



THE BARCODE PODCAST Episode 009

Jon Jennings: How to Innovate Across CPG Categories

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Welcome to The Barcode Podcast, where we equip emerging consumer brands. I'm Ben Ponder, and at Barcode, we're here to give our listeners the knowledge and tools you need to thrive in the marketplace.

Disruption. Innovation. We hear buzzy business words like that so often, but what they actually mean? What does it look like to disrupt an industry or an aisle in the grocery store? If you create some cool new thing that doesn't solve a problem, it doesn't matter how cool the thing is. Innovation for the sake of innovation doesn't matter if no one needs the thing you made.

From his start as the creative director at Bear Naked granola to his current role as the COO of Pact Clothing, our guest Jon Jennings has been part of some big transitions and innovations in his career. There's a lot of great lessons in his story and in our conversation and I'm excited to have you here listening in. Let's get to the podcast.

BEN I'm Ben Ponder, welcome to the Barcode Podcast and I'm excited to have my friend Jon Jennings with me in the studio today. Jon, welcome and thanks for coming in and I know you're a busy guy, so it's always great to see you and great to chat with you.

JON Great to be here, Ben. Thanks for having me.

BEN Awesome. So we're going to, we're going to go ahead and dive in because there's a lot of interesting stuff that I want to talk to Jon about. And first things first, Jon, tell us about your favorite meal or your best meal ever.

JON Okay. So we have to do backstory first.

BEN Backstory is great.

JON So, uh, which is gonna lead into all kinds of fun things for our conversation today. I was the most finicky kid ever that there was, I think I ate cereal, cheese, pizza.

BEN What kind of cereal?

JON Uh, so mom wouldn't buy the sugar cereals. So it was mostly like dad ate Rice Chex every single morning. Um, I liked, I was into Corn Pops was the one like sweet sugar when I could go with. Shredded wheat, like frost not the... Remember the old school ones?

BEN Huge, huge ones.

JON Not the little like mini bites.

BEN Like the burrito, the Chipotle burrito size [crosstalk].

JON Well there's the mega, which is a whole nother conversation but then there was like the longer like there's like three of the Mini-wheat's in like one long one. And I had a whole strategy on how I would [crosstalk].

BEN But it was more, it was marketed as, as good for you but it was really just spray coated in sugar.

JON Totally. Which is why...

BEN Which is why you loved it.

JON It was the perfect thing 'cause it, my mom thought it was healthy. I knew it had sweet and then I had this whole like Lincoln logs style way that would build it in my bowl and I had a very slippery way they'd pour the water in and like or not the water[crosstalk].

BEN You were OCD back then?

JON Oh yes. Always, always forever. I was at OCD and the milk, like I would know exactly how to eat it based on like milk saturation and like breaking of it and how the frosting would be...

BEN Right. Because then the sugar, the sugar is dispersing through the milk at that point.

JON Right the frosting can never go down because I had otherwise it was like, it was quote and quote melt off the bottom and [crosstalk].

BEN And it was so disappointing.

JON Who wants a non-sugarcoated [crosstalk].

BEN That's the worst cereal ever.

JON That's the worst thing ever. 'Cause they'd advise of eating Grape Nuts.

BEN Okay. So sorry I've gotten you off on the cereal tangent here. But uh, so...

JON So that was it.

BEN Finicky kid.

JON So finicky, through college, I'm telling you I ate nothing. My mother and my mother, amazing cook and she catered to me something fierce. So then I meet my then girlfriend, now wife who grew up in Thailand. So she, for our first date, she wants to go to Thai food. I'm freaking out a head Typhon. One time I think I literally spit it out or vomited like when I had it with my mom because I had such these preconceived mental block. But wait, this was a girl. So I had to like show up.

BEN This was a moment of truth for you.

JON Yeah, this was a moment of truth. So in a way like that was my most amazing meal, but that's not what we're going to tell the story about. But that was the moment of like breaking out. The next date was Indian food and I was fighting her for the leftovers. This was like all of a sudden everything had changed.

BEN Did she curate it for you? Did she say, okay, look, this is, this is a very picky eater, so I'm going to make sure...

JON No, she didn't know I was a picky, are you kidding me? This is game time.

BEN You brought your game face.

JON I had to pretend that I loved all this.

BEN That's right. Drinking the Tom yum soup and all of the things.

JON Exactly, exactly. I didn't know even how to pronounce this stuff. So, um, so anyhow, where that has, fast forward to me still today, Thai food is by far my absolute favorite cuisine. I've been to Thailand with my wife six times. So there is like big love, but also there's a reality because I've had the gift of going to Thailand, Thai food in Thailand is game changing really different than here.

BEN I'm sure.

JON So nonetheless, we have this fabulous restaurant in Austin called Sway.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JON So probably when you, when you asked me this question, the very first thought was relatively recently, this past summer we had a gathering of friends and family members. My brother-in-law came and who also sent from Thailand and we all gathered around big family style table at Sway and they take Thai food like to that next level.

BEN Right. It's very good.

JON Oh, it's so amazing.

BEN They've three locations I think.

JON I know they definitely have the two and the one at Bee Cave was where we were at, which was awesome. That has that overlooking view of the city. Super great. So, um, so this, you know, the, the table is set and it, you know, there's something different about eating family-style when you're passing and you know, you're going to have at least like five different flavors. I probably had like 10 that

night and there were just these moments of like, Oh my gosh, you have to try this, you know, and it's this tension between, you're so excited to share it with the next person and you maybe don't want to because you want to have at least one more bite of that. So, that was my most recent favorite experience.

BEN So it's the food plus, plus the family and the gathering and the conversation there. And the, you know, again, a lot of this has finger food too, right? So you're grabbing the lettuce and all these things.

JON There are, there were components are definitely finger food. And I'm kind of unapologetically into just like diving my fingers in and, you know, like eat off my spoon because I don't care. Like I don't put the, I don't have the saliva thing or whatever. So there's definitely that aspect. But you know, the thing I think I love so much is the dimension of flavor. That's why I love Thai food. You're getting wicked hot green curries [crosstalk].

BEN Spicy sweet, complex sour.

JON Yeah, then you get there's like super. Like, I don't even know how they do. It's like milk, fat, whipped cream, coconut cream thing they do.

BEN Absolutely.

JON And you have this cool. And the spice and the textures and then there's these crunches from things like the crispy shrimps and oh my gosh. It's just, it's, it's just fabulous.

BEN I love it. So when you go to a Thai restaurant, you've never been there before. What do you order?

JON Um, so if I'm sharing it with someone is different than if I'm solo, right. I love go with someone 'cause that usually means I'm going to get a few more things unless I'm truly thinking I'm going to have a meal that's going to last me three meals, which I'm down with. I love leftovers such a gift.

BEN Sure why not.

JON And Thai food only gets better as it sits. So, uh, probably fairs, especially if no one's ever been there, I start with the som tam which is the shredded green papaya salad, which most people have never had anything like it before. 'Cause there's just no, there's nothing like it in another thing. And you're getting, uh, this crunch in this sour with the vinegar, with the high spice and you're getting, uh, there's these like weird like dried shrimp things in there.

BEN Okay.

JON Has like a crisp thing going on. Yeah.

BEN Again, there's a, there's also the exoticness of Thai food that is, I feel like a lot of Thai restaurants. One thing I really like about Thai restaurants is they don't even attempt to translate many of the many of the, many of the dishes. It's a in many Thai restaurants that I've been to, it's words that are meaningless to me outside of the context of this, this menu.

JON Absolutely.

BEN Like, but I'm all in.

JON Yeah.

BEN I know, I know. It's sort of a pin the tail on the donkey moment where I in again, if it's a, if it's a reputable Thai restaurant, I could close my eyes, point my finger on the menu and it's, it's probably going to be pretty good.

JON Right? Absolutely.

BEN So that's uh, that's excellent.

JON Yeah. Tends to be the same stuff. It's just kind of a question of how much like have they over Americanized it or if they stayed pretty authentic and also probably what access to ingredients do they have here.

BEN Sure, yeah.

JON Um, so you know, well I shouldn't say, you know, most of the time my experiences, if I take someone new, it's always like Pad Thai. Like that is like the one staple Thai...

BEN The national dish.

JON Everyone knows. So I tend to veer away from Pad Thai. Now with that said, a great Pad Thai is great.

BEN It's a great hamburger, you know?

JON Exactly. It's great. Although most pad ties and the reason why the people are drawn to is because of the sweet. I have to like ratchet up the spice level and I need to have complexity. I love to have a lot of vegetables, so I'm getting a lot of complexity of texture flavor in there. So if I can go that route, I'm down with Pad Thai, but typically what I will do is love a tom ka. So that's your coconut milk with the chicken, the lemon grass, the basil. It's fabulous. Um, and then, and I like [crosstalk].

BEN And it's a very complex flavor too.

JON It is, yeah.

BEN Like you, you can like let it rest on your tongue and there's a lot going on there.

JON Absolutely. Absolutely.

BEN And I actually, my thing that I love to do is I take a little dollop of white rice and put it down at the bottom of the bowl. So I'm getting a little bit of that. I mean, if you're an Americanized, I guess you're getting like a cream of rice and chicken soup type of thing going on. Yeah. So that's, that's pretty darn fun. But I would never compare it to that. That's a way to bland this is rising?

JON I like that technique.

BEN Yeah.

JON That's good stuff. Okay. So you, you spent a good portion of your career in the food industry.

BEN Yes.

JON You have w- uh, today you work, uh, for a company called [Pact](#). And, uh, and, and we're going to get to what, what Pact does in the, uh, apparel and basics world of, of organic textiles. And, but I want to, I want to rewind a bit. And before you were in food, you were, uh, an art kid who found himself in Austin, Texas because of a software company. So tell us for like, again, just maybe at a high level, how did you come out of that, that kind of designer for software into, into this your initial foray into the food world?

BEN Yeah. So, um, to set the, the ultimate of stages, uh, let's go back to that obsessive compulsive kid who likes to build his, uh, Lincoln log style, shredded wheat. So I was always a great student, so I was that straight A student kid. Um, but I never liked school. I just, it was just what I thought was the right thing to do and I always wanted to succeed. So I, I, I got the grades, which is great. Um, but the only classes that I really enjoyed were gym class and art class. So, um, as I was...

JON And you grew up in Chicago? I did, I was in the suburbs of Chicago. And, um, I was at a pretty big high school, public high school that had great things. We actually had a little mini computer lab, which was, you know, in 1990 what? two, three like that was a really big deal.

BEN Pretty big deal.

JON Which was a pretty big deal. Which was really great. We had a dark room for those of us who were before digital cameras.

BEN For digital photography.

JON You know, I actually learn how to develop in a, you know, red lights and the dark room.

BEN Silver tone.

JON Yes, it was. And it was magical. It was amazing. There was. So I'm really grateful for the exposure I had as a kid. So when it was time to apply for college and I was, you know, doing my entrance stuff, I'm trying to figure out where I was going to go. Um, the fact that I was going to go do art school at the University of Illinois, my parents, you know, this was a time when they were like, no, no, you're smart. You need to become a doctor or a lawyer. And I was like, yeah, but I really just like art class. So thankfully they didn't fight hard.

BEN Which again, you didn't come from a bougie background, you know? Right. So, yeah. So, so really blue collar, like, like very practical.

JON Very blue, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, that's right. Mom is working as like, uh, administrative assistant for like a real estate lawyer, which doesn't even exist in Texas, but in Chicago and there was. And dad had been working construction his whole life, so, um, and neither of them had finished up with school. They got married, left school. So this was, you know, a pretty big deal. I'm the first born and so I'm going to school and yay. You know, great.

BEN That's right. Well Johnny's going to get himself a job.

JON That's right. But they think I'm going to be a starving artist, but my dad's like, you know, now I'm a parent. Hindsight, like, I get it. Totally right. So, um, so anyhow, I ended up going through art school. I don't even know what that even really entails. Find out there's three tracks, graphic design, industrial design, photography. Build a portfolio, end up applying to graphic and industrial and pick the industrial design tracks. I didn't even know what graphic design was. So industrial, it's really cool. I did a semester of it and realized I'm not a three dimensional thinker, this is not my thing. I go back to the head of the program, get accepted back into graphic design, finish up the program. At the very

end of my school year, someone shows up randomly from Austin, Texas talking about how they make more money than God. And um, I was intrigued. Uh...

BEN Come to Texas.

JON Come to Texas, right? And I literally, even at 21 years old think that it is, it is horses and cowboy hats. I mean, I, I, I haven't traveled much clearly. So I have this vision in my head like, I don't know, but whatever, they're going to fly me and my girlfriend to Austin, Texas. So we go down, I show up and I get, we get full access passes to South by Southwest are taking us around. This is Austin 20 years ago. It's a very big feel, really cool. So, uh, now I'm in software and I'm in this crazy place, it was really built on the ethos of like startup garage mentality. So this is all incredible. Um, and nine months later, 400 of us get laid off in one day. So, uh...

BEN Which is what happens sometimes when you spend so much money on wining and dining people?

JON That's right. That's right. Uh, but it was, it was exciting and it was one of the most incredible experiences of my career because, uh, it brought me here, which I really love. Austin, I'm so grateful to be here.

BEN And you've had lots of opportunities to leave here and you've...

JON I have.

BEN You've been very deliberate and you've stayed here.

JON I have, I have, this is very true. And I've had some arteries to go, some cool places. Um, that may be more about my personality type, but that's, that's besides the point. Uh, yeah.

BEN Okay. So you get, so you, you and 399 other people find yourselves without your, your software jobs. So then what, what happened then?

JON So, um, the software job was amazing 'cause it really introduced me to the idea of HCI, which is now known. It was then human computer interaction now known as UX or user experience. And so I had this incredible background in branding, design, print design, and now I had this exposure to front end and, a digital work. So I thought, well this is great, you know, I'm going to go out. But the market was just, it was 2001 and there were no jobs [crosstalk].

BEN It's a bad time.

JON It was, it was, it was a difficult time to just go and like find a stable position, especially as a young kid who had nine months of experience. So, um, but that's great. Again, it gave me so much confidence in the fact that even in that time like I could find work. I was doing consulting work and then suddenly I found myself having my own business, doing design work, building brands and websites for a bunch of different folks. Um, and one of those clients ended up being a buddy of mine who I met at that software company named Brendan Synnott, who called me up and said, "Hey, I'm going to go do this granola business and I have a label with a bear eating grass. I need your help." So that was the beginning of [Bear Naked granola](#) and it was just one project at a time. He was just like one of many clients and I was working on his stuff. And then eventually we got to a place where the business was exploding. And...

BEN So before we go too far down the road, I want to talk about that initial logo mark, which was the like slash.

JON The slash, the scratching claw.

BEN How did you come up with that?

JON Um, you know, it was, it really, I'm so grateful for the design education I received at Illinois. They really taught, you know, not just how to operate the application. As a matter of fact, they didn't teach us hardly anything. That was totally on your own.

BEN You just gonna pick that up.

JON You've just gotta figure that out on your own. They taught us nothing about the applications, how to work them well. Um, and in fact we were like trying to like use the bootleg applications for my buddy. Ironically it was from Thailand who would go get them like from a disk and then like get it to us 'cause we were all poor college kids. So, um, so they really taught us to do is really understand the context. What's the purpose? How are we, how are we understanding the problem and then creating a solution that has purpose and intention, not just looks pretty.

That sort of an idea. And that the entire basis of learning what design was not just the aesthetic that most people understand it, but really understanding the problem and deconstructing the problem and pulling away what are the things that are, that are not critical, that are not necessary. So you can really get to this idea that I love which is called the crystal goblet. So the crystal goblet so that it can be a, there can be a glass, its fanciness cool gems are made of gold and great materials, but none of those things showcases the beautiful thing, which is the wine inside. So the crystal goblet is the perfect carrier because it is almost invisible to showcase in the content. And so I think there's something there that entire idea. So, um, so how does the crystal goblet translate to slash marks for Bear Naked? Well it was also early part in my career, so...

BEN That's right.

JON It was just kind of, they was, I was like, how do I create this idea of the bear and be a little bit clever and wink towards it without having a photo of a bear or...

BEN Or a cartoon bear.

JON Which is today's logo. Um, and I don't fault for that, right? I mean it's, it's uh, at least it's not Tony the Tiger. But, there is an interesting tension. We'd get into that whole course of course, about from where we came, 'cause Brendan didn't want that. He, he was really against, you know, selling these sugar cereals to kids using cartoon characters.

BEN Right. And again, we're back, we're back to cereal.

JON And we're back to cereal it all connects.

BEN It does. So, so in that, now one of the things that I think people perhaps take for granted now that was really important about Bear Naked granola is you guys were the first, at least the first day at a, on a larger scale to package your stuff in a standup pouch.

JON Absolutely.

BEN Right?

JON Yeah.

BEN So how did that innovation come about?

JON So I'm, I'm gonna stack the answer to that. So the first thing is, I would say there's a number of things that had Brendan and I be a really great team. The first one was granola and just oats in general was just dead. It was a dead category.

BEN Mr. Quaker.

JON That's right. So even as much as there was all a prominent cereal aisle with tons of boxes, granola was like old man or old woman or a hippy food, whatever, right? Like nobody was into that space. So he saw like, Oh my gosh, we can make this great. I've got a great product. Jon knows how to make things look cool. And I'm not looking at their cereal companies. I'm looking at Apple and other like high end brand.

BEN Which is a key insight, right? That you're not, you weren't, your point of reference was not what's, what's the neighbor next door on the shelf doing? It's, how can I think completely differently about this?

JON That's absolutely right. I did not want to be a me too cereal brand, I wanted to bring elevated design sensibility to Granola and Quaker oat category. Right. And that, that in of itself would have so much differentiation as a brand. And then, um, and then Brendan was just great 'cause he this, you know, this, he's very young in his career. This is his first company, that he is work and on, so he and his partner Kelly are in the granola aisle, samp- they saw a sample there.

BEN They're traveling around for the whole first year or so, like sampled, I forget the number, but it's hundreds, perhaps thousands of times, just like ridiculous amounts of sampling. So they're getting real time consumer feedback, which again, a lot of people in the early stages think they can skip. And, and think, Oh there's gotta be a shortcut so I don't have to do the hard work of either making this stuff or of, of getting that face to face a consumer interaction. But it's actually, there's magic in that.

JON Oh there is. And I think the irony in this could build all the way back to Pact I don't know if we'll get there. But Brendan was always fiercely against research, fiercely. And what's interesting now at Pact is that we're actually engaging in really great research. But I think the differentiating factor is he didn't need it then 'cause he was doing it every single day.

BEN He was his own research department.

JON Exactly, and he have the best access to the best research and it was, there was no filter. He wasn't working with a consultant or an agency or whatever. He was getting it right in. So that was so critical to the success. And his end, he's a smart guy, he had great insight and he's in the grocery store over and over. So he's studying the landscape and I can't recall what it was - somebody else had to have been doing it. He had to have seen it, again he was looking outside the category, found this idea of the standup gusseted pouch and he's like, Jon, we're doing this. You know, and so...

BEN Which again, in that moment, if you have cereal, it is in an opaque rectangular box that has some sort of a film or foil liner inside of it. And there were no alternatives.

JON That's right. And you did that because that's what stacked best on the shelf. It gave you a brand billboard. You didn't have to worry about people seeing like sediment and settling - all these different reasons. There's a reason why it was done that way. Right? But enter innovation and disruptive thinking, he's going, I love my product, I love the way it looks. I need people to see these are full size nuts and components in here that are fantastic. And so, I want people to look inside and have a window. And he was all about this idea of like radical transparency way early on. See it. I'm

not trying to hide anything from you. This is amazing. I want you to look, touch, feel. And so it was around, so my design challenge was, okay, how do I account for things like settling of product and you know, and that sort of thing.

BEN Right. You don't highlight the very bottom of the couch.

JON That's right, the bottom was not transparent because it just wasn't as pretty. Um, and, and having to figure out like how do I do this to create that window. But then still now I've got a, you know, smaller amount of real estate to work with to do the brand messaging and all this stuff. So it was a fun challenge and we probably went through four iterations before we ended up with the one that ended up being kind of our champion.

BEN Right. Well, in one of the things that you run into there is when you, when you have a packaging innovation along this lines, you also have to, there, there are equipment ramifications and they're filling and packaging ramifications there that sometimes if you're just operating in a, in, in a standard co-packing environment, they may say, well, no, we only have one way to do it. So you guys had to had to overcome that as well.

JON That's right. And we weren't co-packing right. And that there's the, there is one of the strategic advantages to doing it on your own.

BEN To going the hard way.

JON It's going the hard way. There's no doubt about it. Um, and that cuts both directions. But one of the things was, Hey, we're packing it by hand anyways at the time we can put it in whatever the heck we want to.

BEN That's right. That's right.

JON Um, and I think the other great thing about the, the gusset, the zip gusset idea was, he was saying, I want I, this thing is more than just about what's on the shelf and about presenting it. This is about usage. I don't want people to just open this thing up and pour it out at breakfast time and put it back in their pantry. I need to message to them, this is all day snacking. Zip it up, throw it in your purse, throw it in a backpack, throw it in the car. And so, you know, again, I really applaud him for the insight and then he was partnering with me to just bring it, bring it to life.

BEN No, that's excellent. And now when you see, because I, I, I fear that we're gonna we're, we're gonna talk about a lot of other things. And so I don't want to move on too quickly.

JON Yeah.

BEN Today, if I go to this cereal aisle or the there now there's almost a granola aisle in the store and the state of the art, the state of the union is granola comes in gusseted pouches.

JON That's right.

BEN Right. So if, if you're starting, and I think this is an interesting thing from your perspective, you know, there's all these granola companies and maybe they're doing a different thing or something like that. What's your advice? If somebody comes to you and they say, Hey, I've got an a, I've got this granola and I, I'm packaging it in a standup pouch and it's 2019, or whatever the, the more recent year is, uh, do you think I'm going to be a big deal, Jon?

JON Yeah. So I think there are a lot of people who want to do change for the sake of change because it makes them feel like they're innovating because they're doing change. And if we look at the story that we just navigated together, change with purpose and intention is fundamentally different than change for the sake of change.

BEN Yeah.

JON When people are all doing it a certain way, there's a reason for it and you should probably really understand and pay attention to the reason for it so that you know that if you're wanting to differentiate from that standard, you have a very specific intentional reason for deviating from that standard. So, you know, if someone came to me and said, should I do it in a pouch or a, or not - like that, that's, that's not even a question to be addressed. The, the real thing is do you have an alternative, innovative idea present to me and let me know what you're thinking and then we can discuss what the pros and cons are and whether or not that's a good idea or not, but just change for the sake of change? Like I'm not interested in the conversation.

BEN Right. But then also at the same time, it's harder. It might be a little harder for them to stand out in that granola aisle as well now because like, okay, so you have you, you, you've gotta a new Berry or something like that. Like it's hard to, where's the news there? What, what is truly innovative? How have you transformed that experience? Again, you guys were taking, there were a few things, uh, these theses around radical transparency around how, how, you know, your crystal goblet theory of, of being able to, to truly see the contents, uh, of, of the package, but then also this transformation around seeing granola or cereal as a breakfast food versus an all-day snacking occasion type food. Right? And there's a few pretty major theses in there.

JON Yes, there are. Yes, there are. And so when you're talking about coming into a market, I think that's one of the big things is beyond just packaging, do you have a number of theses for why you're entering the business at all?

BEN Right.

JON Um, and listen, here's the thing. If you're coming and doing the exact same thing that everybody else is doing, but you have operational differentiation and you're able to bring it to market at a better price or something else. Like those are all valid reasons to be a quote unquote me too. 'Cause you're not really a, me too at that point you have, you have strategic differentiation and now you can go get market share. But if you're coming into a place to just be a new brand, expecting somebody to get excited, like you said, 'cause you have a new berry in there, it's probably not going to work.

BEN Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So you, you carry through the Bear Naked granola and a that after, after a period of time is acquired by, uh, Kellogg's.

JON Yes.

BEN And what did you do then?

JON So, um, there was a kind of a breathing period for about two years, uh, in there. And I had actually left Bare Naked a little bit earlier, again, young in my career. And there was another opportunity I end up working, uh, at my church for a little while, which was an incredible gift in its own right because in that space I was exposed to an entirely different world. Live production, video, speed to market. Oh my gosh. I'm talking about every single Sunday.

BEN Live streaming.

JON Yeah. Live stream. You're talking about things like we're in the South here who kind of had the mega church world, right? And so I was exposed to a space, it wasn't like the churches that I kind of sort of attended when I was growing up from Chicago. And all of a sudden you have a huge, a design and branding like, you know, series, message series and these things. So it's almost more like this world of like podcasting or, uh, entertainment media where you're really seeing these demands, at least from like the creative side that I was managing. So that was fascinating. What were some really young, incredible people. Um, and I had to learn a lot about coordinating messaging, everything else. So that was a gift in its own right.

BEN Yeah.

JON Not to mention that one of these young guys introduced me to Google and all of the amazing things that were in the world of Google Docs and sharing docs and everything else. Which was a fundamentally critical piece of how I operate businesses today.

BEN Correct.

JON So I am very grateful for that.

BEN That's right, and that'll be part of our subsequent conversation about the, the transition from artist to operator. But we'll get to that in just a moment. So, so then after that, when, when does the Evol thing happen?

JON So, um, so couple of years post the sale of Bare Naked, um, I ended up going to Mexico with Brendan. Uh, we've always traveled together here and there throughout our history and we're literally on a beach in Mexico at this little surf place and, uh, were chatting. And I frankly, I was just kind of having a bit of a venting moment. I was, I was having some frustrations with what I was doing and because I had left Bare Naked to go work for the church, he was like, Oh, Jon's like untouchable.

BEN He's done. Yeah.

JON He's in this world. He's in this, this space and he's not going to leave that. And I said, I'm really frustrated. I think, I think it's time to make a change. And he's like, and so he came back to like a week later and he said, "Hey, I didn't know that we could even talk business again." He's like, But, um, Tom, who is also the, the, he was the CFO over at Bare Naked. He's like, "Tom and I met this guy who's making burritos in Boulder, Colorado. Do you want to go do it again?" And it was, it was amazing 'cause it was at that moment I just knew, I was like, hell yes. Like it's go time. I'm so excited to do that. You know, the band's coming back together. And it was true. Uh, the guy who had been the VP of sales was another guy who was driving one of the, a what I call the mystery vans of, of Bare Naked where we had like the board short style raft vans and all that. And so he came back, uh, another woman from that team who end up running, uh, the finance side came back. So it was incredible.

BEN And this, this and this, and this is the thing that I think people don't necessarily understand that there is, uh, there is a, a current of bands getting back together and that's, that can be a bit of a thing again to, uh, to novice or a newbie in the industry, you might not even know. You see a, you see a new thing and you're like, Oh, what's that new thing? And you're like, Oh, that, that new thing is going to be a big deal because they have a bunch of people who aren't rookies and they have an idea of what they're doing. So that's, that's what was happening here?

JON It was. And it was really exciting because when you do the band back together too, I'd almost say it's not quite like the analogy where it's the core members. You actually get to build the all-star team.

BEN That's right.

JON You get to go, well there was a group of us, now I'm going to cherry pick from the all-star squad.

BEN 'Cause you also, you also toured with other bands.

JON That's right.

BEN Right? So you're like, I know that drummer, he's really good drummer.

JON He is really, really good.

BEN That's right. So, so at the time, uh, Phil Anson is making Phil's Fresh Burritos in Boulder, Colorado.

JON That's right.

BEN And he's, he's selling it to rock climbers?

JON That's right.

BEN And it, how w-what did you guys see in, in what Phil was making at the time that made you think this is going to be a big deal?

JON Yeah. So, uh, I again, Brendan sees white space, which, which I love. And um, so let's go back. You know, again, there are playbooks, right? Not only is it about repeating teams, but there's repeating playbooks. So in the background, they're, they're doing the deal. So I kind of learned about it later on, but essentially you look at frozen, it doesn't look terribly different to our Quaker man in the hat game. Right?

BEN Right.

JON It's dead. It's Lean Cuisine and a Hungry Man. Nobody's proud of these brands. People are like...

BEN Ultimate commodity.

JON Yeah. And we're talking about literally like the stuff where like if you brought it to the office, you're hiding it in the back of the freezer and then you're burying your trash. Because like there's nothing, nobody wants to talk about the fact I'm eating lean cuisine or hungry man. It's a little bit sad. Um...

BEN Tight? It's the TV trays, the TV dinner.

JON Yes.

BEN Alone in front of the TV.

JON But the TV dinner was brilliant innovation at the time. Like it was groundbreaking. It was this incredible, bring the family together. Now you can literally watch TV, which was new and innovative and have this meal without mom in the kitchen all day long. So it had its place. But again, without change, things eventually creep into their own little death.

BEN That's right. That's right.

JON So here we are and we have this guy who is a, as the term goes, a dirt bag climber who, uh, just honestly doesn't want to work for anybody. So he's like, how can I climb a, he literally an El Dorado Canyon. He's at this little place with his girlfriend and he's like, I'm going to try to fund this by making burritos. And selling them to the climbers, but they're all poor. So nobody's wants to buy his burrito's. So it actually ends up selling them to the gas station at the corner and they start buying. So that's kind of how that game begins. And before he knows it, 'cause he's just a great, hardworking, innovative guy. He ends up building a business. But, you know, life critical thing happens, right? Is we know what these businesses, especially for startups, you hit a place where you're like, I can see the opportunity, but the debt's gone too high. Like, I'm like, the car is wobbling on the freeway.

BEN It gets a little bit scary.

JON It gets scary. And he was at the scary point, um, you know, and he was really at the place where it was like, is this this whole thing going to crumble? My wife is pregnant. We might have to move back to California and live with my mom. Like that's just where they were.

BEN That's right.

JON In comes Brendan and Tom with capes waving in the background in a way. And it's like, Hey, you know, for them, they see a great business deal in front of them. But they all, but Brendan and Tom are also looking at it and bro, and it's the same thing. It's like I see an opportunity here.

BEN They saw a really good product that had limited distribution at the time.

JON That's right.

BEN On a corner outside of Boulder.

JON A little beyond that at the time, but yes.

BEN A little bit of course. Fair. And, and, and at the same time, they thought this could be a great anchor in strategy for building a brand that, that goes after this frozen foods section.

JON Absolutely.

BEN Right? So then, uh, they, they say, Hey, Jon. Do you want, do you want to do this? And you, you, you're at the moment where you're like, yeah, let's do this.

JON Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. And what I love is it was Phil's Fresh Foods and the only other big player, which is still the juggernaut. I would argue, the juggernaut of organic period is Amy's Kitchen. Right?

BEN Right, right.

JON And so, you know, it's such an interesting thing, again, teachable moment for founders. You know, Brendan and I come in and it's, you know, we're just all cylinders. Like really? That's the thing about bringing the team back together. It's not like we're having a conversation. It just starts on day one, we're going? And he's been brainstorming [ideas around this brand and he has this idea to call it Evol](#), love backwards. And Burr and Phil hates it, hates everything about, he hates the name, he hates the brand concepts, he hates the packaging designs that I'm doing. And it was a little bit of that moment of like, it's, I'm bummed that you don't love it. And like, this is why we're here. This is what we do.

BEN That's right.

JON And one day I hope you learn. I hope, I hope we can do the hold hands and be like, yeah, we made that critical decision and it was against everything you liked. And we did have that moment a few years and it was like...

BEN I was wrong.

JON It was amazing.

BEN It pretty well.

JON Yeah. it turned out all right. It turned out all right.

BEN Yeah, that's right exactly. So, so w- what was your, what was your response the first time that you heard, uh, Evol as a, as a name?

JON So the interesting thing, because we lived in Austin or I lived in Austin at the time, um, and they were all in Colorado, is that we had Torchy's Tacos. And so when Brendan and I were talking about what is the ethos of this brand, what does it look like? Well, we kind of referenced back to one of our trips and we had gone on this trip together to Hawaii where we both had tried to learn how to surf. And, um, and there was this...

BEN Emphasis on try.

JON Try. Oh yeah. I still am not a water man. I can't figure it out, but I, I have fantasies of one day, you know, maybe being able to do it, um...

BEN Surfing beside Eddie Vetter? Right [crosstalk]

JON Yeah, it'd be great. It'd be so cool. Um, actually Laird Hamilton and that's where he like is.

BEN That's the spot.

JON So that was, that was pretty decent spot.

BEN That's good.

JON Yeah. It's not a bad life. So there was this great little, um, taco burrito trailer called Pete's that's right there where we were in this place called Hanalei Bay. And that's where the surfers would go. They would surf all morning and they'd go to this place. And so Brendan and I were talking about was the ethos. He's like, "It's that trailer, Jon. Like it's that vibe. Like I want that." And I was like, "I feel you." Like I know we, we were, we literally walked that together. We experienced that together. But here we are in Austin. I've got taco trucks all over the place and then I have Torchy's. And so at first I'm going Evol, Evol, Evol. I'm thinking, is it horns? Is it like the way that Torchy's like played with this cutesy baby devil thing.

BEN Right the Cupid devil?

JON Totally the Cupid devil. But I started sketching concepts and like, it doesn't work. It doesn't work. It doesn't work. And then I realized I needed to be a purely typographic play. Um, and at the time it was a very much a time of hand drawing like hand... that was just kind of, sometimes there are trends that you just are like, I can't, I can't escape it.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JON And it was a very much a hand touch, hand draw, drawn, crafted time in design and [crosstalk].

BEN And it comes back and forth. It swings on a pendulum and that's, you'll have gradients everywhere.

JON That's right.

BEN Drop shadows and then it's very flat.

JON That's right.

BEN Yeah. Right.

JON So, so that was, that was the pattern we were in and it felt right. We were kind of going for this, how do I bring a handcrafted vibe into a very highly manufactured frozen food environment? And so, um, so yeah, I loved the idea of the play is probably the big thing. We talked about Bear Naked. One of the, one of the conversations Brendan and I always had was he wanted something that was pervasive and disruptive. He wanted names of, of brands to be something that people spoke about, even if they didn't like it.

BEN Right.

JON You know? And so the idea of like wanting to get Bear Naked while, you know these very handsome young 20 somethings are saying it in the cereal aisle to the mom, not a bad play. Um, and then you kind of get into Evol, you know, and you're like, you like Evol, like bad Evol. Like what, wait is it love backwards Evol? Like how do you... And it's almost confusing in a good way.

BEN It's a lightning rod.

JON Yeah, it was, it was, and so for those reasons I was on, on board. And ultimately...

BEN It's sort of sort of the old like all, all press is good press.

JON Absolutely, absolutely.

BEN In, in some some respect. So I think it's really interesting and I want to point this out that you had in your mind this, this Pete's, uh, shack in Hawaii and that you're actually building a brand around a moment and an experience that you, you're attempting to in some way transport the consumers of what, what would become Evol, uh, burritos to a place that the, again, the reality is they're microwaving the thing and they're in their, you know, break room kitchen or whatever, whatever that is. But how do you, how do you give them a feel in that, in that branding, in the packaging that they are in some way participating in being somewhere else?

JON That's right.

BEN Which is a very powerful thing.

JON It is, I think this gets into these like larger thesis statements that we spoke about earlier and that was kind of a big one and a, and a disruptive one. And I, and I think one of the challenges when you're doing these things is to hold the reality of where you are simultaneously with the vision of what you're aspiring to do. And to be just real with ourselves about the inherent conflicts that lie therein.

Right. And I can be kind of to an extreme, a realist and so I could have very much, so I have to hold that in myself a lot of that time because Brendan and this, what makes Brendan and I so beautifully complimentary is he is flying off, you know, the cliffs. Just leaping being like, I can fly.

BEN Super optimist.

JON Yes, super optimist, you know, has such a vision for these things and I tend to pull back. But that tension, um, is really quite beautiful. So I knew where he wanted to go. I also knew this was frozen food. And um, you know, meanwhile we're dealing with something else an undercurrent - which is how do I start to train people that just frozen food in general is not bad or gross, but actually the absolute best, most natural preservative? When you really think about over time you got salt, which has historically been the best preservative.

BEN Fair.

JON Right? And then you have in since modern, you know, refrigeration and freezers, now we have frozen, or you could say even in the days in which people lived in the North, they could freeze stuff and it would hold. And so it was really about...

BEN So rather than chemical preservatives, you're using thermal preservatives?

JON Precisely.

BEN Right?

JON So now all of a sudden it's about slowly introducing these ideas and training people up and being like, we're playing the natural and organic game here, folks. This is the most natural organic way for us to preserve this food. When mom makes something great, when grandma makes something great, and we've got leftovers for the lasagna that she made. It's in the freezer. When there's leftover chicken soup, it's in the freezer, you know, so that we can keep it for longer than three days or whatever.

BEN Exactly.

JON So trying to build that bridge around the concept of frozen and then taking people this aspirational place. I think this is where the design, the photography of the language, that hand touched, vibe, those, those were the ways in which we channeled that. And I think that's the thing is I'm not saying that every average person who interacted with a brand would be like, Oh, I feel like I'm there. I'm, I'm in Hanalei Bay.

BEN Of course, of course, yeah. That's right. Yeah.

JON But it's understanding where you're trying to take people to even start to give you direction in the choices that you're making.

BEN Because you have theoretically infinite choices you could, you could make. And so having that thesis actually begins to narrow your scope and actually makes it easier for you to make decisions.

JON That's right. Every designer, every business decision maker must have guardrails, must have guardrails. Every marketer must have guardrails. Uh, you, we want to fantasize sometimes about worlds where there are no guard rails as if like that's better. But the reality is the really creative, innovative thinking happens within the guard rails and then knowing where to break the guardrails.

There are those moments when you're like, I'm breaking through something right here because again, I have a thesis. I have a reason to do it. That's the time to do it.

BEN Exactly. No, that's, that's great. So you guys, uh, build up the, the Evol business and eventually, uh, sold that one to Boulder Brands in this, in this, this time around, you actually stuck around for a little while. So what was it like making that transition from startup to what at the time was, was uh, still a rapidly growing, uh, kind of natural foods conglomerate that was based in Boulder, you, you stayed here and were, were going back and forth. What was that period like for you?

JON Hard.

BEN Yeah.

JON (laughs) um...

BEN That's a big shift for, uh, for people who are used to that, that scrappy startups phase.

JON Yeah. And the thing was, again, um, we have to hold all the things on one hand while we're at Evol and we're small and we're building it. We're fantasizing. Gosh, if we just had more money to put behind our marketing efforts, our sales efforts, everything else. So, and also you're, you're building it because you're dreaming about launching it. And so, you know, when this happened, it's this really complicated bittersweet thing every time where you're like, we did it and aww, it's over.

BEN Yeah, yeah.

JON Like so it's the celebration and mourning happening at the same time. Um, and so getting into Boulder Brands, there was a lot of excitement, but it wasn't like we had these conversations with Boulder Brands about like upping the budgets. It was all assumptions. It was a hope.

BEN Right.

JON And then you realize you get into a system that has a lot of different family members, if you will. And some of those family members are doing better than other family members. And like the money is...

BEN And this is, the parents aren't treating all the kids equally in the family?

JON Absolutely not. That's right. The winners get funded.

BEN That's right.

JON The bigger players get funded. And so, like, if we use this analogy, like the allowance is kind of already distributed and so you're, you know, we're almost there for an entire year before you're even kind of, you know, it was kinda like, do your thing over there. You've got our roof. Um, but we're, we're trying to find your place in this new ecosystem. Uh, so now you're playing two different games, if you will. One out there in the market, continue to do what you've been doing, but then a new one kind of internally figure out, well where do you fit? How does this work? Who stays and goes? Where do we merge that? There's so much, um, redundancy happening. And, and I think, again, no fault of Boulder Brands. This is a reality. When you become a conglomerate, you're bringing things together. You know, you've got an accountant over here, an accountant over there. Do you need two accountants now or do you, can you do it with only one?

BEN Right.

JON So that's its own other design problem, which I would have been fascinated to work on frankly. Um, but, but as someone who wasn't in that position, and that was probably for me personally, my greater struggle was when you're in a position, let me rephrase that, when I have been in a position where I can make decisions and see them go, that's really exciting and empowering. I love that. So then to be in a position where there's now layers and you know, you can't make, I couldn't make those decisions anymore. That would just like immediately take effect that that was really hard for me.

BEN Sure. And then, but you at the time though, you didn't just stick with Evol in the, like you, you had some other responsibilities over time across the, the Boulder Brands portfolio. How did, how did your role begin to, to transition there while you were there?

JON So, um, I'm looking to figure out where, what does that role look like? I'm, I'm trying to navigate it. Am I going to sit in the world of innovation 'cause I was leading so much innovation Evol and how we brought things to market is my role gonna sit in creative? Really exciting opportunity, right? Now I have five different brands and I have very strong opinions and experience around how creative teams work. But you know, that would have meant, you know, booting certain people from positions that had been there for a while and asking people to restructure something that has been there and was working as they were fine with it working. So, you know, there was an idea of like how, how I make this next move most likely is going to displace other people, which again, this starts to get into more complex conversation. Um...

BEN It's not all upside.

JON No, no.

BEN Yeah, yeah.

JON Um, but it was exciting. The possibilities were very exciting and so I started having those conversations while also doing the business to figure out where I'd land. What we ended up doing was really looking at Boulder brands as, as what is the frozen business portfolio from Boulder brands that primarily included Udi's frozen and Evol frozen. So I did a lot of work to bring that together. Uh, marry those two worlds, work with their creative team, um, and then present, you know, support sales and marketing efforts across those things and that platform and the innovation process between those two worlds. Um, so that was really where I was moving towards as, until we had the hike with Brendan, which may be your next question.

BEN Well, that's right. So then you're a, but, but I think I hear in there again, this, uh, no pun intended, Evolution, uh, for you personally, uh, happening there from graphic designer to operator. Like you, you can almost see this as a way station along that, along that journey, right? Where you're beginning to think about innovation and how, how you, how you, uh, kind of empower and enable your teams to accomplish these shared tasks and things like that. Which is a pretty, pretty far afield from where you, you started out in this, in this world, right?

JON Absolutely. Absolutely.

BEN Again, this is a very successful company. You're doing really well. Like you have a really good role at Boulder Brands and, uh, you, but you, you can hear even in your story that you're restless.

JON Yeah, absolutely.

BEN Again, right. And so, so let, let's, let's transition to hiking.

JON One of my trips to Boulder, and again, Brendan and I are friends first, right? So I'm just reaching out to a buddy and being like, "Hey, let's, let's go for a hike." Um, and we're on a hike just enjoying the foothills of Boulder, Colorado. Beautiful day, talking about all things in life. And, uh, one of the, you know, things that he was sharing with me was that because at this point Brendan is really an investor with kind of that investor board, seed operation influence with a number of different brands. Uh...

BEN This was his Revelry Brands?

JON This was Revelry. That's right. Correct.

BEN Right.

JON And so now he's saying, I'm going to go step full time into Pact and go be the CEO. And...

BEN Which at the time was just one of his Revelry Brands investments?

JON That's right. That's correct. So here was a pretty big move from him and I'm really curious, will tell me about that. Why is revelry not working out for you? What's the deal? Um, and that's kind of its own separate story of the pros and cons. Like we're always having to face when we're making business decisions.

BEN Yeah.

JON But he saw a really, really powerful opportunity with Pact. He really believed in it, but he also had been through a number of teams and a number of leaders with Pact. And I think he'd kind of come to a place where he said, if I believe this, I have to get more skin in the game. Literally, I have to put my skin in the game.

BEN I need to be present.

JON Yes.

BEN Right.

JON Every day. Um, and, and really it, the, the company had been, I think, in Utah. It was, it was like literally it started in California, had been moved to another state for the leadership of the team. And then he had brought it to Boulder hoping he could still have it close enough. And even that wasn't quite enough to really get the spark that he needed. So this was now his decision to do that. So as he's sharing with me, I'm getting real curious and you know, he straight up says to me, he's like, "Listen, I legally, like, I'm not allowed to talk to you." So, so, uh, but he's like, "But I am rebuilding some..."

BEN This is what I'm doing.

JON But this job like is about to be posted and if you want to figure something out and have a conversation about it, I will like leave that up to you. So I really respected, you know, he respected and honored his agreements as well, which was great. Um, and so I ended up meeting with the Boulder Brands team and just talking about, you know, Hey, this is something that I'm looking to pursue and would that be workable? Could we, you know, make arrangements and they were fabulous and accommodating and, um, it probably also helped that it wasn't a food brand.

BEN Right, right.

JON So, uh, so that was all good and you know, they wished me the best and I had some great relationships from there and I made a move over to Pact to be their VP of marketing. That was four and a half years ago. It'll be five years in January.

BEN So let's w- we're going to continue the Pact story in just a second. We're going to take a quick break.

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Back to the episode!

BEN Okay. Okay. So five years ago you joined Pact as the VP of marketing. And again, this is you, uh, Brendan has gone all in on this, what had been one of his investments, but he, he realized some combination of I need to be focused on this. Plus I see this as a major opportunity. What, what did you see at the time in Pact that got you excited?

JON So again, let's go back to the stories that we've been telling. Um, when I, when I hear from Brendan that he sees something and then all of a sudden I like put those glasses on and I see it with my own eyes, then I make a decision, right?

BEN Right.

JON And so far, uh, I was like, Oh, I see that. Oh, I see that.

BEN That's worked out pretty well for you guys.

JON Yeah, I'm pretty excited about that. So really when I was inquiring like, why, what are you doing? What do you see with patch, whatever? And he said, Jon, it's, I see the same thing that we did in food. It's an organic crop. It's cotton is no different than corn, soybeans, beans, whatever it is. Like it's, it's an organic crop. And in fact, it's one of the biggest ones...

BEN And it's a really challenging crop too. Again, I think that we're in the same way that, that, that consumers are, are very separated from food production. We are also very separated, arguably even more separated because, uh, a lot of, a lot of the, uh, the crop as it relates to cotton is no longer domestic. It's, it's now a global crop. So we're physically separated from it too. So we don't necessarily know how challenging cotton is to grow, especially organically.

JON Absolutely. And, um, I think that the only reason, I mean, aside from the moving away from a more rural to a more urban world in America that has created that natural separation, our food, I think organic is really been a movement or in food to elevate the consciousness. And I think it's been beautiful. In fact, I'm really excited. Uh, I don't know if you recently saw the only organic, the skip the chemicals campaign, the fact that Gary Hirshberg and the folks over at Amy's Kitchen and so many things like 100 of these organic food brands have partnered together. I'm really stoked, they just released this national campaign and it tells me...

BEN And these are some of the OG organic people too?

JON Yes, absolutely.

BEN You have Stoneyfield farms. Amy's Organic, people who've been organic since before organic was cool.

JON Absolutely. And these are the people who are doing organic back in our day 'cause we were the OGs in bear, you know, with Bear Naked as well. And so to see, Oh my gosh, how far this has come since we all were kind of innovating that 20 some odd years ago and to see that the movement is, I mean look at what's Whole Foods has done and look at how the growth of this industry has happened. Uh, so to see that, that there's actually the ability to start to partner up. I mean, yes it has grown in its great, but I still, you know, it's still not Kellogg and General Mills...

BEN No, it's still so much, so much head room.

JON Yes. And the amount of marketing dollars that they have to continue to, you know, run and operate their businesses. No disrespect, but, uh, but to see this starting to happen I think is really exciting. And for me, this is, it seems like I'm always moving towards like one of the greater challenges, right? That people don't know this to your point about apparel. In fact, there's really no regulation in apparel, at least in food. We have regulation standards at Evol. If we want to be USDA organic, there is a USDA organic certifier in the plant.

BEN Anytime you're running the product.

JON That is correct.

BEN That's right.

JON As you know, they're in the plant. They're being like the government is putting their seal on this so that consumers can trust the authenticity,

BEN They have an office in the plant. They have a parking space in front of the plant.

JON That's correct.

BEN They're there every single time.

JON Every day. So, um, we don't have that in, in apparel. So, so to your point. What I have learned in apparel, we could have a whole other podcast on.

BEN Absolutely.

JON It's fascinating. Um, but it is these, these, again in the same way we talked about people being separated from frozen and these ideas, it's this no one is thinking about where does my clothing come from? How is it made? And the way that people are starting to really think about where does my food come from and how has it made? And there's a lot of pretty gnarly stories. Stories that are not as prevalent in the news today, but we've heard them, we've heard about factories...

BEN Sweat- sweatshops.

JON Yes. Factory collapses, deaths in Bangladesh, you know, these sorts of things. And then there's others stories that are not so publicly talked about, about things around like farmer suicides in India. Like it's not, it's not really exciting things.

BEN There's a, there's a dark side to it.

JON There's a dark side, And there's a dark side to most industries.

BEN Right.

JON Um, and I'm not e- and I'm also not suggesting that that is the absolute of what is occurring everywhere with every single brand that's out there. But the point being, it's really hard. Again, it's, it's, I'm really likening it to when everybody started calling food natural.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JON And then there was this huge whistle-blowing event. And again, probably those of us that are in the industry know this more than people who are not in the industry, but it was like, what does natural mean? It means nothing. It's a non-regulated term that people were just using to push sales because of what was going on.

BEN It was the ultimate in green washing.

JON Ultimate. Right. So now what is about to happen? This movement is happening in, in the clothing industry right now as well. Um, everyone is starting to talk about sustainable. We know theoretically the idea means generally, but there's no like accountability to it.

BEN How do you prove that something is sustainable or not sustainable?

JON That's right and I think there are some things in the market. They are not as, as powerful and influential today. Perhaps again in 10, 20 years they will be. Um, there is, there is something called GOTS, which is the global organic trade standard and that is actually a part of the USDA organic umbrella actually. That is, that is like their certifying party. Um, from the government's perspective for apparel, um, and managing organic cotton supply chains. And they have very specific rules and regulations just like in food. Um, and they're quite lovely. And then there is fair trade that we all know about from coffee and chocolate and some other products. And so that really becomes, um, an even higher level. So GOTS has, um, also has standards for labor and the welfare of humans. Um, but we're, but we like double dipping. We're doubling down on this. We're also going with the fair trade standard, uh, because not only do they have their own rules and regulations for the, for the wellbeing of, of these folks, but they also have a fund that you, you know, we pay a premium on to then goes back in and allows these workers to then use those funds as they see fit for the betterment of their community. So...

BEN That's really cool.

JON It's really great. And these are the only two like legitimate like standards, um, that are kind of taking it to the same level of like organic standards. You know, there's other things out there that are, uh, that exists. But I don't think they have the integrity that these two have.

BEN Yeah. So, so you guys, you saw that man, this is a, this is this really a messy nebulous world over here. We think that we can, uh, bring some more of the radical transparency to this world. What did, what did you see as the opportunity in, again, you, you didn't necessarily shoot for high fashion, Milan and Paris. What did you, what did you see the opportunity as?

JON So this has been a really interesting journey. I would argue this has been the hardest journey I've been on to date. Um...

BEN Which is, uh, uh, probably encouraging for people to hear because you assume that, Oh, you're, you have all these successes. Shouldn't it get easier? Well, if, if you're taking on major challenges, not every one of them is, you know, is, is just kind of easy street.

JON If I did another food brand, but very specifically, if I did another granola/cereal brand or another frozen food brand, then I think it's very possible that it could have been easier. Certainly probably wouldn't have been harder. But even saying that, I don't know, I didn't live that life. Right?

BEN Right.

JON There could be any number of things. The people could have been more challenging. The barriers to entry could've been more challenging. The investmen...

BEN The market could change.

JON The market could change.

BEN Yeah.

JON There's any number of things that could have made it made it more or less challenging. What makes this one particularly challenging is that we came in again with that thesis statement. The thesis statement was, we know grocery, we know how to play this game of grocery. Let's be disruptive. Let's put very basic underwear, socks, undershirts into boxes present in grocery. The way that grocery operates. Don't ask them to be apparel retailers 'cause we know walking into your favorite apparel retailer is not like walking into HEB or Whole Foods or Kroger.

BEN Absolutely.

JON It's a very different experience. So we weren't asking the grocery stores to be apparel retailers. So we box it up for them, did all of these things. And in an effect it worked because we have nationwide distribution in Whole Foods. So it worked, but not to the level that the business needed it to work.

BEN Right.

JON And we were hoping like we did in food, you have a success story and one retailer in this case Whole Foods, you leverage that success story to go, uh, be successful in another place like a Target. Um, leverage that success story to go be a successful at a club, store. And so on this game goes, this is kind of the [crosstalk].

BEN But, but fundamentally one of the challenges there is that people don't go to whole foods to buy clothes, even, even basics. And now they do have a whole body section, right?

JON Sure.

BEN Where there are, there are a number of different products that are not food are sold, but still you're, that's a pretty big consumer behavior change that you, that you're asking for.

JON Absolutely. And, and to your point, you know, there's a number of people who go grocery shopping to get in and get out. You have to be a little bit in the, I enjoy grocery shopping and discovering

what's here and there are areas that, population of people and that's great. Those are the people who are probably finding Pact at Whole Foods and getting exposed to the brand. Um, in fact, we just did a, uh, kind of a random survey of folks that are currently, um, subscribers at Pact. And the data came back and four out of the five people met us at Whole Foods.

BEN So still very important for discovery.

JON Very important for discovery, very important for the connective tissue of the brand, the brand values. That's the other thing is I don't have to work so hard to tell you about it as if I'm in target. If I'm in Target, you don't, I don't even know that you're looking for those things at whole foods. It's like, I know what's in here. I know at this place, this retailer promises for values. Oh, this brand's here, it must be aligned.

BEN Right.

JON And if they want to go further, they can go further. So, um...

BEN So you guys were on this journey where you, you had, you had your theses about how this was going to go and it didn't necessarily go that way.

JON That's right.

BEN And so you had to be adaptive and pivot and do some other things. And I know you found yourself going really hard, uh, down the e-commerce path. Right? So what, what did you learn along the way?

JON So really the way it worked was we were all in, we went all into the wholesale business, the grocery business thing. We literally, um, trimmed down the portfolio of product we made, made very strategic decisions around our team because we didn't need these like people who are doing these apparel things. We needed a very lean team to go do this thing that we need to do. And uh, so we did those things. Meanwhile, we had a website because it actually started as an econ business and there were a bunch of issues, uh, that were going on with the website. They were causing stuff. And so I reached out to a buddy of mine who I knew was a great technologist and I was like, "Hey, can you build me like a \$10,000 super basic shoppable site?" Maybe it's on the Shopify platform or whatever. Uh, we are currently at Magento and, um, and essentially these things were kind of parallel pathing.

I knew I had to have something. So that was kind of on the back burner, but it had to be like good enough. Which is funny because you know, it's not like a brochure ware site for like a food company to be shoppable is quite complex in and of its own right.

BEN Very much so.

JON Very much so. So he does an audit, I trust him and he comes back and he's like, yeah, that thing you want me to build, you just going to have the exact same, it's going to look prettier 'cause you're gonna do design work, but it's just going to have the same exact same problems that you're currently having in three to six months and you're just going to be knocking on my door being like, TJ, why did you build me a, you know, a shinier, broken thing.

BEN Right. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JON So we got him involved and he ended up, again innovating and building a brilliant solution for us. Um, that is a custom solution set on top of NetSuite, which was, um, the system that we were running the business on. So, so that's happening in the background. We're all in with the wholesale

thing, but the doors aren't really opening the way we're wanting to. But then I also knew I had to not just build the technology, I had to have somebody on the econ platform. So I call another buddy of mine up again, one of the, the all stars from Evol. I said, Hey, I know you like this stuff. Will you kind of sit on it, we'll throw some money your way and you can do the things that you do and just like keep it going. Well, that thing that he was doing was growing. Where the other thing wasn't really moving. And so, you know, as it does it, it caused us to take a look at it and pay more attention to it.

Um, and eventually we got to a place, and I remember this moment where we were all going, we're in eComm company. Like, this is where it's going. We're seeing what's happening. This was, again, when you're in the industry, you see more of this stuff than when you're not, but it was like the malls are closing. Is retail dying in America? Is it all online? It's all direct to consumer and Amazon, you know, is it, is everything going to get shut down that's brick and mortar? So you know, there wasn't, it wasn't like the doors were opening up for us to be in the apparel space anyways and it was all pointing towards eComm and direct to consumer. So we're like, that's w- this is the future. Like we have got to go play here. And so we really changed the, the focus. And I remember we were talking internally and then to the board and we're like, we're an eComm company.

They're like, "No you're not." And they were, these guys weren't eComm people, you know, folks on the board. They're not eComm folks. They were people that were from the wholesale background because that's what we're doing. And we wanted that expertise and advising. And then it was probably five, six months later, they're like, so y'all are an eComm company. I'm like, "Yeah."

BEN You know, you know what I think super interesting about this is that, uh, you know, we talk a lot about product market fit and the assumption is that this is this like two way relationship or equation. And often really what we say is there's a market and this market is out there and then you're, you're continuing to tweak your product until you meet the market.

JON Yes.

BEN You guys in some respects did the opposite. You have, you had this product, and you was, and you, you came to the conclusion, guys, we're going after the wrong market, right? So our, our, our consumer isn't shopping this way. They're shopping a very different way and so we're going to keep the nuts and bolts of the product are actually pretty similar, but we're going to shift our market approach to find that fit.

JON Um, I want to, accept you telling us that we were genius and innovative, but let's, I think, let's talk about what really, probably with the case...

BEN How did it really go, yeah.

JON Let's be really clear. If Costco would have given us the business, if Target would have partnered with, give us the business, we'd be a wholesale company selling underwear and socks and undershirts and boxes, period all day long.

BEN That's right. Because at the time I remember us talking about that. That was, that was your, your goal. That's what you're trying to do.

JON And if the business could have exploded in growth that way. Heck yeah, baby. Like we were going to do that, but the reality was those doors didn't know open [crosstalk].

BEN That's right so you had to do something.

JON [inaudible] close like, well, so do we all just go, well, it didn't work and we all take our toys and go home or do we go, okay, that's not working. Is there anything that could work? If we, if we move our focus, our attention, our resources to another area, can we see growth? And that's exactly what happened. We moved the resources to the thing that was kind of on the back burner, put it to the front burner, put the energy and again restructured the team to add fuel to that thing and expertise and all of a sudden growth, growth, growth, growth, growth is starting to happen. And now wholesale kind of shifts back and it's like whole says, you know, Whole Foods is an awesome partner. Let's continue to keep focus and growth in that, that world. But let's not worry about all this other world of retail. At least not now.

BEN Right.

JON Now that may come back on the table and hopefully it does because I would love to have the, what I call the, the omni-channel.

BEN All of the above.

JON The whole thing. I want the whole, you know, thing, but you know, there's a, there's, there are there times when, let's just call it what it is, you can't be too greedy.

BEN That's right. You play the hand you are dealt.

JON You play the hand you're dealt. You go where it's going. You know, you work with it.

BEN That's right. Well in, uh, and around that time you met, you were making a transition personally and in your career to, to being the COO of Pact as well. Right? So, so now I feel like this metamorphosis of, of, of uh, young Jon, the designer to, to a more seasoned Jon the operator has, has come full circle a little bit. And you, you now find yourself operating a direct to consumer eCommerce company.

JON Yes.

BEN Right? That yes. You're, you are, you are omni-channel in some respects, but, but your, your, your focus really is on that, on that eCommerce.

JON Absolutely.

BEN In a time where D to C is a big deal. Right. And so, so you're, you're learning about this, you know, you're doing it live and you're doing it live alongside a lot of other brands. And, and, and D to C and apparel is a, is obviously a reasonably mature, uh, market and path to market in the food world. It's still, people are still figuring it out. 'Cause sometimes it's complicated. It's complicated to ship frozen burritos around the country.

JON Yes it is. We did that [crosstalk].

BEN And all of these sort of set. That's right. You tried. But, uh, it, it's tough. And uh, so what did you like tell us about like your, your path of learning around being this D to C eCommerce company? 'Cause again, this is not your background.

JON No, it's not. So um, I feel like there's two stories in there. One is you know, this D to C game and one is like the Evolution of Jon, if you will, from design.

BEN Yeah, yeah. Both are interesting.

JON So let's with like my path and... I look at it like this. I think that people, I think we all have a way in which we frame up a word, a phrase, an idea based on our experience, right? So when anyone says or even my mom will be like, Oh, Jon is a designer, right? People are automatically thinking like he's an artsy guy. Maybe he does paintings, like he does these other things. Which is great. Um, but the reality is, as I said for me, my education design told me how to look at complex messes like organized chaos.

BEN Yeah.

JON There is nothing quite like the design project of organizing chaos when you are a operator COO of a fast growth startup company. I couldn't have a better design project-

BEN Absolutely.

JON -than that. And what I love about it is it's not fixed state. Right? When I, I think about the Evolution of print to software and design or web design to a business, and I love this, right? Because print was so, it's so nerve wracking 'cause man, when you put that thing off. And we know the difference between like a piece of letterhead versus a package, right? We designed a package, you know like Oh baby it has to be perfect.

BEN That's right, we printed a million of them.

JON We printed a million. It's going to be in the market for a long time. You can't just like pull that off the shelf because we all know that that takes a lot of time, energy and costs. So like the permanent state of that. But then I, when I started to learn software, I was like - Oh my gosh, there's not the permanence of decision making. You can truly iterate. And that was the mantra of software like speed to market. Go, go, go, go iterate, iterate, iterate. It doesn't have to be perfect. It'll never be perfect. Learned from the use. And so I got really fascinated by that. I'm like, "Oh that's really interesting." But then I get to take that now and leverage it in running a business. And it's, you know, it's always a chronic state of change and chaos and, and I'm trying to reduce the chaos and bring clarity and put things into place, put systems into place. And systems are everything from a document that manages what projects a certain person or team is doing to the meeting cadence in which you do those things, to how the decision making and the flow of communication happens. And assembling all those pieces together so that the thing that is the business is operating in its most efficient state is one of the most fascinating things for me. I love it.

BEN I love it. Yeah. So I, I tend to think of it, and we've talked about this before as a series of micro experiments that I'm constantly running a bunch of experiments.

JON Yes.

BEN And you're just looking to see, you know, an experiment can't fail. An experiment. You get an experiment that you get data from is a successful experiment. Whether it got the result that you thought it was going to get or not, as long as you're rapidly iterating and running these experiments, you're like, Oh, that worked. Oh, that didn't work. Huh? I wonder why that didn't work. Maybe we should change some variable here. And then we try that again. And again. So you're, so you're, you're saying that you took your artistic design thinking mindset and actually just redeployed it to the broader system of, of the business. Now, so let's talk about what, what is to the second part of that, that question, how did that, how was, how was that thinking germane to where the business was at, at this point?

JON Absolutely. So, um, I kind of mentioned it in some of the story pieces of having to change the team. You know, it sounds like it's a sidebar. Those are major, major changes.

BEN Absolutely.

JON You know, it's really, really massive to go from a team that is wholesale oriented to a team that is direct consumer oriented.

BEN Which means that you have to let people go and that's painful. It's painful, it's painful to be let go. It's painful to let people go. It's terrible.

JON And these are people, you know, especially in a small company, you know, these are typically people you're, you're becoming friends with. It's not just, you know, Sally and building C who I've never really met before.

BEN Right. Right.

JON Um, and so that's really, really tricky. And then not only is it, there's the relational human aspect that is tricky, but it's tricky as a business, you can't just be like, Oh, I'm going to remove those seven people and just automatically bring in these great people that are going to just fix all my problems. It is so fraught with risk.

BEN Oh yeah.

JON Because, you are pulling people out, which means that, you know, these people are all doing work, which means there's all, it's like who's picking up all those pieces? What things can die? What things can't die? Oh, these people sound like they're sitting around being like, I don't have anything to do. All the other people who are there are maxed out. So it's like, where do you move the work? And then if you're gonna bring somebody new in again, we all want to fantasize, Oh, we'll hire this one person and it's all gonna be great.

BEN And he or she will do the work of seven people on day one.

JON And they're all unicorns. Right? You're always trying to hire the unicorn, which is great when you find them. But in no matter what, no matter what expertise they have, they have to come in and learn your business.

BEN Yeah.

JON Right. They have to learn your community. How does this thing work? And it just takes time. That like almost osmosis thing. You just have to breathe something for long enough before you finally like it's just part of you. And so now you're not just operating the way you know how to operate, but you're operating, you know how to operate with the integrity of the brand and the ethos and the systems of the entire thing. So that's really challenging. So I'm managing how do I find the new people, how do I appropriately in ti- and the right times, let people go from the business and do that in a way that hopefully we're, you know, not burning bridges or at least transition them away that they have the best chance for success. 'Cause I, you know, everybody has bills to pay and families to feed and all those things.

And then how do I then bring people in once I get them in and find those people, which his own thing. How then do we get them stood up and get them part of this? And then all the people who didn't leave, how do I manage their roles and transitions and sensitivities.

BEN And their emotions?

JON And their emotions. Am I going to be fired next? Is this an unstable place? Is that person taking my job? Are they going to be my boss? Are they going to in fact, you know, make decisions that are going to affect my life and the way that I do my job. So it's a really interesting game.

BEN That's right. Yeah. It's really tricky. It's, it involves a lot of humans. Humans are complex and humans in systems are even more complex. And so you had all these humans, uh, who were running a business and you had to make some, some major changes. And then, uh, and then you had to, to discover alongside again, other peer companies around the country and around the world who are attempting to do this D to C eCommerce business. How did you learn, again, how did you go from not being an expert at this, to becoming an expert at this? Is there a conference you go to where you learn all the things?

JON Well, there are plenty of conferences out there who would tell you...

BEN And they're all very expensive.

JON They're very expensive. But they'll tell you if you attend and you know, um, but no, and I listen, I'm sure some of those are great.

BEN Sure.

JON Right. And they have their place in the world. Uh, there, there are great opportunities for networking and meeting new people and get exposed to new ideas and, and hearing just like with this podcast from hearing from people who've been there. So there's an absolutely great value, but it's not like you do one of those things or listen to one podcast or read one book and all of a sudden it happens. Again, you get in there and the thing is, you know, are we experts? Doubt it, right? I mean, are we experts at anything?

BEN You're trying.

JON Yeah, we're doing it right. Yeah. But I'm confident. I'm confident in who we are, how we work together and what we do. And you know, it's interesting to go full circle. The fact that Brendan and I met at a software company, um, we have this as part of our ethos. We love this stuff. And so to me it's, it's a lot of combining all the brand stuff we've done in the past with our passion and background in technology and software. So we're marrying those worlds up, but we are operating in fundamentally, unique spaces. We've never been digital marketers and we've never done an apparel brand. And Oh my gosh, is apparel different? Um, it is where I would say food, I, you've heard me say this before in food. I was always playing the game with packaging. How do I disrupt your shopping pattern enough to get you to pause? How do I get you to touch the package? How do I get you to lift the package up? Maybe turn it over.

BEN It's very tactile.

JON Very tactile, and then can I actually get you to taste it? And if I can put some in the aisles to put it in your mouth. Oh my gosh. Have I just accelerated the whole process? Well with doing this whole game. First of all, apparel is visual. It's visual, visual, visual, visual, and it's a lot of deals. And as much, the tension we hold in our business is like, we don't want to be a discount brand, but sales work, everybody likes a sale.

BEN That's right.

JON You know, you got to move product [crosstalk].

BEN They little wavy, the little wavy tag.

JON Yeah.

BEN It matters.

JON It matters. So it's been a really interesting process. So I would say we are learning and developing our expertise trial by fire.

BEN Yeah.

JON Um, I think there's also really interesting things about geography. We are not in San Francisco. I think if our business is based in San Francisco, we would have a different group of people, a different network a different staff. And we would be different as a technology company. That said, I also believe Boulder, Colorado is a Silicon Valley of organic and natural foods.

BEN It is.

JON So there's an interesting tension there because we're not attached to the ethos of San Francisco in tech, but we sure are at the heart and center of what our brand's all about. So, you know, there's, there's tradeoffs there. And, um, and we are, and we have really great people and we're learning and adapting and doing the best we can with it. And, and it has been hard and it has been invigorating and it has been fun and challenging and all the pieces together. And I'm really excited about where we are right now.

BEN Are you at a point where you, you think that more brands, even even on the food side, should take, uh, the direct to consumer eCommerce path more seriously than they do?

JON No. Um, I don't have that perspective.

BEN Just because it's so difficult?

JON I think it's really difficult. It's really expensive. You better have a lot of money to play digital marketing. Uh, it's one thing to be, Oh, we're going to create content and I'm going to take great photos, I'm going to build an insert. And that, that stuff is all really great and great for building a brand. And I think that that's real. But again, talking about what norms are, you know, people still go to the grocery store to do grocery shopping, right? So if you're a food brand and you're not, you're just not going to get the traffic. If I'm scrolling my phone, I'm not necessarily interested in buying one bag of granola or chips or certainly not going to be ordering that frozen burrito when it's a 100 degrees on my front porch in Texas. Right?

BEN That's right. That's right.

JON So I just, I don't know that for me, that's not really where it's at. And then even with other goods, um, you know, Amazon is brilliant and what they're doing, the, the challenge that we are facing in trying to be able to even remotely compete with Amazon, you, it can't be done. We cannot, the warehouse structure, the infrastructure that Amazon has built to be able to privilege those of us who are prime members to be able to actually get things at the speed. It's unbelievable.

BEN It's ridiculous.

JON It is an option- operational, just genius. Um, and we could have all kinds of opinions about whether they're destroying the world and all that, but, but if you can hold all that to the side, it is still absolutely phenomenal what they would pull off.

BEN It is impressive. How they're destroying the word.

JON It is impressive. How they're doing it. Um, and so I respect that reality, uh, which we can go again, Amazon, Whole Foods. Fascinating. But, um, but so, so my thing is there are, there are places where being direct to consumer really intriguing. But as a blanket States, kind of like your packaging question you asked me, should I put it in a standup gusset pouch? Why do you want to do it? Why don't you want to do it? What is the thesis statement? What are the reasons that you do or don't want to do these things? So I'd say the same thing for DUC. What's your product? What are you trying to do? You may be way more successful in a grocery store. You may be way more successful selling to Walmart. You may be way more successful being at Amazon and playing that game. Or maybe it is, DUC?

BEN Yeah, whatever game you're playing, be good at that game.

JON Be good at that game.

BEN Yeah. That's so now, so, so transitioning at like, uh, away from even that, that, uh, your career trajectory and some of this stuff you have had the opportunity because you've been in this world in, in Austin, Boulder and other places for, for several years now, um, to, to meet and to, to talk, to learn from entrepreneurs, founders, uh, across the spectrum of consumer packaged goods, right. The, uh, on the apparel side now, but certainly a lot on the food side. When, when, when a startup comes to you and they say, Hey, I've got a new thing, uh, I've made, I've made a new thing. What do you, what do you look for? What are the, what are the signals, again, good or bad that, that you go, Oh, you may actually have something versus there's maybe you don't say it out loud, but in, maybe in the back of your mind, your, your minds kind of screaming like, no, don't do it, you're wasting your time.

JON Usually that one. Yeah.

BEN Yeah. W- w- what are the, what are the signals that you're, you're kind of attuned to there?

JON So I think this is one of the fascinating things about you and me and our relationship is, and I may be making a completely inaccurate assumption, but my experience of you, Ben, is that you are so excited about these companies and the new brands and things are creating such a fabulous champion of people. And I'm a little, I'm a little bit the yin to your yang where I'm like [crosstalk].

BEN It's not going to work.

JON Uh, if you, if you don't want to do a business then talk to me, but like if you really want somebody to squash your energy, come talk to Jon.

BEN Crush your dreams here.

JON I'm a dream crusher. I am totally a dream crusher. I literally sat with somebody so I get a little bit even kind of cold, sweaty when someone's like, Oh, I want to talk to you or my friends, cousins, brothers, you know, sister starting this company. And um, and, and I, I tend to have very initial reasons.

BEN Which is, and that's great. So like actually love that. But we are very complimentary in that way. But uh, hopefully we both also traffic somewhere in the middle and in the, in the reality realm.

JON Absolutely.

BEN What cuts through that cold sweat to you, where you, your, your initial, you know, kind of, uh, your initial resistance is like, okay, maybe this isn't so stupid.

JON Yeah. Um, it usually starts with like, I have to see what exists. Like there has to be something tangible. First of all, if it's just an idea, don't talk to me.

BEN Yeah.

JON I am so not interested in your sketch on a napkin. Like anyone can do that. I'm sorry. You're ideas are cheap, cheap, cheap. There are brilliant ideas out there, but it is [crosstalk].

BEN Yeah, I have an idea. I have a brand, I have a, I have a recipe.

JON Congratulations. Make something and sell it awhile.

BEN That's right.

JON And then let's have a conversation. But for the most part, like I need to see something. Um, and that something may, it's usually something that's, that's far enough along, right. It's in a package that it's, there's something [crosstalk].

BEN And it may not be the most beautiful package.

JON It doesn't need to be. That will tell me its own story.

BEN Right, right.

JON I will see how far along you are. I don't judge someone by... But in fact, usually what happens for me is if your product is amazing and your packaging sucks, I get really excited.

BEN Sure.

JON So I'm like, I know how to approve that.

BEN That's very fixable. That's very fixable.

JON Yeah. If your packaging is awesome, and the product inside, not so good.

BEN Not so exciting.

JON Not so exciting. No. Um, if you can show that you have some really great success somewhere, right. I don't need it to be a nationwide thing. In fact, most of us don't want it to be nationwide. I want to see that you're having gangbuster success. Can't keep up with orders in Austin or in Baltimore or wherever you are.

BEN Yeah.

JON That's really intriguing. Sometimes if it's, let's say it's not, um, food. Okay. So I, so digital marketing, working direct to consumer working. I was, I think listening to music or something maybe on Pandora or maybe I was doing, doing some research on YouTube and this thing shows up and it's called, Oh, what was it? It was really clever. It was like, um, things like some like shark is that they did the pH, that knows [Phin](#). It was called Phin. P-H-I-N. I have a pool in my backyard. Managing pool chemistry, has been a six year learning curve. These folks have this little product that looks like a dolphin fin that sits in there and is connected your smartphone and it just automatically senses your chemistry and then through the app on your phone tells you what you need to add. You didn't even have to know that the pH is high or low. It just says, put in muriatic acid, you need to buy it. Click here. You know what I mean? Like put in this thing and I'm like, that is genius. Again, I don't care about how much they have, what their packaging is. None of this, but I'm just like, that is a, that meets a need and I can feel it.

BEN You solved my problem.

JON You solved my problem. I'm, I'm so in you have my ear.

BEN Because you didn't get a pool because you thought, man, you know what sounds like a, a great way to spend my weekends managing pool chemistry.

JON Yes.

BEN You got a pool 'cause you wanted you and your family to be able to enjoy on a hot Texas day, swimming in the pool.

JON Because no one who's selling pools sells you the complex pain in the ass that is managing your chemistry. They sell you the vision of your family and the pool in August, which is accurate, but so is the other side.

BEN That's right, yeah.

JON So without, you know, I recently had this interaction with folks and it was, again, it was like, Hey, I make this product, great. There's tons of that product in market. Oh, but no, this is how mine is different, and they have like this minor differentia-

BEN Mine is a little different. It's a little better.

JON Right. I have this one little ingredient tastes it and he's like, I could paste it probably and go, yeah, it's good. It's not, there's nothing here that says, Oh my gosh, meeting need meeting demand, differentiator. That category is dead. You just brought up, Oh, I wasn't even aware the category is dead. That's what Brendan does for me.

BEN Right, right.

JON He goes, look, Jon, look, and I go, Oh my gosh, I love that you're looking, I don't even look.

BEN That's right. Yeah.

JON You know?

BEN Yeah. You have to. You have to be that person who's, again, if it's food, maybe you're going to the grocery store or wherever and you're, you're looking and you go, wow, that's a sleepy category.

JON Yes.

BEN Right? And that's, you're like, Oh, I wonder what you could do there. Because, and for me, sometimes it's, it's walking the aisles and seeing, well, I'm in Whole Foods or I'm in some other, a more progressive or natural place and man, this aisle or this set is undifferentiated from a conventional grocer in the Midwest or something along those lines. It's like, eh, it's very unexciting and that you might see that unexciting category as, wow! there's something that possibly could be done there. And, but often it is... And, to the, your differentiation point, you often need to come in with a, a kind of a counter thesis to what's going on.

JON Yeah.

BEN And if, if it's so obvious that anybody could have thought of it, then truth be told, large companies are probably thinking of it, right? It's like, Oh, we'll just tweak something a little bit. Or you get a lot of me two things, right? So there, you know, and if you've been in any industry long enough, you start to see this in the food industry, you see, Oh, here's the gluten free phase and here's, here's the tidal wave. And then here's, here's CBD, here's, here's, here's the next thing around again, keto or whatever. Like in some of those things last, many of them are fads and they come and go really quickly. Again, we can go back even to our childhood to, uh, Snackwell's low fat cookies and all these things. And like, no, you've got to like, in, in all the different things. So you, you start to when, when you've been around the block a little bit, you start to see things for what they are and then you say, well, what's really different here? What, what brands are being built in this moment or have an opportunity to be built that could have some real legs or real staying power. And those usually aren't just, Oh, how do I take the same old, same old and make one little tweak to it.

JON That's right. And I think, um, there's two things that I have on that which I think are just interesting comments, which is to these fads that come and go. If you're a big company and you want to gain a margin point because you can go capitalize on a fad. That makes a lot of sense to me. If you're a tiny little startup thing incubating an idea and you're like, Oh, I want to jump on that fad, your idea, I'm okay if the birthplace is from the fad because it created an innovative thinking where it was like, Oh my gosh, I didn't see it. There's a whole calf, but the brand and the product has to live beyond the fad.

BEN Right? You can't just say, I made gluten-free Apple juice. You're like, it's all gluten free man. Like it's fine.

JON Exactly. Like that's a play that a major Apple juice maker makes to increase a point.

BEN That's right.

JON That's great. And, and I recently- and I get it. Like I get that, that's what, that's marketing people doing their job, knowing what's happening in the market and capitalizing on it through their communication marketing. Great. But, um, there was, I was at one of our little incubator meetup deals and there was somebody who was making donuts. And the whole pitch was like, these donuts are made with all these high protein powders, and it was like donuts that are good for you. I thought to myself, I love donuts. Any time someone convinced me that something is junk, food is good for me, I'm kind of all in like you've got my attention.

BEN That's right.

JON I like it.

BEN Yeah.

JON So, you know, there's things like that..

BEN But then ultimately you have to deliver on, it needs to actually taste like a donut.

JON It has, it at least has to taste great.

BEN That's right. That's right, yeah.

JON I can, I can create some flex in those things as long as it tastes great. But again, I think, I think we're really hitting the nail on the head, which is solve a legitimate problem. Don't tell me you don't want to go work for somebody else. So you're going to do a me too thing and you want to like convince yourself and me that you have something different, you don't.

BEN It's not going to work.

JON It's not, it's not gonna work. And it's too hard. It's too much work. It takes too much time. People, energy, money to build a business. So it better be worth building.

BEN And it's not an easier path. And I think that's the thing that I often, you know, people think, Oh, I don't want to work for somebody else. I'll be an entrepreneur. I'll do a startup that feels kinda cool. Like I won't have, I won't have to check in and do the regular nine to five and stuff like that. And, and, and I, I, you know, my general advice is it's a calling. It's, you need to make sure, like, just so you know, probably economically, it's not the savviest move you'll ever make.

JON That's right.

BEN Right. You should probably have a stable job if you're, if you're trying to optimize your, your financial situation. And even more, it can be soul crushing in different ways. It can be, uh, it's, it's not nine to five. It might be five to nine or it might be beyond that. And so it's just like you're going to be heart, soul, blood, sweat, tears. Every part of you is going to be in this and even yet it is the likely to fail. Right. Even in your case and your story, you have this rock star experienced team and you're like, yeah, we couldn't figure a few things out along the way.

JON That's right.

BEN And it's not guaranteed success at no level is guaranteed. Right. Um, you know, Google Plus didn't work.

JON That's right.

BEN Right.

JON That's right.

BEN Like was there a shortage of resources? Did they have a lack of research or marketing dollars?

JON Amazon made a phone. They made a phone.

BEN That's right.

JON They invested tons of money.

BEN You didn't, if you're listening to this, you didn't buy it.

JON You didn't buy it. That's right.

BEN Stuff. Even with unlimited resources and unlimited expertise, sometimes it doesn't work. It doesn't solve a problem. It doesn't meet the need or it fails to connect, fails to land in some way. And so I just typically, I'm encouraging people, don't take this, don't make a cavalier decision. I mean maybe, maybe all entrepreneurship on some level is a cavalier decision, but at least know going into it, that this is not a, an easier path in many, in almost every respect. It's a tougher path.

JON Yeah. So two stories. One is I love playing basketball, I play basketball...

BEN You love playing all sports.

JON I do, I love all sports, but I'm going to use basketball as mine as my story for this one. I play basketball because I enjoy it. I am not six foot eight. I do not have a 40 plus vertical. I am not training every day so that I can go into the NBA. There may be things that you out there would love to do [crosstalk].

BEN Although, although we can right now declare his eligibility for the NBA draft, just if anybody needs to pick him up. Yeah.

JON If you want to, you know, barely six foot guy, uh, to do that. So, but my thing is just because there may be something that you love to do, so do it. Enjoy it. If you love to bake, if you love to cook, you know, do that thing you, if you like the tinker and build things, do it because you love to do it. It may not amount to something.

BEN Right.

JON But then there's other scenarios. So I have, uh, I have this designer I work with and um, we were talking about she's, she's, she's starting to do some UX stuff with me 'cause I do most of the UX for us and she went on vacation. There are things and she has a lot of the things on her plate but she, she was upset 'cause I had done some things, or I would say she was upset. But she was, she was like, "Hey, I just want to say like, am I still able to do this UX work with you?" And I said, "Cammie, I had to do it because I couldn't sleep." Like I have been wrestling with this like problem that I needed to solve and it's been, it's been like biting at me for like the last month and then I couldn't sleep for the last week. I went to bed thinking about it, I woke up thinking about it, I was like, I want to cancel my meetings just so I can dive in and solve the problem. If you're that passionate about something and you just need to build it, to build it or to solve it or figure out, then do it. And maybe it's going to work and maybe it's not. But if you got to do it, you got to do it. So do it.

BEN And that is a great closing statement from Jon Jennings. So just do it. If, if that's, you, just do it.

JON Do it.

BEN So always a delight to have you, uh, here in the studio, Jon. And, uh, and also just to, to chat and catch up.

JON It's always fun, Ben.

BEN Um, thanks for coming.

JON Absolutely. My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

For links to the people and companies we mentioned during our conversation today, be sure to visit barcodestartup.com/podcast for the show notes and a complete transcript of this conversation.

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