



Leading Women podcast

CommBank Women in Focus

Episode 4: Amber Manning, CEO @Just Cuts™

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Interviewee: Amber Manning, CEO @Just Cuts™

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Amber Manning, CEO @Just Cuts™ on leading from the middle, prioritising communication and harnessing the power of networking. Hear how Amber stayed a cut above the rest, ensuring she would leave a legacy of her own.

Fiona [00:00:06] Welcome to Leading Women, your go-to podcast for stories, tools and resources to shape your leadership journey now and into the future. Hi, I'm Fiona McAuley, Head of Women in Focus at CommBank, joining you from Gadigal country. We acknowledge the traditional owners and recognise their continuing connection to country. We pay our respects to elders, past and present, and extend that respect to all First Nations people. Leading women is just one way CommBank Women in Focus supports the growth of women in business and community. So, no matter where you are on YOUR journey, we're here. Enjoy this episode as we hear from dynamic, inspiring, and resilient women together.

Shivani [00:00:55] Welcome to Leading Women, I'm your host, Shivani Gopal, and today's episode is a transformational conversation with a woman ahead of the curve, leading the future of the franchise industry. Amber Manning is the CEO of Just Cuts and Justice Professional Haircare. She stepped onto the leadership ladder as a 20-year-old business owner and ascended to now being an award-winning, multi-franchise owner, CEO and board member of the Franchise Council of Australia. Following a family legacy of entrepreneurship, Amber leads from the middle, cultivating a culture for over 2,500 hairdressers with her superpowers of communication, collaboration and harnessing the power of networking. You'll love hearing how Amber stayed a cut above the rest by spearheading the digital transformation that has seen Just Cuts continue their global expansion and enabling Amber to leave a legacy of her own. Amber, thanks for joining us on Leading Women today. I am speaking to you today from Gadigal Country. Where are you joining us from?

Amber [00:02:07] Yes, I'm actually up in Awabakal country today in the beautiful city of Newcastle, New South Wales.

Shivani [00:02:14] You've got some stunning beaches over there, too. I hope you do make some time out to get there from time-to-time.

Amber [00:02:19] I will try, I will try.

Shivani [00:02:22] And of course, you're saying you'll try because work keeps you very busy and so does life as the CEO of Just Cuts. And we're going to be talking a lot about that and your leadership journey in fact, Amber, your leadership journey has been transformational and it's been forged through challenges, achievements and celebration. Amber, can you share what sparked your leadership and your path to here?

Amber [00:02:45] Well, thank you so much for the lovely introduction and I guess when I think back to what started my leadership journey, my two passions or goals were: I really wanted to travel the world and I wanted to purchase my first block of land. And I remember asking for a pay increase and didn't get it. And I said to my mum, what am I going to do? We sat down, did a budget, these are all the things that I want to do and how am I going to get there and that's when I actually thought about the journey of going into business ownership. And I actually went into my first business at the age of 20, and was able

to enter leadership because I had to onboard my first employees. I ended up getting so busy that I had to put people on at the age of 20. And that really, I guess, drove my leadership journey into all areas of business and being able to develop and grow people at such a young age. I guess family and business and leadership has always been within my family. My grandfather actually started Chatswood Toyota in Sydney and, you know, was very much been in that franchise space in that business and entrepreneurial space. So really the leadership and what drove me is having flexibility and being able to do the things that I'd like to do. And as a leader, I love to be able to do that for my team, so giving them extra leave throughout the year and that type of thing because what drives me is seeing people happy and travelling and, you know, being with their family if that's what they want to do as well.

Shivani [00:04:18] What a phenomenal prophecy, Amber, of your life. You were 20 years old. You wanted to travel. You wanted to buy land. And lo and behold, fast forward years later in the work that you do now, you do travel all around Australia and you do cover off quite a lot of land in the many franchises that you manage at Just Cuts and of course we will get there. What I think is so phenomenal about this story is the normalisation of business through your family and through your grandfather. What do you think he might say if he were to look upon you now?

Amber [00:04:50] Oh, look, I hope that he would be proud. He was very, you know, always invested in business and people. And, you know, obviously I was very young when he had that business. But through my mother and my aunties, I hear stories about the people and the community and the vibe and the culture that he had within his business. And what I loved is he got to travel to Japan. So I've got, you know, swords that he got from Japan were presented to him and all these beautiful memories of his travels that I see of my grandparents.

Shivani [00:05:21] And that's his legacy, that he's passed on to you and there is so much that you will also be passing on to future generations. And I think that's something that you get to consider and have the privilege of, Amber, you are well beyond your years and you've done so much around transformation. You know, you've been thinking forward as a 20-year-old employing people. And you've also been doing that as the CEO of Just Cuts. In fact, Just Cuts has stayed ahead of the curve when it comes to embracing things like digital technology. You've streamlined operations across every aspect of the brand and you've opened up innovation, customer engagement and team support in new ways. What's been your experience and biggest lessons leading a traditional brick and mortar service business through to digital transformation?

Amber [00:06:09] So when I entered the Just Cuts network the majority of the business was still on docket books in our policies and processes, and relying on people to provide information and for me, it was about automation all the way back then. So we actually went on a journey from making sure that, you know, every salon within Australia had internet within their shopping centre. But as we know, Internet isn't so reliable in concrete and shopping centres and all the rest. So the challenges that we faced around that, making sure that the software that we were building didn't go down and it could operate if it went offline. But I guess the challenges were really we have to take on board our franchisees. So over 125 franchisees came on that journey with us and they were really included in the day-to-day of how we were going to roll out this project, how it worked for our hairdressers on the ground and what they needed as a business as well and that was really about benchmarking, being able to see in real-time data, which was quite new in the hairdressing world.

Shivani [00:07:17] Absolutely, look, I still remember being in high school and walking into a Just Cuts with my older sister and seeing the tech back then, you know, you actually had those old docket books from memory. And you have traversed the business from docket books, as you said, to internet, you know, dial-up Internet and, you know, through to transforming the business through COVID. There's something that you talked about just then around taking everyone through that change journey. What has been some of the biggest change management lessons for you that have come on board?

Amber [00:07:48] It's remembering the stakeholders along the way. So again, not just our business owners being franchisees, but also our team members on the front line and also our clients and customers walk into our door on a daily basis. What are their needs and wants and bringing it back to the client, so always starting with what's going to make it easy for the client. What's going to make it easy for our team and our stylists and then also our business owners? So that's really been at the forefront for us in making sure that the technology works for all parties involved. I think when you sometimes sit back and sometimes I like to say, what are you doing in the ivory tower? We like to get

out of the ivory tower, get out of the office and make sure that we're on the ground with the teams and understanding what's really going on in the business.

Shivani [00:08:36] When you say all of this, Amber, I get this incredible visual in my head of you being such a people-first, people-orientated leader and someone who has their finger really close to the pulse. And I say that because you talked a lot about the needs and wants of your hairdressers and the fact that, you know, some of these are working mothers and you've actually got to look after them. And one of the things that really struck me about our prior conversation that you and I have had is that you think really deeply about the fact that, hang on a second, these people are frontline counselors sometimes for your customers. Tell us more about how you support your staff and your teams, especially around some of these really difficult times.

Amber [00:09:18] Sure and look, you know, I think COVID was a great example of that as well, where sort of say, hairdressers became counselors, even more people to talk to and connect with when they came out of lockdown. And we really put it in place systems, so we launched the first Employee Assistance Program within the hairdressing world, and that was actually quite a digital venture as well because we actually used SMS. So our stylists could SMS the EAP service to say, I need help, I need someone to talk to if they didn't want to get on the phone so that was key for us. We've also partnered with the likes of SANE to write an actual handbook for stylists around situations that they've had to deal within a salon from a mental health perspective. And it also forms part of our onboarding and e-learning so that they know how to manage that. They know how to work with their team leader and their franchise owner to be able to deal with situations in salon.

Shivani [00:10:17] I love the approach around texting for EAP assistance because it's so non-judgmental and so accessible. I feel like I can just put a message in and put it out effectively to the universe and someone is going to reply back with some level of wisdom to help me as I'm there at the frontline helping others, a great digital outcome. Amber, what other exciting developments can you share with us for you continuing this incredible digital-first approach?

Amber [00:10:44] Sure, well, some of those developments have been around developing an app for online check-in so that clients can actually check-in for the haircut from home, from the carpark while they're shopping. Being it mainly in shopping centres, we have a lot of staff that work within the shopping centres that will actually check the wait time in their lunch break and check-in for the haircut. So they know that they've got time to go on their lunch and time to check in for their haircut so that works really well for us. We've also got kiosk iPads in salon where clients can actually check themselves into the queue, receive a text message when they're next in line so they can go away shopping or do what they need to do and not have to wait around. But the real benefit of that is actually for our team members. We know there's a skill shortage Australia-wide at the moment. We are still looking for 200 hairdressers across our network and technology has been able to reduce their time in being able to spend more time with the client while they're in their chair, because the clients are being able to check themselves in and be that next person in line. So that's really been a huge benefit to our team members as well.

Shivani [00:11:48] It's a great translation of how everyday technology should be utilised for important everyday services like hairdressing and I love how applicable and relevant that is. Now I've got to ask the question for our listeners, you are looking for 200 hairdressers, if someone is taking a walk right now and listening to this and thinks, oh, I want to apply, where might they go, Amber?

Amber [00:12:07] Absolutely, obviously they can go on to justcuts.com onto our careers page and apply there.

Shivani [00:12:13] Okay, you heard it here first from the CEO of Just Cuts herself. Brilliant, Amber I'd love to traverse into another topic with you, and that is all around leadership, resilience and especially in a franchise world and a huge congratulations to you here because you've recently been appointed to the Franchise Council of Australia's Board. What an asset your executive leadership experience has as a non-executive director, combining all of your skills and taking it to the next level. Speaking of leadership experiences that have shaped you, what are the most challenging leadership experiences you now draw on as you lead into your executive and non-executive roles?

Amber [00:12:54] Sure, thank you and yes, it's been a very exciting appointment to be on the FCA board. Look, you know, we try not to speak of COVID, but for me it was, you know, when COVID hit, I actually had my first baby in January 2020 and COVID hit in March 2020. So for me, it was straight back into it. Luckily, I had family support around me and that was really communicating with every state salon across countries. So we had New Zealand in lockdown, New Zealand out of lockdown, WA was closed and then it was open. So in the background we were dealing with leasing management, recruitment, all those types of things to make sure that our franchisees as small business owners could see this through. So we had actually never been busier as a team in that time. And I guess the learnings from that for me is just that communication is absolutely key and bringing everyone on board. So there is a true understanding of what's happening, what we are doing for them as a business to support them and what they can do to support their teams as well.

Shivani [00:14:04] Yes, absolutely and communication really is the key around that. There's so much in that, Amber, and I think the thing that I keep coming back to in this is resilience, because you had to move from one plane to another. From negotiating to leasing, tell us all about that.

Amber [00:14:20] We're very much a turnkey business, so we find sites with shopping centres all throughout Australia. We negotiate the lease. We do the design of the salon. So I actually have an in-house designer who helps us design the store based on the area. We then negotiate with our shop fitters and teams to actually bring that to life. So I have a leasing and legal team that review our leases and we have to renew those leases every 5 to 7 years, so next year we've got 55 leases to renew in one go. So it's a lot of work behind the scenes to be able to support our franchisees in the legal and leasing piece and making sure as a small business they're getting the right deal and that their business can thrive going forward because as we know, for us as a business, our biggest costs are rent and wages.

Shivani [00:15:12] Yes, there's that recurring theme there again, around support and resilience. Coming back to COVID, Amber, I know you said we don't like to talk about it, but it is there and it happened to all of us. And there was so much, you know, pain and loss through that period. But there were also some really important lessons learned along the way. And you've shaped the business, you've leant into technology, you've leant into people. Tell me, what do you now do differently as a result of those lessons that you've learned through that COVID period?

Amber [00:15:41] I'd have to bring it back to communication, jumping on the phone, speaking to the people that are impacted. If something's happening in a certain area or a certain state not pretending or assuming that you know what's going on for them, actually getting on the phone and saying, what can we do, how can we support you? Has been number one, and also including everyone and taking them on that journey, whether it's my academy head office team or whether it's the franchisees or the stylists at the front line. We really built up an engagement around our closed Facebook pages. So we have a real tribe happening with our hairdressers. We have 2,500 hairdressers across Australia. They're all on a closed Facebook page where we can engage with them and they're posting up their photos of their haircuts or they're talking about this local sporting team that's won something. So for us it's about creating that tribe and making sure that they don't feel alone. Just because they might be a single Just Cuts in Tasmania doesn't mean they don't have a tribe or a team behind them in Queensland.

Shivani [00:16:45] You know, Amber, in speaking with you, I get this real feeling that you are the kind of leader that really wants to serve. You're there to lead for others. I want to talk about leading yourself now and how you traversed through this period, because, of course, COVID happened. You're at the helm of Just Cuts. There is no manual on how to deal with this situation. This is a 1 in 100 year scenario and one that we didn't think was ever coming for us. What did you do to better lead yourself and how did you manage yourself through this period?

Amber [00:17:17] For me, it's been about wellness, personally and in the workplace. Obviously, the Employee Assistance Program was a driver of that, but for me, I'm a huge believer in meditation. I meditate daily, so that was a big thing for me. And again, that wellness, being able to go out and walk, get some fresh air, take the time out and that was a driver for me through my team as well at the time. What are you doing to look after yourself and your own mindset because I believe in this day and age in moving forward in business; it is looking about at wellness, at your mental health, in the workplace and outside of the workplace.

Shivani [00:17:55] Now, Amber, you're well known for collaborating with owners, industry and the wider Australian franchise community, but it doesn't stop there. As Just Cuts enters the Canadian market, you've taken networking to the next level, connecting with local franchise owners and operators in the country to get the lay of the land or this new land, so to speak. Tell us what this has taught you about your networking superpowers.

Amber [00:18:20] Networking has been a real opportunity for us, especially in the franchise world. Well, you know, franchisors are more than happy to share information of different leasing environment, to the solicitors that they are using, the accountants on the ground, how are tax structures set up in different countries to, you know, what's happening in demographics and local population and the best areas to go to. So as a brand, we've been able to connect with the likes of Bakers Delight who are COBS Bread in Canada, they are an amazing Australian family business that have been over there quite a while and have provided some wonderful insights. And obviously speaking to the guys from Specsavers as well, that we've connected with in Australia that we have now been able to connect with overseas. So networking within the franchise world has been a huge opportunity, especially being on the Franchise Council of Australia's board really opens up more networking opportunities for us as a brand and a business.

Shivani [00:19:17] And what I love about it is networking leads to collaboration, and collaboration is a superpower that will take us to the next level, if only we all knew it. Amber, through this process you have gleaned so many gems and I would like to glean some of those from you. What valuable insights do you have for other women leaders about the power of networking outside of their traditional role or industry across adjacent businesses to model success?

Amber [00:19:42] LinkedIn is a wonderful tool for that and utilising your networks. I believe that Aussies are and Aussie businesses and entrepreneurs are more than happy to share their insights, and learning and networking helps you to hopefully overcome the barriers that they might have already done, so that you can be more successful as well. So if there's someone in your industry or even outside of your industry that you feel that you know you'd like to aspire to, you know, looking them up on LinkedIn, shooting them an email saying hi because I've always found in networking that people are more than happy to share their insights and knowledge, how they've grown their business or how they've grown in their career as well, if it's an industry that you want to get into.

Shivani [00:20:25] I could not agree with that more and what I think that a lot of people get caught up in is I know I can just LinkedIn someone, but how might I do that? Amber, if I wanted to connect in with someone like yourself over LinkedIn, what is the powerful message that I could write to you? To have someone like you say, yes, Shivani, absolutely, I'll respond to you and here are my insights. What advice do you have for me there?

Amber [00:20:50] Great question because there's a lot of junk mail these days. And again, I you know, I feel like women supporting women, I love to be able to support women growing within their careers or industry. So it's really setting out, what are you looking for in having a coffee with someone or I'd like to come to your office. What is it that you would like to get out of that so that that person can actually see what can I actually provide to you to be able to grow as a person or within your business. If they have that insight upfront, it really helps of them being able to say, absolutely, I'd love to make time for this. Whereas I think sometimes people just, I'd like to talk to you makes it a bit harder when people would like to know, well, what would you like to learn from me?

Shivani [00:21:35] Too open-ended and people start to think, well, I don't know where I'm going to fall in this and I don't know what I could possibly offer you. But if you make it nicely defined, people do want to help because they know where you would like to take them. And I think that is another one of your superpowers, by the way, Amber, because you don't just practice mentoring and networking up, you also see the power of peer-to-peer networking because a lot of what you do is actually having coffees with other CEOs.

Amber [00:22:03] Yes, so I'm part of a chief executive group, so I network with CEOs on a monthly basis, and that's really working together and finding out what's happening in their business. Who are they using? What IT are they using? What's happening in the cyber security space? But outside of that, I also network with other CEOs just to catch up for coffee. We email each other and what's happening with industry or just to meet for lunch and chat about the future of franchising or even in retail because

we're very much in the retail space as well. Just Cuts, we manufacture our own Justice haircare brand. So we've really gone from service to entering the retail market. So for me, it was about being able to network with other brands that were retail experts.

Shivani [00:22:50] I love that, Amber, there is so much more that I want to ask you. And I fear that we may not have all the time. So I would like to ask you to leave me and our wonderful listeners with a gem, please. What leadership insight can you leave from your Leadership Toolkit for our listeners here at Leading Women?

Amber [00:23:07] I would absolutely say that meditation has changed my life as a leader. It's really helps you to clear your mind and not have to focus on the small stuff and be able to look at things as a bigger picture. I believe as a leader, you really have to give that time to yourself. As a mother, I've really learned that I know the more time I give myself, the more I can give back to my son. And I see that in business. You know, business is like family. And, you know, you try to separate those lines, but really being able to look after my own wellness and mental health, going for a walk. You know, my favourite thing to do is go for a walk on the beach and that's what helps me clear my mind. So as a leader and to other women, I would say make that time for yourself, even though you probably always feel guilty about it.

Shivani [00:23:51] Yes, because there should be no guilt in looking after yourself. And I took away so many leadership insights that I would love to surmise [for] your additional tool kit as well. Here is what I got from our conversation. Lean in to peer-to-peer mentoring, you never know where that can take you. Have a look at opportunities in challenges because you've done so much out of the difficult times of your life, in particular through COVID. Lean in to people. Keep it simple when it comes to networking. Help others so that you can help yourself. And my favourite, what is your future forecast for your own life? I think back to that 20-year-old Amber who wanted to travel, buy land and see the world and fast forward the years, you have done exactly that. Amber Manning, thank you so much for joining us here at Leading Women.

Amber [00:24:10] Thank you so much for having me today on the Leading Women podcast. I am a huge supporter of women in the workplace, entrepreneurial women, and I love to give back. So to anyone out there, feel free to reach out and it's wonderful to be here today. Thank you so much for having me.

Fiona [00:25:00] Thanks for listening to Leading Women, where we shape what's next in female leadership together. So now, it's over to you. Follow Leading Women on your favourite podcast platform so you don't miss an episode, and find all the links, tips and tools discussed in our show notes.

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