owner, I think you'd probably have to live in a cave right now not to hear about AI. And, truthfully, you'd probably hear about it even if you lived in a cave. It's literally transforming life as we know it. Truthfully, that's a little scary for a lot of us. But fear aside, on the flip side, as a small business owner and as a marketing strategist, I can see what a huge time saver AI has been for me. It's helped me write content, generate ideas for creative copy, brainstorm questions for podcast interviews and even SEO ideas.

Janice Hostager: 0:38

When this podcast was recorded in September of 2024, the quality of AI was really not ready for prime time yet, but it's getting better and better, so much so. I'm really amazed at how much it's progressed in the last few months. And as we talk about in our conversation today, AI will never likely replace the human element, which is so important in connecting with our customers, our clients, our readers. Because AI is such a hot topic in marketing right now, I've got just the guests to help us unpack all of it.

Janice Hostager: 1:12

I'm thrilled today to be chatting with Rachel Hernandez, the Director of Marketing at Nextnet. Rachel leads marketing for the world's largest global network of trusted media outlets, link partners and global news websites. She was a finalist for the Women in Content Marketing of the Year Award by Masthead Media and the Content Marketing Institute. Basically, if there's anyone who knows how to make AI work for content marketing, it's Rachel. So if you use AI right now or you're just thinking about using it, this is the place for you. Let's jump into our conversation with Rachel. Well, hey, Rachel, welcome to My Weekly Marketing.

Rachel Hernandez: 1:50

Hi, thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited. I've been looking forward to this all morning.

Janice Hostager: 1:56

So, before we dive into AI, and because I love this topic so much, I think it's scary, but it just holds so much potential for sure. But tell us a little bit about your own story. How did you get to this point in your career? Tell us a little more about your background.

Rachel Hernandez: 2:17

Yeah, so I got into marketing by way of just really loving writing and loving stories and storytelling. So I went to college, this was back in 2003, and I actually went to the new school and I studied fiction and creative nonfiction writing. So I really thought like I was going to write some short stories or maybe be a journalist. And then I was kind of like maybe you're not going to be like the next great famous American author and we'll have to find another way to um get into the that entry point, into at least like doing some creative work. And it definitely took like a minute because, again, we're talking like over 20 years ago at this point and digital marketing and digital media as we see it now like wasn't, wasn't really a thing like that back then. Um, so I waited tables for a really long time. I kind of flirted with being an English teacher and decided that wasn't the path either. And then, um, I got my way in at an email marketing agency uh, located in St. Petersburg, Florida, and I was able to join that team as a copywriter.

Rachel Hernandez: 3:26

This was about 12 years ago, so that was sort of my entry point and I was writing direct response emails for entrepreneurs, a lot of real estate agents, a lot of people who were just sort of starting their own businesses and were just like trying to grow their lists and get sales via email. And I joined Nextnet in 2016. So I just had my eighth anniversary there, which feels crazy, but thank you. And that's a company that's really focused on. A lot of it is SEO, but like brand exposure through organic platforms in general. So we'll do lots of Google search, organic social media, search on other platforms like Amazon, etc. And that's been really fun because content and content writing is such a big part of getting that exposure on all those kind of different playing fields. So it's been really fun to translate those skills into a marketing director position at this company.

Janice Hostager: 4:31

Yeah, that's great, but I want to say, just because I'm a little older than you are, I'm not going to tell anybody how much older I am.

Janice Hostager: 4:40

If you've got a dream to be an author, girl, you go for it. I mean, if you are early in your life, you can still write that novel or that piece of fiction or whatever it is you want to. Life takes lots of careers, take lots of twists and turns, and also being a copywriter is something that a lot of people really covet. When I first started, when I first graduated from college we're talking back in the 80s, it was hard to get a job in marketing. So I mean it was a really coveted position. So kudos to you, because you would not be where you are if you did not have some amazing content skills. So, anyway, that's my pep talk for the morning. So talk to us how you use AI content in your marketing strategy and

how you use it on a day-to-day basis. For example, like how does it fit into your workflow? Where does it come in?

Janice Hostager: 5:43

Yeah, talk to us a little bit about that.

Rachel Hernandez: 5:45

So um, and I will start just by saying that it's super rare that I will use like um especially if it's something that's longer than a headline or similar that I will use a piece of content that um has been drafted by AI without some significant changes to make sure that um fits the voice, it fits the medium and also just that it doesn't sound like AI, because I think, especially those of us in this space, we can pick it out right away at this point. But one of the reasons why I love AI and one of the ways that it fits into my day-to-day is marketing, really, I think a lot of the time is like a series of tests that we make. At the end of the day, that's just sort of the structure that coming to a really solid marketing campaign takes, and AI just makes it so much easier to come up with just different variations, different ways of saying things, seeing if, like, we can make this headline like a half as long or, you know, maybe we want to try making it twice as long and instead of sitting there sort of like brainstorming, you know, for an hour like a billion different ways to say the same thing, you can put a request like that into Chat GPT with. You know some very like easy parameters to where you're like don't say this word or make it this long or make it this short.

Rachel Hernandez: 7:13

For me, I'm like take out the emojis, because it loves emojis and it just has like, such like, such an easy, just way that you can kind of jump off and move forward. So for testing purposes, that's probably like the biggest role that AI plays in my day-to-day as a content marketer and where I definitely save the most time. I do not recommend using it for writing something long form like a blog post or a white paper or, you know, even like an email that you're really using to drive some sort of conversion. It still has that element of inauthenticity to it. I think, when you know you're really trying to like connect with somebody on that authentic level, but again, like for like, just variations and testing and say it, can you say this thing a different way, because my brain's not as fast as you, man, it's so, it's so, so useful.

Janice Hostager: 8:14

It is, and I love that you said a couple of things here. First of all, I love that, especially for someone who works alone or is working remotely. I think, you know, when I worked at agencies and in bigger marketing departments, we would have creative meetings and

we'd all get in the room and we'd throw pencils at the ceiling and do whatever it took, right, to come up with ideas.

Janice Hostager: 8:39

And it's like having like a creative team with you in a way, because you can put in there.

Janice Hostager: 8:52

Like I need a headline for blah, blah, blah, or I need an introduction, or I just need an outline or something, just to kind of get you going mentally to try and move you along that creative process for sure.

Janice Hostager: 8:59

The other thing I want to say because I think a lot of people don't know this and I don't have ChatGPT open right now but in the settings area there is a place like I know it's in like upper right hand corner where you can go ahead and outline your voice, your brand voice, so you can say, I speak in a very casual format, I like lots of emojis, or I don't use emojis, or you know, and you can also talk to it about it she, he, whatever the AI, about who your ideal customer is, so that they will connect on that level.

Janice Hostager: 9:38

And it is amazing to me that it will pull information that I won't have to say every time I'm asking you to draft something. Here's my target customer, this is what their problem is, blah, blah, blah. They'll have that all figured out and it builds on what it already knows, right? So if you've been using it for six months, it's going to take into account everything that you have told it before, so it knows exactly what to say. So I really encourage anybody who's listening to make sure that they fill out that information on the back end to talk about who their customer is, what their brand voice is like, and so that you're going to get a whole more refined results by doing that.

Janice Hostager: 10:26

So, anyways...

Rachel Hernandez: 10:28

I love that.

Janice Hostager: 10:36

Yes, yeah, but I do. I definitely agree, if you have, if you're looking to go and say, write me a blog post, it's not going to come across well, it can give you some ideas and give you some starting points. It can maybe even give you some things that you wouldn't have

thought about to put in that blog post. But I love what you said about stories, because you bring unique stories and that's what personalizes it, right?

Rachel Hernandez: 10:57

Yes, exactly. Because by nature too, and again, that's kind of why I don't use like AI content that's straight up AI for anything that's long form or anything where I'm like really trying to target somebody. Because in like its nature, generative AI is derivative, like that's how it works, even though it gets more and more advanced the more we use it. But the reason that is, is because it's pulling from what's already there, and so when you're really trying to grow your business and reach your audience and reach your target consumer, you know, a lot of the time people don't necessarily like buy from, they don't buy like just a product.

Rachel Hernandez: 11:39

They buy because they feel connected in some sort of way to the brand, to the owner, to the story of that company, and that's just not something that I think AI can really create and make it authentic, because it's never going to be special. It's always going to come from something that's pre-existing.

Janice Hostager: 11:59

That is so true. That is really true. So where do you see, because I've noticed that AI is getting better and better and better, from where it was even like six months ago. I had to draft an email to a colleague the other day and it was like six o'clock at night and words were not coming out, you know. So I just used AI, I plugged it in, I said this is what I want to say. Can you make this sound less difficult? And it did a really good job with it, and so I think, like you said, it definitely has its place, as long as you don't give it full control of all your marketing, and because it does definitely lack that connection. But do you see, where do you see it going? Do you feel like, down the road, it's going to be more and more human-like?

Rachel Hernandez: 12:46

I do, and I think that is very exciting and also a little scary, I would say. Some concerns, and I am not one that thinks that, like, AI is going to steal every creative person's job because, again, at the end of the day, you kind of always need to have that human element to it that is coming from an actual person. There's always going to have to be some sort of stopgap, some sort of thing that like, really has that that soul connection to whatever the message is I do think it's going to get more human.

Rachel Hernandez: 13:22

I mean, I remember playing with ChatGPT when it first launched and it like couldn't even really have like a sense of humor. You know, like so already, when you speak, you know like how, how far it's come. But I do think, as it gets more and more advanced um, you know and I'm not even going to get into like the scary kind of deep fake things that people have been doing with it. I do think that we're going to see more regulations. I think copyright is going to be a really big issue that people are sort of starting to talk about now. But if you are creating things with AI, if you're drawing inspiration from voices that already exist that aren't your own, again, like this content that it comes up with, it's all derivative, it's all, it's not...

Rachel Hernandez: 14:09

Nothing is new. It can't be new. It can't come up with anything new. Do you own it? Is it yours? And who does it belong to? Um, and so I think it's going to get really, really advanced and really evolved. But that's also going to open up a whole slew of okay wait, though. Like what does this mean in regards to things like that, trademarks are, you know, there's just so much that's going to come, so I would even consider, like keep playing with it, because there's going to be a point where this is part of our day to day, like the way that you know, knowing how to use an Excel, a basic Excel formula, is part of so many people's basic day to day at work, like that's. It's just going to be part of it, but also keeping in mind that there is definitely going to be some things that we're going to have to watch out for.

Janice Hostager: 15:01

Yeah, I mean, this is just a whole new frontier, right. So my husband is a business professor and he always says that technology precedes usage and legal sort of ramifications and we're seeing that definitely here.

Janice Hostager: 15:18

When I was walking my dog this morning, I was listening to a podcast about NFTs and Bitcoin and Web3 and all this stuff. I'm trying to learn about this because it's hard to wrap your mind around right. And it's kind of the same thing where it is so hard to understand what's happening because it's happening at such a rapid pace that it is mind-blowing and we'll have to wait and see where it all goes.

Rachel Hernandez: 15:50

Well, yeah, it's like cause. We remember the early days of the internet, you know, when you would never, ever put like your bank information or your real name or anything like that. And now you know, I can't remember the last time I cashed a check like or you

know, even went to an ATM. It's just that we had to adapt and all these institutions had to adapt, and we're going to see that play out in real time on a marketing and content creation level, but on so many other levels as well.

Janice Hostager: 16:18

Yeah, yeah for sure. So before I, I always do this, I always get off on tangents, but I also want to talk a little bit about how else we can use AI in your day-to-day work, and you mentioned like creative ideas, and certainly we can use it for an outline for a blog post. What about SEO? Before we started recording, you touched on SEO a little bit. I always thought that they didn't really have access so much to search engine results, but has that changed and how can people use it for SEO?

Rachel Hernandez: 16:52

Yeah, so there's um. This is not necessarily like ChatGPT, though ChatGPT does draw from Bing um. So if, like, you want to optimize your website or your content to show up in a ChatGPT answer, then you probably want to focus on Bing optimization. I will fully admit that I have been focused on Google for the past eight years because Google owns 91% of the search share. That being said, Google has, if you've done a search recently that was sort of like top of funnel, like not necessarily using keywords that were based around like buying or conversions, but like just asking a question you probably have seen AI overviews come up at the top of the results page.

Rachel Hernandez: 17:41

So that is something that I think is really going to transform the industry I'm in. Well, transform is kind of dramatic because the search results page on Google has been evolving for so long. We haven't had a list of 10 blue websites on links on one page in a really long time, like now. We have people also ask, featured snippets. You know, a map if you're doing like a brick and mortar search. So this is also kind of just part of the general evolution. But I do think showing up in AI overviews, which are again like at the top of the search results page, usually a question like um, what's like an example. Yesterday I looked at one that was like how to clean stainless steel, you know, and it pulled up like seven different results from seven different websites, has all of the websites listed, has like an actual link to the website for each element of the AI overview and basically gives an answer so that somebody doesn't have to click on a link to figure out how to clean, stainless steel.

Janice Hostager: 18:48

Yes, yeah, yeah.

Rachel Hernandez: 18:50

Yeah, and I think this is great for brand visibility. I think it's actually a really cool, useful way to engage with top of funnel content and it's also helpful for people who, if you are putting budget towards SEO and you want to show up in a traditional list with a link building campaign or content campaign, I would start to really think about maybe making sure that you're focusing on your bottom funnel pages that convert for that kind of optimization, because people are not necessarily going to click on your page anymore for a top of funnel search, which sounds bad at first, but then you're like, oh no, I'm going actually nowhere to focus and the traffic that's coming to my website is already going to be warmer. It's going to be a better lead.

Janice Hostager: 19:36

That's really good advice. So just to clarify everything, because I like to spell everything out. So it's, you know, like you're talking to me like I'm five. So top of funnel. We use different search terms for top of funnel, like how to clean or how to do something. Actually, the how to phrase is often used top of funnel, right, Whereas like a lower in the funnel or bottom funnel would be where do I buy, or what price is, or it is. So it's different terms that we're using when we do a search top of funnel, mid funnel or bottom of funnel.

Rachel Hernandez: 20:14

Yes, yes, exactly so like if it was tennis shoes top of funnel. You know types of tennis shoes for hiking, um, mid funnel. Um, you know, best tennis shoes brands. You're not quite ready to buy it, you don't know who you're going to buy from, but you know you want tennis shoes.

Rachel Hernandez: 20:33

And then bottom funnel buy red tennis shoes.

Janice Hostager: 20:37

Yeah, right, or it could be like buy um Brooks Ghost running shoes or whatever. So it's real specific. Yeah, yeah, definitely. So do you feel like other than time, have you seen some real good benefits to integrating AI into your day to day marketing?

Rachel Hernandez: 21:01

Yeah, I mean time obviously, is the first one that comes to mind, but I think you touched on this earlier is that sometimes, you know, you do get an idea from the output that you would not necessarily have had on your own, and that's always really exciting or special.

Rachel Hernandez: 21:17

I mean, whether it is that's coming from an open AI tool or coming from a team member that says something that you go oh, I didn't think of it that way, that's pretty exciting, and I just think it's also and maybe this is outside of marketing, but in general, I like it when we are introduced to tools that make things easier and that also that we have access to, because also, AI has been around for a really long time.

Rachel Hernandez: 21:49

Like this is not, you know, like new technology. It's new in that it's become widespread to people out there. It's been democratized to a certain extent. With the advent of AI tools for things like content marketing and people maybe relying on them a little bit too much for their output. It's always been kind of a balance between quality and quantity in the space, and now it really is going to be all about quality, because when everybody can create a lot of stuff really quickly, the cream is truly going to rise to the top, because it is going to be the thing that stands out, that is different, that is authentic, that actually says something new.

Rachel Hernandez: 22:35

So that's actually pretty exciting yeah.

Janice Hostager: 22:38

Yes, that is so true. So the better you are as a storyteller, the better you are as a writer, that's going to come into play here big time and the more personalized you make it, right?

Rachel Hernandez: 22:48

Yeah.

Janice Hostager: 22:48

So that's something that AI can do to some degree, but it can't get as personalized to you when you're communicating or to that customer that you're talking to, because you're going to know them so much better, at least at this point. Other than ChatGPT, do you use some other AI tools or platforms?

Rachel Hernandez: 23:10

Yeah, I do. Um, there's two main ones I use, mostly for content and SEO, and I'll give a few examples for the SEO ones, because there's like a few that kind of do the same thing and I've used them both and I like them both for different reasons. Uh, CopyMatic AI um, that is a AI like a generative AI software, uh, but it's very focused on uh, content marketing. So for somebody who's new too, to marketing and doesn't necessarily have

the resources to like build out a big team or um like kind of just dive into prompt engineering, really hardcore with ChatGPT, it's great because you can kind of like it has just different platforms and ways that, like you can say it has like something for an about page, something for an FAQ, something for an instagram post, something for this, something for that.

Rachel Hernandez: 23:58

So if you're not like me or you and you've been doing this for years and you're just getting started, it's very useful to have that formatting already kind of pieced in there. It's CopyMatic AI. For SEO, I've used two tools. These are both softwares Clearscope io and Surfer SEO and what these are really useful for and they're essentially the same thing. So I think Clearscope is a little bit more expensive than Surfer SEO, but what they do, so if you want to rank for a specific keyword, you can plug it into this software and it pulls the top 35 results on the Google results page.

Rachel Hernandez: 24:44

That rank for that keyword and it gives you all of the commonalities. So what type of content is it? Is it a product page, is it a blog post or a how to? It tells you, like the different headers that are in common, how long the piece of content should be. Should it be 100 words, should it be 3,000 words? I used to do this manually, like on Excel spreadsheet, so tools like this like make my life so much easier. It provides you like a whole brief and then, if you write most of them, like connect to Google Docs, but like you can write out the content and connect it to the software, it'll kind of help you structure. So it's optimized really well for search as you're writing.

Janice Hostager: 25:27

Oh, that's cool.

Rachel Hernandez: 25:28

Yeah, for me, that's really cool

Janice Hostager: 25:30

Yeah, well, it's competitive intelligence too.

Janice Hostager: 25:33

Yeah, like you know what's already working um,

Janice Hostager: 25:35

Yeah, I love that.

Rachel Hernandez: 25:37

And that's something that we've integrated for our clients as well, just because, again, we that's a no brainer, um you know, and if your writing is good and strong and you are connecting to the user and you have those elements of like, exactly what you need to do to rank with that structure. Like you're, you're gonna do well.

Janice Hostager: 25:54

That sounds great. So where can people find out more about you, Rachel?

Rachel Hernandez: 25:59

Yeah, I'm active on LinkedIn, so Rachel A Hernandez or I usually encourage people to follow The HOTH on social media. That's one of the companies that I do the content marketing for. Very SEO forward, very AI forward, brand exposure forward, and that is @ thehothseo on all platforms. We've got a great Instagram feed, a great LinkedIn feed, we are on TikTok and Meta, but we share tons of resources. We also, we like to have fun, so we're kind of, we have the leeway to make some jokes and be a little unserious sometimes about stuff that feels really complicated and hard.

Janice Hostager: 26:42

That is awesome. I'll put all the links in the show notes for today. Well, thank you so much, Rachel. I sure appreciated learning more about AI and I will definitely check out those tools, and I appreciate you taking the time to talk.

Rachel Hernandez: 26:56

Thank you so much.

Janice Hostager: 26:58

I wholeheartedly agree that we need to insert the human element in anything that AI spits out, and I definitely want to check out some of the tools she's recommended. For more information about these tools or anything we talked about in today's episode, visit our show notes page at myweeklymarketing.com/75. Thanks so much for listening today. As always, I really appreciate any feedback you have or ideas about things that you'd like to hear more about. Just DM me on Instagram @JaniceHostagerMarketing. See you next time. Bye for now.