



channel mastery

Channel Mastery Podcast, Episode #60: Kristin Carpenter Interviews Jonathan Ellsworth, founder and CEO of Blister

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- Kristin: Jonathan Ellsworth, welcome welcome welcome to the Channel Mastery podcast. It is so great to have you join us today.
- Jonathan E.: Well thank you Kristin. I'm very pleased to be speaking with you.
- Kristin: You are the CEO and founder of Blister. I have been looking forward to hosting you on Channel Mastery for some time because the work that you're producing with your team is a major disruptive factor in the consumer decision journey today and I think there's so much we can learn from you. Can you start by sharing your founder's story and launch story with my awesome audience?
- Jonathan E.: Well thank you Kristin. Yeah, the way this story goes, I think it's a really important part of it is that I grew up in Chicago and the only two things I really cared about were football and basketball and as I often say, there kinda wasn't really a third thing and so that might seem a bit surprising, perhaps, to those who are familiar with Blister because what we do are really in depth reviews of mountain sports equipment but for me, it was ... I was living far away from mountains and really was just a very passionate football and basketball player. I had an injury that ended up ending a college football and basketball career and in a way, that was probably a good thing because it really got me to end up getting a bit more serious about, well, what some people call the life of the mind and while I did fine in high school, I think like a lot of us do, I was not ...
- Jonathan E.: I'm embarrassed to say, I was not tuned in to books and learning to the degree that I wish I could say that I was. But that happened in college and I think the challenges and the competitiveness that I had originally put on a basketball court or a football field, thankfully, I started to direct those things to books and I was a philosophy and literature double major with a kinesiology minor and it was after that and then pursuing a PhD in philosophy that I ended up going to Northern New Mexico to spend a summer of writing and that's really when I started playing in the mountains and-
- Kristin: What part of Northern New Mexico?
- Jonathan E.: It was in Santa Fe and Taos.

Kristin: Awesome.

Jonathan E.: That was kind of the stomping grounds. I thought I was going to be there for a summer, I ended up being there for 17, 18 years.

Kristin: Oh boy.

Jonathan E.: That first summer of mountain biking and climbing and then that first winter of skiing that I just fell in love with these areas that many of your listeners probably fell in love with a lot earlier than I did and it was at that point where I was sort of just a good athlete but new to these sports that have all of this very expensive equipment, right? Skis and ski boots and mountain bikes and the like, and I was pretty surprised by how little good information I could find on these things because I was convinced that getting ... especially being new to these sports, being on the right ski or getting the right mountain bike that would best suit me, that would really help the cause and would make a significant difference and so it was as I was scouring the internet and looking at reviews in print magazines and the like, I was just honestly pretty surprised by the level of product information, the depth of product information that I was able to get from some of these things.

Kristin: And what year was this? What era was this?

Jonathan E.: Yeah, so I mean that whole ... I mean the long version of that was, I went to Northern New Mexico in 2002 and so that's where I really started playing in a big way in the mountains and it was some years of kind of getting to know those sports, getting ingrained in those communities, and then this ... Excuse me. This happened over the course of some years where, constantly looking for these sources of just better information. It finally led to ...

Jonathan E.: It was actually the summer of 2010 and it was actually Independence Day, July 4th, 2010 and I was talking to one of my best friends from grad school at the University of Chicago and we were talking about gear. He had been a skier in college. We were talking about how we couldn't really find the information we were looking for and it was my buddy, Mike Clark, who, on Independence Day said to me, you should start a website and you should do this thing that we're saying we're not currently finding and that was truly, that was the first time, July 4th, 2010, that this idea had really come up and by the following January, Blister had launched.

Kristin: That's awesome and when did you end up in your current headquarter community of, is it Crested Butte or Gunnison, Colorado?

Jonathan E.: We're here in Crested Butte. Yep, I'm right here. We are based in Elevation Hotel at Crested Butte, so I am literally ... I could get up and walk to the chair lift in about 90 seconds-

Kristin: That's awesome.

Jonathan E.: -which is extremely conducive for a lot of the trail running and mountain biking and ski reviewing we do and we made a move to Crested Butte this past fall and-

Kristin: Oh congratulations.

Jonathan E.: Thanks and just as a continuation of what we're doing in terms of ski and mountain bike and running and trail running and climbing, it was just Crested Butte, in addition to being an incredibly good ski area, the trail networks here are so good that as we were thinking about, what is really the kind of optimal place for us to be right now, CB just made a ton of sense and so here we are.

Kristin: Well I know that's a big move to not only start a company but move to a mountain town like that. Obviously I can relate with so many facets of your story. One quick question before we go on. What position did you play in basketball because ball is life, right?

Jonathan E.: Ball is life. Ball is life for sure. Yeah, so I was a point guard and shooting guard. It would depend on what we kind of needed-

Kristin: That's awesome.

Jonathan E.: -and a wide receiver in football, not that you care but-

Kristin: I do care.

Jonathan E.: But yeah, the basketball thing, yeah that was ... and in Chicago. I mean that was my world. Yeah.

Kristin: That's awesome. Well I love that and there's a lot of ... I think the athletic nature of your background and I love the philosophy part of your background too. Were you teaching at university or what did you do with your PhD before you pulled the plug and decided to do ... Are you doing this full time?

Jonathan E.: Oh yeah, it's very full time.

Kristin: Awesome.

Jonathan E.: Very very full time.

Kristin: Give us a little bit of what happened with your career. When did you actually flip that switch?

Jonathan E.: Well so what happened was, I was in my ... Let's see, after my third year in grad school, a liberal arts college reached out and they were interested in having me come teach there and so I was both teaching philosophy and finishing ... and doing dissertation or PhD work at Chicago and so it was that ... I was doing both of those things my fourth and fifth year at the University of Chicago and then the school asked me to apply for a tenure track position. Apparently they liked

what I was doing in the classroom and I wasn't sure I wanted to stay at that school and at the same time, I had a thing going on where I was doing my ... If anybody cares and you can edit this later if you'd like but I was doing dissertation work largely on Hellenistic philosophy, Greco-Roman philosophy and specifically a conception of ethics and stoicism.

Jonathan E.: I wanted to change to a different dissertation topic and that got met with a bit of resistance. I'm pretty stubborn and so at that point, I was going to change this topic and that is 100% what triggered the move to Northern New Mexico. I basically had to kill time for a summer, waiting to see if I was going to make this change of the dissertation topic, if I was going to actually follow one of my professors and advisors to a different university to get this done and so I was like, well I'm going to go play in the mountains for a summer and do some writing and that was supposed to be a summer stint and I never went back.

Kristin: That's awesome. Well no, I think that's very relevant. I just am super curious. 2010, let's look at the media landscape, let's look at what you had at your fingertips at that time to research the products that you were probably wanting to buy and use when you were in the mountains. A lot has changed during that trajectory. It's almost been a 10-year span, right? We're coming up real close on that. I'd love to hear what some of the key tipping point moments were over the past near decade for Blister.

Jonathan E.: Yeah, that's a great question. I think that this has been, I feel like, such an organic process for us that ... Excuse me. I think so much of this and the way that I at least went in to this was really thinking or rethinking through what a product review was and given my background, that meant that I actually ... This sounds really weird I imagine but I was really thinking about these gear reviews as a genre, right? And thinking of them as being maybe the lowest genre or the lowest brow genre out there but that was really became intriguing to me. The idea that, what would happen if we elevated this genre of writing? What would that look like? What would need to be ... What would be the ingredients of that in the like and so I think really those, especially over the course of the first and second and third year of Blister, it was about refining that and getting clearer and clearer and honing our sense of, if it's going to be a product review, one, I think it ought to be really well written, two, it better be honest. Three, it better be accurate and four, it better be really truly useful.

Jonathan E.: Those are a few of the ingredients that we were looking to hit but it's funny, when you talk about tipping points, I'm not sure if this is a tipping point but this is ... It was a very early moment when I thought, in our history and trajectory, this is it. We're good. This is going to be a thing. There was a very large ski manufacturer who had just come out with a new flagship ski and frankly, we thought they were misrepresenting it a bit. They were kind of presenting it as being this big burly, big mountain charger and it just simply wasn't and I remember, when we wrote that first review that said, look, this is a good product in a lot of ways, it just isn't what they're saying it is, right? And I didn't know. I literally thought at the time because again, my background isn't in these endemic outdoor media publications. I was like, so does the company now just

send a hit man over, take me out and just kind of go back to business as normal and that was a key moment.

Jonathan E.: I wasn't murdered that night and what we found was a lot of readers saying, thank you. We had that same experience but nobody was saying this and that was honestly an early moment for us where I thought, yeah, this is starting very much as an experiment. We'll see if there's an audience here and it was really in that moment in the early days where I thought, we really, really have something here. I think another moment was when we were maybe six or seven months old, we had another product review and it was critical. We thought, yeah, there's some things that are good about this but it really could be improved if these three or four things were changed. This was another ski and we wrote that review and you always ... It's kind of a bummer. We're not a gotcha website but I got an email from the CEO of the company and he said, that was the best product feedback we got across the entire development of that product, from any of our athletes or any of our testers or anything else and he said, we're going to change the ski exactly in the ways you said you thought it could ... in the ways that it could be improved.

Kristin: Wow.

Jonathan E.: And we have seen more and more of that throughout our eight and a half years and that's something we're very proud of, right? We're not a gotcha website, we're not here just slinging criticisms or we're not here to make funny comments about, this is the worst, stupidest thing we've ever seen in our lives. It really is just about the consumer and making this commitment from day one that we are never going to lie to our readers and from there, it's just about really really trying to be as accurate and specific as we can about what a product does or doesn't do. I'm not sure either of those give you that tipping point moment but I think-

Kristin: No, both of them do.

Jonathan E.: Those were a couple of key moments for us and honestly, we've just kind of ... We've just been doing the same thing ever since and hopefully just getting better and better at it.

Kristin: That's awesome and I'm glad no one has taken you out.

Jonathan E.: Thanks. Yeah, me too.

Kristin: Let's get down to business here. I mean I think the audience is wanting to hear us both go where we both know we need to go. Let's talk about when a consumer is online researching a buy and obviously there's a very technical product that we're selling in these markets and they're not really given a lot in a caption in a magazine, et cetera, and things are really changing so much in media. I know the magazines are doing the very best that they can but you stand as, I think, an independent stalwart, 1,500 word versus sometimes as low as 90 words, right? Or even less. I mean obviously you can click online and read

more but I think that what you're providing is a tether to a truthful, a permission base.

Kristin: You almost prepare people to kind of go in and maybe talk to a store about it. We have a lot to get into on this but one of the things that you guys remind me of, that I've always really, really loved following, is the DC Rainmaker and the consumer electronics. I mean his stuff is thousands and thousands and thousands of words and for specific categories of product, I'll literally read every single thing he writes. Was that ever an inspiration to you or how did you kind of develop the process around what you do?

Jonathan E.: Yeah. Great question. I have to say, I wasn't aware of DC Rainmaker when I started Blister. It was probably three or four years into Blister that I had ... I came across ... Actually one of my good friends knows him and so she was like, wait a second, do you know DC? And that's what put him on my radar but yeah, that is ... He does a remarkable job of providing in depth information. Honestly, the inspirations for me were, we were kind of coming from a culture where, I think people were often saying, oh no one will read anything. We all have short attention spans now and so you've got to do these little bite size sound bite things and there was ... It has nothing to do with gear reviews but sports lovers and in fact you yourself might know Bill Simmons?

Kristin: Oh yeah.

Jonathan E.: Yeah. Bill Simmons was writing for espn.com at the time, right? He started as the Boston sports guy and Simmons was writing these incredibly long articles on espn.com and I loved them and he, very quickly, became one of the most read things on espn.com. That, to me, provided a bit of evidence that, listen, if there is engaging writing and if you're giving people a reason to read, people will read and honestly, again, this has nothing to do with gear reviews but that led me to wager that, doing this long form in depth reviewing ... because this stuff is expensive and unless you're super rich or have a real big trust fund or you don't actually care about gear, there's a lot of people out there who are like, I need to not miss on this purchase, right?

Kristin: Yeah.

Jonathan E.: And that's always how I felt about it and so it was honestly Bill Simmons with this long form articles he was doing at ESPN that were hugely popular, then paired with this notion that I think we can just elevate this genre and to be honest, here's another weird inspiration. I was thinking a lot at the time about Aaron Sorkin, right? The screenwriter and I don't know if you ever saw a show he did called, "This is Sports Night?"

Kristin: I am not that familiar with that one.

Jonathan E.: Yeah, it's an older show of his and it's kind of, I don't know, kind of sitcom drama, I don't know what the term is. Based a little bit on about a crew. Basically it's a set of espn.com. You should check it out sometime. I think you'd

be into this but I was like, okay, talk about a low brow genre. Who cares about some evening sports recap highlight show? But Aaron Sorkin, who I regard to be an extremely good writer, kind of elevated this genre and I thought, that's maybe something we could do on the gear review front and so again, my two inspirations or two of them, beyond the need of I just wanted better product information on this stuff, kind of came down to Aaron Sorkin and Bill Simmons and that is definitely strange.

Kristin: It's not strange. I totally get it. I love what you're saying though. Everybody is like, oh snackable content, blah blah blah and nobody wants to read. They absolutely will, especially in our markets because what we create and what we're offering to our consumers, our tribes, are literally things that define the best parts of their lives, right?

Jonathan E.: 100%. 100%.

Kristin: Of course they're going to read. I think they're going to read with interest. Even if they've already made a purchase, they're going to keep reading. It seems to me like a complete no brainer but at the same time, what's keeping it sacred is the fact that you aren't owned by anybody. How are you making this work? Tell us about your team, tell us about the process, how do you know when a review is ready for you to hit send on the post?

Jonathan E.: Yeah.

Kristin: That's got to be a little terrifying.

Jonathan E.: It is. No, you're right. Great words.

Kristin: It's a big responsibility.

Jonathan E.: It is a big responsibility and I think especially like a lot of founders, I mean the first two years of Blister, I would work until 5 AM and get up at 9 AM, seven days a week. That was the schedule and I look back and I still work a lot. I think this winter was probably at about 100 hours a week but it was a ... Like a lot, again, I don't think there's anything unique there. I think a lot of founders know, getting something lifted off the ground is a pretty herculean effort but given all the work that's gone into this over the years. I always say, literally this is what I say is, when we do bring on a new reviewer, I view those new people as a grenade. This is like we're rolling a grenade into headquarters, right?

Kristin: I [crosstalk 00:23:36].

Jonathan E.: I don't trust you. We've been doing just fine without you. All you can do really right now is say something that's incorrect and just blow up this credibility that we have worked our asses off to cultivate for the last eight and a half years. I hate new people and I'm probably not that nice to them and our best people are the ones who ... I do literally tell them this so they know what they're getting into, but I say, you're guilty until proven innocent. That's how we do it

here and our best people though, they have accepted that challenge. There is definitely something, I think among our best people. They are extremely competitive. They are very smart and they are extremely competitive.

Jonathan E.: When you put them into an arena that like we've tried to create at Blister to try to keep a very high bar on what we're doing, these people aren't scared, right? These are accomplished, talented, hardworking people. They're energized by it, not terrified. I try to come in and get them terrified because I hope they walk away if they are but our best people are like, I'm in on this and I believe in the mission, I like being challenged and pushed and I still think, all these years later, every time, if I'm going to sit down and write a review or it's one of our people, I think we still always feel that pressure and don't screw this up.

Kristin: Tell me this, when do you let them be readership facing? I mean are they actually glad-handing or talking to or conversing with the people who follow your content or is that ... because it seems to me like this must be a pretty organic process and I doubt you have a list of, all right, you have to have five negative things and eight positive things. Tell us a little bit about ... because I'm also a business owner. There has to be a level of consistency but you're dealing with all these different personalities and now different categories, lots of different passion. It's tough to bring those efficiencies in, I bet.

Jonathan E.: Oh for sure. Yeah, I'd say there's nothing efficient about how we do anything and one of my favorite quotes actually and we'll harken back to the philosophy days but it's, I literally think about this pretty much every day is ... He's not my favorite philosopher by any means but Spinoza. There's a wonderful quote at the end of the introductions to one of his books where he says, "All excellent things are as difficult as they are rare," and when I started Blister, I don't know, stupidly probably, that resonated right off the bat and so I just thought, yeah, we do understandably spend a lot of time in business thinking about, how do we make things more efficient and the like but we made a commitment, again, probably stupidly, from day one, this is going to be hard. We're going to do this the hard way and we may starve to death and so the biggest example of that is, we made an extremely painful and principled decision from day one, that we don't accept any money from the gear manufacturers we review.

Jonathan E.: We've never taken a penny from any of the ski manufacturers or bike manufacturers, et cetera, and that's a great way for a new business to immediately have no funding and be out of business in a couple of months and given that ... but the thinking there was, again, and this is what I always said, we may starve to death in the short term. It's like we're in the desert and we just keep walking past all this water sitting there, right? And again, there is no trust fund behind this. I bootstrapped this company. I was all in on this and I pushed all my chips into the table. There was no safety net here but what I believed was, yes this is hard but we felt like for us, this was the right way to do things. It provides a massive point of differentiation from a lot of the way that media outlets operate and not that that's enough. It's not just having revenue streams that don't have the possibility of undermining the integrity of our work.

Jonathan E.: That's an important thing and we decided day one that we wanted to do it that way but the other thing is, you've got to be really good at this and this maybe gets back to your question, when you've got all these different personalities and reviewers and the rest. It has been a huge challenge for us. I always say, I can throw a rock and hit an accomplished trail runner or mountain biker or skier, but to find someone who is first of all, passionate. That's really the first. You have to be passionate about the area you're reviewing in. Someone who loves this stuff is also good enough. We do, frankly, have a lot of outstanding and remarkable bikers and skiers but I don't even really care about that. You have to be good enough at these activities but the big thing is, the weird skillset of being able to articulate the nuances of what the skier does or does not do, that is the wild card, right?

Jonathan E.: And so we have been very slow over the years to add new reviewers to the team. We get hit up from people all around the world all the time. I mean I'm probably still getting about 5 to 10 emails a week and I'm very gratified by that but it's just people, writing us ... Excuse me. People writing us to say, we love what you're doing and these people are often extremely accomplished in their own right. We love what you're doing, we think we could contribute, would love to and I mean I think the number of those folks who we actually bring on is ... I don't know. Somewhere less than five percent and so it is a hard thing and it's not efficient, right? But we call them unicorns and when we find that unicorn, that's when we will ... They go from being a unicorn to a potential grenade, right? And they go back to being guilty until proven innocent but we want to have ... We want to be kind of blown away by this person coming in and I never know where they're going to be coming from.

Kristin: Right, that's super interesting. Do you have ... You say, we. I mean I kind of get a sense that you're kind of Han Solo with the decisions but do you have a team that you're vetting it with? Some of your longtime contributors or ... ?

Jonathan E.: Absolutely. Yeah and one of the things I will also often say is, I think one of the things that I am absolutely most proud of in terms of what has been built at Blister over these eight and a half years is, our squad is incredible. These are people that are so exceptional, just as people, they are humble, they are smart, they are accomplished in multiple different fields, and I think to the people I kind of get to go to work with and then I get to go ski with and mountain bike with, et cetera, they are just remarkable and so 100%. If we're bringing on a new ski reviewer or a new running reviewer, we will generally have ... They've got to get green lit by a number of the people who we already have in one of the respective areas. I've got a fantastic managing editor, several senior editors and the like and yeah, I don't bring anybody on by myself.

Kristin: Okay. Interesting. Again, the one question that I want to make sure I do get a little clarity on is just the readership and the two way conversation. I want to share one of the many and all of this will be found in the show notes everybody but one of the many just ... People just go out of their way to talk about how much they love Blister and one of them was, "Your website is like crack and I can't get enough of it. I'll be getting the paid subscription," said Thomas, and this is just one of like so many. How do you actually have this relationship with

your readership? I'm curious because it is ... As you said at the beginning, it's all about the consumer, right?

Jonathan E.: Yeah, 100% and again, we really mean it. We just made this commitment like, what happens if we start this company, Blister, with the premise that we're just never going to lie to our audience? What does that look like? How do you create revenue streams? How do you do all of it? What did the reviews look like? Et cetera, et cetera and so every day ... You know very well. I mean with any business, every day, first, stay alive and then two, figure it out, right? And so that's what we've been doing for eight and a half years and what we started by doing was, we just tried to respond to every single comment that a person would post on the website and we have pretty robust comment sections.

Jonathan E.: This got to the point where literally we get comments coming in 24 hours a day from people all around the world and I wasn't sleeping anyway and it just became truly impossible for us to get back to every single person who was commenting and so that was one of the things that led us to the creation of this Blister membership that we have and so one of the things we did there was, listen, we're sorry. I do actually need to go to bed sometimes and so if there was somebody who had a pressing gear question, what we did was we guarantee timely responses to Blister members and so that just became another service and it has created a new revenue stream and there's also kind of a freemium content model attached with this Blister membership.

Jonathan E.: There is some content that Blister members will get that only they get. Most of our content is free but there's some diamonds. Diamonds, that are available to Blister members and so that was just a new revenue stream that really came out of a very organic and real need that these people around the world wanted answers from us and we truly and very literally, could not get back to all of them.

Kristin: All right. Let's pause for just a second. I want everybody listening. People are discovering this content, they're reading it, and then the trust is so strong that they're literally coming back to you and knocking on your door to be like, hey, I'm about to do X, Y, Z, can you give me an answer on what your opinion is on this product versus this product or this feature set versus this one or I'm using it in this environment? Is that kind of what you're talking about?

Jonathan E.: 100% that. Yeah.

Kristin: Wow, so that is like crack.

Jonathan E.: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah and I get it. Again, this has become kind of a more common mantra that people will say, right? Is like, create the company that you always wish existed and I guarantee you that if I found a site like Blister, 100% when I was this new skier, new mountain biker or climber, I would have been all over this. If I felt like there was a publication or some specific people who I really wanted their input and I thought, they're going to lead me in the right direction.

Kristin: Integrity.

Jonathan E.: Integrity. Yeah. Yeah.

Kristin: You're leading with integrity.

Jonathan E.: Yeah.

Kristin: And look at the response that you're getting. People can smell BS from so far away.

Jonathan E.: Well and look, I think this has become increasingly, I think, such an interesting problem, certainly in broader ... I'll keep it specific to just American culture. There is so much talk these days, right, about fake news.

Kristin: Yeah, this is one of the areas I was so excited to get into with you, so let's go there.

Jonathan E.: Right. I mean I experience, I'm sure you experience this in many of our walks of life. Again, well beyond the arena of outdoor sports equipment but when the New York Times or the Washington Post or Fox News or CNN is dropping an article, I think all of us who are trying to be thinking citizens these days are increasingly faced with this question of, am I able to trust what I just read? Who is the source? What's motivating this? What are the underlying revenue streams going on beneath the surface and it's funny, I mean here at Blister, we are not curing cancer but there is a whole lot of satisfaction in the fact that, in our little corner of the world, every single time we publish a piece, we can at least control that we are putting out product information and again, about products that ... I think a lot about death beds. On our death beds, if we are thinking about the top 5 or 10 moments of our lives, those moments are often, for many of us, going to involve equipment that we're talking about on Blister, right?

Kristin: Amen brother.

Jonathan E.: Right? Your bike or those shoes, that trail run you went on, that ski trip you took with your best friends, et cetera, and I'm like, at least in this little corner of the world, we get to control and in a way, I get to control, the credibility and the integrity of the information we're putting out. I'm not going to go change the political scene, I'm not, but at least in this corner of an area that many of us are so passionate about, we get to control this and there's a whole lot of satisfaction when we hear from people around the world who just say, hey, we super appreciate what you're doing here and that goes a long way. That's very energizing.

Kristin: Well let's talk about how this applies as ... We don't have to talk necessarily about our specialty communities that we're both involved in but the way that the consumer is trained today to do online research and look for either permission or a trusted third party endorsement, oftentimes it's come down to reviews and there's robo reviews, there's people placing reviews. I mean we

have a lot of experience learning about REI clearing a brand's reviews completely off of their forums. It's like the wild wild west out there. People trying to game the system and what I hear that you're doing is trying to bring a trusted human relationship back to it. Talk with us a little bit about how you view the state of reviews today, product reviews. It doesn't have to be gear but you talked about fake news, let's take that down a closer level.

Jonathan E.: Yeah. The thing that I would encourage everybody to do is when ... I mean this goes for anything in life, right? I mean wasn't this from the movie, *All the President's Men*? At least that's maybe where I first heard it but, follow the money. Always follow the money and I think that whether it's a car review from *Car and Driver* or whether it's a review anywhere of anything, I think it's always good to think, what are the motivating financial elements coming from a publication or institution or individual person and so I think that that's just something that I think consumers are becoming more and more savvy about that. Not everybody but some and so honestly, I guess I would have to say that I'm not terribly impressed in general by the state of product reviews that I read and I do think that it really is about having two things, two important pieces in place, which are one, are there revenue streams that are put into direct conflict with the ability to be honest and accurate about a product and then two, I just think lots of people are terrible reviewers.

Jonathan E.: I think we maybe like to think that we're sharp, right? We're probably good at this but having done this day in and day out for eight and a half years now, I just think that a lot of people are not very good and really haven't thought through the aspects of what, in fact, goes into a gear review or any review. I'll give you one example. There's a problem that we will talk about at Blister. We'll sometimes say like, that is a "narcissistic" review or so and so is a narcissistic reviewer, which is frankly at the end of the day, nobody should really care what I, Jonathan Ellsworth, personally think about a product unless you're me, right? In our stupid parlance that we use internally at Blister, I'll kind of talk about, so what I don't want is a narcissistic review who's like, well I didn't like that this ski boot did this and not that and I didn't like this. It's like, well that's great. That's you. What about for say, 50 thousand people reading this review from all around the world, of all different ability levels?

Jonathan E.: I think that this brings in something that is a skill maybe that the best novelists have, which frankly, is the kind of virtue value and power of empathy. If you're a narcissistic reviewer, it's not going to work for you at Blister, right? I think there's a real art of one, yes, I am going to say some things in a review about what I thought about the product but I will also qualify that to say, listen, that's me, you might not care about that particular element at all, in which case, keep reading, this might end up being a great fit for you but I think there is really something about the virtue of empathy, that again, I think the best novelists. When Tolstoy writes *Anna Karenina*, sometimes I think people, especially maybe increasingly nowadays, how does some old Russian dude write about a young Russian peasant girl? And it's like, well okay, that's okay but turns out that Tolstoy had certain powers and had honed an ability to get into the shoes of another person, right?

Jonathan E.: And so again, it might be a bit weird to talk about empathy when it comes to ... in the context of sort of gear reviews but if we're talking about how does one do or review better or worse in any category, whether it's about a novel or a film or a refrigerator or a ski, I think these are some of the things that I just think ... I don't see hard thinking about what actually needs to happen before we type off some product review.

Kristin: I have a question.

Jonathan E.: Okay.

Kristin: You have this team. How can you be sure that they don't have a point of reference that might skew this empathy? You know what I mean?

Jonathan E.: Yeah, so one of the things we do is we ... Again, this is why we don't have a ton of reviewers. If I had said yes to say ... Let's just say five percent of the people who had asked to review for us, we'd have a team of about, I don't know, 1,000, and we could do that and a lot of, frankly, a lot of publications do that. They will set up, say, a ski test, go grab a hundred good skiers say, but kind of random people and then just go get their thoughts. That's not how we operate and so we currently have, in all of the different areas, men and women in ski in snowboard, in climbing, in mountain biking, and running, et cetera, we probably now have about 50 active reviewers in all of those categories and again, I think we want to keep ... We'll take quality over quantity every single time but part of this is, once we bring somebody in, the newbie, the grenade, right, we've got to be very careful here and a lot of this is making sure that we are putting them in a position, one, playing to their wheelhouse, their kind of ...

Jonathan E.: By virtue of being new, it's going to be a bit limited. They haven't reviewed everything that we've all reviewed for all these years. It's foregrounding some of those preferences, personal preferences. Foregrounding that and then making sure that we've put them in a position where, if they're talking about a backpack or a running shoe, they're just coming in in a pretty narrow way, where maybe they're going to talk about this one shoe and compare it to one or two of the most direct competitors to that thing but these are big conversations that we're having behind the scenes, before we would ever publish a review like this from a new person.

Kristin: Right, interesting. Another question that I have, I think just for the audience's sake is, how big is your subscription base? After eight and a half years in business, I'm curious to know how it's grown and then has it steadily grown or was there a couple of recent years or seasons where you just saw an enormous spike? How has your community grown?

Jonathan E.: Yeah, I would think that in terms of overall readership, that I'd say has been more or less steady. We were more than doubling growth year over year and honestly, I haven't even looked at sort of the metrics on last year or something but that's roughly been kind of the trajectory and then the Blister membership and the kind of ... We actually also have a, we call it Blister Premier. If you want

to talk about crack, so this is a thing that ... A Blister membership is 60 bucks a year. Blister Premier is \$200 a year and basically what this is, is for people who are like, look, I just want to get you on the phone and so people will write us and I just had a new Blister Premier member call yesterday. We had a great conversation and but this is where people can hit us up and they might want to talk to me or they might have a question for one of our different reviewers but people love this service and it's really fun.

Jonathan E.: Now we get to go truly one on one and really hash out whatever it is that they're kind of wanting to talk about or sometimes they want background like, why does this matter in this arena or how does this engineering work on some of these products, whatever? Anyway, the subscription services we've done are a newer thing and I think really we've just ... I don't even know when we first launched those but that's been something that again, in this pretty organic way, it's only been the last two years but we're seeing very nice growth on those as well. We're very pleased and the other good thing is, people seem to really love the services. Again, there's nothing efficient about how we do this. It's like, put the work in or don't do it, right? I think I have no good advice for people who are like, I'd like to do something like this with trying to keep the quality bar real high but also doing it in a very efficient and timely way. It's like, yeah, well do something else or find somebody-

Kristin: Yeah, that's not going to work.

Jonathan E.: -smarter than me.

Kristin: No, I actually think that you're spot on there. The second you build process and system and efficiencies into it, it's going to water it down. Tell me this, the brands, right? They must be equal parts thrilled and mortified and terrified by what you're doing. How has the relationship evolved? Is this like a newspaper where you have to buy the product or do they ship it to you? How does this work?

Jonathan E.: Yeah, so one of the things we did and again, when I started Blister, I didn't have any money. I didn't have any money and I made an early decision that it was not the right move for us to go get a bunch of investor money.

Kristin: That never would have worked. Not in a million years.

Jonathan E.: I needed-

Kristin: At least I don't think it would've.

Jonathan E.: Yeah, this was a total experiment. I needed to see what we kind of had on our hands and so yeah, I mean talk about doing things lean and again, like we talked about earlier, we were also turning down all money from these manufacturers who increasingly are kind of beating down our door as like, yo, are you guys taking advertising yet? We'd love to be advertising on the site and every year I'm like, screw me, no, but one of the things we did, the idea was again, and

anybody can do this at home and you can too, if you had this idea to create the most credible, most authoritative source of consumer product information in a given space, how would you, in the real world, try to set this up and so that's really what the question I've been trying to answer kind of from day one and what we decided was, we are not going to accept any advertising money or any money to be in these tests or anything like that but what we will do is create this level playing field and if a company wants to participate, they can.

Jonathan E.: The one thing they have to do is submit the product and then walk away. The companies, we are not, in most cases, buying this product but we are drowning in gear, right? So we can kind of talk about that in a second but it just wasn't ... I mean again, if I had a big trust fund behind this, then sure, we could've done that but what it was was, they all know, they all know that they are not guaranteed a positive review. Like you say, I think they're sort of thrilled and also terrified. What we were, I think, pretty quickly able to establish was, again, the quality of the review, even when it was a bit critical, right? And so I gave that early on example from the CEO of a company who was like, jeez, that was the best product feedback we got. We're going to change the product exactly in the ways you suggest and they did.

Jonathan E.: I think the companies, frankly, and this was a big thing for me. We were able to establish that kind of credibility where it's like, what I would always say in the early days is, look, if you're actually making products that you think are good and you believe in, you have nothing to be afraid of and you know that we're not going to be promoting your competitor because they gave us some bigger ad buy. There's no ad buys by anybody, right? And so that's how we built this up and increasingly ... I also remember the day where again, one of the largest outdoor product manufacturers in the world called us from Europe and their head said, I've read, I think every single review you guys have published on Blister. We know we're not guaranteed a positive review but we believe in what we're making and we want in. How do we go about getting stuff ... How do you do this?

Jonathan E.: And that was another pretty big indicator and I think it was a testament to the quality of work we're doing and there's kind of ... I'll cut myself off to say these two things. It's like, on the one hand, we have this strong principle. We are never going to lie to our audience but we have a second strong principle too and that is, we are always going to do our best to be fair to manufacturers. They might not love where we end up coming down on a product but we don't just say, this thing sucks, right? If we're going to go critical, everybody gets real serious around here and we ... This is where the philosophy training, I think.

Jonathan E.: We're literally combing every single word that's written in a statement and making sure we're ready to ride and die with the claims that we're making and so yeah, sometimes at the end of the day there can be, I think, reasonable disagreement among smart people about what a product does or doesn't do and we'd be happy to have them comment in the comment section or reach out to us and say, hey, we're not on the same page here and here's why but give us the why, right? We're giving you the why every time we go positive or negative. We expect the same back from the manufacturer.

Kristin: That's good.

Jonathan E.: Right.

Kristin: I have a couple more questions. Obviously you've been so gracious with your time and I know we need to look to wrapping it up soon but there's one thing I have to talk with you about before I let you go today and that is the Blister endorsed stores, okay? Because I feel like ... I'm starting to really understand just the intensive allure of being able to find the integrity out there around the passion and around what's sacred in our lives in mountain sports and I know a lot of other specialty markets need this as well but right now we're talking about our shared markets in mountain and outdoor but bringing in the store concept, to me, is so interesting because it's almost like you have this probably die hard loyal online following and they want to kind of carry something into where they buy the gear, where they get their gear serviced, et cetera. When did this idea come into play and how is it factoring into your growth?

Jonathan E.: Yeah. Once again, this was an organic development. We just kept hearing again and again and again from people who were like, hey, sick, I just read this amazing mountain bike review on Blister, totally sold. I bought the bike or I bought the ski or that ski boot sounds terrific. We are always telling people, by the way, in our ski boot reviews in particular, first and foremost, go try this thing on. It does not matter if we love a boot if that thing does not fit your foot and so every single one ... literally every single one of our ski boot reviews is like, go try this thing on and so more and more people then were like, well cool, I live in Pennsylvania or I live in Utah and there's a bunch of shops around. Which one would you recommend or where should I go, right? And so we just kept getting inundating with this stuff and it just became kind of obvious that like, well here's another service that we could provide and these things are delicate, by the way.

Jonathan E.: On the one hand, we think there are a number of really good shops out there and yet now, by giving us ... Excuse me. By giving a kind of Blister stamp of approval, we are holding these particular shops to a high standard and so that's why we do have a list of shops but this is not, again, been something ... We could have blown this list out and had 400 shops by now. We don't because again, I'd rather grow this thing slow and in the right way, feel very very confident about the shops we're recommending, have good reasons why that's the right shop in a given area to recommend, so on and so forth, and so that's what we've done and then, by the way, the other trick for us is, we will drop a shop if we start to hear that ...

Jonathan E.: If we're starting to get reports and we do, we encourage our Blister audience to hit us up and tell us about the experience at one of these shops and we've had some times where we had enough people come back and say, hey, so and so is great but I had this not great service experience at the shop. We cut them.

Kristin: Interesting.

Jonathan E.: That's what ... Again though, if we come back to, what are we trying to do here fundamentally? It's like, keep a high bar, whether it comes to product reviews, whether it comes to places you can truly and genuinely trust to provide a very high level of service, et cetera, et cetera. This is not efficient but-

Kristin: It's specialty though.

Jonathan E.: Yeah and it's about, look, are you committed to doing things the right way or do you just talk about doing things the right way?

Kristin: Right and so-

Jonathan E.: You know? It's like, I'm making a very long term, long haul wager on, let's actually, to the best of our ability, at every step, try to do things, truly try to do things the right way and to steal a line from Henry David Thoreau I guess, that is my faith in a seed, right? You plant a seed, you look like a moron. You take a seed, you put it in the dirt, nothing happens. Nothing happens for quite a while, right? But if you're playing a long game, this thing grows and it grows strong and I don't give a shit about the short term. Other people can play that game and look for their little hacks to try to optimize everything and get super efficient, that's fine and those people are probably smarter than me but-

Kristin: It's not even optimizing for efficiency though, Jonathan, it's optimizing to hack what people are finding online and gaming how they're getting them to buy things.

Jonathan E.: Yeah, I mean-

Kristin: That's why I think that your service is so revered.

Jonathan E.: Well and other companies can do it a different way and look, we'll all place our wagers but I know that every day, myself and with our team, it feels very good about the way we try to do things and we could all be richer but there's a lot of satisfaction and fulfillment, I think, that comes from having a strong mission, having strong principles, and every day, being pretty clear on how to carry out and further those principles and missions and build things out, build this company out in a way that don't undermine either.

Kristin: Right. Well I have to say, there's a blog post that I actually just quoted in a different podcast intro and I think it's also suitable for this and it's ... I'll put the link in the show notes. Three reasons I'm choosing people over algorithms, right? And I feel like that's so tied into what you're doing here. I'll put the link in the show notes for that but I just think, thank God you are playing the long game, eight and a half years in. I mean I salute you for doing what you're doing and I think that you need to hold fast to the formula that you have because it's obviously working and it's making a big impact on the right people, not the right algorithms, not the right quote audiences. There's a person behind every subscriber that you're serving and I think you really get that.

Jonathan E.: Well thank you, yeah. I mean that gets ... You say well and get to the heart of what we're trying to do and yeah, I mean it feels good. There's a lot of clarity here in that we're not tempted to deviate off this. If anything, all we're trying to do is expand the amount of content that we're doing in some of these different categories, maybe see where it makes sense to expand into other categories but the mission itself, none of us are sitting around hand wringing about, should we be doing things fundamentally differently?

Kristin: Right. Well and I want to just invite everybody to check out blisterreviews.com and you're going to find amazing information there. Please check out the Blister manifesto, look at the contributor bios because as you eloquently said, you should know more about your gear reviewer than just his or her name, right? And then you also have some other cool things like a list of the recommended shops and just a lot of great information there. I invite everybody to check it out and Jonathan, this was a fantastic conversation. I definitely want to have you back on the show. Love what you're doing and yeah, is there anything that you want to say to the Channel Mastery audience to wrap it up?

Jonathan E.: No, I think we'll ... I don't know. I don't think I could say it any better than Spinoza, right? I really ... I find it so inspiring when people really are truly committed to doing things in an excellent way and it doesn't mean that we do things perfectly. It doesn't mean any of us do anything perfectly but we can strive every day to do things with integrity and to do it with real excellence and I always find that super inspiring and I'm grateful for all the people out there who are doing, kind of on a similar trajectory or have a similar intention in all these myriad different walks of life and so here's to us all doing our best to contribute to a mission like that, I think. Hopefully that bodes well for us and keeps the world a better place.

Kristin: And I'll also put the link in to your podcast, fellow podcast. You have a fantastic name for your show, I'm jealous. Gear 30. Really? That's fantastic.

Jonathan E.: Well we actually now ... I mean we can end with this. I love great conversation and I very much thank you for this one today and so we actually now have five podcasts-

Kristin: What?

Jonathan E.: Yeah.

Kristin: Okay, tell me.

Jonathan E.: It all started three years ago with the Blister podcast. That was our original one and where we stepped into the waters and we then realized that there was such an opportunity and natural extension for us to be talking about gear, we launched Gear 30. That is where we unapologetically nerd out. Often it's about ski and snowboard gear. Well so it's usually about ski and snowboard gear and we just unapologetically go deep. The crack addicts out there, right, they love this one. We just, a month or two ago, launched a new bike podcast that I'm

very proud of. It's called Bikes and Big Ideas. Claudio Caluori, who is a big personality in the mountain bike world, he does ... He's a commentator for all the world cup downhill races, he's my cohost on that one.

Kristin: Awesome.

Jonathan E.: We have a new running podcast that we launched several months ago called Off the Couch-

Kristin: Another great name.

Jonathan E.: Thank you. Yeah. My cohost there is Brendan Leonard-

Kristin: Oh my gosh. He's one of my very favorites.

Jonathan E.: Yeah, so that's been a lot of fun so far and we then have a climbing podcast called, All Things Climbing. Again, I love the genre of the good conversation and so we are ... That's definitely another area that we've really grown into. So yeah, five a week.

Kristin: Good for you. No wonder you're not sleeping. All of the links will be in the show notes but you are truly elevating service. Thank you and you're helping all of us have a better time with the happiest part of our lives. You're really doing a lot of great things. Congratulations to you and I'm so grateful that you were able to be on the Channel Mastery podcast.

Jonathan E.: Well thank you so much and for all the kind words and for the invitations. This has been really fun.

Kristin: Awesome and more to come in the future here everybody. Thank you so much.

Jonathan E.: Thank you.