



channel mastery

169: Gareth Richards on bridging the gap between outdoor industry professionals, brands and specialty retailers

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Kristin: Welcome back everybody to another episode of the channel mastery podcast. I'm so excited to introduce to you Gareth Richards today, who is the CEO of Outdoor ProLink. Welcome to the show Gareth. It's absolutely great to have you here.

Gareth: Thanks Kristin. And see it's a treat and I'm honored, thank you.

Kristin: Of course. So I know that you founded the company in 2004. We'd love to hear, have you give some of your background and then why you founded Outdoor ProLink? I realized that was quite a while ago, but it's important to lay the foundation for where we're going today.

Gareth: Well as you can likely tell, and I have a bit of an accent, so I'm not local, I'm from Wales, but I've lived in the United States since 1987. And I'm not going anywhere. I live in Boulder. And my journey really in the outdoors was started in Wales. You know, I was a rugby player, played a lot of rugby in high school. And one of the things I was always intrigued about was the outdoors in and primarily just the height. One of the earliest memories I have, if not the earliest memory I had, was being invited to go kayaking with this woman who lived a few miles away on a farm. Her name was Christine Evans. It's amazing I can still remember the name and she invited me to go whitewater kayaking, never been whitewater kayaking before. So I went with her, she was very proficient.

She was actually on the Welsh slalom guide team. And I went with her and it was really fun. It just literally turned something on inside me that has never ever turned off and we had some fun took him a number of swims, you know, and, and shack the light. And one of the things that I left that day with was how, how incredible it was to be on a river and sharing that with a partner.

And I went hiking with her a few more times. And one of the funny stories around that is I was so excited about it, that I bought a spray school, the same spray skirt that she had good. And the crazy thing is, and anybody who's listening to this podcast, who's a kayaker will say, well, how do you buy a spray skirt without owning a kayak?

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And lo and behold, that was my first mistake in the world of buying outdoor gear. You don't buy a spray skip before you buy a kayak. So that was, that was really the intro. Got undergrad in Wales got a degree in environmental studies and a minor in outdoor pursuits, did a bunch of rock climbing, mountaineering, kayaking, caving, in Wales as a student.

And that was really the launching pad. And since that time, I've been fortunate enough to work in the outdoors since graduating from undergrad to this day. And came to United States on a rotary international scholarship to go to grad school at CU, worked for Knowles, worked for Cornell university in their outdoor program. And then faculty member of the outdoor education program at Prescott college in Arizona for about nine years. And quite a journey, you know, from there I jumped ship of higher education and joined a very early dot com and that dot com was called planetoutdoors.com.

Kristin: Oh, I remember planet outdoors. I remember. Yeah. Michael Hudson was the gear editor there if I remember correctly.

Gareth: Exactly right. And we had a wild ride, you know, I came right out of education into the business world didn't know much about the business world at all, but I was hungry to learn, took that right for about 18-20 months. And it all gets in, I'm sorry to say, but it gave me the launch into outdoor business world. And, and since then, you know, in director of sales for a few outdoor brands and during my tenure at those brands and little spots in between, I launched Outdoor ProLink in the fall of 2004, which was risky as you likely know, starting your own business, borrowing money, launched it in my basement in Boulder.

And since that time, and it's been a wild ride, we started with three brands in the golf equipment, which is not in business anymore. I'm sorry to say camp, climbing equipment and optic nerve sunglasses who are still going. Yeah, so we started with three brands and now we have just over 120 incredible outdoor brands on the site and about 130,000 individually approved and authenticated outdoor pros in the database buying from, from the website.

Kristin: Now this is where we get into it. So I'm super excited. I'm very excited also that you shared your background because you are definitely, you grew up within the ranks. I love your experience and I can totally relate with that day. You went kayaking. I'll never forget walking into the outdoor adventures silo at UC Davis and just being hit by a two by four and realizing like, here are my people, right. And I was there for whitewater guide training and like never looked back. So I totally get it. And I feel so fortunate that we have the opportunity to tell your story here today, because it's super important. You came from the outdoor educator side, you were a guide as well, but then you also have brand experience. So that trifecta, you really saw a gap that you wanted to fill without

door pro link. And I wanted to hear exactly what your, what the gap was that you saw.

Gareth: Got it. So one of the, you know, one of the things I was always interested in the, in the best equipment, you know, for me being the rock shoe, the backpack, the kayak, the power, the whole nine yards. So one of the things I knew was I, you could approach an outdoor brands and ask them for a discount on that product if you worked in industry. And it was always, it was always really challenging. And if you've got the right person, you'd get the pro form, so to speak, you'd fill it out and fax it back in with a credit card.

And you hoped, it was a hope and a prayer, that you got that piece of equipment and you might experience in the outdoors. And then my experience with planet outdoors really got me thinking about, Hey, how can we make that easier, that, that more efficient for the pro who was, you know, who was me and then the brand. And because it's really, historically, it was really challenging to execute a pro deal because it really wasn't something that was on anybody's desk at any brand tall. So one of the things we did during a little bit of time, at planet outdoors, but then during 2004 was really target some brands. And I remember you know, we, we launched with those three brands that I mentioned. And it was interesting because they took the leap of faith. They saw the organization, they saw history and then the technology piece, which would allow us to authenticate the pro make, sure that that person, him or her was legitimate and they truly worked in the outdoor industry, so they were qualified to get a discount on the piece of gear, and then also they would see that as a marketing opportunity.

And an example of that is, you know, I took a guy climbing in Alaska. And he was an attorney in LA and he'd done some claiming, but his intention was to climb Danali a couple of years before he came into the two guys with me for a week. And he drilled on every piece of gear. And he said, which boots, which backpack, which helmet, which hands? I can tell him exactly which one, and guess what, he went into probably A-16 and bought all this gear at a limit to this day, you know, he's flummoxed about a sleeping bag.

And he said, well, what sleeping bag? It was June, you know, lit, you know, in Alaska and that you got so not too high. I was like, just go get a 20 degree down sleeping bag. He's like, okay, which one? I'm like, well, get it down, North Face back, which one? Get the down North Face, 20 degree sleep bag. And it's called the cat's Meow. And that's the one he went to buy. So the power of the, on the outdoor educator or the guide, their word, his or her word is incredible. Right? So what we told, what I told him and what I've told hundreds of people since, Hey, go get these rock shoes, go get these approaches, go get this water filter, go get whatever you want. They go buy whatever or whatever their client list that tells them to go by.

Kristin: It's so true. And I think it, I think long, well influencer marketing, I think has existed for

since the dawn of time in one way or another, but guides are definitely influencers. And you started this before, there was a “platform,” if you will. And you grew into a platform that kind of, you know, brings these guides together with the purveyors of the gear that they need and that they're recommending to their clients, which is very important channel. It ultimately has a client outside with like a, you know, the ultimate backdrop with a person who they trust, they're sharing a rope with them or whatever it is, whatever type of outdoor experience they're having. Of course, they're going to go buy the product that they recommend and you know, that they're using to keep them safe and to give them a good time out there. So it's super interesting because when you founded this, we were still in traditional media era. Now we see, you know, the it's not like influencer marketing is less, you know, brand new or anything, as I said, but it's definitely a big play right now. And ultimately these guides are influencers. So it's interesting to see how, like, talk to me about how your business has grown, because ultimately there's the tech component of it, but really what's remains the same as the vetting process and protecting that experience with the brands and the guides.

Gareth: Exactly. So one of the things that's, that's true to my heart is, if you consider, you know, who were the first members of Outdoor Prolink, they were likely my buddies. You know, men and women from across the industry, it guides, educators from all across the United States. And I did everything, you know, so I negotiated the deals with each brand. I loaded all the products. I vetted all the pros. I processed all the artists, you know, all that stuff. I mean, you know all about starting a business. And since that time, every year, year over year, we have a thing we've just looked at all of our processes and made them better. And by that, I mean when we vet an application, when we vet a person who applies to become a member of Outdoor Prolink, we look at who they are, what they do, where they live, their gender, and obviously what they do for a living.

So we have these rubrics that are tried and tested, and we revisit these rubrics every quarter, every six months to make them better. So the people, the pros who are getting access, getting a membership to Outdoor Prolink, truly are professionals in the outdoor industries. And, and we check every single person, making sure that they are legitimate and they could be an easy one, right, is somebody who works for a guiding company in Washington and they guide on really well. They may be a mgs certified guide, or they may have a pay stub from that guiding company. They may be a grand Canyon guide. There may be a rock climbing guide. They may be working for Mountain Hardware. So those are the types of people who are in our database. So we want to make sure that we're connecting people who are truly walking the talk with the brands. And I think one of the things that the brands appreciate us for is, truly stringent rules and regulations, how we authenticate somebody.

Kristin: I would love to hear what happens if an applicant for Outdoor Pro Link is on the fringe. It's really important to hit that today in our conversation, especially with the fact that everybody's online. We have people who are trained to be looking for deals out there.

And they're also trained to look for the fast, when they want that quote frictionless experience, right. But Outdoor Pro link really functions as a true gatekeeper, protecting the trifecta, if you will, of like, you know, the, the pro the brand and the consumer. So I'd love to hear what you and your team do. If you encounter a pro application, that's iffy in your opinion.

Gareth: Got it. Great question. So I think to begin with our membership team our membership specialists, and that's what we call them because that's what they are. They look at every single application and if an applicant is on the fringe, so to speak, we as a group, we'll review those and make a final ruling together. And then each quarter we will revisit all those fringe cases and adjust our rules to make sure, and this is a promise to our brands to make sure that I would database remain squeaky clean. The process that we allow in get 12 months of membership, and then each pro is required to upload new documentation that's current, right? That's really, it shows us that they're legitimate and silver working in the industry to renew their membership. And then if they don't renew that membership and we'll remind them time and time again, to, to, to upload those docs, that account will be terminated.

Kristin: Okay. So according to the Outdoor Industry Association, and this is a study that we'll have linked in the show notes for this podcast episode 5.3 million Americans are directly employed by the outdoor industry over 153 million Americans participate annually in outdoor activities. Just to give kind of a sense of the landscape to the audience here today, the Outdoor ProLink membership base of 130,000 that you told us about earlier represents 2% of the total reported outdoor recreation positions and 0.008% of reported annual outdoor recreation end consumers. So that's a really interesting way to, I think, set up a snapshot for our audience that shows how stringent your vetting process is and how unwilling you and your team are to compromise when it comes to maintaining your authenticity and your guidelines, frankly, and that keeps the channel clean. So tell me more about who qualifies as an Outdoor ProLink professional.

Gareth: Got it. Again, this is, this is where the rubber meets the road for us. To make it through, you know, the first stage of, of our vetting process, a Pro has to fall into, you know, one of the buckets. For example, they work for an outdoor brand, they sell outdoor gear, they might require outdoor gear to their jobs and they might be a guide. They might work as an outdoor educator. The likely occurred advocate for the outdoor industry. They might work in environmental conservation or in public service.

So, when a pro purchase program stretches the boundaries of who's considered a pro, it really muddies the waters and expanding pro deals to a, a broader audience that don't deserve discounts, you know, and that's super important to us and to other brands that we partner with. And this is where we truly differentiate ourselves from other pro purchase programs out there. You know, we're gonna refuse to let our database get diluted. And that's our commitment again, to 120 brands that we have on the site.

People who who are not consider pros and therefore are not accepted into our platform

include enthusiastic, right? Outdoor enthusiasts. Those experts so-called experts are hobbyists. You know, they are not pros subscribers or members of outdoor clubs on non-profits.

They're not pros, right. Students who take outdoor ed courses or clients who are being gated, they're not pros either. So none of these folks are going to get access to Outdoor Prolink.

And, and maybe as importantly, or, or, you know, something that's near and to my heart is that we have strict qualification standards and will adhere to these standards as well as a strict code of conduct. And we, we publish this code of conduct on our emails on the website, and our promise to our brands is that if a pro is caught a bit abusing their pro deals, for example, that they're buying gear for others or reselling it, you know, for example, which has happened, you know, with some other programs, it really disrupts the retail environment. And if we catch those people, we're going to boot them immediately. And that's, and that's our commitment.

Kristin: Right. And are you able to articulate, like what a success story looks like for a brand when Outdoor Prolinks like value equation really comes to life as a channel, and then I'd also love to talk to you about retail when you're done with that.

Gareth: Got it. Let me, let me pick one maybe in early stage brands. So I remember, okay know, I did everything. I did all the pitching. I did the whole nine yards, which was super challenging. I couldn't get, you probably know Paul, he was the VP of sales and marketing for Gregory. And I really wanted Gregory Backpacks in those days. I think it was 2005 and I couldn't get Paul to answer my emails, my phone calls. So I flew to Temecula, to Southern California, to Ontario. I think it was, I drove to Temecula to the Gregory office and I sat outside and all didn't know who's coming. And I sat outside and he, he came to the door and he sort of looked around the door and he said, and I knew him a little bit, kind of, what are you doing here? I said, I want you to be part of Outdoor Prolink. And he shook his head a little bit said you better come in.

I gave him the pitch. And he said, we're in. And, you know, since 2005, I think it was, you know, Gregory has been on the website year over year, over year, and they've done really well really well. And they enjoy the relationship. Obviously they enjoy the fact that the packs and the brand are exposed to the database of 130,000 pros. And we've done a number of reviews for Gregory day packs, multi-day packs, technical packs. So they've really seen the exposure on Outdoor Prolink to a hundred plus thousand pros is phenomenal. And it really paints the picture because we're not trying to get all the backpack companies. We're quite discerning, you know, we have that, we have Osprey Mount Smith and Gregory and a couple of others, but we're not trying to get, you know, the 55 or the 75 types of backpacks on the site. We're looking for quality.

Kristin: Okay. I totally, I think I'm following where you're going. So you're also looking to the pack

brands that have the categories that the guides use as well. And yeah, and so that, that totally makes sense as well. And one of the things we're going to post on the show notes page is, is the manifesto for outdoor pro link, which actually includes like a very detailed list of what is, and is not a pro as well as, you know, the manifesto in terms of like the commitment that you and your team have to keep the, the list squeaky clean, because let's be honest, like one of the other things that's evolved since you started this and have grown your relationships is we see channels becoming dirtier and dirtier like Amazon is a great example or any marketplaces with third party sellers. What we're seeing now as, as everybody's migrated online, and you know, we've seen a proliferation in digital sales, digital retail, et cetera.

We're seeing some other sites that are claiming to be pro deal sites that don't have the human to human interaction that I believe you're explaining to us here with Outdoor Prolink and your history and trust, but we're seeing like the channel becoming muddied and dirty by that. So let's also talk about the work that you and your team have put in place. And I know you did some of this during COVID because you had an opportunity to, frankly, like you had time to kind of reach in and do research type things up in terms of like getting pros to give testimonials and, and actually really do your best to kind of like tighten the relationship between brands pros and retailers. And I'd love to have you talk a little bit about, you know, the retail equation, because that is obviously super important for specialty.

Gareth: Right. Right. And you know, that part has been quite challenging over the, over the last little bit. And one of the, one of the things that we're committed to is making sure our pros are truly authentic and they would be the people that the brands want using the product. One of the things that we know also is that lots of people want a discount. So we do our utmost to make sure the database is full of authentic pros. And at the same time, if these pro consumers apply and we don't let them in, you know, because they are consumers and they should be walking into a retail store and paying full price. And we truly believe that. And the intention being of our business model is that we provide a discount to the pros in, in the database who then in turn will drive traffic of their students, of their clients into stores to pay for price.

And that's our commitment to the store owners. That's our commitment to the brands and that sort of commitment to our business model, because it's truly important to me to support the industry as a whole. Independent outdoor stores are obviously, you know, a big part of who we are. I mean, I was a director of sales for a number of outdoor brands and I would walk into those stores and I can talk to those store owners and store managers about what it means to drive traffic into those stores. And one of the things truly is pro deals. And one of the things that we want to make sure is that our pros have a code of conduct and their commitment is to really tell their students, tell their clients, tell their family. Hey, you like this piece here, go buy it at, get in our, you know, whichever store it is. I mean, there are so many incredible independent of those stores,

as well as the big guys out there. And that's where people should be going to, to buy the product if they're not outdoor professionals. And that truly is our commitment.

Kristin: That totally makes sense. And no matter how much things have changed Gareth, that's one thing that really hasn't, and it's a testament to how important the retail channel is. And, you know, obviously I'm a huge fan of specialty retail. This whole entire podcast is involves so much of that as a channel. And like ultimately today, the consumer doesn't see the channel. So for example, they may book with a guide service. They may look at the Instagram feed of the guide or the company they work for. They'll see this product, that's their first imprint. Then they actually start, they get the gear list, right? So let's look at, let's say, you and I were going to go climb the grand through XOM or something. So we'll get a gear list. And it's like, here's what you need to bring. Here's how you should prepare. That's the second impression.

Then you get out there and you actually see them using this pack in the, in the wild. Oftentimes the gear list is, tan it out even before the adventure begins. It ties them back to a local store, right? So I just feel like no matter how much things have changed that outdoor pro in terms of the guide, the client relationship and, and sending them somewhere where they'll be taken care of at a retail shop is actually really an important part of the impression they're leaving on that end consumer. And another reason why it's so important that you have this code of conduct.

Gareth: Absolutely. And I think, you know, if you think about what a, a new person in the outdoor industry wants right now, somebody who's a newbie. It could be a rock climber, kayaker, hiker, they need to be handheld, they need to be shown what a good fitting boot feels like, what are the socks? If they're going on a backpack trip, they need to feel a weight in that backpack. Sure. The color is great and it goes with their eyes, right. But does it fit? And how does it ride when there's, you know, 30 pounds. So for, for a store employee, to be able to fit a person to a back to a backpack or for a multi-day trip that they're going on is, is key to their success and they come, but, and then obviously the enjoyment of going into the outdoors. You know, what happened in the last 12 months with COVID, there are thousands, thousands upon thousands of new consumers coming to the outdoors, because people are realizing that it's so long before, what are they going to do if they're going to go into their closest outdoor store and start buying equipment.

And hopefully they'll come to a store who have great employees. And most of these independent stores have great employees who are educated in the types of equipment and their proposed uses and they're fit because fit means comfort, comfort means enjoyment. And I'm truly committed to that. And if we can be a part of that, by driving those new people into outdoors, into outdoor stores, then we've done our job on truly that, that is our commitment to the outdoor industry as a whole. Give the pro a discount

an appropriate discount, support the brand, and then drive traffic into these outdoor stores.

Kristin: It totally makes sense. And I also know, you know, we've worked with the AMGA and I was on their board for a number of years, but now they're still a client. And they, I know that they talk about any kind of brand sponsorship or any kind of, you know, pro relationship with a brand is something that they also vet. So it's like part of the acumen of becoming a guide through the AMGA is, is learning this acumen. It's something they take very, very seriously because they do truly see it as an ecosystem to keep those clients coming back. And that is ultimately like their bread and butter is that repeat business. So I think that that's also a really important thing to point out. And really at the end of the day, people that's, what's making this equation work, you haven't automated. It, it hasn't turned into a tech solution while you have made it easier, you know, through technical upgrades and innovations, you still have people on the front lines vetting this, like you're guarding the door if you will, with your team. And I think that the more that you grow and the more that we see evolution, as long as you're keeping those people, like they understand the value equation, they understand the criteria they're managing this. Then I think that you're going to be able to keep that squeaky clean. It's when we trust algorithms more than that, or we look for efficiencies with overhead that's when we get into trouble, I think.

Gareth: Right. And, and we do see some examples of that out there right now, you know, our database is 130,000 truly authenticated and verified process. And we will re-verify them every 12 months, we will lose some people and we'll add new people. That's our commitment, you know, and it's a commitment that I have, it's a commitment that we all have at the company because it bolsters the whole outdoor industry. All ships will rise. You know, we do our job well. The brands will succeed, the pros will get the right equipment at the right price, and then we will drive those people's clients, their students into outdoor stores. And it'll be, you know, it's a win-win for sure.

Kristin: Right? So it's not so much like it's, I mean, it is a channel we're on the Channel Mastery podcast. This is a channel, but it's almost like a multi-channel experience that your, your basically trying to orchestrate and keep within some boundaries. But one of the things we talked about as we were rehearsing for this, Gareth, is that some brands C see this or other pro channels as a sales channel only. And that's also on the other side of the equation on the brand side where things can really go South. Can you speak to that a little bit with all of your decades of experience doing this?

Gareth: Yes. You know, I think once, once the pro program of a company becomes an absolute sales channel, I think they've lost their way. It really does need to be 100% a marketing opportunity, connecting the right demographic with the right piece of product who can then intern or walk their talk. Some brands have been attracted to pro programs. There's, you know, there's some out there who show huge numbers of participants, huge numbers of members, and they're not, you know, they're not pros, they're

prosumers or they're experts. And it's not the right demographic to provide a discount to because we were doing a disservice to the industry. Those people really can and should be going into specialty retail and paying full price because they're not working in the outdoor industries, so they really don't deserve. And that's a big word, right? They don't deserve a discount on that piece of product. Got it. So that's really, it really is our commitment to keep our values high drive traffic into those outdoor stores, so that, so that we can all flourish.

Kristin: Right? This is a very important point to reiterate. This is not a pro deal site. It is called Outdoor Prolink. And it is literally specifically for these 130,000 vetted people. And so that's also really important because I think that your point is so valid in terms of like going from pro to expert or influencer, that's really messed things up. And it, it really has muddied the water and really extended the discount arm to a broader audience. And there's two things that I take issue with. There's a lot of things, but two main things. Number one, it teaches people to shop for price, and we're a specialty world. And we, you know, a lot goes into the R and D on these products, but that brings me to you having worked with, you know, very technical brands for the entire time that we've been in existence for 20 years, it's actually quite dangerous for a consumer to obtain something like an Avalon or any kind of climbing equipment, any kind of whitewater equipment.

Like a lot of the stuff that we make products for is really dangerous. And it is super important that they get the training that they need from a retailer, whether that's an online trusted retailer, that's going to offer that or somebody that they can like go and talk to in person. So, you know, I just feel like there's a couple of things that are just so important. We can't lose our ethics because that's also when we're going to see some very high profile, negative optics on the outdoor recreation window during our most important growth opportunity, which is coming out of COVID, of course, I'm not trying to capitalize on COVID, but I'm calling it as we all see it. We are seeing a huge influx of growth, and we really need to step up and protect our channel right now.

Gareth: Well, right now, right. One of the things that we'd be doing during COVID, you know, we were, we had as many of the businesses had, you know, we, had a big scare in, in March and April of last year where people, you know, retracted pulled in, they didn't know where this was going. And come may of 2020, we saw a lot of people come out of the woodwork, come out of the houses, you know, and start hiking trail running, biking, climbing. And we saw a renewed interest in the business applications soared, you know, and, and again, we, you know, we did the right thing with all the applications and only allow the appropriate people in one of the things, some of the things that we we did during the time, during the time of COVID, so to speak, was really look at how, and what is the connection between the pro and the store, the independent store, and what is it, what can we do to help drive traffic into that store?

And we tell people, you know, we tell our pros, you know, emails after they make a purchase. Hey, if you have clients, if we have students and they're interested in your product, tell them, tell them the name of your favorite outdoor store in the town, where they live, where they're taking the class and tell them to go, to go buy the product there and make sure that it fits and it's comfortable. So one of the things that we're working diligently on right now is trying to measure that direct impact of having a hundred plus thousand pros out there, be walking the talk via passive as bodies brands, and driving their clients into the stores and, and trying to validate that and measure that is something that's that we're working on today, and we'll continue to work on it. So we become great targets for the independent outdoor store, as well as the, so I think that's that's really our commitment and I'm committed to that. I've always been committed to that. And everybody in the company is committed to that.

Kristin: Absolutely. I mean, it's, it's very clear that you were just from your background, but coming out of COVID and understanding the importance of retail being so compromised last year in our ecosystem, taking a new shape, I really am so excited to hear you reiterate that. And I'm sure what you're going to be creating is going to bring a lot of insight. I mean, there are very few opportunities to basically serve a consumer from the point of discovery, all the, all the way to the point of conversion, the way that Outdoor Prolink and guides do that is a very special opportunity. And I think it's something that is really important and part of what makes the outdoor active lifestyle markets. So incredible. So it's wonderful to hear that you're investing in that.

I guess going forward here knowing that the landscape is changing so much out there, and we are all supposed to be focused on consumer centricity now more than ever, because ultimately, you know, when you are doing your sales leadership, everything was about driving people to retail. Now we can't really drive people anywhere. They drive themselves, they're owning the entire experience, right? But that guide is offering a third-party testimonial. That is probably more powerful than anything else, frankly.

Gareth: Absolutely. I mean, I couldn't tell you, you know, the number of times that I had that opportunity and that responsibility to share with a client or a student, what they should go buy and they listen, they listen, you know that. So if we go back many, many years ago, when I was in undergrad, the first rock climbing class I took in college, the instructor's name, right. I remember to this day, I was 19. His name was Pat Little John. He was wearing a pair of Oslo, Oslo Canyon, rock shoes. Now Oslo doesn't make rock shoes anymore, but guess what? Rock shoes I bought as long Canyon rocks was the same Brock sheet. Cause if they're good enough for Pat, they were absolutely good enough for me. The next week I went out with a different instructor, instructor, Paul Kitchen. I remember his name.

He was wearing a European brand. The harness was a troll, Mach five honest, incredible, right. I can still remember to this day, the color is red and white. I went out and bought the exact same harness as him because I asked him like, you'd like that harness? He's like, yeah, I love it. It's safe. It's I wear it all day long. Okay, I'm going to go buy it. So seeing it, hearing it, touching it and feeling it, I mean, those are all of the things that I, as a student at the time was able to participate in and make the buying decision right down then by watching that, that person or kitchen, or Pat little John on the terms of, of going kayaking with Christine Evans, you know, when I was 16, well it's, I mean, it's powerful and I've done the same to, literally hundreds of students over my tenure as, as a guide and an outdoor educator. And it's fun to be able to share with people, you know, the stories about the harness of a helmet or the mountaineering boots or a kayak paddle, you know and they believe you and, and, and because you're not bending and you're, you're real and that's, that's what Prolink is all about sharing stories and helping advise people buy the right gear for the right, for the right adventure.

Kristin: Well, I have to applaud you for really staying committed to your mission and not being deterred to like go big, w you probably have had multiple opportunities to muddy the lines yourselves and get bigger, and you haven't done that. And I know that that's because you come from, you know, the background that you do and you value the relationships and you really have so much respect for the specialty ecosystem. So, I mean, I'm just, I thought it was really important to have you on today to not only talk about and, you know, applaud how far you've come with this awesome business model, but to really differentiate you, because I think it's easy for people to just lump Outdoor Prolink in with other pro deal sites. And you're very, very special in terms of like this hand built approach, this hand vetted approach, the people, you know, and trust like this is really, really important to depart to, I think everybody in the business community today.

Gareth: Right. And, you know, all I can say is, you know, our business model is based on trust and that, and that's a, that's a big statement, right? I mean, all again from Gregory trusted me, you know, Tommy know from cam trusted me, you know, there's pro business and on and on and on to, you know, octarocks and Martin hardware. And Scarpa, I mean, so many credible brands trust us with the authentication process that we have, the employees that we have to have their best interests at heart. And then we do it. You know, we do a great job with our marketing team in reviewing product telling stories about our members of our guides instructors and sharing that on social media, on a website and, and on the blog. And it's really imperative that we do job that is just insightful and trustworthy. And I think that's, that's all we can ask.

Kristin: And you can't trust an algorithm, you can only trust a person. Yes. So I think that's important for us to close with here today. And I will have links to everything that you mentioned so that people can check out the dirt bags, dreams blog, and all of the other ways that you foster and grow the relationships that you have with people in the

industry guiding and the trades, frankly. So I just really, I'm so grateful you were able to come on today. Is there anything that I might've forgotten to share? Do you think we covered it all?

Gareth: I think, I think we did a pretty good job. I got some stories in there

Kristin: You did. And I love that you have this like mind like a steel trap and you remember all these names,

Gareth: Right? I, I can only hope that the people I said, you know, my days, weeks and months in the outdoors, you know, all over the nation, all over the world, really climbing and kayaking and hiking, you know, I hope they can remember my name and the recommendations I made to them about what equipment to buy.

Kristin: I should have probably said this at the beginning, but as, as often happens with the podcast or an article, the lead comes out at the end. And I think that what you just said is so important because the guides are essentially enabling the consumer, the client to have one of the best experiences of their lives. And the gear is part of that. And of course, you're not going to forget, and you want to replicate as much of that as you can so that you can hold onto it. So that right there, I think is the glue that makes this equation continue.

Gareth: It is, it is. And it, and I mean, it's a gift, you know, to be able to take people into the outdoors and have them be, you know, dry, have a positive experience and an enjoyment, you know, really enjoy it. And part of that is having the right equipment.

Kristin: Absolutely. Well, thank you so much. This was awesome. And a very interesting channel discussion or experience discussion. I mean, depending on how you look at it, but this was very timely, very insightful for everything that's happening today. As we're coming back from COVID into a brand new retail ecosystem out there. So thank you so much for taking the time Gareth. It was great to have you here today.

Gareth: Thank you, Kristin. What a treat.