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#174: Keith Bornholtz, Gathr Outdoors
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Kristin:

Welcome back, everybody, to another episode of the Channel Mastery Podcast. I'm very excited to introduce Keith Bornholtz to you today, who is the CEO of Gathr Outdoors, formally known as the MacNeill Pride Group. Welcome to the show. It's great to have you, Keith.

Keith Bornholtz:

Thanks, Kristin. It's great to be here. Looking forward to it.

Kristin:

Well, I have to start by saying I love the new name. It's G-A-T-H-R, Gathr Outdoors. And here we are at January 2022. We're coming up on two years of our friend the pandemic. You joined your company about six or seven months ago, and I think that was a pretty challenging time to take over a grouping of brands and create a new direction. Can you talk a little bit about what inspired you to take on that role during such a challenging time in terms of business headwinds?

Keith:

Yeah, sure. Well, part of it is I spent a good part of my career, in what I think are kind of passion-based CPG-type industries. And certainly, the outdoor industry is passion-based. The second thing is I'm a bit of a change agent or a change junkie. I'm really comfortable with things that are challenging or messy. And this was an opportunity to come into something that was really evolving at a minimum, and be part of that. While I've only been here, as you said, six, seven months, we've actually done quite a bit, and in that time acquired three businesses. So you're right. It's been a busy time, and it's been a strange time with the pandemic, but in terms of the type of leader I am and the type of environments I like, that type of business is a good fit for me and how I like to work.

Kristin:

Well, you're the perfect person for the role during a time like this. And one of the things I think that would be most inspiring to hear you talk about is the way that you describe Gathr Outdoors to be a platform for outdoor recreation brands that you own. So I would love for you to talk about that because I do feel like it really signifies a change in a corporate conglomerate. That might be how we referred to a grouping of brands yesterday. But today, I think the platform is a lot more appropriate, and there's a lot of, I think, leverage and power behind that are very different in terms of merger, acquisition, blueprints we've seen in the past. So talking about one plus one equaling 10, instead of two. Can you speak to your vision around how you see Gathr Outdoors as a platform instead of a conglomeration of brands?

Keith Bornholtz:



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Sure. Yeah, there's kind of a lot there, actually, to unpack. You mentioned this notion of a conglomerate, and I've been fortunate enough to be in a lot of different CPG businesses, and there is this sort of acquire and control and combine approach that I think is a bit of a legacy approach in a lot of industries, and certainly really common in consumer products. And one of the dangers of that in my view is you just rip the heart out of the brands. And I think, at least for this business, it's just essential that that entrepreneurial passion and the spirit of each and every one of the brands continues to survive and thrive.

And to me, a platform signifies bringing those companies together in a supportive way, where they can all thrive and be healthy and share best practices and build upon each other's successes, and that one company can benefit the next. And so to me, this notion of a platform or a family of brands is just a better fit for, I think, who the brands are independently, but even more so who we are together as Gathr Outdoors.

Kristin:

And I think for such a time as now, I mean, being in the outdoor space, and as you said, in passion-based industries, we love our legacy participants, but we're always wanting more people to come in to make the pie bigger. And with COVID, bicycling, outdoor, endurance sports, RV, all of those, I guess the team sports side took a little bit of a bench for a little bit of time, but point being is we got this huge influx of new participants. And the thing I love most about Gathr Outdoors is just the inclusivity behind the name. And I would love to hear you talk about the direction in pulling together these brands so that you're creating an opportunity for some of these newcomers to stay.

Keith Bornholtz:

Yeah. You know, it's funny, as we think about each of the brands individually, but collectively as well, there's so many people that are participating in the outdoor industry. And very few of us are pack rafting down a river someplace or planning a 10 or 12-day hike with a 50-pound pack. And while we have products and brands that support the pro and the enthusiast, the truth is, most of us are not that. And I think what we stand for as Gathr Outdoors is a couple of things. One, we believe that the outdoors is best when it's shared. I mean, that's when you create memories, whether it's with your family or friends or loved ones, versus in this sort of battle against your personal fortitude. And I think that that's really important. And when you think about it from that perspective, it's important to be inclusive and to recognize an outdoor activity, big or small, is what it is to that individual. And if we can bring people into outdoor activities, whether it's the first time they go hiking, or maybe the first or second time they experience camping with their family, we think that is both a fantastic thing to be able to accomplish as a company. We think our brands do a great job of doing that, and we think it supports what is so great about the outdoors.

Kristin:

I love that.



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Keith Bornholtz:

So that represents that, bringing people together outside, having great experiences that are comfortable, memorable, and quite honestly, makes them want to come back.

Kristin:

I love that.

Keith Bornholtz:

Does that help?

Kristin:

It does. And I have a question. I think I did a little sleuthing on you before this, and you came from the pet industry most recently, which is most certainly passion-driven, and I think is also kind of the great equalizer. Anybody, any age, any interest, can have a dog and belong to that club, yet it still has this exclusive feel and specialty feels to it. So I'm almost wondering if you came in with a little bit of, I guess, seasoning in terms of what your vision is for Gathr Outdoors. So I don't know if you have anything you want to comment on that, just with the chops that you got in the pet industry most recently?

Keith Bornholtz:

Well, you hit on something I think is really important, and the more time I spend in the industry, is ringing true, and that's this idea of passion, and it's at the consumer level, it's with our retail partners. People absolutely love their pets and they're highly committed to them. They're part of their family. It's something that they identify with as individuals. And I think the participation in outdoor activities and the passion that comes with that is consistent or carries over. And those are industries I like to be a part of. I think they're exciting. I think that you can get into them. I think they're emotional. And so from that standpoint, there are definite similarities in the pet industry and the outdoors industry. And for me, that's really exciting. There's a lot of boring businesses that you can spend your time and your life understanding and trying to change or improve. But when you have the benefit of participants being passionate, it's a lot more fun.

Kristin:

I agree. Let's join hands and thank the universe that we're not selling vacuum cleaners. I mean, Tyson's done a pretty good job making that spicy lately, but let's be honest. I mean, what you've just identified with pet, the inclusivity of that, that's truly the runway for outdoor. And I think we've had trouble getting out of our own way, leading into the pandemic, frankly, where we were a little bit exclusive and a little bit, we weren't exactly the most welcoming. And I love the way that you describe it, the aspirational images of everything we put out there. Not only did it represent maybe a certain way that you're supposed to look or a certain race you're supposed to



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be, I'm just going to go out there, but that's really the brand Bible that we've stuck to, if you will, in the outdoor active lifestyle markets.

So the more that we can see, with what you're doing with Gathr, and how it can reach from people tailgating to people enjoying their kids' soccer games to understanding like, wow, I'm in a pandemic and I've become closer with my friends and family in this bubble because I've been able to recreate with them outdoors, that I think has ignited a passion that maybe our industry prior to COVID wasn't paying attention to, but it's here now. And I feel like the platform that you're building is going to really enable that to make a positive impact happen really quickly. And I guess I'm curious to know, as you mentioned your wholesale partners, how are you envisioning bringing them into the opportunity that Gathr Outdoors is presenting?

Keith Bornholtz:

Yeah, well, there's sort of a pragmatic reality to that with what we've been doing, which is growing. We've been acquiring companies, great brands that have what I think is overlapping outdoor occasions. Very oftentimes you could be a fan, a participant, a consumer of our brand, one brand, but the other brands would fit in those same types of outdoor activities. And so very simply, we're sort of building scale.

And I think with retail partners when you have the ability to solve problems or bring innovation in a multitude of categories versus one, I think you become an easier partner to work with. I think you become a partner that can solve problems across categories versus within categories. And I hope that that allows us to have a higher level strategic conversation with retailers that are looking to figure out how do I continue to compete in this dynamic and ever-changing environment?

And so the connectivity between the businesses that we're in and the categories that we participate in is helpful. The scale naturally helps. But I also think that our brands do have approachability for both new consumers and what I'll call highly committed enthusiasts. And so you don't give anything up, I guess I would say, in working with us as a partner.

Kristin:

Absolutely. And I don't know if, as we're looking at kind of the view of stakeholders and the broader assortment that you're bringing to your wholesale partners and other tertiary stakeholders, are they asking you about the future? Because there's been so much change in terms of like three brands since you've started seven months ago, let's say, and a rebrand. I mean, are they looking at 2022 and having the conversation of what more can we expect? Or I guess that's also something I'm curious about for the Channel Mastery audience. Where do you see a platform like Gathr going this year?

Keith Bornholtz:

Yeah. You know, when I think about opportunity, it's not a great answer. In fact, it's a pretty bad one, but I see it everywhere. But at some level, I think that's accurate. I mean, we have businesses within the platform that you can make the argument are growing well ahead of



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expectation. And one approach could be to sort of leave those businesses alone. But as a leadership team, when we get together and evaluate, we look through the lens of potential, and some of our largest or healthiest businesses in my view still have massive addressable market opportunities. They have enhancements in branding. They have expansion within categories. There are certainly points of distribution that would be additive. So I think that opportunity exists within each of our brands, but also across the platform, and I feel that's really powerful and super exciting.

Kristin:

That is. And I don't think it's a bad answer. I mean, coming out of the pandemic, in the outdoor active lifestyle market, in the outdoor recreation industries, we do have a bigger opportunity than ever. And I think that a lot of operators such as yourself have done an exceptional job kind of hunkering down and doing what needs to happen to keep things flowing. But I think there are a few who have gone out and really expanded on the level that you and the Gathr team have during a difficult time. And as they say, you know, don't waste a perfectly good crisis, in our case a pandemic. And so I'm not looking at it opportunistically. So please, I don't want to offend anybody by that, because obviously there are so many sensitivities around this, but at the same time, I think it's important to note that we are actually, I think responsible in our leadership roles right now, to create a better experience for people that we've never served before.

And I think that's one of the biggest things that you're going to accomplish with the platform that you're building. And I know there are probably a lot of leaders listening to this today, wondering like, I'll have what he's having. Like, how did you do that? I know you have a specific model in your leadership style that I'd love for you to share. And I think that it's really compelling in terms of the three Hs, just to give you an idea when we were rehearsing, you mentioned.

And I think that anything you can talk about to other executives listening today on how to expand during a time when the globe is curtailing or maybe feeling a little bit like let's make ourselves smaller and safer, and you guys went out and created a bigger entity, frankly. So from a leadership standpoint, do you have anything you can share with other executives who might be wanting to do the same thing in 2022?

Keith Bornholtz:

Yeah. Well first, I want to kind of touch on this idea of opportunity in our expansion because I think with opportunity comes responsibility. And while we see the awful impacts of the pandemic, a lot of us in the outdoor industry are benefiting, right? Our businesses are growing as people spend more time outside. We owe it to those new consumers coming into our markets and engaging our brands and buying our products that they have a great experience so that we're preserving that long term success, and that they're enjoying the benefits of spending time outside, which is healthy and it's awesome and it creates memories. And so not only do I see it as an opportunity, but there's a responsibility there like we've got to do it right, I think. And I think that leads to why we want to be inclusive about that.



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The second part of your question around what we're doing and why it might be a little contrarian and how I think about it, you know, I'm not somebody that gives a lot of advice, but I do like to try to be pretty self-aware and understand how I operate as a leader. So I don't know how valuable this would be to anybody, but for me, I think there's a benefit in structured thinking. And you mentioned that I use models at times, and I do. I read a lot. I listen to a lot of podcasts and I gather ideas and models and processes from different approaches. And I try to think through whether they make sense and can be reapplied. And you mentioned this three H concept. It's certainly not mine. But as we were looking at this significant pivot, this transformation that was taking place, I wanted to think through how do I do this in a way that is reasonable, that's fair, and that's considerate because while I have a high tolerance for change, and in fact I enjoy it, I also recognize that change can be scary for most people. And I had to think through that because the audiences across these different companies, whether they've been part of the platform for some time or are new, have a very different perception of that than I might, and a very different approach. And so the simple three H model is really about honoring the past so that you're thinking through and recognizing what the people that are part of the team have been through or might be thinking. And it's about being honest about the present and transparent with the organization as to what's going on or what's changed and where we're at. And then finally, being hopeful about the future and sharing your aspirations both as a leader and what you believe about the business.

And I think, again, it's a model that I used. I'm not advocating it, but as I learned that many years ago and thought about what I'd be asking our organization and the new members of the family to do as they joined us, it just made sense to me to keep that in mind as a process. And we tried to do that as a leadership team, as we thought through where we were at and where we were going, and how we were going to get there.

Kristin:

That's incredible. Thank you so much. And I know you might think like I don't want to give advice, but that actually was very, very helpful. And I think that there are a lot of executives that are being tasked to mindfully grow or perhaps exponentially grow this year. And when you look at it through that model, honor the past, be honest about the present, and hope for the future, I think that it's a very considerate, empathetic way to approach a business goal. And I think there's a lot of respect in that, and I think it really fits well in the passion-driven industries that are really driven by relationships and emotions in terms of what we love to do and why we're in these markets. So I think that's actually a perfect way for us to wrap up unless there's anything I forgot about the Gathr Outdoors announcement. Obviously, all of the links to anything you would want to know about that will be in the show notes, but I would love to make sure that I covered everything on that because this is truly a big deal.

Keith Bornholtz:

Oh, well, gosh, I'm obviously biased. I could talk about it for hours probably. You know, I guess I would leave you with a couple of quick things. We didn't just rename the company. I think that



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would be unfair, and at some level insulting. We started with a purpose and we really needed to think through what each of our collective businesses mean. And then we worked through our values, and we were really critical and self-reflective about what the values are for the company. Then we moved on to strategic choices, and then looked at structure and how we can build an organization to deliver against what it is we're setting out to accomplish. Out of that came a roadmap and a path that we're committed to, and that felt so different and such a demarcation of change and so significant that we felt it was important to rebrand the company, that the identity was changing so much.

So I would never want you or the audience or whoever's listening to think that as a new leader, particularly in such a short time, I came on board and simply just changed the name of the company. It was an outpouring or a result of what I think is some really important fundamental work with a team of people and an outstanding facilitator to dig deep around what our purpose is, what our values are, and our strategies. I guess I'd encourage folks, as our website goes live, to engage us in those conversations, because the name's important and we are proud of it and we love it, but what we are as an organization and how we're going to create value for end consumers and customers, that's in our purpose, our values, and our strategy. And we'd love to have conversations about that. So I guess that's how I'd end it.

Kristin:

Awesome. Tell us where we can learn more. What's the new website? It's going to be in the show notes, but I'd also like you to say it here.

Keith Bornholtz:

Yeah, yeah. It's Gathr Outdoors. As you mentioned, it's Gathr, drop the E, and that's probably the easiest place to get some initial information. And obviously, you can reach out to me and try to find me or our leadership team on LinkedIn. That's probably the second easiest way to go about it.

Kristin:

Yep. And I'll put links in there, as well. And thank you so much. We're so excited to be part of this process and really looking forward to 2022 and the positive impact you and the Gathr Outdoors team is going to make.

Keith Bornholtz:

Ah, thanks, Kristin. This has been a lot of fun. Thanks so much for the conversation today. I enjoyed it.

Kristin:

All right. Thank you so much.

Keith Bornholtz:



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Take care.