

26. Ready for Our Closeup

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What do Black Panther, Minority Report, and “The Office” have in common? Some of your favorite characters are driving Toyota and Lexus vehicles! But how do products find their way into these projects? What characters make the best Toyota/Lexus drivers? What do we do with all of those awesome cars once filming wraps? To help us answer these questions and more, we sit down with MaryJane Kroll, Media Manager in the Lexus Division of Toyota Motor North America.

Full transcript below.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:00:00] All right. So, welcome to Toyota Untold. Today, we have MJ Kroll, Mary Jane Kroll. We call you MJ here at Toyota and Lexus. So, welcome to the Toyota Untold Podcast.

Mary Jane Kroll: Thank you so much. I’m thrilled to be here.

Tyler Litchenberger: I am so excited about this episode because this is about product placement. How do we get our vehicles into TV shows, movies, all the work that goes on behind the scenes there? And so, I think the first question that I have is, why? Like what is the benefit for us to get our vehicles into these places? And do we proactively seek these opportunities, or do they come to us, or is it both?

Mary Jane Knoll: The answer is definitely both. And we'll start with the why. The why is really because we're trying to put the brand as much in front of our consumers wherever they are that we [00:01:00] can. It's sort of a simple answer. And we want to be part of cultural conversations that we might not necessarily automatically be inserted into without these moments and these high-profile types of media experiences that people are having, and consuming together, and talking about, and so forth. So, of course we produce plenty of advertising.

Tyler Litchenberger: Of course.

Mary Jane Knoll: But we want to not just be surrounding the content, we actually want to be a part of the content as much as we can.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's so interesting. So, what would you say the mix is on what we go out and seek versus what comes to us?

Mary Jane Knoll: That's a great question. Gosh, I would say most of our placements are actually coming to us.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: Requests for vehicles, for types of vehicles, or they have a specific vehicle in mind that they really want. So, most come to us, but they're definitely placements that we seek. And those are likely to be the more visible ones that [00:02:00] you might remember from recent campaigns.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah. For me, on like the Lexus side, Black Panther comes to mind first, [], because I love Black Panther; and [], because, like, I mean, it was like iconic having the vehicle in the movie.

Mary Jane Knoll: Yeah. Black Panther was absolutely just an amazing partnership on every level with Marvel, of course. And yeah, it's the gift that keeps on giving too 'cause there's still a lot of interest in our participation in the custom LC that we made to support that partnership. And believe it or not, actually, going back even further, Minority Report-

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, really?

Mary Jane Knoll: ... which I think goes back to the early '90s.

Tyler Litchenberger: I was going to say-

Mary Jane Knoll: You might have to fact check me on that one. I was not at Lexus at the time.

Tyler Litchenberger: ... that's way back.

Mary Jane Knoll: But Minority Report actually still bubbles up from time to time, whether it's articles or the vehicle actually, at least, the frame of the vehicle is still around. I think it's over [00:03:00] Toyota Connected, last I checked.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh my God, we still have it.

Mary Jane Kroll: We do, we do.

Tyler Litchenberger: From the '90s, amazing.

Mary Jane Kroll: It was actually on eBay at one point and I rescued it from eBay. I said, we cannot let that leave our vortex here. It's too important to our industry.

Tyler Litchenberger: I think people would be surprised how many things we find on eBay that we're like, "Hmm, we should own that."

Mary Jane Kroll: Yeah, exactly. And we did own it at the time, but we were getting ready to move to Texas, and there was a lot of just cleaning house, cleaning out the closets.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's fascinating. We rescued it from ourselves, which happens a lot here too.

Mary Jane Kroll: Exactly, exactly. Yes, it does. It does.

Tyler Litchenberger: So, what are some of the criteria that you're looking for when an opportunity comes into your inbox? When do you say, "Hey, you know what, this hits the Mark on X, Y, Z that we're looking for"?

Mary Jane Kroll: Absolutely. I mean, I would say first off, we try to cast the widest net possible in terms of opportunities that we'll consider. And the primary reason for that is that almost, [00:04:00] I would say, 9 out of 10, opportunities maybe even more get ruled out for one reason or another.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: And that can have everything to do with the suitability of the opportunity. It can have to do with logistics; although I like to think our team really makes things happen, and we're credited with that from a lot of the partners that we work with. So, it's good affirmation to know we have been able to establish ourselves as a good partner who's responsive and we get cars to all corners of the world, actually, but we're ultimately looking at what's the product that they're wanting to place, what's the character they're placing it with.

The character of the character matters to us. And there's a whole lot of nuance, frankly, in considering it because you may have a character that could even be a criminal, for example, but who is somebody you're rooting for, right? For one reason or another, [00:05:00] they've faced challenges that we can all relate to, and we might actually want to place a vehicle with that character.

And then, conversely, we've had characters that are maybe extremely close minded or just not great people by very reasonable standards, and we might not pursue those opportunities because we wouldn't want the character's traits to be put on the car. And then, of course, for Lexus, we do have a very affluent customer. We're looking to, most often, ensure that our vehicles are placed with drivers that would be appropriate that the viewer might identify with that person and see themselves there. And then, ultimately add consideration, add desire for the brand because they can [00:06:00] relate to it.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting. So, it, kind of, has to embody that Experience Amazing tagline a little bit.

Mary Jane Kroll: Absolutely. I mean, certainly, for any major partnership, Experience Amazing would be absolutely at the core of it. But we have a wide variety of placements that we do. And I think that is a testament

just to keeping that open net and considering all the possibilities and what might be right for any particular vehicle that we're placing.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: And there's a range. Yeah.

Tyler Litchenberger: What are some of those bigger partnerships? Is Marvel one of those?

Mary Jane Knoll: Marvel has become a great partner most recently with Black Panther, and we are working on some other future plans.

Tyler Litchenberger: I am a huge Marvel fan.

Mary Jane Knoll: yes, wonderful partner, love working with them. We've also worked recently with Sony on Men in Black International.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's great.

Mary Jane Knoll: And they were really a great partner too. We love the relationships we've built there. [00:07:00] And the amount of production both in television and film that comes out of Sony is pretty staggering. I think they like to say they entertain more people and more places than any other company, so-

Tyler Litchenberger: Wow!

Mary Jane Knoll: So, yeah. You wouldn't-

Tyler Litchenberger: That's a big deal.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... always think of them because they're doing a lot of production for the studio names you might know. So, they're a great partner as well. And we have relationships actually with virtually every studio. And are constantly looking at opportunities across the studios. And-

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting

Mary Jane Knoll: ... we're actually working with Universal Pictures right now as well-

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... on a film called Marry Me-

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... that features Jennifer Lopez. So, that will come out later this year. I think it promises to be really entertaining and looks like it's a great story. And she's amazing in everything she does. So, we're excited to be kind of part of her [00:08:00] universe.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah, absolutely. Is there a standard way that these things work or is every opportunity different? Like do they say, "Hey, we want this many vehicles, and you're going to get them back," or, "Hey, we're going to take these, and completely crush them, and you'll never see them again"?

Mary Jane Knoll: Both of those possibilities are very real. In the case of Black Panther, the needed a pretty

significant number. I think we ultimately supplied six LC prototypes.

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

Mary Jane Knoll: All, but one, were slated to be destroyed during production.

Tyler Litchenberger: No.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, that will definitely-

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, my goodness.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... cause a few deep breaths and gulps among the entire team, not the least of which is the chief engineer who, in that case, when it's a product that's pre-production, we really needed assistance from our friends in Japan, and they really stepped up seeing the [00:09:00] possibilities of the project, and how big it could be for the brand. And it's a huge credit to Sato-san in this case for having the vision and really making it possible for us to get those cars. So, you do have the full spectrum of cars could be crushed.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: Cars could be destroyed. Damage is almost always just a potential factor-

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... because of the way the nature of filming, even some of the things that they do to prepare a vehicle to be filmed actually will cause some damage, rigging, and things like that.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, we always have to be prepared for that. But there's also times where we just need this car on this day at this time. We promise it's going to be pristine and no real risk involved. So, the full spectrum is possible.

Tyler Litchenberger: Can we talk about an urban legend I heard for Black Panther?

Mary Jane Knoll: Oh, sure.

Tyler Litchenberger: So, Lexus had the partnership with Black Panther, but [00:10:00] I heard that there was a request that said, "Listen, there's a scene, and we might need like 12 blacked out 4Runners. Can we just have those too, and we're going to completely destroy them?"

Mary Jane Knoll: So, you're not entirely wrong.

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, we had a meeting with the film makers, and they indicated that they needed vehicles for the villain-

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... in the film. And they had a brand in mind for those vehicles that we preferred not to share the screen with.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: And we said, "Hey, if we can convince our sister brand-"

Tyler Litchenberger: Yes.

Mary Jane Knoll: "... on the other side of the building-"

Tyler Litchenberger: Nancy and Lorenzo, get on it.

Mary Jane Knoll: Exactly. I said, "If they'll support us, would you consider 4Runners?" And actually, the filmmakers really liked that idea immediately. And they ultimately did ask if they can make some modifications to the 4Runners, which we went back to the [00:11:00] Toyota team to get that approved, of course. But, yeah, it worked out really nicely because-

Tyler Litchenberger: Amazing.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... the combination of both of those placements actually was ranked as the top value of the year for 2018. So, when you combine both Lexus and Toyota top value of all, not just auto brands, but all placements-

Tyler Litchenberger: All placements?

Mary Jane Knoll: ... for the entire year-

Tyler Litchenberger: Wow!

Mary Jane Knoll: ... it's from a company called Concave Marketing that they specialize in measuring the value of the placement itself. So, we measure a lot of different KPIs, if you will, to measure the value of one of these opportunities. But one piece of that would be the actual placement in the film.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right, right.

Mary Jane Knoll: But there's a lot of other items as well that we measure.

Tyler Litchenberger: Do you get to go on site during filming, or who goes onsite, or does anybody?

Mary Jane Knoll: Good question. Sometimes, we are [00:12:00] invited to set. Sometimes, we're not. And that would generally depend on the sort of size of the partnership. If it's a straight placement, and we understand exactly how our vehicles are being used, we might not necessarily need to be on set. Other times, we're invited to set more to give us exposure to the story, and the background, and all the materials that they're using, costumes, props, you name it, really, to help us build our own plans. It's not always even to see our own products in use.

But yes, I, I did go to visit the set of Black Panther and was there for some of the scenes that were shot in Atlanta of the LC when T'Challa transforms to Black Panther and commandeers the LC to chase the villain, in this case. So, I was able to watch some of that. And it is fun. It's fun to visit the sets, but [00:13:00] it's actually

a little different for me because I come from more of the commercial production background side of things where when we're on set, we have a say on how everything comes out and how it gets filmed.

In the case of product placement, it's really important to be a respectful guest on those sets and mostly just very appreciative for the opportunity to be there. If we're asked for notes, if we're asked for input, we give it in a measured way, and we really want to make sure that our filmmakers and all of the folks who are involved in the production don't see us as a burden to their process. We want to be there just to support, and facilitate, and help us understand what the potential outcome will be, so we can prepare for that.

Tyler Litchenberger: It's not selfies all day with Chadwick Bozeman, right?

Mary Jane Knoll: Definitely not, definitely [00:14:00] not.

Tyler Litchenberger: Are there any perks to this?

Mary Jane Knoll: Oh, interesting. Personally, I find it to be really satisfying from a work standpoint because I will tell you that every single one of these is a little bit of a Start your Impossible.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: It's like, it's the-

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah. It sounds easy to start with, I'm sure. "Oh, you want this car for that? Great. Let's do that." And then, you're like, "I'm sorry, what?" by the end.

Mary Jane Knoll: Yeah. There's an inherent risk, right? So, we are naturally, I think, for the, for the, for all the right reasons, we're a pretty risk averse company, right?

Tyler Litchenberger: We are, yes.

Mary Jane Knoll: We didn't get where we are by being fast and loose with everything, right? So, in the case of placement and even more so when you're building a big co-promotion around a placement, there are an incredible amount of variables and unknowns. Working with Marvel, working with Sony, working with some of these really big players who just [00:15:00] know what they're doing-

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: Right?

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: And we have an excellent partner. Debra Harper is her name from a company called Movie Mogul. She reads every script we consider. She makes recommendations. So, we have a good arsenal of tools in our tool chest to try to attach ourselves to projects that are going to be successful.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: But you, ultimately, don't know what the outcome's going to be.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

Mary Jane Knoll: And the effort level to actually make these partnerships happen, even when it's just as

simple as supplying the vehicles is a huge, huge effort that goes into it, and very outsized relative to the spend is actually relatively small in the media world compared to the effort that's required of our team to actually bring these partnerships to fruition.

So, it's definitely a start your impossible. I really looked back at the end of Black Panther and thought [00:16:00] to myself, "I don't know how we pulled that off," but a lot of really great things happen to facilitate along the way, and a lot of great people said yes when we needed them to-

Tyler Litchenberger: Great.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... and took risks when we needed them to, and it turned out to pay off, but it could just as easily not pay off, right?

Tyler Litchenberger: Absolutely.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, there's always a risk.

Tyler Litchenberger: So, the process is you get these requests, I'm sure they come into a media mailbox or something, or they go through agency partners that you know. And then, you or this agency friend partner kind of reviews them and bubble up the cream of the crop and say, "Hey, here are some things I think we should consider." Is that it?

Mary Jane Knoll: That's essentially it. The opportunities come to us from all different partners. We do have a partner specifically dedicated to making recommendations for us, but we essentially find out what the production is, when are they going, and when do they start filming? So, when do they need vehicles? Where [00:17:00] is it going to be? And a lot of production is moving abroad to Europe.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: Extra fun challenge. So, yes, a lot of production is moving.

Tyler Litchenberger: But the US, then, does that and not like Toyota Motor Europe, TME?

Mary Jane Knoll: We actually have built a really nice partnership with our friends, particularly in the UK but, of course, TME as well helps to facilitate. And so much production's happening in the UK that we tread very lightly because we don't want to make anyone mad at us, but we have asked many favors, and they have just been amazing in helping us source product. And of course, with Lexus, most of our volume is here in the United States. So, certain products are very hard to get in Europe or not there at all. So, we have shipped like our larger SUVs are not in Europe other than Russia.

Tyler Litchenberger: Like my GX.

Mary Jane Knoll: Exactly, yes. And it's harder to get a vehicle out of Russia than it is to just ship one [00:18:00] from the US. So-

Tyler Litchenberger: Really?

Mary Jane Knoll: So, yeah, it does affect what we can place and how for sure. But yeah, it's quite the challenge

Tyler Litchenberger: So, essentially, you have to become like a shipping expert, a transportation expert.

Mary Jane Knoll: Yes. And we have help and support there too. But you're basically evaluating all of the, sort of, truly logistical aspects of dates, and times, and locations. And then, just as quickly, if there is a script available, which there isn't always and, usually, we're only permitted to read just the pages.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, yes. I'm sure Marvel's not sending you the full.

Mary Jane Knoll: Right. And Marvel typically wouldn't even send something out that you might have to go there to read it. Understandably, everybody's very protective of their IP not wanting to have security breaches. So, we'll review whatever we can of the script, of the storyline, trying to understand the characters that would be associated with the vehicles. [00:19:00] And occasionally, we are going on far less information than that. There's a film that we recently did provide a vehicle for that was essentially on a promise that you don't want to miss this opportunity, but it is highly secretive, and you won't regret it.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: It was very little information.

Tyler Litchenberger: No, wait, wait, wait. I'm going to assume, I'm just going to assume, and you tell me if I'm wrong, that you've worked with this person before. It's gone well before. This isn't someone you-

Mary Jane Knoll: Right.

Tyler Litchenberger: ... don't know who just showed up-

Mary Jane Knoll: Yes.

Tyler Litchenberger: ... at your door. Okay.

Mary Jane Knoll: Yes. You be careful and there has to be trust that already exist, for sure.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yes, you only do that with someone you're like, "All right, we've done this before. I trust you you're going to do what you say you're going to do."

Mary Jane Knoll: Yeah, yeah.

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay. All right, for sure.

Mary Jane Knoll: But again, there are always holes in the information that we receive, and we do our best to evaluate. And look at the timing too because if something that we're hoping to make into a [00:20:00] bigger partnership, the timing of when the film comes out, can we support it with media during that time? Does it fit with our initiatives that we already have planned during that time? And are we going to try to co-create any content that we would want to promote at that time? So, there's a lot of different factors to consider.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's got to be really tough because you're probably planning 18 months to 24 months out, and you've got to look at future product that's coming into the market that doesn't yet exist.

Mary Jane Knoll: Exactly.

Tyler Litchenberger: Do we have prototype vehicles for these things that doesn't yet exist? And can we fit-

Mary Jane Knoll: Yes.

Tyler Litchenberger: You don't even know a budget might look like that year.

Mary Jane Knoll: That is very true, yes. And we make a lot of educated guesses.

Tyler Litchenberger: All right.

Mary Jane Knoll: It's really what it comes down to. And you're right, we are planning pretty far in advance because just the way media buying works, particularly with broadcast media, which when you're doing a co-promotional [00:21:00] partnership, there's always a lot of interests in support and in broadcast. And that is bought on a broadcast year, which starts in October, ends in September. So, we could be very far out in what we've already secured for-

Tyler Litchenberger: Wow!

Mary Jane Knoll: ... even 12 months ahead. And sometimes further because of the way the broadcast here works. So, it's a big factor. In the case of Men in Black International, we featured the RCF, which had a minor change. And so, we needed to shoot the current model and have them make CG updates.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: And it held true, which is often a case. A minor change update can often be more difficult to implement in CG than it is to implement a major change because major change, virtually, everything is changed.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

Mary Jane Knoll: With a minor change, it's more in the details.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right. A piece of a headlight, a part of a grill.

Mary Jane Knoll: [00:22:00] Exactly, exactly. So, reviewing all of that footage and making sure that every change was made from second to second was another layer of challenge for the team. I cannot profess to have done that work myself. I was very grateful that both the agency team and some of our advertising team members handled that.

Tyler Litchenberger: Product too, yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: Yes, exactly.

Tyler Litchenberger: Now, I'm sure there's things that we expect of the studios or whoever we're working with, but is their expectations of us, on us of what we're going to do, and what we are going to be held accountable to? And what are those things?

Mary Jane Knoll: Yes, absolutely. So, we're very careful in ironing out deal points and responsibilities on both sides when we build a contract. It's another urban legend, but it is true, the Black Panther contract took nearly a year to complete.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, my goodness.

Mary Jane Knoll: And a big part of that was just because you've got two very big [00:23:00] self-protective companies that are trying to make sure that all of our outcomes that we're all desiring are going to be promised and very clearly secured in the contract. So, it's pretty tough. But yes, the primary value besides, of course, the value of the product in the film itself and supplying everything to support that is media value. So, they're looking to launch a film centrally launching a product that all is primarily consumed in a very finite period of time. So, they need big awareness, really fast, huge scale. So, they're leveraging partners that can help them build that scale.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: And ideally, bring more and more people into the theater to-

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... see the film. So, that's a big part of the value that we bring. We, also, I think ... Marvel, we credit them with being a great partner because they did everything they could to help us be [00:24:00] successful. But they also credit us with being a good partner because we leaned in really everywhere we could with that partnership. So, we brought the media value that was promised, but we did a lot more than that. Everything from building a custom vehicle that we took around to all kinds of big events, auto shows, and SEMA, and places like that.

Tyler Litchenberger: It was the one that had like the claw marks in it too, right?

Mary Jane Knoll: Well, we actually had ... now, that you mentioned that-

Tyler Litchenberger: Because I remember that one from the lobby.

Mary Jane Knoll: From the lobby.

Tyler Litchenberger: It was here in the lobby. And I was like, "Oh man. Amazing."

Mary Jane Knoll: So, that vehicle is actually used in filming.

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, that was-

Tyler Litchenberger: That makes it even cooler to see that I saw it in person.

Mary Jane Knoll: That was one of our prop cars, we called it. And it was actually ... it's currently on display at the Peterson Automotive Museum-

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, cool.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... in LA.

Tyler Litchenberger: Awesome.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, that's kinda nice. It still lives on. The vehicle I was referring to is the super customized

LC that we partnered with West Coast Customs.

Tyler Litchenberger: Cool.

Mary Jane Knoll: We did a feature [00:25:00] on their show to show the building process. Marvel was involved in the-

Tyler Litchenberger: Nice.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... concept of that. It's widened. It has this amazing custom paint that it turns out it's very expensive to repair when you damage it, even in the slightest way. But that car has just drawn all kinds of attention and really sparks people's imagination. They love to take photos with it. They love to post it and share it. And so, it becomes its own content generator, which was really great.

And yeah, it's just a testament, I think, to Marvel as a partner that we were able to lean in, and they kept saying yes to us, which is not always that easy, right, when you have outsiders saying, "Hey, what if we did this?" And they were really great to work with on that. But I apologize. I can't remember where we started.

Tyler Litchenberger: We started ... what is it? Our obligation, but you were talking-

Mary Jane Knoll: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

Tyler Litchenberger: You went all over. Yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: Yes, yes, okay. And ultimately, [00:26:00] we do provide actual proof that everything ran and-

Tyler Litchenberger: We went above and beyond.

Mary Jane Knoll: Yeah, exactly. And we always make sure we actually present those plans to our studio partners and say, "Does this match what you were expecting?" And of course, they understand that we reserve the right to be reaching our prospective customers in those buys. We're not necessarily changing our demographic or anything like that. And fortunately, we're able to find partners that are really well aligned with who we're trying to reach too. So, that works out very well.

Tyler Litchenberger: And there was also a big team member engagement portion to it too.

Mary Jane Knoll: Absolutely.

Tyler Litchenberger: Like I just remember that we got to see the car. I know Lexus, some team members got to go see the movie early, correct?

Mary Jane Knoll: Yes, yes.

Tyler Litchenberger: Slightly, like a day or something.

Mary Jane Kroll: Yes, yes. Marvel is a very protective of their pre or advanced screenings, as they call them and the timing on those. So, yes. [00:27:00] I actually just learned today that the Avengers, which we were not partnered in but to prescreen Avengers, it was limited to one hour before the global release. I think for Black Panther, we actually had a couple of days prior to the global release. So, we had a little more latitude for those advanced screenings. But our dealers also get involved and host their own screens.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, fun.

Mary Jane Kroll: Yeah. So, it's a nice way for them to either reward associates, great customers, perspective customers, and we provide point of sale materials for the dealerships too, so they can connect to the film and to the excitement around it. And they have given us a lot of really great feedback on those efforts.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's awesome. So, you said the most successful one that we've had is the Black Panther.

Mary Jane Kroll: I may have said a few times that it'll be a miracle if we ever recreate that, but that doesn't [00:28:00] mean we're not aiming for it, for sure.

Tyler Litchenberger: Well, I think it was also with the movie too. I think the movie did so much better than people expected it to 'cause it was that good. So, that probably propelled the product placement as well.

Mary Jane Kroll: it was so good. Of course, I was biased, but I really wanted it to win best picture. I felt like it broke barriers in a way that you just hadn't seen before.

Tyler Litchenberger: You and me both.

Mary Jane Kroll: I really thought it should have won, but it was an honor just to be nominated, I'm sure they would say because that was a big deal too for a superhero film to be nominated. But I was cheering for every one of their creators. I mean, Hannah, who won for production design, and Ruth Carter won for costumes. I mean, it was so amazing, the collaboration that they built. And again, having been able to witness that up close really helped me understand how Marvel [00:29:00] really sort of stacks their plan for success. Still not a guarantee ever, but they do an amazing job of putting a really great team together to make sure that the script is firing on all cylinders, that the relevance is there for the audience that is so excited for this character, really, to be brought to a screen. And the way they created the world of Wakanda, just amazing.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah. And I think in big picture too, how all of the Marvel pieces are fitting together, right? And I feel like a Black Panther was like a penultimate movie to get to Avengers Endgame.

Mary Jane Knoll: Oh yes.

Tyler Litchenberger: And like maybe penultimate is not the right word, but I mean that is definitely not the right word, but it was like such a key moment to get to Endgame, basically putting that in one place.

Mary Jane Kroll: I can't imagine what that room looks like, where all the sticky notes are going up to-

Tyler Litchenberger: With the red string connecting it.

Mary Jane Kroll: All the plot points. Yes. But it is brilliant. And they have done an amazing job.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:30:00] Has there been any odd requests for vehicles that you're like, "Okay?"

Mary Jane Knoll: Not necessarily odd requests in terms of the vehicle, other than we do occasionally get requested for vintage models. And for the first time, we actually are supporting a vintage placement upcoming. It's in Little Fires Everywhere that's on Hulu with Reese Witherspoon-

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, nice.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... and Kerry Washington. And we placed a vintage LX-

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay. Oh, wow!

Mary Jane Knoll: ...into that series. And we're surrounding the sponsorship with, obviously, our current day, both GX and LX.

Tyler Litchenberger: Awesome.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, kind of a little bit of a test for us to see. And I felt like it was a reasonably safe bet. The content is obviously going to be great, but also the fact that LX is just so iconic in the Lexus lineup that it [00:31:00] felt like, to me, that nostalgia might be nice for people to see 'cause we all remember when the LX came out. But the weird stuff really comes more to what they might want to do with the car. We did a placement on Ray Donovan on Showtime. And I don't know if you're familiar with the show.

Tyler Litchenberger: I haven't seen it.

Mary Jane Knoll: He is described as a Hollywood fixer.

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, oftentimes, it's a celebrity, they get into trouble, and he kind of comes in and fixes the situation for them. It would have been very difficult for us to connect to his character or any of the folks on his team because there can be blood, there could be dead bodies, there can be even dead body parts. There's all kinds of things that he's involved in to try to help his clients.

Tyler Litchenberger: Fix it.

Mary Jane Knoll: So, we were able to do a [00:32:00] placement on the show, but it was with the head of a studio played by Susan Sarandon, and they were able to assure us that she would not have any dead people in the car. So-

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, thank goodness.

Mary Jane Knoll: But I will tell you, many of our competitors do not have those same restrictions. So, it does affect your ability to place as widely as you might want to because the more restrictions that there are on the way a vehicle can be placed, the fewer placements you might be eligible for. But yes, we are careful about that.

Tyler Litchenberger: But I think it'd be better to be strategic than not, right?

Mary Jane Kroll: Absolutely, absolutely. But the folks who don't have those restrictions are very successful too.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Kroll: So, something to consider, but we're always evaluating.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right.

Mary Jane Knoll: And looking at the whole placement, if you will, and what the potential outcome could be before we make a decision. And [00:33:00] yeah, yeah.

Tyler Litchenberger: Have there been some of those that you're like, "You know what? Let's do it. Let's take the risk"?

Mary Jane Kroll: Yes, yes. There was one in particular that was pretty recent actually. And the producer of the film just was absolutely adamant that the LC was the right vehicle for this character to drive. And again, by the typical standards, you might say like, "Oh, probably, we need to be careful with that one." And yet, he was a hugely aspirational character, who was also just amazingly cool, and stylish, and so smart. And really just a brilliant guy who is operating within his own paradigm to achieve success. But yes, the film was called Superfly.

Tyler Litchenberger: Okay.

Mary Jane Knoll: And a really cool movie, but one that it might not have been a typical placement [00:34:00] for us.

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: And yet, we still decided to move forward, and we're glad we did.

Tyler Litchenberger: So, in the world of influencers, fan forums, all this other stuff that happens in my world in social media, do product placements still hold the power they once did?

Mary Jane Kroll: I think they do. In fact, they've almost become more important because there is so much content that people are consuming in so many ways, and they have more and more ways to avoid advertising. We, obviously, have strategy in place to make sure our advertising is relevant, and in context, and still gets consumed in a meaningful way. But product placement is one of the ways that we can still be seen and be visible as a brand without necessarily always being able to place advertising in those same places.

And in fact, I would actually say that the influencers and all of [00:35:00] just what's possible in social actually fans the flames and actually adds to the possibilities of the way we can leverage and bring attention to book the placements and even more so the bigger partnerships that we deploy. So, a very significant influencer strategy that we leveraged all the way up to the point where Black Panther came out that worked really well, we wanted the fan base to already know we were there and be anticipating our participation.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, interesting.

Mary Jane Kroll: ... prior [crosstalk] .

Tyler Litchenberger: So, they work in tandem really then?

Mary Jane Kroll: Absolutely. It's all part of a well-executed plan.

Tyler Litchenberger: See? I just wasn't like, "Oh man, we should do that," you know?

Mary Jane Kroll: Yeah, yeah. Definitely, it's more to think about, of course.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: But it's also another way to measure too to look at the sharability, to look at our social communities, and how we're able to grow them, [00:36:00] and grow excitement around them, what this content is, is another great opportunity that may not have existed in any real meaningful way prior to the frenzy that is the world of social now.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right, right.

Mary Jane Knoll: We have the ability to get decisions made quickly and we can mobilize quickly, which can be really critical when there might be a cultural moment happening that we didn't necessarily anticipate, and we can mobilize quickly to leverage that.

Tyler Litchenberger: Did the placements ever like not work? You thought it was going to be some way, and you're like, "Man, that just didn't hit the way I thought it was going to."

Mary Jane Kroll: Yeah. In the case of when it's straight up placement, and we're not building a bigger partnership around it, it's disappointing, but it's usually, sort of, part of the landscape, right? It's part of what you're trying to con keep supporting. And [00:37:00] if we're not willing to take risks, we're also gonna miss out on the big successes. And in the case where we're not promoting it in a big way, if it didn't land, hopefully, not that many people noticed. You know what I mean?

Tyler Litchenberger: Right, right, yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: But if it's a big partnership and it doesn't land, then that's a bigger challenge. And it's more about managing the perception, I think. Particularly, the perception of success. And if you look at Men in Black International, which is more recent, by Black Panther standards, it's not really comparable. And yet, we really had a return on our investment before the film ever came out with that partnership because they were good enough to include the RCF in their advanced trailer. That advanced trailer gets 150 million worldwide [00:38:00] views. And suddenly, your value is already locked up. And that's before we've even done all the things that we could do to make sure the value is seen.

And ultimately, the creative that we developed around that partnership as well resonated really well with our audiences. So, that ended up being a win when if you just looked at the traditional measures, like how did it do at the box office, it would be like, "Oh well, not as great as we would have liked;" and yet, we had long since had our return on investment. So, yeah. It just keeps telling me that it's worth the risk, but you just have to keep applying all that rigor and making sure that we are just using our full arsenal of measures, and predictors, and educated guesses-

Tyler Litchenberger: Right, yeah.

Mary Jane Kroll: ... and hypothesis in order to decide if something's going to be a good [00:39:00] bet. But

the truth is you never know.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's crazy.

Mary Jane Kroll: I know, I know.

Tyler Litchenberger: Now, when the vehicle goes on set, does it have ... I know you said, sometimes, you're there, they have questions, maybe there's ... I don't know if there's one for a Black Panther, but is there like some sort of stylist wiping it down? Do we provide that? Does it, you know?

Mary Jane Kroll: So, every film or production that has vehicles, they have an entire transportation team that specifically takes care of their cars. But we do up the ante especially, again, with a big partnership or if there are big performance moments that they're going to be filming. I have actually tapped more than once my friend, Garrett, who is a part of our tech team. And he has been kind enough and his management has been kind enough to release him for me. [00:40:00] And he's been kind enough to go to Korea-

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, wow!

Mary Jane Kroll: ... for the filming of the LCs in Busan, Korea. He was there for, I think, at least, a couple of weeks. And every time the transpo teams are so grateful to have him there 'cause he not only is a great technician who knows the car so well, but he knows racing. He knows stunts. He understands how to help them create these moments that they're looking to create-

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Kroll: ... with the vehicles. And he also went to both the UK and to Morocco for us for Men in Black International.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, fun.

Mary Jane Kroll: And there have been moments where I said, "Okay, Garrett, if you don't feel safe, you need to let me know," because he's being mobbed by throngs of people in Morocco who are just fascinated by the production process and by the cars, and they want to get close, and they want to see everything. [00:41:00] So, I was definitely in close touch with him on that to make sure he was okay. But he seems to have enjoyed having the adventure. And oftentimes, the production teams don't necessarily even realize he's not one of them.

Tyler Litchenberger: Oh, interesting!

Mary Jane Kroll: We have to remind them when it's time that he needs to come home. We're like, "Please." And it actually helps me too, because he can provide me some real-time information of what's happening on set and if there's anything that's different than what we expected, he can give us a little bit of Intel. But, of course, we've great partners who always honor what we've set out to gain from the partnership, so.

Tyler Litchenberger: My question to Garrett would have been like, can you get a picture of Chris Hemsworth please? Like how close can you get?

Mary Jane Kroll: Chris was definitely right there, and in the car, and Tessa as well. And if Garrett took any [00:42:00] photos, he did not share those with me.

Tyler Litchenberger: Garrett. So, give up the pictures.

Mary Jane Kroll: He's too busy working. He's very focused.

Tyler Litchenberger: That's true. I get it. I get it. There is a job to be done. Do we get to interact with any of the stars of the movies? Do they do stuff for us?

Mary Jane Kroll: That's a really good question too. The short answer is yes, but it's not without some complexity to it because understandably, they are very much invested in promoting their film, but they're not necessarily looking to promote partners unless those partners are also supporting them directly. So, you have to just be a little bit careful and respectful-

Tyler Litchenberger: It's always a two-way street, yeah.

Mary Jane Kroll: ... of those boundaries. But in the case of Chadwick Bozeman, for example, we actually hired Chadwick to be in our commercial that we created for the LS launch.

Tyler Litchenberger: Amazing.

Mary Jane Knoll: And so, he obviously had a vested interest in being a partner of [00:43:00] ours at that point. But yeah, it is always just a little bit of a careful area. And we lean heavily on the studios to kind of help us navigate that because they also have a vested interest in their partners receiving the value that they had hoped for. And part of that value is some proximity to the stars of the film.

And in the case of the Black Panther premiere, we had really great presence there and a tremendous amount of earned value from our presence there because it was just such a star-studded. Sometimes, you'll have premiers where only the stars of the film are kind of there and photographed, and maybe a few other folks show up for it. In the case of Black Panther, it was just-

Tyler Litchenberger: Marvel showed up-

Mary Jane Knoll: ... might as well have been the Academy Awards.

Tyler Litchenberger: Right, right.

Mary Jane Kroll: And to your point, the Marvel a stable of great actors who [00:44:00] are in all of their different films often show up to support. And that definitely helps add to the fanfare and to the attention that it receives.

Tyler Litchenberger: Very cool. I think I've asked all the questions that I have. This was so interesting and like fascinating. I don't think people realize when they see and especially like TV shows that those are actually placed things, right?

Mary Jane Kroll: Yes, yes. And it's funny, sometimes, they are officially placed. And other times, you may have had a paid placement in the first or second season. And then, we might decide strategically to go a different direction. And very often, we'll get requested to actually keep the vehicles for continuity insofar. So, it's actually an investment that can pay dividends down the line-

Tyler Litchenberger: Interesting.

Mary Jane Knoll: ... when the vehicles are still being incorporated into the show, and we're not necessarily actively paying a placement fee in those cases. So, yeah, it's probably more [00:45:00] often than you think, it's

probably a placement. But then, there's times where we are able to benefit from having kind of been in the right place at the right time. We've even had a case where we had an SUV that was shooting on a location at one of the studios and another show needed a similar vehicle, and they said, "Can we borrow it from them?" And we're like, "Okay, sure."

Tyler Litchenberger: It was a twofer.

Mary Jane Kroll: Yeah, exactly. So, that happens a fair amount because the nature of production can be very last minute.

Tyler Litchenberger: Yeah.

Mary Jane Knoll: And so, oftentimes, they're just getting the inputs of what they need for filming sometimes only a few days, even a week in advance. And so, sometimes, it's a bird in the hand that gets the ... or the early bird gets the worm. I don't know what the appropriate joke would be there. But yeah, it definitely helps. And to be [00:46:00] just the best partner we can be at every opportunity and try to make it happen when they need us, it ends up paying dividends for us down the line too.

Tyler Litchenberger: Very cool. Well, I want to be you when I grow up. It's got to be so fun and interesting. I'm sure.

Mary Jane Kroll: Well, you're welcome to come and shadow with us. You'll see both the glory and the pain and suffering that goes into it. But it is, it's super fun, it's super interesting, and yeah. But it definitely takes a lot of hard work for that one moment of satisfaction.

Tyler Litchenberger: All right. BRB everybody. I'm going to go read all the scripts. MJ, thank you so much for joining us on Toyota Untold.

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