



channel mastery

Channel Mastery Podcast, Episode #60: Kristin Carpenter Interviews Bob Wheeler, CEO of Airstream

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- Kristin: Welcome back everybody to another episode of The Channel Mastery Podcast. I have a very special guest to share with you today. Welcome Bob Wheeler, the President and CEO of Airstream. Welcome Bob, it is so great to have you on the show today.
- Bob Wheeler: Hey Kristin. Good morning and thanks for having me. I'm excited about our talk today.
- Kristin: Oh, I can't wait to share you with my audience. You lead an iconic brand. We have so much to get into here in terms of making sure that that legacy brand stays current and truly continues to engage and attract new fans into its community. Before we get into that, though, I'd love to have you share how you got to your post at Airstream. What was happening in your career prior to joining Airstream?
- Bob Wheeler: Sure. Just to go back a little ways, I'm a manufacturing engineer and mechanical engineer by education. I started out in the automotive world for General Motors but I got recruited into the recreational vehicle industry about 25 years ago and I've never escaped. It's like the RV industry black hole. But I worked for a couple of other RV companies. One called Fleetwood, which was pretty big in its day, but came to Airstream in 2002 and really just fell in love with the company and the brand and I really don't think I could work anywhere else in this industry now, after having the Airstream experience. But to answer your question, I'm a lightly polished mechanical engineer.
- Kristin: Well, you seem like such a brand guy for being a mechanical engineer, I have to say.
- Bob Wheeler: Yeah, I've become a convert. I've become a marketing guy who by street level experience, and it's really something I've become passionate about. Even as I've moved into different roles within the company.
- Kristin: Well, that is in my opinion, I really feel like I've been a lifelong fan of Airstream' and I feel like the storytelling, and there's obviously a lot of marketing, but what really stands out to me with this brand is just this crazy, loyal, diehard following that you have. I mean, there are those who have one and perhaps have

refurbished one, or are very into DIYing. There's communities all over the intrawebs for that, but then you're also continuing to truly innovate and attract new fans in.

Kristin: And also looking at the fact that you joined in 2002. I mean, that's a good run. We're talking over 18 years ago, social media, user generated content, all of that didn't even exist when you took the reigns, but I'm curious to know, when you started, what were some of the key things that you saw that were truly special and timeless about Airstream and how have you preserved that through the evolution of what we've seen being a consumer centric brand?

Bob Wheeler: Now you're taking me back. Yeah, 2002, when I came to the company it was really, the brand was in disrepair. It was in decline, even at a time when the rest of the RV industry was growing, Airstream was shrinking. They only had one product line, it was called the Classic. It was a very traditional, aimed at the greatest generation, baby boomer customer, really not relevant for anybody any younger. And even becoming irrelevant for those buyers.

Bob Wheeler: Very stale, but what we had here was this enormous asset, this brand power that went back decades, which people associated with travel and adventure and freedom and community and fellowship, so we knew we had a lot to work with. I was brought in by a brand new president at the time, a guy named Dicky Riegel who had a real vision for the brand and the company.

Bob Wheeler: We worked together in those early days, mostly on product. That was our biggest opportunity, and there's a whole great sidebar about this designer we got connected with named Christopher Dean who had this absolutely radical, revolutionary take on the Airstream, and convinced the company to build it. That changed the company, transformed it in about a period of about two to three years in the early 2000s, in a way that still resonates today.

Bob Wheeler: The company was declining, brought some new fresh thinking about product in, reluctantly got the company to build it. Our dealers were very reluctant to show it, once they did though, it took off like a rocket. We became the darling of the design press, very important group of influencers. That has just blown the doors off our understanding of what the brand is and what it could be in ways that I almost can't describe. Just profoundly changed the nature of this company, and not just in product design, but in lots of areas.

Kristin: Obviously you had fans and followers prior to that. I mean, the company as you said was founded in the '50s, and I think that what that did was reignite the passion and have people look again and probably attract a new consumer, but one that was in love with the old and the new. Would you agree?

Bob Wheeler: Oh yeah, very much so. People have always loved the exterior of Airstreams, and we really haven't changed them much since the company was founded in the '30s, honestly. But the interiors you think looked like your grandmother's kitchen and what we did in the early 2000s was bring outside design help,

designers that were just so passionate about the brand and the opportunity, was to design an interior that lived up to the promise of the exterior.

Bob Wheeler: Through that, it allowed those customers that just loved the brand and loved what they saw on the road to walk inside the Airstream and fall in love with the interior. When that happened, they started writing checks. It got people to commit that never would have otherwise and those people have been very important, and different kinds of customers that we had seen historically. That was a very important change for us.

Kristin: One of the things that we talked about before we hit the record button here today was really the balance I guess, that you have found in your role and as you're leading your team, to really continue to accept and I think hold up the community. Whether they are rebuilding an Airstream and sharing that, or interested in purchasing something new, and you're just, you're talking about the interior. Obviously back then, people had to actually walk in and look at this, probably at a consumer event or if they happened to be near a dealer. What are the primary channels that you're seeing that are most effective today that are sharing what's special about Airstream on the inside? Whether it's something that a consumer is renovating themselves and wants to share, or whether it's something that you're unveiling as a company.

Bob Wheeler: Sure. First of all, we love our vintage community. 75 or 80% of all the Airstream trailers ever made are still on the road, so we would never want to, and we really couldn't reject our vintage owners. We love what they represent. They're ambassadors for the lifestyle, they're very passionate, and they have this unbelievable, creative range and energy to develop the Airstream to match their vision. From that, we draw a lot of inspiration, frankly, for future designs and we're certainly feeding on that energy and their passion.

Bob Wheeler: They're able to communicate that now through channels that we just didn't have access to back in 2002 obviously, and they're all the traditional stuff, like what's traditional in today's social media environment. Strong Facebook presence, Instagram is probably the biggest and growing the fastest for us. Twitter, of course, YouTube to a lesser extent. But more recently we started generating our own very high quality content, storytelling around the product and the brand and its uses and destinations. That's the next chapter for us in terms of how we communicate what our customers are doing, but also inspire users to get out, hit the road, and to give them great places to travel to.

Kristin: That brings up a really great point. I'm glad you brought that up. Looking at, I spent a lot of time reviewing your owned media as we say, your website content, your blog, et cetera. You have incredible people writing for you. I mean, I'm going to put all the links in the show notes so people can see that, but it literally feels like it's literary, like you're elevating the genre of brand content marketing. I can see that.

Bob Wheeler: That's high praise, thank you.

Kristin: I also know you have so many people that are creating their own content. Obviously my brain automatically goes to consistency and are there sandbox rules? They're not. You kind of have to take the gloves off so to speak, and let people create what they want around your brand. Has that ever challenged you from just a brand consistency, across channels, from that standpoint, because you're producing such high quality content from the "mothership" which is the Airstream company?

Bob Wheeler: We have to take the good with the bad, but fortunately there's very little bad that's self-generated by our users. They're driven to share their experiences with the same passion that drives us to inspire customers. They love what they're doing, they love where they're going, the people they meet, the experiences they have. However they communicate that, the upside is just so far outweighs the downside. Some of that we curate. We've got some programs, we have some literal ambassadors of the brand that are out there creating stories for us. We have a program called Endless Caravan where we give a trailer to a family or couple or individual that apply for this program.

Bob Wheeler: We give them a trailer and a truck and they hit the road and the blog about it and take pictures. We rotate people through that, interesting kind of eclectic mix of people. Some of it's curated, some of it's mildly overseen and some of it's completely self-generated by our customers. Typically speaking, when they're talking about how much fun they're having and how inspired they are with their Airstream, that's a very consistent message from all the touchpoints of the brand. For the most part, it's been very, very good for us.

Kristin: That's great to hear, because that is one of the things that I think a lot of the guests on this show and many other clients that we serve at Verde are struggling with, is letting go of that control and today the consumer owns it, whether we want to believe that, realize it, fold it into our day-to-day or not, that is what's happening.

Bob Wheeler: That's a great point. You can only control so much and it's like your kid. All you can do is give them a good set of values and push them out of the nest, and a brand is a lot like that. It's going to take on a life of its own, and if you've built the right foundation and attached the right people to the brand, I think it's going to stay in a good place for the most part.

Bob Wheeler: Not that we don't get dinged up. I mean, I'll be honest with you, our customers are very vocal and when they find something about the product or the brand they don't like, they speak up about it. But we can take our lumps, we're an 88 year old company and they're not going to throw us off the reservation [inaudible 00:12:15]. We can take the heat.

Kristin: Well, it just makes you more real, I think, is that transparency. That's a perfect segue into let's talk about how your consumer is showing up today at your key distribution point, which is still your dealer, correct?

Bob Wheeler: Yeah, absolutely.

Kristin: Let me know how has that evolved from say even three to five years ago?

Bob Wheeler: So, it's interesting, this whole dealership channel distribution model is in many industries, outdated. But for what we do, it's still very relevant. I don't really see us ever getting away from it. If you think about it, what an Airstream is, you're going to want to see it before you write the check and to walk around in it and get a sense of space and floor plan and layout, and some of these things you just cannot recreate virtually, even though we do a pretty good job on our website.

Bob Wheeler: So, dealership channel distribution here to stay. But to your point, your question, consumers now are showing up ready. They know what they want, they've done all the research, and we've done a pretty good job of giving them every tool they need to figure out what kind of travel trailer or motor home they need, how big, what they're going to use it for, what they need to tow it with. They're showing up very educated at our dealerships, and that's provided a challenge to our dealership personnel in some cases.

Bob Wheeler: Nobody wants to come to a dealership and feel like they know more than the salesperson they're talking to. We really had to push training and support and knowledge at our dealership so they can engage those customers and feed their passion, rather than being an obstacle or a headwind to that purchase decision. It's changed, not the physical distribution, but certainly changed how our dealerships execute, especially our high level guys.

Bob Wheeler: Just one point, all of our dealers are independent. None of them are franchisees, so we incent them and persuade them to do things a certain way, but we can't tell them. It's this very delicate dance of showing them why it's in their best interest to allow us to help them and once they see the magic and see how it works, they're generally onboard.

Kristin: I have to ask a couple of questions around this, because this is an area that we spend a lot of time studying on this podcast, and obviously I think I'm almost a little bit obsessed about this, in pretty much every part of my career. I'm looking at the fact that you're still using independent dealers, you are evolving them along so that when they are going toe to toe or they're face to face with an educated consumer, they're actually able to further that conversation and pick up exactly where they need to with that consumer experience.

Kristin: That's something that is super challenging for just about every brand that still counts specialty retail, which I definitely believe your dealers are a specialty retail. That's the class that they're in, because they're selling multiple, expensive product, but high featured product, stuff they can't buy on Amazon, right?

Bob Wheeler: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kristin: They have to really continue that experience when they show up at that physical location. Aside from supplying training, support, and knowledge, what have you seen work to keep that storytelling in tact on the sales floor? Because that's the number one thing I think I've learned. As I've worked more in, we call it the vehicle supported adventure space at Verde, I've seen a lot of the brands really struggle with a disconnect there. The second it gets into the dealer, they kind of, I think largely pick up and do what they normally have done forever. They're super habitual in many cases, in terms of how they're selling it, but it sounds like you've cracked the code a little bit. Can you explain what you've found that's maybe worked and some of the things that have failed that you've had to change?

Bob Wheeler: Yeah, sure. This is a great topic. I'm sure for a lot of the brands you work with, and the evolution, it's been a long and very carefully curated one for us. We have about 80 dealers nationwide, again. They're all independents. We went from having maybe one or two exclusive Airstream dealers out of that group to now we have 20 Airstream exclusive dealers and that's growing. What that's done is it's transformed our understanding of how a dealership can interact with Airstream and interact with an Airstream customer, and it's also helped drive change through the rest of the dealer network, even those dealers that carry multiple brands.

Bob Wheeler: What have we done to support that? Some of it's pretty mechanical, great training, online training tools 24/7, requiring a dealer sales personnel to pass the certification test, and incenting them to do so. If they pass their certification, on each product they get a spiff ... There's a financial incentive to do that. But one of the things we really do that honestly is the most inspirational for them is we bring them back to the factory and we have these big training sessions here.

Bob Wheeler: They take the tour and they look at parts of the assembly process and they see the people here in Jackson Center, building these Airstreams with their hands, with all the care and craftsmanship that's part of that experience and they leave inspired. I mean, it's almost transformational. And when we see them go back to the dealerships, we can see the impact on their conversion rate and their sales numbers, and customer satisfaction.

Bob Wheeler: It's a combination of online support for training tools for people at the dealerships, bringing people back here and inspiring them, and most recently we put in place the dealer standards program that incents dealers to provide a better customer experience and we surveyed our customers after this sales experience, and very soon we'll be surveying them after the service experience, and creating our dealers and their financial incentive associated with getting higher grades and some of the stuff we borrowed from the automotive industry.

Bob Wheeler: So, there's several pieces to this puzzle of getting the dealers to feed that passion of customers when they come in and really be prepared to answer their

questions and answer their needs, rather than throw cold water on their burgeoning desire to own an Airstream.

Kristin: That is fantastic. I mean, really, really great stuff. I mean, are you using a special ... The way you've structured your company internally, obviously we've seen VP of Sales, customer service and support. Do you have a special team that has evolved with the way you're creating this? It almost sounds like a continued training program where they have to continually re-up their certification, and I love how you said that you're motivating them with the carrot rather than the stick, right?

Bob Wheeler: Yeah, because they're all independent dealers. It's got to be all carrot and no stick. If they were franchises, we'd have a lot more leverage, but we have such a good partnership with our dealers, it works very well. But to your point, we've had to resource this internally, and I get that a lot of smaller brands and companies can't just hire people and pour money into these resources, but we've had to do that proactively, because we could see where things were headed.

Bob Wheeler: Here's our motivation, let me give you this one little statistic. We typically in a given market, our BTA, we've got 1% market share of the RV trade. Where we have independent dealers, I'm sorry, Airstream exclusive dealers, that jumps almost immediately to 3%. From an organic growth standpoint, we can see the impact, those dealers are more successful for us, they're more successful for their business partners. We know that we need to invest in this area and help drive and support this trend, because it really is the future of the company.

Kristin: How are these dealers, the independents specifically, how are they using the top tier content that you're creating at Airstream?

Bob Wheeler: This is an area that's been a little bit of a challenge. How do we get them to weave the content we're creating into their marketing message? We've provided and continue to provide some very well executed marketing and advertising tools where there's an ad slick, 30 or 60 second ad slick that they can put their dealership tag on at the end, whether it's television or radio.

Bob Wheeler: We provide lots of point of purchase marketing pieces. We have all the storytelling and content creation that we do as a company, we pass to them and ask them, they can either display it on monitors within their dealerships, they can send it out to their customer database, which is not necessarily the same as ours. We try to load their lip with high quality content and if we can get their attention and get them to put a process in place to pass this stuff on, then the brand message is very consistent, and they're really tapping into this investment we've made in creating these high quality tools.

Bob Wheeler: It's still evolving but more and more dealers, they're understanding the value and getting [inaudible] with these programs.

Kristin: That's great. You just said something I have to get a little bit more clarity on, too. Setting a process around it I think has literally been the million dollar question, right? Because you have what works, you know what works obviously internally, and at the regions where you have that 3% market share, obviously you're seeing it work there. But what are the processes? Are you using any tools? I know there are several SaaS products that have popped up that are made specifically for this purpose. Is that something that you actually have an Airstream process around that you share with your dealers or are you tapping into a third party solution?

Bob Wheeler: A combination of both. For our broad CRM solution, we use HubSpot.

Kristin: That's an excellent program.

Bob Wheeler: Yeah, it really is. Unfortunately, all the dealers, dealers typically have their own CRM system. Some of them come from automotive, some of them are homegrown, some of them are other systems, so getting everything to integrate is our next big challenge. But in the meantime, the process I talk about is understanding who at a dealership this content should be directed to, and having somebody who's responsible then to take that, either repackage it or just take it wholesale and pass it on to their customer database, or turn it into an ad with their tag on the end, and finding that resource at the dealership who has that responsibility and getting on a regular cadence of providing them with this content to pass on.

Bob Wheeler: It's pretty mechanical stuff. It's just some dealerships are good at it and get it, and others just, they don't have an interest, or they don't understand the value. It's evolving, but it's moving in the right direction.

Kristin: Thank goodness, right?

Bob Wheeler: Yeah. Oh man. It's funny, we used to think of our dealers as our weak link. They're independent and everything can, the wheels can come off the buggy at the dealership in terms of customer experience. We've really taken this partnership approach and as more and more dealers have seen the value of Airstream exclusive stores, and that success has built on itself. Other dealers that have multi-brand stores are now buying and opening standalone locations for Airstream because they've seen how it works. It's a snowball, and it's building on itself in a way that I find really, really exciting.

Kristin: That actually brings me to a really great topic that I want to add. Airstreams seem to be in exactly where you would expect them to be. Whether it's a music festival or maybe it's a food truck at a really cool event like South by Southwest in Austin, right? It's almost like a product placement with consumers, but it's not, because they're obviously creating it themselves. But you also must have ties into I guess holding up great events or like we've talked about when we were together in Washington D.C. at the RV Industry Association event, looking at caravan outpost as one example in Ohio. I know there are several versions of

that. How are you folding that into your marketing? How are you making the regional dealers around those benefit from the actual power behind that? It's like a theater for your brand, that's built.

Bob Wheeler: Well, it's a combination of things. Some of those we don't even know about.

Kristin: Wow.

Bob Wheeler: When somebody brings the Airstream to OR for example, we get a picture of it from somebody that attended very often. We don't know about it ahead of time. It's something they bought for a mobile activation, or mobile food truck, or somebody takes some Airstreams to a music event. We find out about those after the fact and if it's cool, we pass on that content. In other cases, we have a media fleet, or a marketing fleet of about 10 vehicles and if we're contacted ahead of time by somebody that wants to use an Airstream for an event or an activation, and it makes sense for the brand, we do everything we can to support that.

Bob Wheeler: Luckily, Airstream is this ... I don't want to use the term ubiquitous, but it's a cool symbol that's universally accepted as high quality and a little retro, but really cool. It serves as a great backdrop in a lot of different settings, whether it's a coding conference, or just over the weekend we were at an AT&T Shape conference on the Universal Studios lot in Southern California, getting exposed to a crowd that we never would have seen otherwise.

Bob Wheeler: Whether it's an outdoor OR event or something focused on outdoor recreation. We're very lucky and I don't take this for granted, but we serve as this great backdrop in any number of settings, and that gets us in front of a pretty diverse crowd, a crowd that we in some cases would never think to tap into, or never have a chance to get in front of otherwise.

Kristin: And they join the tribe.

Bob Wheeler: And they join the tribe, and we love it. I mean, it's so fun and inspirational. It's interesting. Doesn't matter where you go, it could be a coding conference or something automotive, or outdoor, but you see that spark in people's eyes when they look at the Airstream and they have that same reaction. It's the same look, I don't care who they are, and I just love that reaction. The people that just get it, they see this thing and they're just inspired, and like, "I could really have an adventure with that thing. If I can get one of those and have the courage to hit the road and do these things that maybe I'm a little fearful to do." That's the energy this company feeds on, is that spark of inspiration and enabling that adventure. That makes my job a lot of fun.

Kristin: And I think people need that more and more today than they ever have before.

Bob Wheeler: Oh, absolutely. As a society, we're so afraid now and when you get out in the Airstream community and you're on the road and you understand the support

network you have, it's just, it completely changes your perspective about the nature of things out there and the community of nomads that just have the courage to travel and it's not dangerous. Just life changing experiences there that many people are just afraid to even try to tap into, and if we can change that thinking a little bit in our own little way, then we've done something good.

Kristin: I think that that brings up a really interesting facet of your career here with Airstream, and that is your role as a leader within the RV Industry Association and the membership there. I think obviously you've just expressed that you've spent the majority of your career in this space and as you said, it's the black hole, it's tough to leave. I think that they're not letting you leave because they need what you're learning on the ground at Airstream. I was wondering if you could share your opinion on a few of the important points of evolution that you're working toward with your colleagues at the RV Industry Association right now, to help the membership I guess modernize, evolve, and really capture this quest for adventure that you know is out there, that you're seeing really thrive with your brand.

Bob Wheeler: Yeah, it's a great question. I appreciate what you're saying about my impact on the industry. I think Airstream can serve in some ways to inspire and lead in a way that other brands can't or don't want to or don't need to. Some of those areas are more specifically or prosaically, the service experience at dealerships. For most customers, all the excitement is in finding and buying the RV and then the first time they go back for a service experience, it's just terrible.

Bob Wheeler: They can't get an appointment for three months, the wrong parts get shipped from the OEM, the manufacturer, two or three times. It just completely let's the air out of their balloons, so the industry is taking a real leadership position on trying to improve, they call it repair event cycle time, RECT, and trying to improve their customer experience on the service side. That's certainly one piece.

Bob Wheeler: Customer experience in general at the dealership, there's this history within the industry of buying an RV is a lot like buying a used car. High pressure sales and, "What do we have to do to get you in one of these things today, sir?" Which might be expected by greatest generation and boomers, is just not acceptable for GenXers and millennials, and you see that thinking starting to change at a number of dealerships, some big ones, about providing the kind of buying experience that customers have come to expect for other big ticket items.

Bob Wheeler: Those are certainly two important areas I see evolution happening. Maybe not as fast as we'd like, but certainly recognition that you can't treat a millennial at a dealership the way you treated a boomer. They just, they're not interested. They'll find some other use for their recreation dollars. It's change or die, it really is, and a lot of dealerships are starting to understand that equation.

Kristin: I see also that looking at the quintessential Mac store, or some of the bicycle retailers out there who are doing a great job evolving, they get the initial sale or

even if it's a direct brand that they're buying online, they can win that consumer and bring them back as a loyal consumer if they're doing a great job with that service. That's the only place they can get that service, so I could totally see how you guys are focusing on that, because ultimately it's what's going to keep them on the road, it's what's going to keep them loyal, and it has been I think an afterthought from everything I've learned, being in the industry much shorter time than you.

Kristin: But I think that it's actually a quick way to see results and traction in terms of making sure that you're serving your community in the way that they need you to. I mean, there literally are very few options it sounds like from where a buyer can get the service that they need to stay on the road.

Bob Wheeler: With Airstream, it's even more critical, because 50% of our buyers are first time RVers. They don't know what to expect and they buy an Airstream, and it's like buying a Lexus. They expect to be able to go to any Airstream dealership in the nation, get a service appointment very quickly and get their problem resolved. Many of our dealers understand that, but we also have dealers and these are some of our challenges, here's some dirty laundry, we have some dealers, if you're traveling and you have a problem with something and you call the local dealership, their first question is, "Did you buy it here?" If your answer's no, you go to the end of the line, or you can't get a service appointment at all.

Bob Wheeler: If you think about that, that's completely unacceptable for somebody that's bought into this brand promise of Airstream, the travel and adventure, you have to be able to count on that support network anywhere you go. It's about travel, it's not about staying local. We're really working hard to transform that understanding within the Airstream network and we've done a very good job, but then more broadly, through the rest of the industry that's a challenge. It's not driven by spite, it's driven by a lack of service resources. Dealers, in their defense, they'll say, "Look, I've got more service than I can handle and should I take care of the guy that bought it here or the guy that didn't buy it here?"

Bob Wheeler: You go to the end of the line. I get that thinking, but on the other hand, we've got to find a way to do a better job for those people. Especially, they're on vacation. You can't go to your vacation without a refrigerator or an air conditioner. You've got to get those people taken care of, and more and more dealers are really buying into that commitment and that understanding.

Kristin: It's so interesting, because we spend a lot of time talking about how Amazon is training the consumer, and all consumers are being trained by marketplaces like Amazon in terms of that two hour delivery for Prime now, et cetera. They're just starting to realize like, "These are our table stakes." But then when they come into contact where there's a combination of, "Hey, I have an experience with a Lexus or a Ferrari" or something like that, and they consider Airstream to be a luxury item like that, to have that disconnect I could totally see, there's a disconnect in terms of that luxury brand experience, but there's also a

disconnect from the community that they thought they were a priority in. You know what I mean? I could see how that's very challenging for you.

Bob Wheeler: Yeah. You just hit the nail on the head. Their expectations have been set elsewhere and that's the standard that we have to live up to. They don't have any patience for anything that falls short, and I don't blame them. This is the bar we have to meet, and we're excited and proud to try to hit that bar in many, many places we do.

Kristin: So, one of the questions that I had, I think you just answered. Can you share an example of how the best facet about Airstream, which is enabling adventure, I think, is also the most challenging, right?

Bob Wheeler: Yeah, right. We're like, "Hit the road" but then if you have something wrong, we have to be able to take care of you while you're on the road in some foreign place. It's two sides of the same coin, and that's just something we have to work toward doing a better job at.

Kristin: And you did tell me before we hit record, I loved actually what you shared about the founder and the vision, all about customer experience, right? All about adventure, inspiration, fellowship, building a community. You called that your constitution and that goes back to the founder. You must have had to have evolved multiple times in the lifespan of this community to keep that creed timeless the way you described it.

Bob Wheeler: Yeah. The Wally Byam's Creed, which was written in the late '50s, is just, I don't know, maybe you can provide a link to it, but first of all it's poetry. It's so beautifully written. It never talks about travel trailer and motor homes. It's about adventure and experience and community and fellowship, and seeing what's over the next hill and leaving a place better than you found it. It's just we lost track of it, I think, in the '80s and '90s, but we came back to it and we were like, "Holy cow, this is everything that really encompasses what this brand's about. If we can just continue to provide support for doing the things that are in this creed, we'll be in great shape as a company."

Bob Wheeler: It's really inspirational. It's kind of like the constitution. The thing is so timeless, it really, I'd love to learn more about how it was written. We're trying to find that in our archives. Anyway, it's a great inspirational lodestar for us that we use. I've got it posted on the wall here in the office and everywhere.

Kristin: That's awesome. As we look to wrap up here, I want to respect your time. You've been so gracious, this has been amazing and inspiring. I have to ask, can you give us a bit of a future view in terms of how you see your brand fans engaging with Airstream with the product, with your content, with adventure, going forward, looking ahead like a year to 18 months? I dare go beyond that because things keep changing so much out there in terms of how they're discovering and engaging with brands, but what are you seeing as I'd say near horizon for you in terms of brand evolution?

Bob Wheeler: We have this really exciting opportunity and I think I touched on it earlier, but it's how do we stay connected with our customers after they hit the road, after they've ... The whole consideration and purchase process, we've got that all mapped out, and we've got pretty good control and support of that whole process. But when they leave the dealership, where do we take this thing? What do we do with it and what happens if we have trouble and campgrounds and towing? There are all these pain points around the experience, what's the reality sets in, I guess it's like buying a boat in some ways. How can we engage with our customers, continue the relationship with them, after they leave the dealership in ways that overcome some of those pain points and then also surprise and delight?

Bob Wheeler: These are enabled by digital tools primarily, and it's opened up this whole new world of opportunity for us to drive that customer experience in the right direction, and inspire more and more people to do the same kind of thing. Because we can help. All those pain points, the things that scare you off, the idea of hitting the road, we can help with those things and there's a community of people here that are just as passionate about their Airstream as you are, and the lifestyle, and they're out there to help. That's one thing about this company and brand is the folks that buy Airstream are just fantastic and helpful and they want to be a resource, especially to a new owner.

Bob Wheeler: How can we connect all those dots in a way that makes the experience better, allows us to continue in that relationship at a higher level with the company and the brand and really drives the brand toward the future? It's a whole opportunity outside the product. We're a very product focused company. We're thinking this evolving really strongly in this direction of products plus services, not just products as we evolve. That's pretty near term.

Kristin: That's awesome. You're basically talking about ways to support them digitally in a community beyond the dealer. That would be things like trip planning or supply and resupply, I guess, ease in connecting with roadside community. Are you partnering with any, like a Garmin or anything like that? I don't know, maybe that might be looking around the corners a little too openly, because I realize this is probably a little proprietary, right? But at the same time, it's very exciting. You look at the exterior of the Airstream not changing very much. Obviously the inside experience definitely has, and now look at what you're planning on bridging to a digital experience around this product and the community of it. I mean, I think this is fascinating.

Bob Wheeler: And it's got us completely energized and we're figuring out how we resource it for the future. You talk about navigation, I'll put a plug in for an app that's owned now by our parent company, Thor Industries, that we've had a close relationship with. It's called Roadtrippers, and they're a Cincinnati based trip planning and navigation tool, but they magic in Roadtrippers, they call their user detourists, which I think is really clever.

Kristin: That is.

Bob Wheeler: It's about all these cool things along your path. It's interesting diversions and detours and side trips. It's not about point A to point B. It's about all the cool stuff between point A and point B and inspiring people to slow down, turn off the main drag and go see the biggest bottle of [twine] and the brew pub, every brew pub between here and San Francisco. You can put in all these great filters, and it creates this kind of eclectic travel experience. It's not about just navigation, getting from one place to another. That really, we love Roadtrippers for that reason, it's kind of the anti-Google in that way. We love it because it reflects the character of our customers and how they travel.

Bob Wheeler: That navigation experience fits what we need much, much more than a how do you get from here to there as efficiently as possible. Roadtrippers is a great app that we've integrated into our offering and our parent company purchased, and has integrated into their digital offerings for the rest of their products as well.

Kristin: That is a fantastic example. Obviously we'll put links in the show notes for as many things as we talked about that exist now, and I'd like to just invite people to follow your company to see the evolution of this digital expansion and the channels that you're going to be using. Where can they learn more about that specifically?

Bob Wheeler: Well, our newsletter which you can sign up for at our website. We typically try to include an update on how things are evolving in our digital platforms. At least at the point at which it's ready for public consumption. A lot of that focus in the short term has been around the technology. How do we stay connected? 4G wireless connectivity kits that give you a good three bars of cell connectivity wherever you travel, whether it's in a camp ground or remote camping. It's the mechanical parts of the connection with our customers and we will be rolling out more and more of these other features around the experience and the lifestyle that I talked about here in the not too distant future.

Kristin: I think that you just gave me a great idea to have a couple of mobile offices for Verde, using some of these tools.

Bob Wheeler: [inaudible 00:41:38]. Yeah. Don't get me started on modern nomads and the mobile workforce, but I think Verde could very well use some of these resources, and I know a guy.

Kristin: Thank you so much, Bob. This has been a fantastic journey in this interview today, and I would love to have you back on the show and continue to educate and inspire my audience through what you're doing with this iconic brand. I mean, you're digitizing an experience and just a way of life around a brand that's super emotionally connected with so many people. Brings so many happy memories up for so many people, so I really can't wait to see how this evolves and I just also want to say hats off to you and your team for continuing to be path burners here.

Bob Wheeler: Oh, thanks Kristin. It's been a real pleasure and I'd be happy to come back on anytime.

Kristin: Thank you so much.