

Baking Security into the Enterprise, One Stroopwafel at a Time

A chat with a Cisco technical solutions engineer, security evangelist, and Chief Stroopwafel Officer

Michelle Dennedy: All right, so I am super excited, Michelle Dennedy, Chief Sigma Rider and Privacy Officer here at Cisco, and there I was recording a podcast when I noticed that our very own Nicole Wajer, who is—and she's nodding at me because I practiced the Dutch pronunciation—who is in her day job our technical solutions architect and world traveler, solution provider, we'll get to that in a minute. But, interestingly enough, her really formal title, I think it was self-anointed, but I now think the world has adopted it, Chief Stroopwafel Officer. Welcome, Nicole, to the show!

Nicole Wajer: Well thank you, Michelle.

Michelle Dennedy: So, welcome to the Privacy Sigma Riders, where we talk about all things weird, wacky, and sometimes we take a variance into baked goods. This is a first, for us on the Sigma Riders. So, introduce yourself to the audience and first let's talk about the technical solutions architect side of your job, and then let's talk about stroopwafel.

Nicole Wajer: Sure, sure. So, Nicole, and I will leave the name as earlier pronounced, which is awesome actually.

Michelle Dennedy: No, say it your way!

Nicole Wajer: Wajer. So, it's—

Michelle Dennedy: Oh, I need a little more "i" in it. Wajer.

Nicole Wajer: For a foreign person, you did excellent, because it's always Wager or Wajee and so I know like, "Oh, that's me." Joined Cisco 11 years ago, because I really love technology and when I was studying computer science, I thought, "Oh, when I grow up, you know, I wanna work for Cisco." The growing up never happened, by the way, I'm still—

Michelle Dennedy: Oh, me neither.

Nicole Wajer: I'm still 5' 3".

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, I'm a little tiny bit taller, but no more mature than I was about 23.

Nicole Wajer: Exactly. And I joined the sales organization in the Netherlands, where I'm born and raised, proudly from Amsterdam.

Michelle Dennedy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nicole Wajer: And combining my passion for technology and explaining to the customers, you know, why technology is key and why Cisco is better or best or even not even Cisco, because I also talk about security even a lot. Last week I was in the Hague because we had a cybersecurity week there, and I was explaining about how to live in a world full of cybercrime. Came any direction I went, because these guys are from a resiliency point of view, in manufacturing. So, they're not your daily people that all of a sudden they get technology and they go like, "Oh my god, how do I live, keep living?" GDPR, by the way, also comes to play because it's all, and so many angles there.

So, on my day job now, nowadays I work for the Worldwide Enterprise sales team. And there I am focusing with just a small group of nine, eight people where we focus on SD-WAN, which is our wide area network solution. But also software-defined access, SDA, and we are enabling the whole field in order to sell this stuff. And I'm also looking with the angle of security there, again. So, security, although sometimes they say, "Nicole you're in Enterprise now." No. no. no. Security's still my passion. It's not going away. Guess what? I am using the Identity Services Engine in this case, and your Stealthwatch, or ETA in cryptic traffic analytics, which is [unintelligible] a part of the SDA solution. It's in my day job. Enabling and even explaining to customers that why this is important and why automation is key.

Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, Nicole, it's so much to unpack, and it's really fascinating on a lot of different levels. A, the passion and obvious joy that you have putting together complicated things like software defined networking and access, adding a security layer on top that I think a lot of people don't understand. It's an art form as well as a highly technical form to figure out how do manufacturing concerns keep their own integrity, how do they protect their employees, how do they protect their customers and their communities. So, how did your background, I mean I think it's, I think the other thing that might surprise people is, you know, there's a certain Revenge of the Nerds stereotypical engineer, antisocial male, straight-laced, quiet...You're none of these things. How did you come to be in the role that you are and obviously enjoying it as much as you are?

Nicole Wajer: So, when I was born—

Michelle Dennedy: There I was in my egg—

Nicole Wajer: So, that's a very good one actually, because I remember I sometimes talked to colleagues and then I asked them, "How do you see me? How do you perceive me?" Because sometimes I need to step out of myself, basically, and have a little look. And I remember this guy, I bumped into this guy at Cisco Live a couple of years ago, and his colleague I knew very well because he was working for Advanced Services, and we had a major project in the Netherlands, so I worked almost on a daily basis with him. So, I chatted with him, la la la, and we just left, and I didn't introduce myself to the other guy. But the other guy was so intrigued, and he's like, he said, "Who, who—"

Michelle Dennedy: "What just happened to me?"

Nicole Wajer: "Who is this?"

Michelle Dennedy: You were just Nicole—

- Nicole Wajer: And then he said, "Oh, that's Nicole, and by the way if you want to impress her you need to talk about IPv6." Basically, he had the tools, so he works out of Toronto, a Russian guy, and he did not, he started programming on his tool, making IPv6 capable. So, the next day he showed this, he's like, "Look, look what I have, look, and it does IPv6!" In the end, he told me the story that it didn't had it before, but just for me especially he implemented, and it took him only two codes, lines of code. So, I was like, "Yes!" So, I talked to him later. I said, "So how, how do you perceive me?" And he said, "You're an engineer with social skills." And I look, "Yeah, so?" And, "That's not normal, Nicole."
- Michelle Dennedy: Well, we do tend to deviate from the norm over here. But I think it's a wonderful thing. So, I'm going to name drop a little bit. I actually had dinner with Vince Cerf last week, which was amazing! I'm a total fan-girl and somebody was asking him about IPv6 and you know, "Oh, do you think it's really gonna happen?" And he just looked at them, like dead-pan, and said, "Of course we're running out of addresses. Of course it will happen."
- Nicole Wajer: We're already run out of addresses, but then mostly the technical people go, "Oh, but we've got NAT!" Network Address Translation. And then I go, "No, no, no, don't go there. That's so much pain. Have you ever tried?" And again, coming back to security, I mean, visibility, knowing who is behind what, forget about it. And then they go, "Yeah, yeah, you're right. OK. Deploy v6!" It's scary for people. And that's, and so, with deploying IPv6, but even secure stuff, just to come back on that one, is that when you talk about security, then they just think it's only putting in that firewall and you're done—
- Michelle Dennedy: Exactly. Or encrypting everything like it's magic.
- Nicole Wajer: Exactly. And then, but still, and as you said, right, it goes way further. How do you know that that box that came from Factory A has not been altered? How do you know that that image is the correct image has not been altered? People assume.
- Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, and when that image is carrying your identity, your health record, the health of your power system grid information, these little nuances. Sometimes like you said, two lines of code and then now we're in v6 land, right—
- Nicole Wajer: Exactly—
- Michelle Dennedy: ...rather than the old-fashioned world.
- Nicole Wajer: It's just a scary part that they go, "The address is so big. Where do I start?" And they—
- Michelle Dennedy: Here, start with a rather non-big woman, teaching you the way. That's where you start.
- Nicole Wajer: Exactly! I'm more than happy to.
- Michelle Dennedy: So, sometimes these, like, spicy, hard, salty technology things, I think they go back down with maybe, I don't know, a lovely confectionary biscuit. Tell me about your stroopwafel journey. What is a stroopwafel and how did you become its officer?
- Nicole Wajer: So...

- Michelle Dennedy: I look in the production booth and he's going, "What?" and "Stop it." Zing!
- Nicole Wajer: And basically, so, if Dutch people are listening to this podcast, so she's talking about a stroopwafel.
- Michelle Dennedy: Oh, in the US, it's a "stroooooo-wah-full."
- Nicole Wajer: Exactly. It's a Dutch cookie. It's a biscuit with caramel in between. It's a complete sugar rush. And many years ago, when Cisco—I just have to laugh because people will know—we had this marketing borderless networks they thought that was the thing to go for because there were no borders anymore. It sort of made sense, but mostly people were laughing a little bit. We were just deploying Identity Services Engine 1.0 and we were having a discussion on how to make security sexy actually. And, uh, Ross Fowler was leading borderless networks, Australian guy, and he, I thought to myself, "OK. How can I make an impact? How can I have VPs remember my face and say, 'Hey Nicole' or 'Hey you, I remember you. I remember you.'"
- So, I gave him a stroopwafel. And I gave it to him and he said, "Thank you" and he went home. Next day, he passed me by and he just nodded politely. Like, huh, "Missed that one!" And then one, two, and he "Oh! By the way! Thank you! I ate that cookie last night. It was awesome!" I'm like, "Yes!" And so, and that's what I do. I started giving it out first to VPs, but then I thought, "You know why only... it's also your colleagues." So, I bring them. I hope nobody of Border Control is listening. I don't declare them.
- Michelle Dennedy: Do you have to declare a—
- Nicole Wajer: No, you don't actually.
- Michelle Dennedy: ...a stroopwafel...wafel? Say it again.
- Nicole Wajer: Stroopwafel. Stroopwafel.
- Michelle Dennedy: Stroopwafel. I think if I say it in a very serious tone, it sounds better. Stroopwafel. We are taking your stroopwafels.
- Nicole Wajer: I actually, in the beginning, I did mention, and then I said, "No, no need." So that's why I just don't use it. It's actually a hilarious factor when I just mention, "Oh, by the way, I didn't declare that."
- Michelle Dennedy: Half a bag full of biscuits here.
- Nicole Wajer: Because, besides when I bring them, I always joke about, you know, "I'm your stroopwafel pusher. The first one's for free."
- Michelle Dennedy: Yes, it's true. She did say that to me and now I'm an addict.
- Nicole Wajer: And it helps because these VPs are, they just come back to, and they just hold up their hand like, "Nicole, give it to me."

- Michelle Dennedy: What I love, you practice security. You bake it into our enterprise as well as to our other IPv6 evangelism but you call yourself the CSO?
- Nicole Wajer: Yes. Again, you know, it stands for Chief Stroopwafel Officer. I wanted to be a some type of CXO and, with all respect, I was, how do you say correctly in English, inspired by a girl called Katherine McNamara here in the office; she changed her title in the directory to Identity Services Queen. And that's where I thought, "Oh! I need to do something. I want to." Of course, you know, it needs to be something that nobody gets offended, etc. So, it literally it was in front of me. It was like I had it in my hands already and I just changed it. And now I do get people that say, "What type of CXO are you?" I'm like, "Yes!"
- I don't get the paycheck yet, though.
- Michelle Dennedy: I like that. Well, you get cookies at least, so that's good. And always smiles, and always memorable stories. So, Nicole, tell us what gives you hope as a technologist, as an evangelist, as a leader, and someone who is a big part of our culture. What gives you hope and what drives you?
- Nicole Wajer: The excitement about technology. Technology changes. Technology is basically innovation. Living in a world today and seeing stuff changing, I remember on Twitter actually I think I said I was there when the internet started. I think it was on Twitter I have that stuff there. But it's so amazing. It opens up doors. I love to—it expands the world, I mean, I'm just waiting for my first connection with an alien.
- Michelle Dennedy: Yeah, I think, you know, Esther Dyson said she's going to be the first Martian, and I think she probably will have the stroopwafel in her pocket.
- Nicole Wajer: It's one of those most important things to bring along—
- Michelle Dennedy: ...Agreed.
- Nicole Wajer: ...because it doesn't go bad.
- Michelle Dennedy: I agree! Well Nicole, thank you so much. I literally just saw that she was in the office today. I had to take advantage and have you on the Privacy Sigma Riders. Thank you so much for all that you do. You're a huge inspiration to me, and you're always the pick-me-up even when I don't have a shot of sugar from a stroopwafel.
- Nicole Wajer: No problem. Thank you so much, Michelle.
- Michelle Dennedy: Thank you. It's a wrap, Sigma Riders.
- Michelle Dennedy: You've been listening to Privacy Sigma Riders, brought to you by the Cisco Security and Trust Organization. Special thanks to Kory Westerhold for our original theme music. Our producers are Susan Borton and David Ball. You can find all our episodes on trust.cisco.com or subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. And please take a moment to review and rate us on iTunes. To stay ahead of the curve between episodes, consider following us on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. And you can find me, Michelle Dennedy, on Twitter @mdennedy. Until next time.