



How Akamai Answered the 'Why' Regarding Its Brand Purpose

Kim Salem-Jackson, EVP and CMO at Akamai, talks about how she reset the company's brand purpose

By **Marie Griffin**

Kim Salem-Jackson, EVP and CMO at Akamai, initially set out to update the technology company's purpose to drive a new marketing campaign but ended up leading the entire organization through what she calls "a very robust journey of purpose work."

Kim Salem-Jackson, who joined ANA member Akamai as global VP of marketing and corporate communications in 2017, was named EVP and CMO in March 2021. "My goal was to have Akamai show up bigger and more boldly in the marketplace," she says. "My brand team and I were ideating on a campaign, but it kept falling short of greatness. What we realized was that we were missing our 'why' – why Akamai exists."

Salem-Jackson says Akamai has "always been a purpose-driven company," starting from its 1998 launch. Following its inception, the company set out to solve the "worldwide wait" of the early internet with geographically distributed servers that made the web much more accessible for users. Akamai also got into cybersecurity and cloud computing, which got a shot in the arm with its recent acquisition of Linode. Although she set out to update Akamai's purpose to drive a new marketing campaign, Salem-Jackson ended up leading the entire organization through what she says was "a very robust journey of purpose work."



Life Online Campaign, Times Square

She partnered with Anthony Williams, EVP and chief human resources officer at Akamai, to address pain points most companies continue to grapple with: high levels of attrition spurred by the so-called Great Resignation and the ongoing fight for tech talent.

"If you asked me in March 2021 if I had any intention of doing all of this, I would have said, 'Absolutely not,'" Salem-Jackson says. "But after doing due diligence on the power of purpose, having conversations with employees and customers, and hearing what the analysts were saying, I realized there was a gaping hole we needed to fill as an organization."

Five months later, at a companywide meeting, Salem-Jackson introduced a new purpose statement: "We make life better for billions of people, billions of times a day." She also updated the company's mission statement, "We power and protect life online." The purpose and mission statements work in concert, she says, "but they draft off our purpose, which is why we exist." In an interview with B2B Marketer, Salem-Jackson talks about how the process of articulating Akamai's purpose helped spur a new branding campaign,

engage the C-suite, and raise the visibility of the marketing team throughout the company.

Q. How did you get buy-in from other senior-level Akamai executives for your plan?

I went directly to our co-founder and CEO, Tom Leighton. I made an impassioned plea about how I felt we needed to redefine our purpose, and he said, "Do it, Kim."

It's critical that company leadership buys in from the get-go. The entire management team was part of the journey, and the process was iterative and collaborative to bring them – and eventually the whole organization – along with us.

Q. What did it take to execute the purpose project?

We had a core working team led by our head of HR, our general counsel, and me. We partnered with a consultancy called Conspiracy of Love, which provided a strategic framework with three phases – discovering our purpose, activating our purpose, and identifying our societal cause.

In the first phase, [the consultancy] conducted interviews with customers and the leadership team [and] created a survey that went to employees

across different roles, levels, and tenures. It also ran workshops that involved employees through the world, across all departments. Marketing and HR set the context for the attendees and assisted in the organization, rollout, and follow up. Phase two will be ongoing as we embed purpose into our culture. The third phase is to create with purpose and make a big societal impact. We're working on a big, hairy, audacious goal that we will commit to for the next decade or two. The Akamai Foundation, which focuses on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education, will take the lead on this, but it will be a cross-functional initiative.

Q. How are you communicating the company's purpose and mission through your marketing efforts?

The purpose and mission work went hand in hand with the marketing campaign that followed. We turned our mission statement into a tagline, "Power and Protect Life Online," because we realized after talking to customers that our mission statement resonated as an imperative. In May 2022, we launched our first **TV spot** in 20 years. The commercial, a targeted media buy for the investor community, showcases the impact Akamai has on the world and ran on CNBC and other financial outlets.

"Power and Protect Life Online," Akamai's first TV commercial in two decades, targeted the investor community and ran on CNBC and other financial outlets from May 2021 through July 2022.

The tagline echoes the company's new mission statement, "We power and protect life online," which recently got an upgrade along with the company's brand purpose. Akamai/YouTube

Engagement for this brand campaign had three to five times the engagement of our regular programs because we changed the narrative from what we do to what we make possible. Our digital campaign exceeded click-through rate performance benchmarks on all platforms, with Twitter beating benchmarks by [a factor of] 1.5. Our cost-per-click was 55 percent more efficient than our platform benchmarks. Nine out of 10 people were more positive toward Akamai after seeing our TV spot, two-thirds took the action of going online to find more information, and one in three thought Akamai could be a suitable partner for their business.

We are starting to activate different flavors of the campaign for each of our major markets, including the cloud-computing space we entered with our acquisition of Linode.

Q. Has driving purpose had a halo effect for marketing throughout the company?

It has done wonders in elevating marketing's role within the organization. It was always well placed, but our purpose work kicked it up a notch. Akamai was a product-led engineering company where go-to-market equaled ad sales, but there's a new appreciation and hunger for what marketing can do.



Marketing is about humanizing the customer journey and creating memorable connection points, which brings us back to our purpose.

Marketing at Akamai is no longer just about the customer journey and moving customers from A to B in the fastest, most profitable way. It's about humanizing the journey and creating memorable connection points, which brings us back to the purpose work.

Q. How will you continue to build on the company's brand purpose in 2023?

We are working on a big brand campaign for next year. It will be a 12-month global initiative that supports a big release, which might be in a new market or a return to a market. It will be big, bold, and sophisticated, maybe even repositioning the company.

We will absolutely be back to TV. We will probably reskin the website. It'll run the full gamut, including big social amplification, a global media release, and a media tour. The best thing is that it's all marketing led. We're trying to figure out how to better position Akamai for the future. As a CMO, that's probably one of the most exciting things you can do. ■