



“Vegetables are considered the holy grail, in terms of healthy eating...and although there was the V8 beverage, no one had cracked the vegetable code.”

– **Kay Allison**  
Co-Founder and  
Chief Growth Officer  
Farm & Oven, Inc.

## Interview with Kay Allison

**You’re known as a market research magician. Where did that talent come from?**

My family calls me a psychic satellite, which is a gift I’ve had since I was very young. When I walk into a room, I’m usually able to sense what’s going on underneath the observable action and conversation that’s taking place. I was also trained as an executive coach, in a program that was steeped in ontological philosophy, where I learned how to deconstruct language. That training really helped with the skill part of what I do.

I soon discovered that the combination of my natural abilities and professional training had value in the business world. For example, I was running a business for J. Walter Thomson, and had worked out a process that was based on listening more creatively to consumers. I discovered that I had the ability to simultaneously articulate what we had learned, as well as its underlying meaning. That’s when I received validation that this was an unusual talent, and that I was capable of doing it very fast. I was able to quickly solve a business problem that might take a team of people much longer to figure out.

**What’s an example of the type of brand strategy assignment you’ve handled?**

I’ve done a lot of work helping brand teams to revitalize dusty old brands. For example, I worked with S.C. Johnson on its line of Glade air fresheners, which was a 1950s, baby boomer kind of brand. In our research, we learned that people use air fresheners to create an environment with a certain type of family dynamic or family experience. Walking into a room that smells like fresh cut grass puts you in a different physic space than walking into an area that smells like the ocean. We also realized that something in the air can create a state of homeostasis. When it’s cold outside you use warm fragrances, and when it’s warm outside you use cool fragrances. Human beings like to be in homeostasis...we like to be regulated.

People who scent the air use a variety of means to accomplish that goal, including diffusers, candles, sprays, etc., and S.C. Johnson had been marketing their products and displaying them on the shelf by that type of diffuser. So we worked with the company to revise their strategy by marketing and grouping their products by fragrance, and by the type of environment the consumer is trying to create, with a range of dispensers. It was a simple brand solution that had a significant impact on the product line.

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## Why do companies often have difficulty coming up with simple solutions on their own?

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I've faced this issue many times, where what seems like a common sense solution is difficult for a client to achieve without an outside perspective. I came to learn that there's a biological phenomenon called structural coupling, in which human beings adapt to their environment on a cellular level. For example, if you join a workplace where people are cynical, then you are going to become cynical, despite your best efforts not to be. So it becomes very difficult for people to adopt a different point of view.

The history of a company also becomes extraordinarily powerful. A new employee becomes indoctrinated within what has been established as the product category dynamics and consumer expectations. Someone from the outside can more easily question those basic assumptions, and often times their solutions will seem like common sense. But because of the structural coupling and the powerful history, those solutions are very difficult for a company to develop on their own.

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## Can you provide any insights into marketing to Millennials?

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In my current entrepreneurial venture, Farm & Oven, we make veggies taste like cake. Health-conscious,

food-conscious moms in their 20s and 30s are our primary consumer. I've had to learn what the Millennial dynamic is. The most striking things are their distrust of organizations and brands, and conversely, their trust of human beings. Millennials hunger for real human beings to be behind the brands they choose. That's part of the reason why big companies are at such a disadvantage today. With brand managers rotating in and out of assignments every 12 to 18 months, and all the legal liabilities involved, they can't tie their product to a human being.

Today's market dynamics are completely different from the past. With Justin's Nut Butter, for example, when you call the company, Justin answers the phone. It may be a recording of Justin's voice, but it's Justin. When you go on their Amazon brand store, there is handwriting from Justin. It's a human being. That's what Millennials want...someone who is human, but not necessarily perfect. Here I am, flaws and all.

Baby Boomers in the 60s also rejected institutions, but Millennials are much hipper, because marketing is injected into everything. My kids, who are Millennials, will go to a movie and say, "Oh yeah, they paid for product placement." There is a much higher level of sophistication now regarding how they are being manipulated.

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## You re-defined focus groups through your Energy Annex facility in Chicago. What was the thinking behind that?

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Focus groups are often horrible as mini quantitative studies. It's a misuse of the focus group discipline, in my opinion. If you come up with an idea, and then use a focus group as a quantitative test, you are going to cherry pick what you want to hear.

Focus groups are most useful for research that was once called the "fuzzy front end of innovation." That's when you've got a hypothesis, you think there might be a possible business opportunity, and you want to find out if there is a revenue generating solution that taps into a consumer need, where nothing currently exists.

For example, Avon CEO Andrea Jung realized that her company didn't hold any purchasing power with girls and women from ages 11 to 22. So we helped Avon to create a new brand based on a direct selling model targeted for that population. In our market research, we interacted with 11 and 12 year-olds, and then with teens and young adults, to gain a clear sense for who they were, and what they cared about in their lives. Our fundamental learning was that these girls and women are extraordinarily deep and philosophical, and completely frivolous, at the same time...and they do not see that as a dichotomy. The way that they dress and groom

their external selves is how they try on different identities. And the identity that gets them to feel like they belong in the world is the one they move forward with. Glitter eye shadow and playing around with pink or red lipstick involves human development issues. So the brand Avon came up with was Mark Cosmetics, which enables those girls and young women to “Make your Mark.” This was a very effective way of using qualitative research, because it delved down and articulated the motivating behavior in that particular segment, so that Avon had an actionable rationale for branding.

A longstanding industry shortcoming is that typical focus group environments are like mini board rooms, with cheap conference tables and chairs. We put consumers in these environments, and they feel as though they should act like a business person rather than a consumer. When we created the Energy Annex, we decided to apply all of the industry best practices in market research, and to overlay a physical environment that struck a balance between design, beauty and coolness and homey welcoming. Our interview rooms look like a comfortable loft or family room...done stylishly, but not so hip that it's uncomfortable. We trained our staff to be extraordinarily kind, welcoming and personable. People feel like it's a creative learning environment, rather than a sterile laboratory. We opened the Energy Annex in 2004 and it has been one of the world's top focus group facilities for 15 years running. We were the first to adopt this approach, and now there are a lot of copycats.

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**Your latest venture is a natural snack foods company, Farm & Oven, Inc., and its mission is to increase consumption of vegetables. What prompted you to start the company?**

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For many years, with my “Energy Infuser” company, I did a lot of work in the consumer package goods world for major food companies, including Kraft, PepsiCo, ConAgra, Tyson and Campbells. In my travels around the world for those clients, I would ask consumers what constituted healthy food to them. And the first word out of everyone's mouth, regardless of culture, was “vegetables.” Vegetables are considered the holy grail in terms of healthy eating. I had worked on several projects for those big clients trying to create delicious foods that actually delivered a significant amount of vegetables. And although there was the V8 beverage, no one had really cracked the vegetable code.

From a personal standpoint, my youngest child was so picky that she would even refuse to eat any green candy. I had worked for 32 years to get veggies into my family...juicing, pureeing, sneaking and hiding, whatever I could think of to get them to eat vegetables. Then one day I opened a can of pumpkin to make pumpkin bread, and I thought “This is it!” My family loved it. This is the type of food where veggies belong. If you're going to make a zucchini muffin, you start with zucchini. I did a concept test,

and got extraordinarily positive results. I worked with someone who develops recipes that can be commercialized and did some taste tests along the way. I had consumers embedded in the development of the products right from the outset.

We launched our ecommerce channel in November 2017, and were exclusively ecommerce the first year. Since the beginning of 2019, we've expanded into brick and mortar stores, and should be in 1,300 stores by September. We are in Sprouts, and a bunch of regional chains. We don't use co-packers. We manufacture the products in our own 10,000 square foot bakery.

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**Farm & Oven has developed a healthy following on social media. Is that an important part of your marketing?**

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Social media is the best. It's like having a direct relationship with thousands of people who are interested in Farm & Oven. The other beauty of social media – which we did not have in the previous parts of my career – is that the data allows you to see every conversion, and every level of engagement. It's just a treasure trove of data. But the best part is the one-on-one relationships with people and the opportunity to be a real live human being, not just a brand.

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### **Any career guidance for students or marketing professionals just starting out?**

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I describe myself as an intellectual omnivore. I've learned about biology, about behavioral economics, about ontological philosophy. I read biographies, I listen to podcasts. It's

that curiosity factor that continues to keep everything fresh for me. That's an important part of success in any line of work, not just marketing.

But curiosity needs to be coupled with practical application of what's learned. One of my first bosses said that "the opposite of what is really so is... Really? So what?" That idea has stuck with me. It's not just for the sake of learning that I'm curious.

I'm always asking: "How can I use this information?" or "What can I do with this?" or "How would that make sense in my world?" That's my advice: to always ask yourself "So what?" when you learn something, and see where it takes you.

## Kay Allison Biography

Kay Allison creates innovations grounded in consumer insight.

And today, she is co-founder of Farm&Oven Snacks, Inc, producer of bakery bites that give you 40% of your daily veggies (that's 2 full servings of non-GMO veggies) and 1 billion probiotics.

Previously, Kay founded and was CEO of Energy Infuser, an insight-inspired innovation agency from 1999 - 2014. The company generated \$6MM in revenue and worked with clients including Kraft Foods, Avon Products, Hewlett-Packard, PepsiCo, Mondelez and msnbc.com.

Another of Kay's entrepreneurial innovations is the Energy Annex, an award-winning, innovative focus group facility founded in 2004.

Kay created and taught a Marketing Innovation course at Northwestern University's Medill School, and she authored *Secrets from the Innovation Room*.