



# channel mastery

#171: Stephen Regenold, VP of Strategy at All Gear  
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Kristin: Welcome back everybody to another episode of the Channel Mastery podcast. I have a really fantastic longtime friend of a guest here today.

Before I introduce him though, I'd like to just give you a little bit of a primer on what we're going to be talking about today. So in January of 2021, All Gear became a new house of brands of sorts, which is a group of nine sites owned by Lola Digital Media. All gear has a significant audience, strong media brands and a different approach, which is what we're going to talk about today with Stephen Regenold, my esteemed guest and longtime friend.

Welcome to the show today, Stephen.

Stephen: Hey Kristin. Great to see you.

Kristin: Well, we've known each other a long time and I just want to throw a few things out there. Stephen is a fantastic journalist, former syndicated gear journalist, New York Times contributor. Today, he serves as the Vice President of Strategy at All Gear. And I would love for you to start by talking about you're really like not to go into hours, but like you have a lengthy background serving the outdoor active lifestyle consumer, which is what this show is all about. I'd love for you to give us some high points of your career and how and why you joined up with Lola. And now that you're heading All Gear, super curious to hear the story.

Stephen: Yeah, thanks. So I've just had my foot and kind of this outdoor gear, outdoor active lifestyle media space for going on two decades. So I've known you for most of it and probably all of it. And, uh, started in college with Ezine and then called Vertical Jones. It was all about climbing and that kind of morphed into something called Gear Junkie, which I built over the course of 15 plus years into a small media company with a couple offices and about 20 employees. And just kind of got to this plateau of where I needed some, uh, kind of like a next level, looking for that next level of, of just the synergy you get from a group. And about two years ago, we ran into these guys at Lola digital and they're a startup out of LA trying to do kind of a new type of media company and long story short, after about a year of conversations, they ended up acquiring Gear Junkie and pretty big moment for me and my staff. And we essentially doubled the size of Lola

at the time. And then immediately plowed into an initiative of growing a new division, which we just launched a couple of months ago and it's called All Gear.

And as the name says, it's immediate division about gear it's broader than just outdoor. We have an auto site, we have something called gear hungry, which is more lifestyle. Um, and then we also acquired some names that I'm sure a lot of your listeners know, like Switchback Travel, Bike Rumor. Um, I run far and then explore as web. So it's, uh, been a whirlwind for sure.

Kristin: You have been busy. So Stephen has an awesome, you know, growing, well, I don't know if they're growing other than reptiles, but you have great family. Like I think you have what, four or five kids.

Stephen: We have five kids in, in, uh, the information tortoise that Chris knows about. He's kind of banging around in the background here in his cage. So we're talking about our pets. Yeah. Five kids, a 16 year old daughter down to a three-year-old still in diapers. So yeah.

Kristin: That's awesome. That's game on. And you went ahead and, you know, went through an acquisition and now I love the quote from the press release. All gear is a continuation of this ethos of Lola founded in 2018 on the theme of serving passionate, enthusiastic across multiple niche interests. And ultimately your editors and content creators are immersed in the communities of the readers they serve, which I think is a super important point for us to jump off of today. And that was a quote from Soni Obinger, who's a Chief Content Officer at Lola digital media.

So I, again, I was super excited to have you on the show because I see you as an expert in our target consumer here in the outdoor active lifestyle markets. Um, and ultimately you're pulling together. I mean, I think a lot of people would just say out more media consolidation, but it's much more than that. I would love for you to get into some, you know, positioning on exactly what all gear does and ultimately how it kind of extends the Lola value equation to the audience that you know, so, yeah.

Stephen: Yeah, definitely. So I guess the first bullet point would be kind of a niche focus, but diverse, the all gear portfolio really touches, like I said, outdoor adventure, but also bike running. We have an auto site and we also have kind of a lifestyle site, so products for your life and what kind of unites all that is really expert driven content, buyer's guides, best of's, that inform the reader as to what they should look at and consider purchasing. So it's very focused around products and gear. Plus we have a new staff that covers trends and personality and kind of keeps the soul of the publications, but the backbone is really focused on the gear and the products and the buyer's guides. And because of that, we have just a very intent driven in the funnel kind of quote unquote readership and, uh, you know, one fact, which is amazing is that last year for each business day of the year, the Lola publications generated about \$1 million per day in sales for our retail partners. So really huge ad scale kind of mechanism that we've built around All Gear and Lola.

Kristin: Oh my gosh, absolutely. So can you talk a little bit about the retail partners? Because ultimately as you know, well, you've been on the podcast here before we do serve a lot of specialty retailers, kind of the more traditional brick and mortar retailers. Um, but obviously all of them now have I'm sure, healthy online facets to their businesses, um, because of the great quickening that COVID brought our way, but let's talk a little bit about that because ultimately I think everybody knows now through COVID that we are responsible as brands and especially retailers or brands in and of themselves in terms of providing an experience, the best ones are anyway, our, our job is to give the consumer what they need and empower them to buy where they want to buy. So while in some ways I'm putting a question here that is truly not relevant anymore because the consumer quote wears the pants. They are going to buy where they want to buy. And sometimes the reciprocity that comes from your content on All Gear, what provokes that, uh, sometimes they want to go down and, and support their brick and mortar, like whatever it is they want to do, we're ultimately giving them what they need so that they can have that choice. But they will ask as they're listening to this, like, will this be in your opinion, like growing retail sales, or when you talk about retail partners, like, what exactly do you mean in that regard?

Stephen: Yeah, I mean, it's everything from Amazon to the independent shops, into brokering custom deals with startups that have Shopify as their backend. So it is across the board. We, we are actually very heavy into kind of the avant link companies. So a lot of the niche and core gear brands, um, two of our sites, gear junkie and switchback travel were avant links partner of the year, two years in a row. So that's a huge part of what we do. We're not an Amazon only kind of shop. And you do see that in our space, um, kind of the content commerce space of, uh, publications or media sites leaning so much into Amazon that it's sort bankrupts. A lot of other focuses for us Backcountry, REI, Evo, and then working directly with the Patagonia's and Columbia's and North Faces of the world. It's pretty diversified.

Kristin: Right. And one thing that I did notice that you did well, um, you've always been, you know, I think very much a journalist and have always put that first. And the few times I've had you on the podcast, you've always gone back to that, like editorial, it truly is king. And you try to have that line. Um, you were very, I think, clear with how you were providing branded content around some of the adventure racing you used to do, et cetera. Um, as we're now moving into like kind of really dissecting what is content commerce look like in 2021 and beyond, where do you see that like branded commerce play in your ecosystem?

Stephen: Well, the branded content and content commerce, I guess I would look at in two different ways, but with both, it just comes down to, is it authentic, good, relevant information that a reader wants to look at and engage with? And if it's not, that's just, that's kind of the table stakes, right? So if you're not producing great articles and video and photos and usable content, uh, where are you? So I think in the past where you could be, as you could potentially somewhat game some of these systems with SEO, or even on Amazon search and so forth, and we've seen, I think, you know, I know a good trend of just the push to produce more authentic content is coming from kind of,

kind of both sides. I.e. from the reader as it always have, but also from, from the sort of data side with SEO and with the big retailers that, really are something you need to lean into as well.

Kristin: So let's talk about when we were in our rehearsal, you talked about a big algorithm shift that happened in December of 2020, like just to kind of cap off a pretty easygoing year. We had that happen. But yeah, but the way that, you know, in the past, we've talked about algorithms like there, this, you know, terrifying thing running around, like out to get us when in actuality, all that really is, is like Google relaying to us or whatever platform relaying to us - this is how consumers are, will be best benefited from what we're seeing on this platform. So talk us through the change that you saw and how you really feel that kind of cleaned up the, uh, research environment, leading people into a funnel.

Stephen: Yeah. I mean, when you say algorithm change, it's you know, a thousand pages of explanation and code and it's, it's very complicated, but to really distill it, I feel like the push is to more real and more human. So as publishers, you just need to lean into the, they eat equation is what Google calls it, which is expertise, authority, and trust and produce content kind of based off of those premises, which as a journalist and a media guys, kind of what we've tried to do.

I'm involved in a couple of groups and just beyond my company and really saw some of my cohorts get decimated by this algorithm change because they had so much been building sites based on keywords and code and not really looking at it through the qualitative lens of a reader as much, and at Lola and with All Gear and we're not perfect. But with our sites, we really try to lean into that quote unquote data plus heart ethos, which is something we're trying to develop as, yeah, look at the data, do all the best SEO practices and check all those boxes. But in the end, what should really be the majority of your effort should be around the heart, the soul of this, which is the true research, journalism and writing that is the backbone of these kinds of articles.

Kristin: And it's what people want to belong to is the, the trusted community that forms around that I believe as you well know. So this obviously this data plus heart, uh, is that what we can call the algorithm change or is that more the way you're looking at like the lens you're looking at it through?

Stephen: That's, that's our lens. I certainly don't want to speak for Google. Um, but it seems like it, you know, we just, we really saw that the good, again, like more human type content with original photography of people in the field, testing gear, first person, verbiage, anecdotes, advice like you would give to a friend, you know, that, that kind of style essentially what a reader wants to see when he, or she looks, you know, for best tent, for camping with family, they want to get like a great, easy to read clean article, which tells them, uh, objectively what to do or, or, you know, maybe with some, I should say, you know, subjectively what to do as in giving honest opinions on, on what products and what gear to pick.

Kristin: Right. And, you know, I think that, that the timing on that algorithm change was actually a pretty fantastic when you look at how consumers had to glom on to their browsers for everything like that validation of purchase that maybe has happened in different places was now squarely happening online because it had to, and then in the meantime, we had content farms, my words like trying to like draw people in and, and potentially commoditize that experience and drive people to a commoditized marketplace potentially. Whereas what the traditional publisher in our space, nobody wants to be called that anymore. I realized, cause it's all digitized, but like the actual like heart, if you will, the ethos of like really providing that service for the specialty consumer was probably not able to really keep up with that because it's almost impossible to keep up with marketplaces and, and what they're investing in and all of that.

So it's actually super beneficial, um, in terms of enabling consumers to really get engaged with the content that's going to help them make the right buy. Um, so I feel like we might've seen, like it's been super awkward out there in the editorial landscape. Let's be honest. And COVID made that maybe, um, a little bit more organized because it had to, but it's been pretty awkward for a few years watching these legacy media properties, try and stay in business and try and do more of what they always have done to keep, you know, to stay in business, which is the definition of, you know, insanity as Einstein says. But at the same time now we're seeing consolidation, we're seeing content commerce data plus heart now, like where do you see this all going for the actual ecosystem for the brands and the outdoor consumer? Like, let's look ahead six months, if you, if you can. I realize I'm asking you to look into a crystal ball, but let's say I want to buy something. And I start Googling, like, tell me what the difference is going to be. Now that we have entities like yours, where I could actually like engage with trusted content and then have an experience in there?

Stephen: I hope where it goes is just the Google essentially, which is the 800 pound gorilla, but there's other entities like Amazon has a huge search engine focus, et cetera, but let's just talk about Google. I, I hope in six months from now, it's just much more clean experience for anybody that is looking to learn about gear and potentially buy something. Um, that's, that's where the push seems to be going. And I think just getting those search results served you that are, uh, both irrelevant and trustworthy and engaging. That's kind of the best scenario.

Kristin: All right. So as we were rehearsing, you mentioned a project that you and the team at All Gear working on. I think you said a little bit later in 2021. Can you talk about that with us? Cause I think that'll give us some additional insights.

Stephen: Yeah, for sure. So it's kind of in its formative conversational brainstorm stage, but essentially we want to launch an incubator, excuse me, an incubator or a launch pad within Lola and All Gear that really just refines all the practices around content commerce down to the T's. So we're going to hire staff and move some people around and potentially form either a project that runs through this year or potentially a whole new department. And really just focusing on how do you build a system around content commerce from again, the backend, the data, the SEO to the studio, where you take the

photos to the field, where we test the product to publish in the article and then also to keeping track of how that article is doing and, uh, making sure that it's updated and just really building a best in class process around that whole complicated scenario of going from idea to article, to maintaining an article throughout potentially years.

And in addition to that, we're going to be leaning into first party data and backend some new backend tech and also potentially opening a new test facility. So just kind of pulling all of these digital and in real life facets that it takes to run a content commerce publisher into one place. And under one department. Right now, I think it's really a bit fractured, I think not only at our company, but in the industry, you have your tech department looking at SEO potentially, or UI UX. And then you have your freelancers who are in the field testing the gear, you have your editors in between. You might have an affiliate sales person talking to REI at some place in there. So it's, it's a fairly fractured process and we're trying to build something that makes it cohesive.

Kristin: And your point about it, like you post something and I'm sure that updating the content is part of that. Like, that's almost like just as important then it's something that may get left off the table if you're not really buttoned up with a system here. Um, I think that you just hit on like really the epicenter of the evolution, which is we see tech people in to the outdoor active lifestyle market. We've seen that with Amazon for a long time. We've seen some publishers evolve that way. There definitely are a lot of content creators that have come into it that way. Um, almost, you know, if you were to like looking at an analogy between like retail and content, we have, you know, the brick and mortar retailers, we have direct first. And then we, in on the editorial side, we have more digitally minded video content producers, as well as like more traditional media, but it's really tech versus like the humans of editorial, how it's been monetized and how the two are merging. And when I hear you talk about like, you have team, a team that lives in breeze, the topics that you cover immersed in the communities you serve, that feels really separate than making an awesome tech stack that enables

Stephen: Exactly. Yeah. And it's, it's sort of getting those two departments to talk to each other and to build processes so that they can help each other because we're both going toward the same goal, but, uh, it's really two different sets of people in two different timelines and building a system around that is just going to make everything more efficient.

Kristin: Cannot wait to see what that system is.

Stephen: Yeah. And we have, we have the system, but it's, it's going to be refined and maybe defined better because right now it's just at least at our company, it's, it's very much run by the editors because it has been for years. And I think it should remain that way, but I feel like we need to lean more into our SEO staff and our affiliate staff and make sure that we're doing it 110%.

Kristin: Right. Well, and looking at their timeline as we're looking to wrap up here, you know, you just finalize the acquisition of, um, I run far, January 22nd. Um, Switchback was December 31st and Bike Rumor was December 18th. And I'm wondering, do you, have,

you had mentioned you have some more, um, acquisitions potentially on the horizon. I know you probably can't speak about them, you know, in exactly what their names are, but what are we looking at for the rest of the year here? Because obviously it takes, you know, investment to grow audience through acquisition and you also have a, uh, a new experience to deliver. So I'm curious to know, like now that you've announced and you're kind of getting down to brass tacks and getting your process built, like what we should expect from an acquisition standpoint, going forward this year.

Stephen: We're trying to kind of balance how much should we diversify versus how much should we build kind of sisters sites and something like a switchback travel and a gear junkie. There's a lot of overlap, but it doesn't mean that we can land in kind of the, the top of the SERPs for both like best hiking boots. If switchback gets positioned one and gear junkie gets positioned too, that's amazing. Um, or we can diversify and maybe go into say, uh, you know, the triathlon space or something little more adjacent. And so we probably have five to 10 conversations right now with other sites and media publishers. And, um, obviously have NDAs and can't talk about any of that, but I would say it's, it's active lifestyle and it's for the most part adjacent to the sites that we're looking at, but we also are looking at maybe more the tech space, like wearables and health and wellness. And so kind of staying in that sphere, but being diversified enough.

Kristin: And with the auto wise, which was April 10th of 2020, I mean, obviously with gear junkie, you guys have done a remarkable job in my opinion, covering RV in a, in a relevant way, but more so Overland, like I really think you've created a fantastic portal for outdoor active lifestyle enthusiasts to discover that. Where does the automotive piece land here?

Stephen: I would say auto wise is kind of our most, um, you know, separated site as far as content, but obviously almost everybody drives and needs a vehicles. So, um, it, it essentially lands a little bit adjacent to everything else, but it's still part of the ethos of just deep expert driven content about products, which in this case are cars and trucks and campers. The editor of Auto Wise is actually Brian Dorr, who's a longtime Gear Junkie contributor. He's very deep into overlanding he's a world-class kayaker and very much an outdoor guy. So that, that kind of seeps into a lot of what they do at Ottawa wise as well.

Kristin: Yeah. How can it not, he is literally like the president of overlanding.

Stephen: Yeah. I think he lived out of his van for many years and just has that, you know, just real core, um, connection.

Kristin: That's awesome. Anything else you want to add about what you're forming up as a next-generation media group here before we wrap up today?

Stephen: Well, we're just trying to All Gear into a world-class, uh, group of publications. And I guess, you know, as a journalist and editor, I'm just going to put a stake in the ground that we're going to do world-class content and hire experts to write about their, um,

subjects and also not getting away from trying to be the sole and sort of pulse of the industry. I feel like Gear Junkie for many years has really tried to break news and be part of the conversation and stay relevant. So we've been talking about products and content commerce all day, but we certainly, every week are publishing a, you know, 10 plus articles on personality profiles and adventure stories and trends and sort of breaking news in our space. So we're not going to forget about that kind of journalistic direction, especially with some of the sites like Gear Junkie, cause it's just, it's how you stay relevant with your audience. And it's how, you know, a reader comes to identify with you and it becomes a part of your community and trusts use that when you do then write about best camping tents, you kind of have that, you know, you have that foot in the door with this consumer who knows you and trusts you. And so maybe that's a final thing to say.

Kristin: Yep, it's that digital reciprocity through content that provides a service really. I mean, this entire universe has been built on relationships and reciprocity. I don't care what channel you buy from or engage on. That's ultimately it, and it all starts with trust. And you, I think have just exhibited an expert level of like caretaking and growing that trust with our focal consumer. So I want to first also congratulate you on the evolution of you as a professional in your career. And thank you for bringing in a much bigger swath of excited consumers over the time you were leading Gear Junkie. I mean, literally yours was the first bigger portal and you never, I think, left that core, you know, foundation, if you will, that you started with, and that's remarkable. It really is. You really brought like this VIP experience to so many more people than we were serving before.

Stephen: Well thank you. I mean, I've just always been a gear junkie and an obsessive outdoors person and have had the opportunity to build a career around. It's been amazing. So, and I, you know, it's been great working with you through these years too, Kristin.

Kristin: Well, thank you so much. I appreciate it. And I look forward to seeing more news around the, you know, what you're doing over at All Gear and Lola as we continue through 2021 and beyond. So thank you so much for being on the show today.

Stephen: Yeah. Thanks. Awesome.