



EPISODE 12

Forging a regenerative future for fashion: Insights from Eric Liedtke, executive vice president of brand strategy at Under Armour and founder and chief executive officer of UNLESS Collective

**Host:** Alan Hart, leader in marketing and customer strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP

**Guests:** Eric Liedtke, EVP of Brand Strategy at Under Armour

**Alan Hart:** Are you ready to go beyond the basics of marketing? I'm Alan Hart and this is marketing beyond where we talk about the questions that spark change and share ideas that challenge the status quo. Join us as we explore the future of marketing and its endless potential.

**Eric Liedtke:** I'm very consistent with everyone I talk to. I'm living my life right now with a very clear principle: zero wasted hours. So, if I'm not doing something for myself, for my family, for my friends, for my community, or for my world, I'm not doing it.

**Alan Hart:** Today on the show, I've got Eric Liedtke. He's the founder and CEO of UNLESS Collective, recently acquired by Under Armour. He also serves as the president of the Under Armour brand. UNLESS, through Eric's

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leadership, developed a regenerative creation model aimed at changing the way footwear, apparel, and accessories are designed, distributed, collected, and safely returned to the Earth. He stepped away from his executive board position at Adidas in December of 2019 to focus on his passion for fighting plastic waste. At Adidas, he led all brands and businesses, fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation, and scaled the Adidas e-com platform to reach \$4 billion in 2020. Liedtke's leadership drove material and process innovation and sustainability initiatives and streetwear growth adding over \$8 billion in revenue in six years. He's initiated partnerships to combat marine pollution, including with Parley for the Oceans, and drove efforts to eliminate virgin polyester from Adidas products in 2024. Through all this experience and the conversation today, you'll hear a lot about UNLESS Collective, what he's trying to do to help save the oceans, as well as how it fits into Under Armour's strategy and where he thinks the Under Armour brand can go. That and much more with Eric Liedtke.

Well, Eric, welcome to the show.

**Eric Liedtke:** Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

**Alan Hart:** Yeah, I can't wait to have this conversation. We're going to get to talk about Under Armour, entrepreneurship, all kinds of stuff. I guess before we get started though, I would love to know where did you get your career start and how did you end up—you're now the president of Under Armour, is that right? You've also got this other role.

**Eric Liedtke:** Exactly. So, president of the Under Armour brand, which means I look after all creation: strategy, operating model, product, digital concepts, and things like that. So, just want to make sure we're clear. We have a CEO, and I'm one of many, but my realm is making cool stuff.

How did I get my start? Well, it's a long story. How far back do you want to go? Long and short of it is, I was sitting in an ad agency in Detroit and I wasn't happy. I was a suit. So, I wasn't the creative guy. I was more of the client relations. I just realized that I wasn't happy unless I was doing sport, having done sport, or talking about sport. So, I got to working my network, and back in the day, we called it our Rolodex, and finding out who we could talk to and who was in sport. One of my best friends was working for Adidas, back in the day in the early 1990s. He introduced me to some guys that were former Nike guys. If you're following the industry, you may know the name of Peter Moore, who designed the first Nike shoes, and Rob Strasser, who actually signed Jordan, among other things, but those two guys had broken off from Phil [Knight] at Nike and started the Adidas America subsidiary, and they were hiring. So, in 1994, I was like I've got to go work there. This is before cellphones. This is before email. This is like good, old-fashioned writing letters and picking up landlines and calling, and I was just relentless. It took me 12 months to land a job there, but I never looked back; 26 years later, I basically started next to the mailroom as what they call a sweeper, which is basically someone that did anything. Then, 26 years later, I found myself at the top of the company, or 20 years later, I was the brand president of Adidas and I was in charge of all creation there as a board member, and I was living in Germany. Then, I had this wild idea that we could make things out of plants versus plastics. I left Adidas to fix the problem of microplastics and nanoplastics, which I'm super excited to share with your listeners, and that led me to being acquired by Under Armour in September of last year. So, it's been a bit of a roller coaster of big to small to big, but it's been super fun.

**Alan Hart:** Well, it's awesome. One, just your career going back to '94 before cellphones. That's fun in itself.

**Eric Liedtke:** I remember the first BlackBerry came out, and I was one of the first ones to have it. It was like carrying around a Pop-Tart in your pocket. It was like I can email! I can call people! It was like, *what?* What's going on here? Honestly, I hate to say it, but we used a lot of fax machines and teletype machines and stuff to do sales. I feel like I've lived through the world-changing events of digitization.

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**Alan Hart:** I still miss my BlackBerry, to be honest. That tactile keyboard, not to mention you could skip it across the parking lot and still pick it up and use it. It was indestructible.

**Eric Liedtke:** Steve Jobs came in and just swept them out. The BlackBerry film is a good one. If you haven't seen it, it's a really good movie about the climb and the top and the arrogance of being on top and then boom, the humility of just dropping to the bottom with basically the iPhone coming in and disrupting everything.

**Alan Hart:** Awesome. Let's talk a little bit about UNLESS Collective. You talked about a long, storied rise at Adidas, or *AH-dee-das*.

**Eric Liedtke:** As you will. As you will.

**Alan Hart:** As you will. OK, alright.

**Eric Liedtke:** *AH-dee-das* makes it sound very European. I just want to throw that out there.

**Alan Hart:** It does, but I think it's more proper. I don't know.

**Eric Liedtke:** It is, it is, but it all depends where you live and your background. *AH-dee-das* is the appropriate thing because—this is a little fun fact—the founder of Adidas's name was Adolf Dassler. His nickname was Adi. So, he went "Adi" and then the first three letters of the last name: *Adi Das*. So, that's basically the guy's name who founded the company.

**Alan Hart:** I love it. I love it. I love it. Well, going from there to deciding to focus on plant-based materials, that's a big shift. Not only going from a big company to a small company, but you're talking about a fundamental technology shift that you're going to try to take.

**Eric Liedtke:** Yeah, I like to build stuff, and I think the big wakeup moment was in 2014, Parley for the Oceans founder, Cyrill Gutsch, walked into my office when I was at Adi in Germany and said, "Hey, would you like to save the oceans?" and I was like, "Yeah," I think that's important, because I am a sportsman and I like the water even more. If I'm doing sports in the water, I'm the happiest person in life, in the world. I was like, "I've kind of got a job I'm doing. I'm not going to now go be an activist." He was like, "No, no, no. You don't understand. You're part of the problems." I was like, "What do you mean?" He educated me then on the role of nanoplastics and microplastics and how it was killing the krill and the phytoplanktons that are in the ocean. The phytoplanktons are responsible for every second breath we have.

So, once you go down that rabbit hole, it's hard to come back up and be like, "Oh, everything's normal again." When you realize the impact you're having as the president of a brand that's producing basically billions of products a year that are made of petroleum-based synthetics and nylons and spandexes and things like that, that are wonderful, brilliant, breathable, flexible wicking materials, but they never go away. They're forever materials. So, I didn't realize that. When he pulled back that curtain, I was like, "Ugh!" I've got to deal with that now. Not only am I trying to sell more product, I've got to deal with the fact that the stuff I'm selling is now actually killing the ocean and therefore eventually killing us because the you go deeper and you find, oh, [these nanoplastics are entering into our bodies and some of us are eating a credit card worth of plastics or drinking a credit card or breathing a credit card worth of plastics a week](#). Now, you find out [you have a plastic spoon worth of microplastics in your brain](#), you find out [you're more likely to die of a stroke or heart disease when you've got nanoplastics in your arteries](#), which most of us are accumulating at a scary rate. So, you can't then turn that off. There's only so often you can whisper yourself to sleep at night thinking you're doing good things. Especially when you have children and you want them to have children—and their children and their children—the accumulation.

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So, at a certain point, I had to say time out. I've got to go try and do this full time. I loved my job at Adi, but I had this thing in my brain that was bigger than sport. Then, it was like, "OK, how do I systemically change the fashion industry to get off of petroleum-based feedstocks, and is there a way to change the plants and minerals?" That was when I left in 2019 and just before COVID hit, and then COVID hit. I raised some money and started a brand remotely on Zoom calls like this, being like, "Hey, that's a great idea. Let's try to make some product out of just plants and minerals." We got to work with a hearty bunch of friends that had similar mission alignment and it's been a blast. That was in 2020. We founded ourselves with some seed capital, and we then went on to build that up over four years. Then, Kevin Plank, the founder and CEO of Under Armour, called and said, "Hey, would you like to come on board, and we'd like to buy UNLESS, and maybe we could have you and UNLESS and it would be a nice partnership." So, I hope that explains a little bit about the genesis of why and where that ended up.

**Alan Hart:** No, it does, it does. Now, with the acquisition and you've got this dual role thing going on, is it bittersweet? Is it all upside in your mind? How do you think about it?

**Eric Liedtke:** I'm very consistent with everyone I talk to. I'm living my life right now with a very clear principle: zero wasted hours. So, if I'm not doing something for myself, for my family, for my friends, for my community, or for my world, I'm not doing it. So, I have a different perspective than the career-climbing, aspirational person I was when I was at Adidas. I've now been fortunate enough to be successful in my career. When I was at Adidas, we had a lot of success. We grew the business \$8 billion in six years and we quadrupled the bottom line, and all the numbers were up. Share price went from \$50 to \$300 or something. So, I was successful, I had a lot of fun, and I was able to take care of my family.

So, when I did the startup life, I was in a different place than most startup entrepreneurs. So, now, going back into a big machine, I still carry that with me. So, I'm like, "OK, I'm here to help Under Armour be the best Under Armour can be, but I'm really here to scale the UNLESS dream. I'm really here to scale this promise of a regenerative future for fashion, and can we systemically change the industry from one that's based on oil and petroleum to one that's based on plants? So, we don't have harmful nanoplastics and microplastics entering our bodies at an unprecedented rate and wreaking havoc because I just think we're at the tip of the iceberg from what actually is happening to us from our plastic exposure.

Your skin is your largest organ, and it's absorbing things, whether it be sun or materials or chemicals, at a daily, minute-by-minute basis. What you put on your skin, whether it be creams or whether it be scents or whether it be clothing, is having a direct impact on what's going in your body. So, we're now talking about microplastics exposure, but what about the chemical exposure? [Because the other thing that people don't know is plastics require tens of thousands of chemicals to create and make. Those chemicals leach into your body when you sweat.](#) So, there's a whole discovery thing. I'm trying to pioneer solutions to with Under Armour—because Under Armour is great because they believe in the mission, they want to help the mission. We just launched a collaboration at Milan Design Week, which was fantastic and sold out and we're selling it out right now at our Baltimore store really successfully. So, they want to scale this idea because we're better place to do it than the brand that was built on a material revolution called *stretch* to now disrupt the industry with the next one called *plants*. So, I'm super bullish on the force multiplier that we have between the two ideas.

**Alan Hart:** How technical is the solve here? Meaning you go from performance materials like stretch, to your point. Compression—that's the historical genesis of Under Armour. It's compression?

**Eric Liedtke:** Yeah.

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**Alan Hart:** How do you start to think about, how do I move that from oil-based or petroleum-based materials into plant-based materials? Then, I also have to believe that sneakers are the other angle that you've got to figure out, too, right?

**Eric Liedtke:** Yeah. It's a great question, Alan. You clearly know your topic. So, as a startup that's got minimal capital, you've got to be very selective on what you choose to get into. We were always founded on the idea "Can we make a 100% plant-based shoe?" I'm happy to say we did that with the Degenerate version 1. It was a work in progress, it's not perfect, but there's five things we had to work around: stretch; glues, because all glues are petroleum-based; foams, most foams are polyurethane, which is a compound plastic; and then you've got dyes and inks. So, those I call the "five horsemen." Everything else we could get off the shelf. I'm wearing a crewneck right now. It's a robust cotton. We pay attention to how you put it together from a stitch line, from a thread line, from a ribbing standpoint. You can solve those things with mechanical stretch. But for the most part, it's really paying attention to how you put things together. So, it's the little details. It's the base material, yes, but then it's the trims and details, the prints and dyes you put on it to make it harmlessly go away within industrial compost or even your backyard. So, our stuff, we guarantee everything will go back and create nutrient-rich soil.

When you get more technical, when you get into a sock, which took us two years. We do have a sock, but it took us two years to develop with the leading sock and operation managers at FutureStitch to really help us do that because it's complex to do it without nylons. It's easy to do it with nylons, it's easy to do it with synthetics that stretch, and those are just basically melted plastics. But to do a mechanical stretch with natural rubber latex, and then you get to the shoe—and the shoe is super complex to do because you've got to figure out how to cure the outsole, and what's the outsole made of. OK, you have to procure natural rubber latex. You work with a startup called Natural Fiber Welding, which is an unbelievable startup using only plant polymers, out of Peoria, Illinois. These guys are doing unprecedented work, but they came to fruition the same time we were at UNLESS. So, we kind of partnered in arms to say maybe we could make the impossible shoe. That's like we're saying, "OK, what's the inspiration from plant-based proteins to plant-based polymers?" And saying let's make the 'impossible shoe.' That was a rallying cry, and we got to work and we figured it out. But it was like, how are you going to create the compounds? How are you going to put it together without glues? So, we went to Italy to make sure we were doing the proper stitching and going back to the infinite cobblers of Italy. They're in the details and they can really make it. So, really attention to detail about how those things come together.

Since then, we saw there's a small company in Maine called Worthen that's making adhesives that are biodegradable and compostable, which is great. So, now we can use a limited glue, but it's a glue nonetheless. So, now we have some glue. So, now there's foam developers coming out. There's a lot of great innovations going on. So, I think once you start this little snowball on the mountain top, it quickly can become an avalanche as you find like-minded people and engineers and designers and chemists trying to solve the same problem of how do we make our product go harmlessly away. So, that's the brief that we have now at Under Armour, and now we've entered into a company that's multibillion-dollar company with a lot of capital to invest in research and development more than a little startup that's trying to live paycheck-to-paycheck-type thing. So, the set moved from being a startup trying to solve for things as I talked about, really using things off the shelf, and finding other innovators giving solutions, to now going inside a big parent company that's as committed to the cause but now can tap into not only their own research and development, but working with big chemical companies to solve the problem of plastic chemistry versus plant chemistry. I'm super excited about some of the things that we're finding out there that we can do with plant-based solutions. So, we're sticking to the mandate of everything needs to go away, but it's now exciting to have the capital behind us to develop new things.

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**Alan Hart:** That's super interesting. As you think about... we've talked about how you make it possible to make products that can compete similarly to their predecessors. How do you think about the market itself, the consumer, the brand? How does that need to evolve to meet people where they are, but also take them on this journey with you?

**Eric Liedtke:** It's great. Thank you for that. I think one of the things that we founded the company on is I think my research at Adi and my experience with ocean plastic and some of the things we did there, there's a real consumer insight that they care. That's not a question. People care. The question is they don't want to compromise their taste or the quality of the product for their values, and they don't want to compromise really too much on price. We don't want to make it a luxury thing where you have to pay 2X or 3X the price point. So, we really try to meet people at a... we don't want to compromise your taste for your values or your values for your taste because, just to give an example, Oatly milk came along and did the same thing with plant-based proteins. I'm a vegan. I used to have to choke back an almond milk latte. But I'm doing it for the world! But now it's like, 'Oh, an Oatly!' I'll take an oatmeal one because it's more delicious than dairy. So, that's the level you need to have when you get into a fashion brand as well. You can't ask people to compromise those things. Ultimately, you have to build something that within three years, with the right volumes, can be at unit economics parity with what's currently offered. So, we need to make sure that we have the unit economics that come together and meet the consumer where they are. Because if it's just a luxury item, if it's just something that only the very privileged can buy, then it's not going to scale, and my ambition is to systemically change the entire industry from oils to plants. So, we had to meet both of those. So, those are the big challenges to bring the consumer along. Once you do that, and I would put our current UNLESS offer, which is very lifestyle, very skate, very workwear meets streetwear oriented, I would put that up against anything Carhartt and Dickies are doing, from a taste-level standpoint, from a quality standpoint. So, now, can we get to the price point? Yes, but we need more volume. So, now it's a question of scaling the volume. Again, here comes Under Armour who's going to help us scale audience, help us scale distribution. So, that's where I think you get into this dynamic. So, step one, get the value at the same level they're expecting, get the quality at the same level they're expecting, get the taste at the same level they're expecting, get it built on a better stack. Step two is scale the brand and get the volumes to hit the unit economics on par.

**Alan Hart:** You mentioned where this fits in the scan of things. This is in the lifestyle category, if you will, like streetwear/skate, to your point. Is there a desire—it sounds like there is—but is there a desire to move this into the core Under Armour as well at different elements?

**Eric Liedtke:** Oh, hell yes. Oh, hell yes.

**Alan Hart:** OK, alright.

**Eric Liedtke:** We started where we were because of the capitalization. As a startup, you're always undercapitalized. So, you spend your money building the product; then, you spend your money buying inventory; you spend your money on your employees; and then you're like, "Oh, we're out of money, but nobody knows about us." So, we built this thing. How do we now tell people about it? Everything is pay-for-play now. How do we distribute it? We don't really have a sales force, and they're not just going to come to our [direct-to-consumer] site or e-comm site without knowing about us. So, now you're like, are you going to pay have thousands of dollars a day to try to buy and have some people see us? So, now there's the question of how you scale audience and distribution. So, we go inside of Under Armour, and we're like, "OK, now we need to solve for these five horsemen."

So, the brief I'm working with the research teams—and this is the luxury of being the president of Under Armour also. It's like, OK, strategically, we're focused on this. We're focused on regenerative. We're focused on solving some of these big issues that were limiting in the startup world. Let's solve for stretch, which, to your point, is a core piece

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and capability of all performance products. You need stretch, you need breathability, you need some of these things. So, we need to solve for that, which we don't have right now. They need to be invented, and we're in the process of trying to explore those in those opportunities. You need to solve for glues. So, if you're going to make a running shoe, you're going to make a basketball shoe, you're going to make a football cleat, you've got to solve for glues, you've got to solve for plates, you got to solve for PVAc's. You got to solve for a lot of things. I think they're all solvable, but we have to go one after the other. But the idea is can we solve for glues, can we solve for stretch, can we solve for foams, can we solve for prints? Can we solve for dyes. If we can do all that, then we can systemically change the \$3 trillion fashion industry that's currently based on the back of petroleum.

**Alan Hart:** Yeah, well, I love it.

**Eric Liedtke:** Stay tuned there, but that's the dream.

**Alan Hart:** Well, I'm looking forward to seeing where it goes. This is your passion. You can just feel it, and you're driving it with Under Armour now. Are you also working on the core Under Armour as well or are you just focused on this and have this transpired?

**Eric Liedtke:** Oh no. I'm deep in the machine! I don't wear the title of Under Armour brand president for jokes and giggles, and that's something I take very serious. Yeah, we're working on the operating model, we're working on the strategic plan, we're working on building compelling products and building consumer advocacy. So, yeah, we're deep in the weeds of storytelling and everything else. So, I spend 99% of my time on Under Armour on core business and probably 1% of my time on UNLESS, but we have a general manager that does the day-to-day UNLESS stuff as we build that out.

**Alan Hart:** Gotcha. What do you feel as a brand that the core—I don't know what it is. Maybe it's the secret sauce? The core equity that you're trying to play up in the market as you try to think about how do I propel the Under Armour brand itself?

**Eric Liedtke:** Yeah, I think Under Armour is uniquely positioned in the space. I think the roots... First of all, we're founder-led, which I think gives us a distinct opportunity to lean into—I think, anytime you have a founder still engaged in day-to-day business, you still have that heart and soul. When I worked at Adidas, the founder was long in the rearview mirror. I think you've got very few brands—maybe New Balance, you could argue that the Davises are still running—but very few brands are still founder-led, unless they're small ones coming up, like I'm running or what have you. So, I think from an Under Armour standpoint, having that leadership, having that North Star, is really inspiring and really motivating on a regular basis. Being a brand that's in Baltimore, in the heartland of the Northeast, if you will—and maybe it's a city that's been taking some harder knocks than it deserves, but it's an industrial city that really represents the core of Under Armour. Being a brand that is apparel founded primarily and grew into footwear is also a differentiator, especially as a multibillion-dollar brand that we are. Leaning into some of these credentials, whether it be the founder story of Kevin [Plank] and being underdog, whether it be the hard roots of being in—I mean, you're in Baltimore versus Beaverton, you're in Baltimore versus Boston, you're in Baltimore versus Germany. There's a distinct difference of grit and muscle and hard work and scrap and humility that goes into that, and I'm here for it.

I think Under Armour represents a lot of what America is and the values we hold dear. It's no coincidence that our headquarters is less than a mile and half from the Fort McHenry where the "Star-Spangled Banner" was written. So, there's a lot of there there. I think Under Armour has always been the alpha brand when it came out, and I think how we dimensional-ize that into representing a few more things is fun and exciting, and I'm excited to build it. I



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don't want to divulge too much because we're not fully cooked yet, but I see a lot of white space for Under Armour to occupy from its unique positioning some of the things I just outlined.

**Alan Hart:** I have to have you come back on when you can share more details.

**Eric Liedtke:** Yes, but we're not at our best right now. Let's come back on and celebrate the turnaround, which I'm sure is going to happen. But it's going to take a couple of years.

**Alan Hart:** Yeah, yeah, I hear you, I hear you. Well, one of the things we like to do on this show is to get to know you a little bit better. So, I've got a few questions, less about Under Armour, less about UNLESS, but more about you. First question I love asking everyone is has there been an experience over your past that defines or makes up who you are today?

**Eric Liedtke:** Yeah, yeah, many. I don't think there's one inflection point that I had. I had a pretty privileged upbringing. My parents were engineers. My dad was a doctor. My mom was basically a civil servant. She was a renowned engineer, worked for NASA, helped design the first satellite that went up into space. My dad was chief of cardiology at University of Wisconsin. My mom then quit her engineering life to come and raise families and be engaged in our lives. She's basically volunteered her entire life. So, I think having role models of parents that were so service-oriented and were so bigger than transaction. My dad made decisions. As a doctor, and people will know this, you make a decision: you can go into private practice or you can go into research, and there's two different paths and they're both intriguing for different reasons. One is probably much more desirable from a financial standpoint, private practice; one's more desirable to discover solutions to big problems. My dad went into that one. So, he was a university guy that basically was trying to cure heart disease. You don't realize the impact that has on you, but you absorb that. My mom, meanwhile, she's volunteering and founding senior citizens homes. She was the CEO and the CFO and raising money to build out not just senior citizens [homes] but assisted living and then the whole network. So, now she basically has helped build up this place called Attic Angels in Madison, Wisconsin, that's this metropolis of just how people can age gracefully, is the best way I can say it, and never be shamed by putting in a home to die. It's like, no, you come in when you want to have assisted meals coming in and you make a community, and then you can graduate to the next level if you need more services, and the next level. Yes, it's all there. So, anyway, long story short, I was surrounded by people that were giving. I was surrounded by people that were purpose-led and not transactional-led. I went the other way. I went into business. I became a very transactional, but I've come around full circle now to be very purpose-led and very intentional with every decision I make. Even being with you today, it's like is this going to help my world, my community, my friends, my family? Yeah, it helps all involved because it helps me get the word out on UNLESS, but I believe living your life with purpose and always keeping in mind legacy is really important, and I learned it from my parents for years.

**Alan Hart:** Well, what advice would you give your younger self if you're starting this journey all over again?

**Eric Liedtke:** Party less. Living with that kind of role modeling was hard. They were high achievers and I was like, I'm rebelling, I'm going over here and I'm going to drink and smoke and do what I need to do to disconnect from this world of perfection. So, I did that and I came through that, and I came through a lot smarter, but I would have liked to have maybe stopped a little earlier. But all kidding aside, I think there's one advice I love giving to myself and everybody I work with is don't let perfect get in the way of better. I think sometimes we dream too much about perfect end states. And even being a startup, "Well, we could uuuh-ghhh!" Like, no, just every day, you're going to get better; every day, just take a step; every day, take a step, and if you do that, all of a sudden you look up and say, "Holy shit, look how far I came." It's like climbing a mountain, right? You don't realize that when you stand at the trailhead and you look up at the mountain, you're like, "I don't—that's a lot." Then, you look back, "Oh my gosh, I've



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come so far!" So, I think it's just really breaking journeys down into steps. So, I would really lean into that if I were giving that advice to myself.

**Alan Hart:** Love it. Well, is there something that either you're trying to learn more about yourself or you think marketers—this is a show primarily for marketers—you think marketers need to be learning more about? Could be either.

**Eric Liedtke:** I think marketing in general—and I'm learning this. We just hired a head of marketing at Under Armour, Tyler Rutstein, and he's probably 25 years younger than me, which I don't let him ever hear that. But he's bringing in a whole new playbook. I think the marketing rules are changing systemically. Just from a general marketing communication, it's no news to anybody that nobody's watching TV anymore. The cables have been cut. Everything is streaming all the time. User-generated content is blowing up. But it's really paying attention to those trends and making sure you can capture on them is the real—if you want to get into the Comms Marketing 101—it's like, I'm shocked at how fast the industry has changed and continues to change, day in and day out, and how you go one day from building these glorious cruise ships of these commercials that run for 30 seconds and that you've taken six months to build them, oh my God, and it's like... (pfft) it doesn't matter. It's like nobody's watching the Super Bowl commercial anymore, I'm sorry. That's a bunch of boomers and Gen Xers. If you want to get to today's consumers, how are you breaking that down for TikTok? How are you doing it with user-generated content? How are you doing it from almost the most unpolished version you can do? It's like, this is what, you know, like "Get me to hold my phone up. A selfie is the new comms!" It's just... from a classic trained marketer like myself, that's just... No! I'm used to being in the studio with LED lights and backdrops. No, it's like those days are kind of over. It's the unpolished, the unsynchronized, raw. People want *real*. They want to feel like they're talking to a *real* person. It's like one of the things Tyler taught me yesterday, internal is the new external. People want to know behind the scenes, and they don't want to have a glorious story. They want to see the innovations in real life. They want to hear the founder's story. Going back to, again, what Kevin brings that others don't have. It's a rich real, there's authenticity there, and I think people crave that. So, how do you become the more authentic true self on a regular basis is the advice I give to anybody that cares to take it.

**Alan Hart:** No, I appreciate that. Then, two more questions for you. Is there any trends or subcultures that you personally follow or take notice of?

**Eric Liedtke:** To me, that's where you have to geek out at what you love. There's people that love cars, there's people that love motorcycles, there's people that love computers. I love everything surf. So, I'm a pretend surfer. I like to surf. I can get on a wave. I can pop up. I can ride a wave, but I'm certainly not an accomplished surfer, but there's something profound for me about being in the water. It speaks back to why I'm doing what I'm doing, about feeling the breath of the Earth underneath your board. There's something really spiritual about that for me. So, I just geek out on the whole surf culture, surf vibe, surf look, surf origins, waves, you can name. Anything that has to do with that. It's not so much about the subculture, but there is one big one there. It's even about the natural elements that create the waves. When you ride a wave, it's the last breath of that wave. That wave may have traveled thousands of miles, but the *end* is the beginning of your ride. So, anyway, again, like I said, I can get very philosophical here, but it's kind of what we're doing through regenerative fashion as well. We start with the end in mind. So, somehow they all relate back, and maybe it's a mistake, maybe it's the universe whispering to me quietly.

**Alan Hart:** It feels like everything in your life is coming in alignment.

**Eric Liedtke:** Yeah, I feel very content.

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**Alan Hart:** Well, last question I have for you. What do you think is the largest opportunity or threat facing marketers today?

**Eric Liedtke:** Well, the easy answer there is AI. (laughs) But how? I think the largest opportunity is absolutely how do you automate and how do you target people more effectively. I think AI is doing that wonderfully. It's unbelievable what AI can do for you from a creation standpoint, from a tool standpoint, from a targeting standpoint, from an optimization standpoint to a storytelling standpoint. I think that's an opportunity and a threat. I don't think AI is very authentic yet, and I think people crave authenticity. I think there's a reason why people love user-generated content. They love hearing from people they trust. You develop these relationships with people you follow through TikTok or through YouTube or different channels. They let you see behind the scenes, so you get to know the person. I follow this person, Nathan Florence, [who] is [the brother of] John John Florence, [who] is one of the best surfers in the world. But he does these vlogs on YouTube, and I can't get enough of them. They're 15–20 minutes long, but it's not just him riding waves, which is spectacular. It's him discovering new places, him going on tour, him and his wife photographing him, him not being able to paddle out—because I can relate to that. But it's super raw and authentic. But AI could never do it because it requires a deep insight. You have to go down the rabbit hole of understanding surfing and his experience of traveling. Traveling with multiple surfboards and trying to check in on the airplane and all that nightmare of them breaking boards—but I'm there for it because it's a lived experience that you can appreciate. So, I think it's how marketers tomorrow can use the tools of AI, but the craft of authenticity. So, this word I used to like to use at Adidas from my friend, Paul Gaudio. He used to talk about the best way to predict the future is to craft it. So, we came up with a term called *FutureCraft*, which is a beautiful term about how you bring the authenticity of yesterday's atelier shops from fashion and you blend it with the innovation of tomorrow. I think marketers need to think about it the same way. How do you keep it real and personal and human and authentic while using the tools of AI tomorrow.

**Alan Hart:** I love it. Well, Eric, thank you for coming on the show. This has been fascinating.

**Eric Liedtke:** I hope so. It was enjoyable for me. I always like having discussions about cool stuff. So, yeah, maybe I'm not the coolest, but I like to talk about things that are interesting to me. So, I appreciate your interest and help. So, hopefully somebody gets some value out of it.

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