



# StoreForce Interview with Build-A-Bear Workshop





# How Build-A-Bear Weathered the Pandemic

## A Conversation with Build-A-Bear Executives

Led by Melissa Caçador,  
StoreForce Client Engagement Manager



**Melissa Caçador**  
Client Engagement Manager  
StoreForce

**Melissa Caçador** is a Client Engagement Manager at StoreForce. She brings 15+ years of experience, working for large specialty retailers in several roles including Human Resources and Store Operations. Melissa is a subject matter expert in store facing technologies such as POS, Traffic Counters, Labor Scheduling and WFM systems. Melissa helps clients utilize the StoreForce solution to support their operational initiatives, as well as delivering it through involvement with functional design, support, client training, and project management.



**Roz Johnson**  
Senior Vice President, Store  
Operations & Guest Experience  
Build-A-Bear Workshop

**Roz Johnson**, Sr. VP Store Operations and Guest Experience, joined Build-A-Bear Workshop in July 2015 as Managing Director of Store Operations. Roz has extensive experience in specialty and department store retail at celebrated brands such as American Eagle, Gap and Macy's/Federated Stores. In her current role Roz leads the Field, Store Operations and Guest Services teams in developing process improvements and innovative solutions that increase speed to action, enable agility and improve productivity, with the goal of ensuring consistency in the BABW experience wherever the Guest chooses to engage the brand.



**Chris Hurt**  
Chief Operation &  
Experience Officer  
Build-A-Bear Workshop

**Chris Hurt**, Chief Operations and Experience Officer, joined Build-A-Bear Workshop in April 2015 as Chief Operations Officer. Prior to joining the Company, Mr. Hurt was at American Eagle Outfitters, Inc. from 2002 to April 2015 in various senior leadership roles of increasing responsibility, including Senior Vice President, North America and Vice President/General Manager—Factory, Canada, Mexico Retail from 2011 to April 2015, and East Zone Vice President and Regional Director from 2002 to 2011. Before joining American Eagle Outfitters, Mr. Hurt held positions of increasing responsibility at companies including Polo Ralph Lauren and The Procter & Gamble Company.

**Melissa:** Thank you so much for joining me today. Would you take a minute and introduce yourselves?

**Chris:** I'll start. My name is Chris Hurt. I'm Build-A-Bear's Chief Operation & Experience Officer and I've been with the organization for six years. It's an exciting role at an exciting brand, and as we all know, this past year has been very interesting.

**Roz:** I'm Roz Johnson. I'm the Senior Vice President of Operations & Guest Experience, and I've also been with Build-A-Bear about six years. As Chris said, it certainly has been an interesting and challenging year, but also an exciting year and I'm happy to talk to you about our business and what this past year has challenged us to do and enabled us to do, and the support that StoreForce has given us to make many of these things happen is so appreciated.

**Melissa:** I think when most people think of Build-A-Bear Workshops, they picture, a lot of kids in stores looking at and touching everything. You almost had to reimagine your brand and pivot your business model to the changes. How were you able to do that?

**Chris:** It's a great question. I remember there were things that I thought I would never have to do in my career and one was to close an entire field organization; all 300 stores in North America and 50 in the UK. Almost immediately people asked me when will the doors reopen and when did we think we would be back doing parties? We really didn't know.

But what we did know was that we were going to reopen our stores. So Roz and I started planning on how we were going to reopen our stores and what was it going to take to do that.

One of the things that is interesting about the US market is every city, every county, every state has different regulations and orders, all of which we tracked. In addition, we tracked the health and safety recommendations put out by the CDC.

We took all these recommendations, all these guidelines, all these occupancy rules and we looked at everything we do that makes Build-A-Bear special. We talked about reimagining the experience that we provide in our stores and how we could continue to provide that experience while adhering to social distance recommendations; and we still had to provide our experience, our high touch experience.

One day I was talking to Roz and I said, 'You know, we always say high touch experience, but we don't touch people.' So we quickly changed our language to 'high engagement environment because that's really what we have. It's inclusive and it's a high engagement environment.



**Chris:** We have what we call 'station standards' and 'make behaviors' which are what we want each station to look like. For example, we made a small change to our stuffing station. Normally the child would be right next to our Bear Builder who does the stuffing. So we created a 'hug station' that was six feet away. The child would put their furry friend, unstuffed, into the hug station and then step back. Our Bear Builder would get that furry friend and stuff it while the child twirled their hands instead of stepping on a pedal. So, we did not change our brand's DNA, and that was important. It was simply different.

We were able to take this foundation and put the new adjustments into place. Our language stayed the same, our make behaviors were the same. What we were able to do was help our teams understand how to make the adjustments.

**Roz:** With our many years in retail, we had countless connections that we could tap into, like our retail networks, the CDC, the National Retail Federation, and others. As Chris said we did not change our business model or our in-store engagement environment. It was important that we developed a plan that allowed us to reopen safely for our guests and for our associates and still provide our engagement environment.

When we were able, we went to a store to see what this would look like. At one point, as a store in Dallas was opening, Chris got on a plane and met with the store team and laid out what we had modeled. Based on their feedback we made some modifications and then we met with another store and laid it all out and made more modifications. That allowed us to give firsthand feedback and guidance to our store teams.

**Chris:** There were some pivot moments from a leadership perspective. For instance, we held 'Covid meetings' every morning. We did that for about five mornings until Sharon, our CEO, said 'I am not going to another Covid meeting. This is ridiculous.' So we renamed it the 'success meeting' and that small change made a major impact. Would you rather go to a success meeting or a Covid meeting? I'd be like 'Oh, what? I'm not able to make that meeting because I'm in the success meeting.'

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was six feet away.”

- Chris Hurt



**Melissa:** How did you accelerate that and what did it mean to you as you went through all those stages.

**Chris:** I mentioned going to Dallas for a reason. That was May 5th and 7th. We closed our stores, on March 18. We opened the Dallas doors with all the new health and safety guidelines, all new experience guidelines, and the training for 'buy-online, ship-from-store.' All this was done in that small time period. This was no small feat from an IT standpoint, no small feat from getting all the training and getting it out to the stores and getting the district manager trained.

So we opened those first two stores with a distribution model of 'buy-online, ship-from-store.' We did not have 'pick-up in store,' or 'pick-up curbside' and we certainly did not have 'same day delivery.'



Roz put in place something for our entire organization, called 'Experience First Friday.' Every Friday we distribute stories of things that happened in our workshops, and things that happened online, and things that were sent to us. Experience First Friday ensures that our entire organization never loses sight of what we really provide every day. You can buy a stuffed animal anywhere, but that is not what we are about. We are about providing that experience and adding a little more to life.

**Roz:** Layered in that 'experience first' component was how we can make an amazing moment for our guests and continue to provide that experience for people who can't get to the store.

We have some of the most loyal guests who go online and post pictures showing their Build-A-Bear box sitting on their front porch. The box had been delivered in a really short period of time because it was not coming out of our warehouse. It was coming out of a store that was close to them. We shortened our delivery time because we can Geotarget those online orders, and they then ship from a neighboring store.

**“ We shortened our delivery time because we can Geotarget those online orders, and they then ship from a neighboring store.”**

- Roz Johnson

I have a tremendous amount of pride in my team. They accomplished something that was amazing. We put together our '2020 look back' and created a store operations annual report because we thought this was an experience that we needed to memorialize. Let's hope we don't have to go through it again, but I think that if we found ourselves in a position where something was threatening our business, we could flip a switch to say here's what we learned when we had to do it before. Let's talk about what works. Let's talk about how we just got it done.

**Melissa:** Talk a little bit about the home party box and where that came from.

**Roz:** When we have a party with 10 kids there will also be five to ten adults. With store occupancy restrictions we just cannot do sizeable parties. People need a 'feel good' and who doesn't want to celebrate a birthday? Let's give our guests a way to do that. So we have our home party packages that can be purchased online. While guests can't come in to stuff it, they can select their furry friend and we can stuff it and ship it with clothes ready to go. There is an assortment of clothing and accessories that go with every package. We can provide them with games, online invitations, online thank-you notes, all the components of having a party, and instructions on how to have a great Build-A-Bear party.

**Chris:** The home party box is something that will continue for those who want to have a party at home. There is no reason that we cannot provide the home party box. The home party box is also fun. It's a result of the spirit and the energy of Build-A-Bear and how are we going to make sure that Build-A-Bear is around for decades. We always say we are the best party favor ever. But you're right, not all kids live close to a Build-A-Bear Workshop. But now, with the home party box individuals who live in remote places can get a taste of the workshop environment. That's really been fun.

Another thing with the party business is companies have started to do parties for team building. We ship bears out to people on a team and they have their party where they would do some team building exercises. We always had this, but it became a bigger business this past year. As we say for kids of all ages Build-A-Bear is always there for the fun.

**Roz:** We also had a member of the Operations team lead a company on a zoom call with their employees even doing a heart ceremony. It was the company's way of staying connected to their associates and their families, because they were all working remotely.

**Melissa:** A bear is such a personal gift and it really allows people to make the connection with family, even if they are miles apart. If Nana can't be there for Christmas what's the next best thing? Send a bear with her voice inside of it. I thought that was super cool.

**Chris:** Recorded voice is definitely one of the key personalization elements that we have. You can't be in a workshop for very long and not have some touching moment whether it's service men or women deploying, and they leave their voice in a bear, or someone who knows that they may be terminally ill and they want to leave a message to their loved ones. It touches you in a big way and there is so many of those along with so many celebratory events. We always say add a little more heart to those moments and it's just fun and exciting when we see those.



**Melissa:** Can you tell us a little bit about how Bear Builder University has helped move the business forward?

**Roz:** Our guests love knowing and understanding how we do what we do, whether it's the heart ceremony or bringing their furry friends to life. Bear Builder University is an opportunity, not unlike a party, to bring a group of kids together and learn what it means to be a Bear Builder. We have child size aprons and the kids come in and go through the experience of learning how to be a Bear Builder. It is really cool. The group would make their bears, they would learn how to stuff, they'd wear their aprons and their name tags and, at the end they'd receive a certificate that said they graduated from Bear Builder University.

Some of our best ideas bubble up from our guests and our store teams. We have a number of guests who shared that they have children who are autistic, and they want to come to the workshop, but maybe it's not ideal for them to come when things are busy and noisy. We have music playing with stuffers filling. So we came up with the sensory friendly events and we created 'Sensory Friendly Sunday,' an opportunity for these parents to bring their kids in at a time where we could lower the lights, eliminate the music and limit the number of people who could participate. Instead, they could come in and have the experience in a way that was not disruptive for them and allow them to really be in a calm environment.

**Melissa:** Some of the things that you've put into place over the last year are (1) buy online, pick-up in store, (2) buy online, pick-up at curb, (3) buy online, ship from store and (4) same day shipping. Which of these offerings do you think are here to stay long term?

**Chris:** They are all here to stay long term.

We know that people want to 'buy online, pick-up in store'. People will still want to come in for the experience. There is also the gifting piece, so people will still want to come in and pick-up in store.

People also like 'buy online, pick-up curbside.' I think the more people like 'pick-up in store' the less they will want to pick-up curbside, especially in malls where they might have other shopping to do.

'Buy online ship from store', will grow as e-commerce builds. No question, we will continue to do that and we look to expand to do that. It's awesome to have 300 mini distribution centers.

'Same day delivery' is on our radar but in fact, we should not be same day delivery. The furry friend needs to be stuffed, it must be dressed, it must have the right sound in it and then it has to be stitched. And a heart goes in every single one. We could not prepare and deliver fast enough.

**Roz:** So I think all will stay in place, but the percent that they are used

will fluctuate as people get more and more comfortable with coming back to the store and how they want to interact with our brand. No matter their choice, we have a distribution channel they could want.

**“We know that people want to 'buy online, pick-up in store'. People will still want to come in for the experience.”**

- Chris Hurt

**“No matter the customer's choice, we have a distribution channel they could want.”**

- Roz Johnson

Melissa: Can you tell us a little bit about how you use the StoreForce dashboard?

**Roz:** I'm addicted to my StoreForce dashboard. I love watching it. Every morning I log into Microsoft Teams and into my email and go into StoreForce first thing. I keep the dashboard up in the background so I can get a sense of what is going on. It's exciting to watch and it gives us an opportunity to celebrate with our teams, to recognize them and the progress they're making. We have tremendous commitment in our field organization.

These cool dashboards also let the team see how they are doing. One of the things that was key to launching these things successfully was getting buy-in from the teams. We approached it by saying here is what's in it for you, and they were incredibly committed to having these changes go off flawlessly.

Build-A-Bear is a place where people consciously self select. They want to come in, because it's not about just standing there holding something. It's an experience and a show and the teams pride themselves on making those memories and those experiences. That's what makes 'Experience First Friday' so exciting. We get to share those stories. Chris and I know that we work in headquarters, but by nature we are store people, we are field people. We love to share and market what our store teams are doing with the rest of the organization. There is the product team and the marketing team and the brand team and everybody comes



together to create great products and our teams in the store bring it to life and that's really cool.

**Chris:** I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Melissa for all the things that we have been able to do with StoreForce. We consider you part of our team. We value the ability to look at information and react quickly to whatever is happening using the tools that you put in place. We really, really appreciate it.

**Roz:** One of the things that makes this partnership work is that you are a retailer. Stores talk to us with a true understanding of what it means to operate retail stores.

We made a commitment that we would have something about StoreForce and smart scheduling on every single call with the DMs with the expectation that they then take that knowledge to their store team. It's all about making our teams smarter in how they run their business. Starting with all of us. We went through the training and then had it filter down to our stores.

You have been an important partner, and I speak for the entire Operations team. They really respect you and like working with you and like the support that you provide. And I love the calls because we all learn together. A lot of sharing and learning. Melissa, you are a bear and I, like Chris, thank you.

**Melissa:** Well that's excellent, and thank you for making me an honorary bear. It's been a real pleasure to work with you guys and to watch Build-A-Bear over the last year. I would like to thank you both so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

“ I'm addicted to my StoreForce dashboard. I love watching it.”

- Roz Johnson



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