



Channel Mastery Podcast, Episode #44: Kristin Carpenter-Ogden Interviews Sarah Lockwood, of College Outside

The Art of Channel Reinvention

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- Kristin: [00:00](#) Welcome everybody to the very first video production of Channel Mastery. [Editor's note: This was the first video recorded, and the second video production posted.] I am so, so proud and excited to do this show video and to have my first guest, Sarah Lockwood, who is the CEO and founder of College Outside joining me. Calling in from beautiful Carpenteria, CA today.
- [00:17](#) How are ya?
- Sarah Lockwood: [00:18](#) I'm doing great! Thanks for having me.
- Kristin: [00:20](#) Well, I have been wanting to have you on the show for sometime because you have done some pretty serious disruption, and you're still mid-disruption I would say, around how brands interface with college outdoor programs and kids who want to go outside who are of college age, which is a super important demographic.
- [00:39](#) Can you tell us about your founding story in terms of the opportunity you saw and how you went after it and just the whole story? I can't wait to share you with my audience.
- Sarah Lockwood: [00:48](#) Yeah, absolutely. So College Outside, as a background for anyone who doesn't know exactly what we do, our primary

focus is that we sell equipment to university outdoor programs and their student leaders and participants.

[01:01](#) So, this idea started, gosh, maybe five or six years ago. My background is, I was part of an outdoor program, and I was responsible for purchasing the equipment for our program, and even just five or six years ago, the process was pretty complicated.

[01:18](#) In order to get the equipment we needed, we knew that we could maybe negotiate wholesale pricing or get some sort of good deal because we were a university group. And we were, taking kids outside for the first time. But in order to do that, we had to reach out to each individual brand that we wanted the products from, explain to them who we were, and convince them that we were a legitimate university group, and negotiate pricing, and usually it was about 25 or 30 emails back and forth just to ... [crosstalk 00:01:48]

Kristin: [01:47](#) Oh my gosh.

Sarah Lockwood: [01:48](#) ... one brand. [crosstalk 00:01:51]

Kristin: [01:51](#) That sounds really efficient.

Sarah Lockwood: [01:53](#) I'm sorry?

Kristin: [01:53](#) That sounds really efficient.

Sarah Lockwood: [01:55](#) Yeah, it was not the most efficient thing in the world, and it was really frustrating. And it was frustrating, I'm sure, from the brands' perspective which is something that we've learned is absolutely true.

Kristin: [02:05](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[02:06](#) So keep going. This is awesome. So basically before you ... actually before you keep going, can you talk a little bit about the way things had been done forever, and then bump back into the 30 emails and what happened from there.

Sarah Lockwood: [02:19](#) Yeah, I mean, I guess the way things that had been done forever is that universities, you know, have built these outdoor programs knowing that the importance, kind of hypothetically, that it was important to get students outside.

[02:33](#) Most groups on campus actually were formed by students who formed outing clubs or climbing clubs.

Kristin: [02:33](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah Lockwood: [02:40](#) As a way for them and their friends to get outside, and most groups do start as student run clubs and then develop into outdoor education programs.

Kristin: [02:49](#) Right.

Sarah Lockwood: [02:49](#) So it's really this grassroots movement of students across the country on campuses saying, "Hey, we want to get outside and we want to get other students outside."

[02:57](#) Most college campuses these days actually do have, if not one, multiple different outdoor focused groups on campus.

[02:57](#) [crosstalk 00:03:04]

Sarah Lockwood: [03:04](#) That being said, the outdoor industry as a whole didn't seem to know that these existed or that they were even a group that they could cater to, and so there was really no attention being given to any of these outdoor groups that were being formed all over the country.

Kristin: [03:20](#) Wasn't it an actual physical platform in the form of a small or several small trade shows where these relationships and transactions, if you will, would take place?

Sarah Lockwood: [03:30](#) Yeah, so there was maybe one or two events during the year where if you really had your act together as a university, you could send a representative to a small show where maybe you could get lucky to meet a rep at one of the brands you were hoping to buy from, and build that relationship kind of one on one.

[03:47](#) It was just very old school, one-on-one relationship building, which is still good, but the problem there is that within the university space, there's really high turnover.

[03:56](#) So even if a relationship was established between a rep and university, within a couple of years usually there'd be turnover in the university and you'd have to start over from scratch.

Kristin: [04:06](#) Ugh.

Sarah Lockwood: [04:07](#) ... And it became just a very frustrating process for the sales reps working in that space. So, very quickly, although many sales reps were required to cater to the ... maybe were asked to

work with the universities in their region, it was something that wasn't easy and was very frustrating.

- Kristin: [04:23](#) Right, and so basically go back now to you got through these first 30 emails, you explained who you were, they trusted you, and then what was kind of the light you showed them? What was the pathway forward?
- Sarah Lockwood: [04:34](#) Yeah, so the pathway forward was ... what I realized is if there was an organization that could simply form ... whose focus was to form relationships with universities and to have a program that would be so beneficial to a university that they would want to stay in touch with you, then we could eliminate most of the challenges and hurdles that both parties were experiencing.
- [04:57](#) What we do primarily, is our job is to build relationships with universities and to set ourselves up as a primary vendor supplier.
- Kristin: [05:05](#) Right.
- Sarah Lockwood: [05:05](#) From the university perspective, they only have to deal with one vendor supplier.
- [05:10](#) That's not a fun process. There's a lot of paperwork and bureaucracy with universities, but they only have to do it one time.
- Kristin: [05:15](#) Right.
- Sarah Lockwood: [05:16](#) Then, once they have that set up, then they can access the equipment they need from, you know, 50 brands all at once.
- [05:24](#) Makes it very easy.
- Kristin: [05:24](#) That's awesome.
- [05:25](#) Well, that must have taken a lot of time and a lot of vision to pull together and I feel that the timing is so, so auspicious too, Sarah because I feel like you completed a ... almost like a circuit or you closed a circle that they needed and they were used to just from a basic blocking and tackling for these programs that the students wanted, and then as you said, the outdoor programs started to go, but now we're starting to see the big move to experiential outdoor education.
- Kristin: [05:52](#) So, can you talk about how you're ramping up, or maybe already handling that with what you're doing?

Sarah Lockwood: [05:57](#) Yeah, absolutely.

[05:58](#) Well that's been one of the real joys of what we're doing, and that's kind of been the core mission is if we can provide resources for these programs to help them grow, to help them get more students outside, and then to be kind of cheerleader for these outdoor education programs that don't really have anyone vouching on behalf of them.

Kristin: [05:58](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah Lockwood: [06:16](#) We are out there saying if these programs are important, we're helping provide the research and the like I said, the cheerleading behind saying that these programs are important.

[06:25](#) What we're seeing is that universities across the country are starting to take them more seriously, and are starting to put their own resources now into these programs.

Kristin: [06:35](#) That's awesome! [crosstalk 00:06:36]

Sarah Lockwood: [06:36](#) Yeah, outdoor education has become a program ... a reason why students are choosing to go to university. They're seeing a decrease in stress on campus. They're seeing just really positive effects when student are participating in these outdoor programs versus just you're typical Greek scene on campus.

Kristin: [06:51](#) Or sitting there on their phones or on their computers constantly. I ...

Sarah Lockwood: [06:51](#) ... Absolutely.

Kristin: [06:56](#) Yeah, I could totally see how this would be a game changer actually for that. Plus, you're kind of, I think, creating lifelong outdoor aficionados, I'm hoping through this program. I mean, that's when I found my try was joining up with outdoor adventures as UC Davis. I mean, that was an actual raft guiding program, but you know, that's where the mountain bikers, the climbers, all of us would kind of gravitate there.

[07:20](#) We didn't actually have a university sanctioned program. This was an actual business that was run off of the UC Davis campus.

[07:26](#) So, are you also working with outfitters that are based on campus in addition to these programs?

Sarah Lockwood: [07:32](#) We work with ... it runs the gamut honestly. This past year, we worked with 50 brand spanking new outing clubs that were

formed, which is really great seeing a huge growth in clubs and service we provide to them is crucial for them to even be able to exist.

Kristin: [07:32](#)

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah Lockwood: [07:47](#)

We also work with some of the largest outdoor education programs in the country like Princeton University. They have a freshman orientation program that all students go through.

[07:57](#)

The University of Utah, obviously, has a massive outdoor education program. So, yes full gamut from new little outing club all the way through professionally guided program on campus.

Kristin: [08:08](#)

Cool. Lets talk about the channel strategy around this.

[08:12](#)

How do you keep in touch with, I guess you call them your be-to-be customers, the actual colleges themselves? And is there a component that includes data or business to consumer that you're also either implementing or exploring?

Sarah Lockwood: [08:25](#)

Yes, absolutely.

[08:27](#)

The basic premise and the thing we focus the most on, is those relationships with the universities. We have a pretty extensive application process that a group on campus has to go through to gain access to College Outside.

[08:39](#)

In that application, we ask a lot of questions about that program to learn a lot about them, and over time that accumulates to pretty significant amount of data and information we have on this demographic and on these programs.

[08:52](#)

That's information that we share with our brand partners to help them build strategies around how ... what are the best products, what are the best categories, what are the best price points to be able to reach this demographic.

Kristin: [09:03](#)

That sounds really powerful.

Sarah Lockwood: [09:05](#)

It is really powerful, and the fun thing ... and the you know, the challenges that we tackle in terms of turnover, for us it's actually very easy.

[09:11](#)

Universities want to renew their accounts with us annually, right? At this point, the first couple of years were kind of ... when our product wasn't as good and we were chasing after a

lot of universities, but at this point, the product is so helpful and has become so entrenched in institutionalized in their programs, that's just what they do. They renew their College Outside account every year.

[09:31](#)

Then we have the new leaders, the new administrators, and the new directors that are coming in, and we know who those buyers are.

[09:37](#)

We have that direct channel into those university buyers, which is an absolutely valuable tool for the brands that we work with.

Kristin:

[09:43](#)

Right.

Sarah Lockwood:

[09:44](#)

Yeah. In terms of kind of the value here, I think one thing you mentioned was the fact that so many students are being introduced to the outdoors through these programs.

Kristin:

[09:54](#)

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah Lockwood:

[09:55](#)

That's something that we see over and over, and have the data to support.

[09:58](#)

A lot of the freshman class coming in, when they're going on these outdoor trips, I mean they are new, new, new to the outdoors.

Kristin:

[10:06](#)

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah Lockwood:

[10:07](#)

I was actually talking with one of our brand partners yesterday, who was surprised to know that the rental units on campus include everything from tents and sleeping bags to boots and base layers and gloves.

[10:18](#)

Things you might be kind of like, "Ew, that's kind of gross," but I mean, these students come in with none of the equipment they need to go outside, and it's the university's space to provide them that product to make sure they have a good experience, right? There's nothing worse than going out and getting cold 'cause you're wearing cotton, or wearing a pack that doesn't fit.

Kristin:

[10:32](#)

Right.

Sarah Lockwood:

[10:36](#)

University really plays a huge space in introducing these students and getting them in the right outdoor gear for the first time.

Kristin: [10:42](#) Are you able to bridge the students back into the brands in any way through you know, social media, a newsletter, or some kind of an opt in, or is that kind of something that is a little off limits just because that's the user group of the university?

Sarah Lockwood: [10:56](#) No, actually the way it works is when a university group applies for access on College Outside, they're given a group account which they could use for their institutional and rental purchases, but the student leaders on campus who are leading the trips are also given individual accounts on College Outside, kind of like a pro deal account.

Kristin: [11:14](#) Oh, cool.

Sarah Lockwood: [11:15](#) So when ... because they have access, then we have a direct channel to communicate with them.

[11:15](#) [crosstalk 00:11:20]

[11:20](#) In terms of how we're establishing our brands, College Outside is becoming a huge resource and kind of a one-stop place for college students who are interested in the outdoors. Our email list is pretty extensive. It goes out to about 25,000 students. We have insane open rights on that. We produce content on our website that's specifically targeted towards college outdoorsy students.

[11:42](#) Our Instagram is really fun. If you don't follow it, you should.

[11:46](#) These are kind of ways that we're constantly trying to introduce our students to new brands, to new products, and let them ... give them the tools and resources they need to feel confident going outside and leading others outside.

Kristin: [11:58](#) Are you using any of their content or testimonials back for the brands at all?

Sarah Lockwood: [12:04](#) Oh, absolutely. That's a huge piece of it.

[12:07](#) Again, when we do have kind of a retail partnership, or brand partnership, it's a back and forth. We're meeting with them a minimum twice a year at the trade shows, and we provide them information on how their products are doing compared to their competitors in the space, the feedback that we are receiving.

[12:25](#) We have done full focus groups, and we can seed product out to the university groups that we work with, and receive feedback back, so this is, this is a demographic that our brand is really

focused on and sees the importance of in terms of building their future user base and their future customer. We can kind of help them figure out the best way to focus their strengths on this demographic.

Kristin: [12:46](#) Oh my gosh, it really sounds like the solution that existed before is not even apples to apples.

Kristin: [12:53](#) Honestly.

Sarah Lockwood: [12:53](#) Yeah, and it's interesting. What we're doing really isn't that new if you think about other industries that have done this very successfully.

Sarah Lockwood: [13:01](#) I mean, the whole Apple generation of Apple computers, right? I mean, they ten years ago said, "We want to have every college student, every high school student to have an Apple computer." Knowing that that's going to be their first laptop, and that's how they built the Apple generation.

Kristin: [13:01](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah Lockwood: [13:15](#) I mean, focusing on introducing a college student to your brand, that is just like this really key moment in time when an individual is forming their own personal identity, making their own choices for the first time, and to be able to connect at that point with that brand is just a really powerful moment.

Kristin: [13:34](#) Right. It also, I think, is really key because it's followed up very quickly by an actual outdoor experience, or perhaps the experience just preceded it.

[13:44](#) That's the other thing we're really seeing with the way people are researching and buying products online today is having that experiential backdrop, or maybe it's a before, during and after, is really an important part in terms of really getting and cementing that person into this identity or this type of a relationship with a brand, so I think that that's actually really exciting. Then to actually take the moment and turn it into content for the brands or feedback for the brands, I think is incredible.

[14:10](#) You mentioned you have a 25,000 person list. What do you think your total reach is into this really, really ... I always call it the wet bar of soap. It's really slippery demographic. It's tough to get your arms around this demographic, but it sounds like you're really creating almost like some book ends for it for the industry to go after.

Sarah Lockwood: [14:29](#) Yeah, absolutely.

[14:31](#) The people who are part of our ... who have accounts with College Outside and are on our email list, those are kind of your core student leaders.

[14:37](#) In terms of the amount of students who interact with those programs, at this point in terms of College Outside schools is probably somewhere around 400- or 500,000 students a school year.

Kristin: [14:49](#) Whoa.

Sarah Lockwood: [14:49](#) It's big, and that's honestly probably an underestimate.

Sarah Lockwood: [14:53](#) Those are just the programs that we work with. My guess is probably at least a tenth of all college students goes on an outdoor trip or participates in these programs. That's about what, two million students?

Kristin: [15:03](#) Wow.

Sarah Lockwood: [15:03](#) It's a big opportunity. We take this very seriously, and we have a two-pronged approach to it.

[15:08](#) The first is about 50% of our business comes from the rental units. Saying that we are working with our brands to help them figure, and the schools, to figure out what is the best product for their rental unit.

[15:19](#) Now when you have a backpack in a rental unit like that, that's going to get a you know, a few hundred touch points throughout the school year. That's really powerful for one backpack.

Kristin: [15:29](#) It is.

Sarah Lockwood: [15:29](#) Again, the students are so novice, that this might be the first backpack they wear. We want to make sure that it fits well. That it has an adjustable frame, so that it works and they have a pleasant experience backpacking.

[15:41](#) Well, what we see then is that student comes back the next year as a leader and they're a little cooler, they're a little bit more in line and they get what's going on and they want their own backpack, and that's where we come in and then we kind of upgrade them, right?

Sarah Lockwood: [15:52](#) We say, “Okay, now you don't want the adjustable frame. You want one that's, you know, fit for you and your body type and here's a good backpack that would represent you as a student leader.”

Kristin: [16:00](#) Right.

Sarah Lockwood: [16:01](#) That's the cycle that we see, and we can track that pretty closely between the products and brands that we have in those rental units and then the individuals where they're purchasing from those brands later on in their college career.

Kristin: [16:13](#) I'm also curious, and this may be a little bit further along, or I'm sure you're probably already thinking about it, but does the two-pronged approach also enable the brands to understand how to continue a relationship with the student once they graduate?

Sarah Lockwood: [16:27](#) Yeah, absolutely, and that's something that we're working on right now is that transition. Knowing that most of these students who leave college and leave these outdoor programs, they either go into work in the outdoor industry or at least become lifelong outdoorists.

Kristin: [16:41](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah Lockwood: [16:44](#) That's absolutely something we're working on.

Kristin: [16:45](#) That's great. Tell us what the Instagram handle is.

Sarah Lockwood: [16:49](#) Oh, the Instagram handle's @collegeoutside, same with our Facebook. Yup

Kristin: [16:53](#) Would you say, I mean you're such a perfect person to ask this. You've heard me over the years I kind of talk about the different demographics matching up with different social platforms, or ways to communicate with brands.

Kristin: [17:04](#) Where would you say the sweet spot is for the freshman up to the senior? Are they all on Instagram? Are they ...

Sarah Lockwood: [17:10](#) ... They're all on Instagram. Yeah, Twitter doesn't exist. Facebook's not ... Facebook's good for events and for groups and that's about it.

Sarah Lockwood: [17:17](#) Instagram is where it's at.

Kristin: [17:20](#) Huh.

Sarah Lockwood: [17:20](#) For us, it's really interesting and it's become a very powerful tool for us in that we ... our focus specifically for the College Outside Instagram was to fill the space that was just funny, cool relatable outdoorsy college, you know, posts.

Kristin: [17:35](#) Not so serious.

Sarah Lockwood: [17:35](#) [crosstalk 00:17:37]

[17:36](#) Not the fact that we sell gear, really at all. As we did a poll the other day, and when we do a poll, we get a few thousand responses from it, and 50% of people who answered it said they had no idea that we sold gear.

Sarah Lockwood: [17:46](#) That's perfect for us because that means Instagram is this huge channel and we ... a lot of the universities that we work with hears about us because of the Instagram, and so it becomes this perfect feeder of content reaching others who would not normally of heard about us.

Kristin: [18:01](#) That's awesome. So, lets hope that they don't change the algorithm up on that anytime soon.

Sarah Lockwood: [18:11](#) I know.

Kristin: [18:11](#) (laughing)

Sarah Lockwood: [18:11](#) They change it all the time. It really gets us.

Kristin: [18:12](#) My audience actually, you know who my audience is. I mean, we have a lot of industry people, but we also just have a lot of people who are interested in our industries.

[18:20](#) Talk about as if you were able to talk to brands that are still not quite getting what College Outside is. Maybe some of the main obstacles that they bring up, or maybe it's a time thing, or I don't have a person in charge of this.

[18:33](#) Talk us through why this is the easiest thing to do and super important for your brand.

Sarah Lockwood: [18:38](#) Yeah, absolutely.

[18:39](#) So, the first question I have for a brand is, "Do you already work with college programs, and if so why? Why is this important to you?" For us it really is a value [inaudible 00:18:48]

[18:47](#) That is the most important thing to start with.

[18:50](#) If a brand realizes and has had those core internal conversations, like yes, we realize that college is a really important demographic for us to tap into, it's going to be a pretty easy relationship for us.

Kristin: [19:01](#) Right.

Sarah Lockwood: [19:01](#) We manage most of it. We try to make it as easy as possible.

[19:06](#) You know, the process of setting it up, setting it up on our site is very easy. You know, we are selling products to the universities at the same price as if they were to go to a brand directly.

Kristin: [19:18](#) Okay.

Sarah Lockwood: [19:18](#) That's part of it. We want to be ... we want the brands to see us as their collegiate sales channel. Knowing that we are going after this business for them. We're bidding for university contacts, right? We're sending out sales quotes on behalf of their brand. Most brands really do absorb us into their sales strategy and treat us as one of their sales channels, and that's really what we want to see.

Sarah Lockwood: [19:40](#) [crosstalk 00:19:40] strategy.

[19:41](#) In fact, a lot of universities get introduced to us because of the brand. Say a university doesn't know about us. They call a brand first, the brand will then send that to us to take care of their business and to help them.

Kristin: [19:52](#) Are the reps still working with you on this, or is it something that you kind of are taking so they can support stores more so?

Sarah Lockwood: [19:59](#) Yeah, it kind of depends a lot of times when we work really closely with reps. In most cases, they're really happy that we exist because it's a category business that was just kind of [inaudible 00:20:09] for them to manage.

Kristin: [20:10](#) Yeah.

Sarah Lockwood: [20:10](#) More often than not, no surprise to us anymore, but maybe a surprise to you is that most brands just don't focus on it, and it's really just ... they say, "We kind of take it if it, if they come to us, of course we'll take their business," but there's no real proactive measures in place to go after this business, and for us that's ridiculous.

[20:30](#) It's an absolutely important and hugely missed opportunity.

Kristin: [20:34](#) They're stepping over millions of people.

Sarah Lockwood: [20:39](#) More important than just the sale alone, the sale is yeah, that's one part of it and I think it's a great sales opportunity, but just in terms of building the brand alliance in front of a marketing relationships opportunity, it's massive.

Kristin: [20:51](#) It is massive, and how many years have you been pushing this forward?

Sarah Lockwood: [20:57](#) Started this in about 2015, or 2013, so five years ago. In about 2015 is when it became my full time job, and now we've got a rapidly growing team as we grow and add on new programming, and we're also trying to figure out more ways to be on campus for ourselves and with our brand partners, so for example, we sponsor about 150-200 on campus events that these groups are throwing themselves.

Sarah Lockwood: [21:21](#) We sponsor them, and send them raffle items, and just finding more ways of connecting with the students.

Kristin: [21:27](#) That's awesome. Well, I've known you for, I think the majority of those five years, and I'm super impressed with what you're pulling together, and I know you're just getting started, so I am so delighted to have had you on the show here today, and I really am hoping that you're opening people's eyes more so being on the show because this is an incredibly, I think there's brand value, there's a lucrative component to it in terms of revenue, and it's really just building lifelong stores of the outdoors and having the brands that they first interact with become part of their identity for that.

[22:00](#) You're doing some incredibly important work, Sarah. Hats off to you.

Sarah Lockwood: [22:00](#) Thank you.

Kristin: [22:04](#) I'm really stoked I was able to have you on the show here today.

Sarah Lockwood: [22:07](#) Yeah, it was a real pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Kristin: [22:09](#) Thanks for being my guinea pig. The very first person I've had on video.

Sarah Lockwood: [22:13](#) Love it.

Kristin: [22:14](#) Alright, thanks so much.