

The Conch- Dawn Polizzotti.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:05] Hello, my name is Julie Kuchepatov, and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We are sailing along on our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, we're showcasing some of the incredible people working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, examining the challenges they face and the triumphs they've achieved. Today, we are very fortunate to have an amazing guest join us, Dawn Polizzotti. Dawn is the Senior Vice President for Digital at Long John Silver's, the nation's largest service seafood chain. Welcome and thank you, Dawn, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's go!

Dawn Polizzotti [00:00:41] Thank you for having me, Julie. I'm really excited to be here.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:44] We've been trying to get you on this show for a long time and so I'm so grateful and thankful that you're taking this Friday afternoon to join us on this final episode of season three of the podcast. I'm so happy.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:00:57] Great. Yeah, happy to be here.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:59] So do we abbreviate quick service as QSR? Is that correct?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:01:04] That's correct.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:05] Okay. So, we might be using just a shorthand for QSR, quick service restaurant or seafood chain. Could you give us, Dawn, a little bit of your background and how you ended up where you are today at Long John Silver's? I am extremely fascinated to hear your back story.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:01:21] Yeah, absolutely. So, I grew up actually on the East Coast outside of Boston.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:26] Yeah.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:01:27] I went to a women's college, which I thought you would find interesting. So, I went to Barnard College at Columbia University in New York City, and then I actually got my MBA in marketing at Columbia Business School. I'm a big foodie. I love cooking. I love going out to restaurants. I love learning about food. I watch the Food Network all the time. So, it was very natural for me to seek out opportunities in the food and restaurant industries. After I got my MBA, I went into consumer packaged goods and then I ended up in the restaurant industry. So, I have more than 25 years of marketing experience, about 15 of those in the restaurant industry. And I've worked at iconic brands like Burger King, Captain D's, Shoney's, and now Long John Silver's. I've done a little bit of everything at all these brands-driving profitable sales growth through new product innovation. And I've done great new advertising campaigns and also digital transformation. I've worked my way up from assistant brand manager to senior vice president. I've lived and worked internationally, and I even started my own company importing olive oils from Chile and selling them to retailers like Whole Foods and the Fresh Market.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:02:47] Wow.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:02:48] So I actually got the opportunity to join Long John Silver's about six months ago when the CEO asked me to lead the digital transformation for the brand.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:02:58] So that's fascinating. What is digital transformation?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:03:02] So it's trying to bring the brand up to our current time so all of the guests in QSR are really trying to access brands in different ways. They're trying to access us through online ordering, through delivery like DoorDash, Uber Eats, and GrubHub. And, you know, digital sales are really a critical part of our off-premise strategy and making sure that we can make seafood accessible to everyone. You know, people are using apps now to place their orders for pickup. They're using loyalty programs. Everything is becoming very mobile-driven these days. So digital really is anything that you can do outside of the restaurants. So it's everything that's off-premise.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:54] Gotcha. Okay. That makes sense. So, you mentioned in your pretty elaborate history in the marketing of food and seafood specifically, that you worked at other QSR or QS seafood chains such as Captain D's. And I just want to confirm that's another type of chain like Long John Silver's, correct?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:04:14] Yeah. So Long John Silver's and Captain D's are the two major seafood QSR players in the United States. And Long John Silver's is the largest. But I have worked at Captain D's for over seven and a half years, so I really know the seafood business very well. And actually, at Burger King, I was actually known as the Chicken Lady because I led all of our chicken development. I led the teams that created and tested and launched chicken fries, which you may be familiar with.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:46] Yes.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:04:47] And the tender, crisp chicken sandwiches. But I was also responsible for our fish sandwiches as well at Burger King. So I've been involved in seafood for, gosh, it's almost been 20 years now.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:00] That's amazing. It's so funny because I grew up on the West Coast and I'm in Portland, Oregon, and we had Skippers. I don't think we have Skippers anymore. That was our fast-food seafood place. There might be some around, I'm not sure actually. So, it's kind of interesting to think about when I was a kid and, you know, going there and getting little popcorn shrimp or fish sandwiches. So, I think that's a pretty neat legacy. So, I read a quote from you when you first started at Long John Silver's, which you mentioned was about six months ago. So, congratulations on that milestone because I'm sure you know, it's hard getting into the groove of a new place. You said "It's an exciting time to be joining the Long John Silver's crew. There's so much opportunity to expand the iconic brand's digital footprint. In this new role I plan to leverage my previous experience to accelerate Long John Silver's off-premise sales and CRM, and increase brand loyalty and customer satisfaction through increased digital and social media engagement." So let's talk about your role as the SVP for Digital of a quick-service seafood chain. And what does an average day look like for you?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:06:07] Well, that's a great question. And there really is no average day in marketing. And I personally love that variety. It's actually one of the reasons I chose marketing as a profession. On any given day I may be on calls with our partners at DoorDash or Uber Eats or GrubHub about running promotions to bring in new guests. But,

you know, my number one priority is growing our off-premise sales in general, including online ordering. So, I'm also working on developing an app for mobile online ordering, as well as a loyalty program. I'm also working with our operations and our IT teams to build our restaurant of the future. So, we're looking at things like digital menu boards and kiosks. And I also am working with our agency to develop digital media plans and then, you know, collaborating with social media influencers to reach our guests and get them talking about our brands so that they think about us the next time they're thinking of where to go to eat lunch or dinner. So, it's a lot of really fun stuff.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:12] Yeah, it sounds kind of like my day. Very diverse. Never the same. Always something new. It does sound like you have a lot on your plate, though.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:07:19] I do. I do. But it's really exciting. And, you know, that's why we started talking about digital transformation. It's really a journey. So, it's really tackling the big things that we need to get done. And like I said, my number one priority is growing those off-premise sales and then getting all the other pieces in place. And in digital, it's critical to have the foundations of the technology. So that involves our IT teams and they're putting new POS systems in our restaurants and that's going to really kind of form the base of where, you know, the tech stack that we're building with the app and the loyalty program and everything. It will just all link in the digital menu boards and the kiosks will also link into that technology. It's a really exciting time at the brand.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:08:11] It sounds like it. You mentioned influencers. I'm curious. What's it like working with influencers in like sum it up in a sentence or two?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:08:21] It's been really fun, actually.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:08:23] Yeah.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:08:23] And they're all so different. So, we have recently partnered with Barstool Sports, which is a huge influencer. They really appeal to our target demographic. So that's been really fun. We've gotten a lot of great engagement with our customers, and I just love seeing all the great comments. But then we're also working with some micro influencers in some of our bigger markets. So, we have one who's in the Albuquerque area and he just actually posted a rap about our seafood. So we're kind of reaching people that we might not have been reaching before through these influencers. We have another in Dallas. He likes to drive around fancy cars. He brought a fancy car through one of our drive-thrus and ordered some of our food. So, you know, they're all so different and reaching our guests in different areas.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:25] Yeah, I think that's something that the seafood industry in general is not accustomed to, is harnessing the power of social media. So, it's kind of interesting to see how you are doing that. And I get it. I mean, you're a big brand and you have the resources and the opportunities to do that. So, I think that's something that we could all be watching a lot closer is how you go about doing that, what works, what doesn't work, and just how you talk about seafood in general. Right? Because that's a real challenge for us.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:09:55] Yes, it really is. Americans don't eat as much seafood as they do beef and chicken. So we really need to work to become top of mind for people when they're thinking about places to eat. They're always thinking about, you know, burgers and chicken and pizza. Seafood is not always top of mind. So, our goal is to, you know, really

trigger that seafood move. You know, when people are thinking about seafood, then they're thinking about our brand. And our customers really love our brand. So when they think about it, they want it. Yeah, but it's just a matter of getting them to think about it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:32] Yeah, that's the trick, right? Of anything. Long John Silver's is two-third franchised owned, and the Long John Silver's company is now owned by its largest franchisee. So, what is franchising and how does this work? I kind of know what it means, but I would love to hear from you as this is, you know, your forte and just kind of walk us through like, how does one become a franchisee? How do you support them as the brand? So just anything you can share with that about a franchisee relationship would be really interesting.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:11:08] Yeah. So, franchisees are really just entrepreneurs. And the great thing about franchise businesses like ours, it's a great option for entrepreneurs because it's already an established brand, right? So, we have 90% brand awareness, and most people know about Long John Silver's. So, you know, an entrepreneur doesn't need to start a business from scratch when they join in a franchise business. So, I think it's always a great option for entrepreneurs. And yes, we are two-thirds owned by franchisees and then the rest are company-owned restaurants and the franchisees, the way we find them is usually through our website and through our network. They're often people who may also have other businesses or, you know, other restaurant chains or other franchise businesses. But usually, we basically talk to them. We need to make sure they meet some financial requirements. They need to have a passion for the restaurant business. I mean, we really want to bring in great operators of our business. The restaurant business is, you know, it's a tough business. And we need to have people who are really passionate about it and who are going to actually be in the restaurants on a daily basis. We also look for people who may have the opportunity to develop more than just one restaurant. I mean, we do have some franchisees who own one, and then we have others who have multiple locations, sometimes throughout the country. We provide ongoing support to our franchisees. So, 24/7 support, whether it be IT, marketing, operations. We give them lots of training and we meet with them regularly. So, we do have franchise committees as well that we meet with on a regular basis to make sure that they understand the major initiatives that we're working on and the expectations that we have for them as partners in our business.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:10] So do they also source through you or do they independently source their products?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:13:15] That's actually the beauty of a franchise business, is that we get the cost efficiencies of buying for multiple locations. So, we do have a supply chain where they purchase products from our distribution centers and our suppliers. And it's basically, you know, they get, like I said, the cost efficiencies of buying for 600 locations versus just one or two locations.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:44] Right. So that is an efficiency of scale in its finest. So, you mentioned a rapper that was singing about Long John Silver's, and it occurred to me, there's this song, I can't remember what it's called, but it's an older song and it's a guy singing about how he's at the Pizza Hut, he's at the Taco Bell, he's at the combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell. Have you heard that song?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:14:05] No. I need to, though.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:08] Well, I'll link it in the show notes. And that's what I'm curious about in terms of like a franchisee, they want to open, you know, a Pizza Hut and a Taco Bell. Can they open a Long John Silver's and a Taco Bell, how does that work if you want to open a combination restaurant?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:14:24] Yeah, and that's a great question. We were actually owned by Yum! Brands in the past. Many of your listeners may be familiar with our co-branded locations, so we do have some locations that are Long John Silver's and KFC. We have some that are Long John Silver's and Taco Bell, and then we have some that are Long John Silver's and A&W. And then we also have several Long John Silver's that are just standalone restaurants. So that was really a product of being part of Yum! and I think it was just a time when. I think they were trying to get the efficiencies of having two restaurants in one location. But we are no longer owned by Yum! So right now, when we franchise, we really want people to open a standalone Long John Silver's.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:13] Yeah, I imagine there are some efficiencies, but also there might be some big differences. Right. So, you go to Taco Bell it's easy for the consumer, right? They want to have a taco and then they want to have some popcorn shrimp or whatever. And so, it's easy, but it's still maybe not as efficient as it could be, right?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:15:29] Yeah. And usually, one brand is the dominant brand in those locations. So oftentimes, you know, at those restaurants where it's a KFC or a Taco Bell and Long John's, we usually have a more limited menu there. So, you know, it is disappointing sometimes for our guests when they go into those locations, they may not always be able to find the food items that they want.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:53] Oh, that makes sense. When was Long John Silver's founded? It's pretty old, right?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:16:00] Yeah. We were founded over 50 years ago. 1969.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:04] Yes. Oh, I was born in 1969.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:16:07] So that was I.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:09] You were? No way.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:16:10] What a great year!

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:14] Oh, my God. Amazing. And we landed on the moon.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:16:16] That's right.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:17] So much stuff happened there. Oh, my gosh. Amazing. So, I had also read that the restaurant chain arrived in Singapore in 1983 and has had a continuous presence in the country ever since and is currently looking to expand in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. So, tell me about global expansion. What is that like? I know it's a big question, but as much as you can share in the little time that we have.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:16:43] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:44] And what are the menus look like in different countries and how do you go about, you know, I mean, we're going to talk a little bit about menu innovation, which it's probably very similar. What are the menus look like and are there regional differences and regional specific offerings that you have?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:17:02] Yeah, Yeah. So, yeah, we have been in Singapore since the eighties actually, and the interest in QSR restaurants overseas has just exploded since then, right? So, there's a huge opportunity for us to expand, especially in Asia, you know, where they do consume a lot of seafood. We have a lot of opportunity there as well as the Middle East and Latin America. So, we actually recently had some prospective franchisees over from Thailand. So that was fun to meet them and learn about their market. And as far as the menu is concerned, so Singapore actually offers something like breakfast, right? Because their consumers actually eat fish for breakfast. So, they have different sandwiches with fish and porridges and things like that. So, you know, what we usually do at John Silver's is and I also did this at Burger King when I was working internationally is, you know, you always have your base menu of things that, you know, the brand is known for. So, for Long John's, you know, we always are going to have our batter dipped fish and shrimp and chicken. But then, you know, we do allow for some regional offerings because we know that customers have different tastes, right? In Asia, you know, they like sweet and spicy and things like that, so we need to make sure that we have things on the menu that are going to appeal to those consumers.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:18:34] Yeah, that sounds really interesting and maybe potentially complicated, right? Because you have to take kind of your tried-and-true menu items here and then adapt them over there to the local consumer. So, I think that that's really, really interesting.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:18:50] Yeah, actually, the tough part is sourcing the same species of fish for example. Over in Singapore, they're using dory where, you know, over here we use pollock. You know, there's also some supply chain differences and some cases where they may not be able to source the exact same species that we're sourcing over here. But it's really interesting. I was mentioning that at Burger King, I did do some global menu innovation where I was actually helping to share different innovations from various countries. And we were able to bring things from Europe to the U.S. and U.S. products to Europe or to Asia or to Latin America. So, you know, I think there's always something really interesting when you start to expand internationally where you actually have more innovation ideas that can be used throughout a company.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:52] Yeah, that's important. And that's great that you kind of take what works and try it somewhere else. And it might work. It might even do better, right?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:19:59] Yeah, absolutely.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:01] We're going to continue to talk about seafood and sourcing because I think, you know, you just touched on it a little bit from the international perspective, and I want to get back to that, but I really want to also focus a little bit more on the menus. And I read that menu innovation is a focus for you and that while Long John Silver's is known for craveable fish and fries, guests are also seeking more variety and flavor options. And so, could you like walk us through what does menu innovation look like? Do you have a test kitchen or how does that work?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:20:32] Menu innovation is really part of our DNA here. And, you know, most restaurant companies, I mean, we have to be constantly innovating and making sure we're meeting our customer's wants and their needs. So, we do not have a test kitchen right now. So, we actually use one of our restaurants as a test kitchen. But we do have a full what we call stage gate process. And a lot of other restaurant companies use this process where we vet different concepts through consumer research. And actually put them into restaurants and test them before they're ever rolled out. And in some cases, it may take a few months to get something out there. And in other cases, it may take, for something new like chicken fries that I worked on at Burger King, that takes over a year to develop that from scratch because it was really a brand new product that we developed with our suppliers.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:21:35] So I realized we're going to talk about chicken for a second. But chicken fries as a new product took more than a year to develop. Why? It's such a simple question, but I mean, it sounds simple, but it's not. Right?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:21:53] Well, yeah. When you're rolling out to, you know, Burger King's case, like 7000 restaurants, you need to make sure that you're doing your due diligence on the products.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:22:02] Yeah.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:22:03] You know, it really starts with the insight that our adult customers wanted a handheld chicken product that they could eat in the car with a sauce, but they didn't want a chicken nugget. They wanted something that was more specific for them. So, the chicken fry was really all about everything from packaging innovation. So, we developed a cupholder that actually fit in your cupholder in your car that had a thing where you could put your sauce so that you could actually dip your chicken fry while you're driving. But all of that had to be developed and then the actual product itself had to be developed with the supplier because the chicken fry is actually cut from chicken breast meat, and they had to develop the equipment to actually be able to manufacture it. Yeah. So, it's just a lot of different players, a lot of different pieces that need to come together. And then, you know, like I said, we usually test it in restaurants for a little while to just make sure that it's going to be a successful product before putting, you know, a lot of marketing dollars behind it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:14] That is really fascinating. And the way you described it makes total sense, right? You had to actually literally create a new holder for it that fit in people's cupholders in their cars. But I think it's actually hilarious that adult people, they don't want to order chicken nuggets. They want to order chicken fingers. They're a little bit different, but they're the same kinda.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:23:33] Exactly.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:35] That is so funny. No, I think this is all super fascinating and it sounds like there's a lot of psychology involved.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:23:41] There really is. The insights come from our customers. I mean, we, you know, monitor what people are saying on social media. And we also do consumer research, you know, with surveys and things like that to try to understand what our customers are looking for. So, I mean, in seafood right now, you know, one of the big things is that people want more portable options. So, we have a lot of seafood meals, but

they're very difficult to eat in the car, right? So, you know, we're looking at different ways to bring customers in more often. They say they'll come more often, but they want something that's more portable. So, you know, we are looking at things like that. We also rolled out a grilled menu several years ago, you know, with fish and shrimp tacos and bowls to try to appeal to those people who, you know, may not have wanted to eat fried fish all the time. They love our fried fish, but, you know, they want some variety, flavor variety as well. And that's where grilled gives them something a little bit different to try. So, you know, we're constantly just listening to what our customers have to say about what they want from us.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:24:56] What's the most popular flavor for your fish right now?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:25:00] So, I mean, our most popular items are fish and shrimp platter and our fish and chicken platter. So, it's kind of our, you know, our standard items. People love our hushpuppies, and they absolutely love our crumblied. And I don't know if you're familiar with our crumblied.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:15] No!

Dawn Polizzotti [00:25:16] It's basically the fried batter. So, when we're frying our fish and our shrimp and our chicken, the little crumblied from the batter like fry up to these delicious little nuggets of goodness.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:29] And you sell those separately.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:25:31] We don't sell them separately. We actually include them in the meals.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:34] Oh, they love it.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:25:35] Sometimes they ask for like a side of crumblied. We'll give them a side of crumblied.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:43] That is incredible. I've never heard of that before. That's amazing.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:25:48] Yes, we did some things last year where we had mac and cheese sometimes as a side item and we put crumblied on it. So, I think there's a lot of innovation we could do with some of these things I mentioned our hushpuppies are really popular as well. So, I think there's probably some fun things we can do with our hushpuppies as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:07] Yeah. So, I was recently in New Orleans and they have beignets, right? So those are kind of similar to hushpuppies. Maybe? There was a restaurant that had, I think it was blue crab beignets, and I was like, that's genius.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:26:17] Yes.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:18] That would be amazing. I think you need to get on that.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:26:21] That sounds fantastic. Thanks for the idea.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:25] Yeah, thank you. I'll take some royalties and some shrimp and some shrimp meals.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:26:31] Yeah, we'll send you a couple of cases of shrimp.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:33] That'll be amazing. Thank you. Okay, you heard it here, folks. Remind me later when I forget about this. So, on the topic of menus, one more question. We're in Lenten season right now, and I understand that this is, you know, a big time for seafood consumption and it's a big time for seafood in restaurants, etc. so could you tell us a little bit about what Lent means for the seafood industry and specifically for Long John Silver's?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:26:58] Oh, it's huge. It's our Super Bowl, right?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:01] Oh, wow.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:27:02] Oh, yeah, we do, you know, the majority of our sales for the year during Lent. On a Friday in Lent, our restaurants are just humming right now. So it's a really huge period for us and we're doing really well this year. So we're really excited about that.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:22] So this is just to affirm. Basically, it's Catholics have sworn off red meat in the time of Lent, so they switch out their protein, generally, they might be eating other proteins for seafood. Is that right? Do I have that right?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:27:36] Yes, and especially on Fridays. That's why Fridays are huge. And, you know, Lent starts on Ash Wednesday. So, we usually see a huge uptick in sales on Ash Wednesday. And then throughout the really six weeks, six, seven weeks of Lent and especially on Fridays.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:59] Wow. Well, that's really interesting. I'm glad it's going well for you this year.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:28:03] Thank you.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:04] So this is a podcast about seafood. right? And so, of course, I need to ask you about sourcing seafood and any sustainability commitments you have. I did read that Long John Silver's adopted the BAP, which is Best Aquaculture Practices certification as part of your sustainable seafood procurement policy in 2014. And I would love to hear a little bit more about your sustainable seafood procurement policy and do you work with sustainability advisors to support your efforts?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:28:35] Yes so that is correct. And in 2014, we did announce the adoption of the BAP certification, and we continue to work closely with the Global Aquaculture Alliance to ensure our farmed seafood is sourced from BAP certified facilities. So yeah, we are partnering with some of the leading suppliers in the world. And they really share our vision of making sure that we are fishing much smarter with less environmental impact. And this is really kind of way before sustainability became a buzzword in the industry. So, we've been creating strategic partnerships, you know, over the years with those suppliers who share our vision of just being much more sustainable. So, you know, most of our wild caught fish actually comes from the deep waters of the Bering Sea. And then other items like our shrimp, they are sourced from only the best managed supply

partners. And on top of all of that, all of our seafood is free of any antibiotics, hormones, it's GMO free, additive free and we never add any artificial color or flavors.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:54] No, that's good to know. I mean, it's not difficult. It's a commitment, right, that everybody has to make. And the majority of people who rely on seafood as their primary source of product for their restaurants or for their work. Selling and buying seafood. I mean, everyone pretty much at this point has a commitment. So, I'm glad to hear that you're also adhering to those commitments. And I think it's just something that I would encourage you all to talk more about because you have such a large presence in this space, and I don't really hear much from others, specifically QSR restaurants around their seafood sourcing or their sustainability commitments. So, I encourage you to talk about it more publicly.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:30:36] Yeah, and I hear you on that. We actually asked our guests about sustainability, among other things. And unfortunately, you know, I don't want to tell you this, but it's not as important to some of them. So that's why, you know, you don't really see it in our advertising necessarily.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:56] Yeah.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:30:57] But it's important for us to make sure that we are still doing that, even though the 18-year-old doesn't really think about it as much as we do.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:31:10] I understand. I think times are changing a little bit and I think that the youth of today are getting more and more savvy to sustainability, whatever that definition is right, because we're still unclear a lot of times. But I think they understand how important it is. And I think more and more companies are going to reflect that in their messaging. And I think you're right. I mean, it's great that you're asking them. And it's interesting to hear, because I always also hear a lot of conflicting reports, depending on who you ask. They're like, our customers aren't asking for this. Or our customers are clamoring for this. So, it's really who knows, right?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:31:45] Yeah. And it varies brand by brand. You know, I will say more of some of the fast casual brands, the customers that frequent those chains. It is a more important thing for those customers. Whereas QSR, it may not be the top priority for customers, but it still doesn't deter us from making sure that we're doing our part.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:12] Right. What's fast casual?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:32:15] So fast casual are places like Panera Bread and Chipotle. And then you've got all these new chains like Cava coming out. They're kind of in between the QSRs. They're maybe a little bit more sit-down concept. They may have fancier food, let's say, than kind of cheap and quick.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:38] I gotcha. Okay. That makes sense. Speaking of consumers and telling stories and talking about your products, we talk a lot on the show about storytelling and the importance of the customer and their understanding about the people behind our seafood. So how do you tell the story of seafood?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:32:56] It all goes back to when we were founded over 50 years ago. The idea for our restaurant chain was really simple. It was all about bringing the unique seafood experience from the coast and making that accessible to all. We really try to tap

into that and what we find is that people have very fond memories of being at the coast, eating seafood. And what we try to do is we try to build those what we call treasured moments for them. So really trying to bring them back to those memories of being at the coast when they bite into our fish and shrimp. You and I grew up on the coasts, but for the last 15 years or so, I've lived in more landlocked areas. And you know, you can't always find the great seafood that you want when you're in a landlocked area. So that was really kind of the vision of the brand. And we really tried to bring that coastal experience back to our guests.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:01] Do you have an early childhood story or a memory about fish or seafood?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:34:06] Oh, I have so many. So many. You know, I grew up on the East Coast, so. And I had family in New England and on Long Island in New York. So, seafood was always a part of my life. I remember visiting lobster shacks in Maine with my family, where you get your lobster, you sit a picnic table and, you know, you just kind of make a big mess outside. So that was really fun. My mom was from the Long Island area, and we used to spend many, many summers on the beach where we'd have clam bakes out on the beach. And then my more recent family tradition is the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve. And we usually have everything from oysters and shrimp, clams, crab legs, scallops, mussels. And of course, because I'm from Boston, we have to have lobster as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:00] Yes, that sounds like a great tradition. So, did you say that's just a recent tradition?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:35:05] It is. It is. So, I'm half-Italian and my brother married a woman who's also Italian. And it was really her family's tradition. So, she's kind of brought it to our family and it's one of our favorite nights of the year honestly, it's just a lot of fun. Yeah, there's family together eating fish for hours and hours.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:26] That's awesome. I was going to say, I think that has its origins in Italian history, correct?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:35:31] Yes. Yes.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:32] That's awesome. So we're going to transition a little bit here to talk about gender equality in the seafood industry because that's what Seafood and Gender Equality, or SAGE, is all about. And so, again, you know, SAGE is about building gender equality and empowering people in this industry, and you are a woman in seafood and in the quick service food industry. So, kind of straddling two different industries and mostly men are found in leadership roles. And I'm assuming this is the same in the quick service sector. So, could you share one or two aspects of the seafood industry and its culture or the quick service industry and its culture that may contribute to inequality in the sector? And what are some of the things that the industry can do to lessen these inequalities?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:36:14] I really think that these issues are not just confined to seafood or to the restaurant industries. I've experienced these issues in other industries as well. But I can say that I've definitely seen some progress over my 25-year career. So, where you might not have seen a woman in the boardroom before, you know, I think you are seeing them more and more. Women in positions of power. And I think that is also having

an effect where, you know, women in positions of power are then lifting up other women with them, and then men are being our advocates. I really do think that it's only a matter of time before we have a much more equal balance of senior women in the workplace, you know, whether it's in seafood or restaurants or any other industry. And I am still pretty old school as far as I think, we as women, we still need to work hard. But, you know, I think the key is that we find those mentors and champions who can really help us with advice and contacts and opportunities so they can really help us move up the ladder. I'm definitely seeing more women and men giving us opportunities to prove ourselves in top positions. And I would just say to everybody, you know, let's show them what we can do because, you know, we can rule the world, right?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:37:44] Exactly. You are actually in probably like one of the top, top positions, correct?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:37:50] So I am on the leadership team here at Long John Silver's and we do have a few women on the leadership team, so I'm very fortunate to have some peers with me at the leadership team level, and I do have other peers who are CEOs and CMOs at other restaurant concepts as well. So, I'm definitely seeing that we are moving into more positions of power.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:18] A lot of women can be found in leadership positions in the seafood sector as chief marketing officers, right? And so, marketing is a place where we tend to find a lot of women. And it's also one of the places that, you know, we've mentioned the power of storytelling, but it's also one of the places in our observations that is kind of the first to be on the chopping block when there needs to be some budget cuts or whatever. So, I think there's a lack of a value. And you can tell me if you feel this too, because I mean, you're in that position, right? You are there getting things done and your company clearly places importance on the value of marketing, right? But we've seen in other, you know, I guess, companies throughout the sector where again, marketing tends to be the first thing that's axed if budget cuts happen, and that's where you find the majority of women. So, I think that, like you said, if you can show the importance, if you can get this done and do it in a way that's really compelling, then maybe there will be some more respect given to that role. Does that sound accurate?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:39:26] Yeah, I would say there are more women in marketing in general, but I do know people who are CFOs, for example, at major corporations. So, women who are CFOs. So, I think we're seeing in other areas, we have a lot of women in operations as well in the restaurant business since operations and marketing really kind of run restaurants. So, I think you're seeing more and more women move up in that area as well. But yeah, I mean, we still have some ways to go as far as breaking some of the barriers.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:04] Some hurdles to cross.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:40:06] That's right. That's right.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:09] So speaking of that, so how can SAGE support you as a woman in this industry?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:40:14] I think providing opportunities just like this podcast is fantastic. So, thank you, you know, for giving me this opportunity. You know, this really gives us a voice to reach others. And, you know, I hope the listeners out there can really get some

great advice from all the people that you have been talking with. I was also reading that, you know, you're doing a lot of things building community with other women and I think that is just so important to make sure that we're networking with each other and mentoring each other. You know, I've really enjoyed mentoring women and men throughout my career, and I think it's just so important for women to find those mentors and champions, you know, throughout their career.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:59] Yeah, that's great. And thank you for those kind words. I really do place a high value of importance on mentorship, and we do hope to have in the future some sort of more formal program around that. But I think, like you said, in the meantime, just continue. A lot of people have said this as advice, like, continue to seek out people that can mentor you, and sometimes it's really hard to find those people. But I think once you do, you'll recognize the value and it'll make it that much better.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:41:27] Yeah, just making those connections is key.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:31] So this podcast also is to inspire people working in or thinking about starting a career in the seafood sector. So what advice would you give to people already in the business or thinking about starting a career in this exciting sector?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:41:44] Yeah, I think it's really important to find those companies where you see women in leadership positions and because obviously then they're going to be supportive of you moving up into those positions. But like I said earlier, you know, I think we really need to support each other and lift each other up and, you know, find those role models, find those mentors who can help you with advice and contacts. You know, it's just so critical to find those special people, you know, who will give you those opportunities. I've been so fortunate to have some people who really believed in me and helped me get the great opportunities that I've had throughout my career. And here I am today.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:33] And here you are today.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:42:34] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:35] SAGE is about also uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry. And this podcast is one of the main ways we're doing this. And of course, you're on here, so I'd love to give you an opportunity to uplift someone. So, who would you like to uplift and why?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:42:49] Well, I'd like to uplift all the women who are listening to this podcast right now. And I want to say to you that you need to go after your dreams because you can do whatever you put your mind to. You do have to work hard. You need to speak up. You need to have courage and take risks and, most importantly, you know, seek new challenges and experiences. And this is just going to help you grow throughout your career. You know, by doing all of that, I think someday you're going to find yourself actually saying to yourself, Wow, I've really created this beautiful, fulfilling life for myself because I did speak up. I did have courage. I did take risks. So, I just think that's so important for all of you to do throughout your careers.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:41] So that's an amazing shout out. And I actually take that personally too, so I'm going to consider that was a shout out to me.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:43:47] Yes, it is.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:49] I have taken risks and I have reached for my dreams, and I think if I can do it, anyone can do it. So that's really great advice and also a great shout out. So, we've come to the end of our conversation and I wanted to share how can our listeners find Long John Silver's online?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:44:07] You can find us online at ljsilvers.com. We're also on all of the social media, so you can find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, as well as LinkedIn. And you can find me as well. You know, I'd love to be a mentor or guide to anybody who would like some help.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:29] That's a very generous offer, and I might take you up on that at some point.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:44:31] Absolutely.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:33] So I also expect, and I hope to hear that this podcast will be streaming at all Long John Silver's locations when it is released?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:44:42] Yes.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:44] You can come and listen to this podcast at any Long John Silver's location. I'm just joking. I'm just joking. That would be kind of weird, but it would be kind of cool, actually. Right?

Dawn Polizzotti [00:44:52] Right.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:53] All right, Dawn. Well, we've come to the end of our time, and I just want to say again, thank you so much for really making this happen. I know it took a long time. I know it's your Friday afternoon and I really appreciate your insights and your thoughtfulness and just your great message. So, thank you.

Dawn Polizzotti [00:45:08] Thank you so much. This was a great opportunity and I really enjoyed it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:15] Thank you for tuning into The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just two seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you!

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:45:29] The Conch podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality, or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing, and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan's Pilgrims. Funding for the Conch podcast as generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and Builders Initiative.