Transforming Pet Care:

Jennifer Strickland's AI-Driven Leadership

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Andy Sack: This is AI First with Adam and Andy, that show that takes you to the front lines of AI innovation and business. I'm Andy Sack and alongside my co-host, Adam Brotman. Each episode, we bring you candid conversations with business leaders transforming their businesses with AI. No fluff, just real talk and actionable use cases and insights for you. Welcome, Jennifer. So glad you could join us today on AI First.

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Thank you for having me. Excited for our conversation today.

Andy Sack: Adam, hello, good morning.

Adam Brotman: Good morning. I'm excited for this conversation too.

Andy Sack: Today we have Jennifer Strickland Fowler from Destination Pet and I want to welcome her and ask her to introduce herself and her company. Tell the audience a little bit about your background and then tell us a little bit about Destination Pet.

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Yeah, no, thank you, Andy. I appreciate it. And again, thank you to both of you for having me today. So my career started really actually in human health care, where I made a decision to go to pharmacy school, became a pharmacist, and it originally said I was going into health care because I didn't want to work for our family business and said I would never do business. obviously, I feel like your family always has the last laugh. And so maybe about nine years or so into that clinical career.

I had the opportunity to go into healthcare administration and really spent the rest of my time prior to Destination Pet in a variety of, I would say, human healthcare roles, especially diagnostics, for-profit healthcare systems, and then had the opportunity to come to Destination Pet. And I'm now the CEO of Destination Pet since about late 2022. Have been really excited, I would say, to transition from human healthcare over to pet care where interestingly enough, there are lot of, probably a lot more similarities than people think. You know, it's a very high trust, high relationship based business, very complex operations.

And I would say that the personal or customer service expectations are also very high. So probably more similarities than most people think between those two industries, but I've been here since about 2022. And what Destination Pet does and what we do is we are, essentially a nationwide group of both veterinary medical clinics as well as pet resorts that offers things like boarding and daycare, dog training, dog grooming, and pet care overall. And we have about 160 locations across 34 states today. So nationwide, we've grown pretty rapidly in the last three years and expect to continue to grow.

Andy Sack: And how many employees are you roughly?

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: A little over 3,500, so a decent number of employees. The majority of that is in field leadership or the field center-based staffing, but a little over 3,500.

Andy Sack: You're talking to someone who, you're talking to two people, one who has many dogs and one who has none or has no pets whatsoever. I'm the one with no pets whatsoever. And so every time I hear the term pet resort, I think about like white lotus for pets, but that's just me.

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: We have some centers that probably have that exact type of service. We do dog facials. We have centers who do doga, which is dog yoga.

Andy Sack: Is that a thing? Doga and dog facials are a thing? Go figure.

Adam Brotman: Doga, doga.

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: It is, it absolutely is. It's, you know, many people with dogs have, I would say, the need and desire to treat their dogs probably better than themselves in some cases.

Andy Sack: Yeah.

Adam Brotman: My dog in the back and her dog facial and sat up and paid attention. Well, yeah, so destination pet is a very cool company and, you know, helping a lot of pet owners and pets in so many ways. I full disclosure, I'm on the board of destination pet. So I'm biased towards both Jennifer and the company. But switching gears, Jennifer, for a second to talk about AI, our topic that we always come back to on the show. You actually went through one of our boot camps. so I want to talk to you about that a little bit, but rather than have this be about our boot camp, I actually just want to talk to you about kind of how you were thinking about AI as a CEO and of a CEO of a sizable national brand and set of operations before you started going on your AI journey. I know we were part of that journey, but it goes beyond us. Just tell Andy and I a little bit about what was your mindset a year ago around AI? You weren't dumb about it, but you hadn't really dug in as much as you have in the last year. What was your mindset and tell us a little bit about your journey?

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Absolutely. You know, as I said a minute ago, Destination Pet is very much of a relationship based, know, high trust based type of consumer services business. Obviously we're a multi unit business. We have centers throughout the entire United States. And I think a year ago, when I thought about AI, I thought, you know, how does AI allow us to do that better? Does it allow us to have better relationships? Does it allow us to have more trust? And it wasn't really clear that AI could drastically transform the business because of the type of business it was. This is not a manufacturing type of business where I can very quickly see where AI may fit in. It's much more of a relationship-based business.

And so I would say a year ago, just like probably most people in my position, you read a lot about AI and you read about how AI has been used and where it's being used. And there's some of that that I think I could readily, I would say grasp and think. How am I going to include this? How am I going to embed this in our business? But I would say a year ago, I would still say it was probably taking up less than 2 to 3 % of my mind share as it relates to how AI is going to help our business or our customer experience or our pet quality or our pet care quality improve. It was still a very small piece of what I thought about in terms of how it could deliver benefits.

And I would say I wasn't quite sure how AI in this type of business could truly deliver benefits that were meaningful in nature. So that's where I was a year ago. You know, and I think as we obviously, as Adam just mentioned, we brought the team in to do an AI bootcamp and we started with our executive team. And I would say my entire mindset in terms of how AI can benefit our business, our staff, our employees, our customers has dramatically changed in that timeframe. And we can talk about that obviously. And it's dramatically changed my executive team's mindset in terms of where can AI be useful for us to be really a better, smarter, better experienced company.

Andy Sack: Jennifer, if you had to go back in time, can you recall what it was that triggered you to say, okay, I'll do a boot camp?

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Yeah, absolutely. So we were first talking to Adam about doing a bootcamp and I had a number of members of our ELT who had been part of that conversation as part of a board meeting and started, I would dabble in it. They started to dabble to say, can I potentially use this in what we're doing? And my chief growth officer came to me one day and said, click this out. Just learning, don't really know much about AI, but I'm just learning. But look what I did. I basically took one of our markets where we have some relatively dense, some density as it relates to competitive competitors in our space. And I basically used AI to give me every competitor within a 10 mile radius. And I asked AI and I used the tool to identify what were the benefits of each of those competitors, what were the differentiators?

And then I asked it to compare our differentiators for our centers within that same market or within that metropolitan service area. And then asked AI to give me how would I win market share in that market considering the competitors and within minutes, so not weeks, we didn't go hire a research firm, but within minutes, he had an answer that I would say was light years ahead where we would have been on our own without some sort of external support. And he had it within minutes. Now, did it tell you exactly what to do in every moment, you know, going forward and every next step? No, necessarily. It really became, I would say this augmentation of our critical thinking skills and a much faster path to get to information that allowed us to make better decisions.

Adam Brotman: That is a great example. Yeah, that's a great, but so you're saying when Brett or whoever you're talking about in that particular example, like came to you with that, you were like, oh wow, I was thinking, so I'm to go back to what you said for our audience, but also for this conversation. you were before that moment and before, you you continued on your journey, you were like, I hear about AI, you use the example, we're not a manufacturing firm. We're not trying to optimize supply chain rationalization or some lean manufacturing operation, which is what you had been thinking about AI, because that was sort of like old fashioned AI, where your algorithms and models, it would sort of tell you how to do something slightly better in a very, in a very highly vertical way.

When Brett did this, you're like, this is like having a consultant. Like this is the kind of thing that we would have normally had to go and pay a lot of money and spend a bunch of time with some consultant to help us with. And Brett just did it with like on his own with AI in minutes. And so that, that sort of, as you put it, that sort of, you know, co-intelligence augmentation advisor in your pocket that sort of opened your eyes up. And then you went, you got everybody sort of into understanding how to use it. And, and what have, you know, what have you seen? What are some examples? Not specific examples, but just the types of things that now you see either your yourself or your team doing with AI, that, sort of helps kind of unlock what you said was your purpose, which is like better relationships with the, with your customers.

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Yeah, I'm going to give you a number of examples. So I will tell you from again, going back to your question about where I was a year ago to where I am now, I don't think a day or probably even an hour goes by that I don't think about how can AI help us do this better, regardless of the topic? How can it help us deliver better customer experience? How can it help us recruit more effectively? Which I'm going to give you an example of that in just a second. And how can it, you know, I use this term internally. So to use the term you just said as co-intelligence. I use this term of co-pilot internally, right?

So AI is really more of a co-pilot and allows you to augment your decision-making, not replace it, not necessarily automate it, but really augment it in a way that you now can actually accelerate your own critical thinking, right? So how do you accelerate your own critical thinking to get the better decisions? And so we're seeing actually, you from the time we did the bootcamp to where we sit now, I would say every executive is consistently and routinely thinking about, wait, how can I leverage AI?

Give you a couple of examples. Our centers depend on staff. Going back to that relationship, we have to have our center staffed.

When we're low on staff, when people leave, they go to college or they move somewhere else and we lose staff, we have to fill those positions relatively quickly or our experience and how many, even how much volume we can handle in our centers drastically changes. Well, because of, you these are entry level positions, we're looking for people who are pet obsessed, people who are trustworthy, people really like to spend time with animals, but also can be trained to deliver that quality of care. We're looking for a certain type of individual. Recruiting for us can sometimes take a while between screening, matching them with our general managers and the centers.

And so we're now starting to leverage AI and how do we make that faster so that our recruiters can actually focus on the interpersonal relationships with those candidates our general managers can focus on the actual interviews and the interpersonal relationships as opposed to let me read 20 CVs or resumes to figure out who I want to screen. So we've started to see it there. We're starting to use it. You'll love this, Adam. We're starting to use it. My new favorite use of AI for our company is we're starting to use it in vendor analysis. And so we're going through a process right now where we're looking at three or four different vendors to deliver on a certain type of project. And we're asking obviously for the RFP or the request for proposal, and we're asking for the information.

And we're leveraging AI to essentially review those vendor proposals for thoroughness, quality, price comparisons, and very quickly coming to an assessment that says, here's the preferred vendor based on the input that you gave me or the input that we put into AI. Here's the preferred vendor, here's where you have some gaps in the other couple vendors, and here's where you might want to ask some additional questions. And so again, really great example where something might've taken us weeks to pull together a number of people, sit in a meeting. If you think about the productivity loss of that alone, right?

You have a lot of people who are paid a certain amount to sit in a room for hours on end, potentially over the course of a couple of weeks to choose a vendor. In healthcare, I saw this all the time. You had huge committees that would be spend weeks, if not months choosing vendors for certain products. And what we've seen in our organization is that just leveraging AI as a co-pilot can help us much more quickly, tease out the details that matter, that differentiate one from another, and help us make a decision much more quickly without the productivity hit. So now I have staff, instead of sitting in meetings, hours of meetings to decide on a vendor, can actually spend that time more effectively on other areas that are more important to our business.

Adam Brotman: Yeah.

Andy Sack: Jennifer, can I ask a question here, Adam? Can I jump in? I'm curious. I have a couple of questions, but as CEO, how are you using it and how does it change your job? And when I say it, how does AI change, how has it changed you and your job?

Adam Brotman: Yeah, of course, jump in.

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Mm-hmm. That's a great question. You know, I said this to a colleague of mine, probably a couple of weeks ago. said, I don't think a day, much less a couple hours goes by in my job that I'm not using AI in some way, shape or form.

You know, editing a document that's going to go out to our consumers, let's say a marketing document, I can very quickly leverage AI to say, you know, think like a consumer who's looking for a place to pet or their pet over the holiday weekend, review this document and tell me what it doesn't give you, right? Tell me what the gaps are in the document. And instead of me spending a lot of time trying to find those gaps and trying to make assumptions around how a consumer may think or not think, I can very quickly leverage AI to edit, to refine, to think about what is missing.

I do the same thing as we think about employee memos, right? Putting out employee memos regarding really any topic at all. I'm leveraging AI, if it's coming from me anyway, I'm leveraging AI to refine those memos, in some cases write those memos, then I refine them from there. So I think it speeds up just communication. So I'm absolutely using it in communication. Adam will love this. I use it in my communication with the board, right? To more quickly, I would say drill into the areas that matter most for my board. And I've had now a muddent experience in AI. I feel like my tools now know my board as well as I do, I think some days. So I'm leveraging it for purposes like that.

I've uploaded PowerPoint decks that I'm sending either to my team or I'm sending to the board. And I've said, think like a chairman of a board and identify where there may be gaps in this presentation or think like a field leader and identify what questions you may have so that we're prepared for those questions. think communication is a big piece for me. I think comparing data sets, right? As a CEO, you get a lot of information. You kind of, feel like you're bombarded in some cases with information from different departments. And I'm starting to leverage AI where I'm comparing data sets with completely different variables potentially that may take a group of analysts hours if not days to do the same thing.

I'm uploading those files and asking for the commonalities. I'm asking for the causes and effects. And it's giving me information that again, I would have to take weeks potentially with a lot, a number of analysts to do that job for me. So it's starting to fill some of those gaps. It also enables me, I would say as a CEO to identify gaps much more quickly so that it can ask more effective questions of my team. So if I get information from my team, I can spend obviously a fair amount of time reviewing that. can identify a gap, but using AI as my co-pilot, again, I can identify those gaps much more quickly and I can spend my time as a CEO on the things that actually matter most that are going to move our efficacy as a company as opposed to, where's this gap?

Let me compare these numbers. Let me compare these data sets. Let me go find an analyst to do this. I think it's allowing me to actually have much more meaningful conversations. And again, in our business, that matters much more than how much time I'm spending in an Excel spreadsheet.

Adam Brotman: Yeah, I can imagine like when you're saying that, Jennifer, like I can imagine that you're using, like you just described it almost like you're using it like a, like a professional briefer where like it. Like at times, you know, as a CEO, especially this is true of all executives, but certainly CEOs, like you have all this stuff coming at you from your team. Like sometimes you feel like you spend half your day just reacting to people presenting to you. And then your job is to like approve or not approve or, know, whatever guide ask, you know, questions and, so much, you're so much better, right? As a CEO or an executive where you know, I think about like the president United States, my understanding is that they get these presidential briefings, right?

And they're like, they must be the best in the world, right? Like these people come and say, you know, you're going to be asked to make a big decision as president of the country. And I'm going to boil this down for you.

And I imagine like those briefings, the president of the United States doesn't, they don't have to like agree with every aspect of the briefing or like it's but it's really helpful to make them crisper and and when you're describing that I imagine that that's helpful for you which is like you basically can use AI to help you cut through ahead of a meeting or during a meeting of the things that are like really going on so you can focus your time and attention better is that does that ring true to you or how do you think about that?

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Yeah, it does. Absolutely. Um, Adam, think it rings, um, quite true for me in terms of allows me to be much more efficient in that. I think the other thing I would add is it. No, it almost becomes a thought partner. Right? So if I'm thinking through, um, nuance within our strategy, um, how do I want to, you know, what, what are the things I need to consider? I think AI has really become not only a way of making my job more efficient, where I can filter through some of the information much more quickly and get to the decision making, which obviously is ultimately one of the jobs of the CEO. It allows me to get to that point quicker, but it also allows me, I would say, to use that same data and that same efficiency, but leverage AI almost as a thought partner.

Again, thinking through where are there gaps? Think like a CEO of a multi-unit business heading into macroeconomic headwinds based on the data that's been published, what's the most important thing that we need to make sure we consider as a potential, you know, Significantly negative outcome of macro economic headwinds. So I think using it also as a thought partner, which sounds crazy on some level. would have told you that was crazy a year ago. If someone told me that I said, AI as a thought partner, I'm not sure I could have wrapped my head around that. but sitting here today, a year later, again, I, I, it has allowed both me and my executive team, I would say to more effectively think critically about problems, challenges, and also those solutions.

Adam Brotman: Yeah.

Andy Sack: But what's the thing that when you look ahead over the next six to 12 months that you're most excited to like to tackle with AI in your business?

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Absolutely. I think for us, there are two main areas. I mentioned quite a few. think for across our organization, I kind of see this as a silver thread that really ties everything together through every part of our organization, whether it's our, we have developers for our technology platform, our HR department as it relates to recruiting, our marketing and growth group as it relates to competitive analysis and vendor selection. So I think there's a silver lead throughout, but I would say the thing that I'm most excited about is how it's going to help us make even better decisions as it relates to our customer experience, even better decisions as it relates to reducing some of the complexity in our centers so that it allows our staff to spend more time with our clients.

So today we have managers and assistant managers that have to spend time in their profit and loss statements and...approving invoices and kind of the main day-to-day running of the business that is not consumer facing. What I'd like to see AI do for us is to continue to improve that efficiency where our teams can spend more time where it matters the most with our pets, with our pet parents, improving that experience. And that's what I'm really excited about is the ability to go from where we're at today, which is really efficiency, improve productivity, this co-pilot mentality for our executive team and our leaders to the next phase for us is really how do we leverage it in a way that's not about, you know, automating a function, but really augmenting a function so that people can spend more time doing what's most important.

Adam Brotman: Wait I got a deep question for you here. So as a CEO, when you think about, I mean, at the end of the day, you're accountable for a lot of things. You're accountable for, you have all these stakeholders, you you've got pets and you've got pet owners and you got your people that work for you across your centers as well as headquarters. So I know you, Jennifer, and I know that's how you think. You think in terms of the actual relationships and humans and stakeholders. And on top of all that, you also have accountability for enterprise value creation and growth. so you to think in all those dimensions. If somebody were to come to you and say, you know, is there, what's the ROI? know, Jennifer, you've been using AI, you became an AI first or you're in the journey to becoming an AI first organization for sure. Like, so you're, you're in my opinion, you're, sort of a model case. Like how would you answer the ROI question? If somebody came to you and said that question, how, would you, what would your answer be after now that you've gone through this journey?

Jennifer Strickland Fowler: Absolutely. You know, I think it really depends on how you define ROI. So for us, if I can have our teams in our center spend more time with pets and pet parents and have, I would say the freedom to provide better quality, better customer experience, because some of the things that are routine in nature don't take as much of their mind share. For me, that's an ROI because what I know is over the course of the next 12 months, the more we do that, the more pets and pet parents that will want to come to our center because we'll be the center of choice in that community for those reasons.

So, you know, can I a year from now say that this AI activity that we're doing today leads to better growth a year from now? Possibly. What I can say today is any time that we get our staff to spend more time with our pets and our pet parents in meaningful ways, we know today that that improves our growth. We know today that that improves the quality of what we provide. So the more we can do that on the backend and allow them to spend that productivity where it matters the most, I'm not worried about reducing people. I'm worried about where they're spending their time and where their mind share is.

I want the majority of their mind share spent on pets and pet parents and not on things like screening resumes or looking at invoices to process on a regular routine basis. I want their time spent in the right place. So I think when you talk about ROI, you know, I think ROI sometimes in this space is done very linearly. spend X dollars and I expect Y dollar back. And I think at least in our business, a multi-unit consumer services business that's very, very dependent on trust and relationships and interaction with consumers. I think the ROI there is kind of indirect, right?

So the more that I can get people spending the right time in the right place, I know today that that's going to lead to better growth. I know today that's going to lead to a better experience for pets. And I know today that's going to lead to better customer satisfaction and ultimately improve loyalty, improve retention and all the things that we talk about in a consumer services business that lead to better equity value for the organization and for the shareholders. So I think that linear ROI, I personally as a CEO, I'm less concerned about in my type of business. What I'm looking for is almost the non-linear ROI. How much can I actually improve in terms of efficiency and productivity so that people can spend their time in places that matter most? And I would also say, and give them the time back that allows them to spark their own creativity.

You what I find is when you have a lot of routine, private functions that people spend a lot of time, whether it's analyzing data or looking at vendors, these kind of very administrative evaluations, you lose your mind share to be creative around the business. You lose your mind share as it relates to how am going to start another service line in my center? Or, Hey, maybe I have room to add some additional grooming cause my groomers have just been jam packed. I would really love to bring in another grooming who maybe does something special.

Right now, when you think about a center leader or a field leader, because of all these other things that have not been fully leveraged, or I would say augmented with AI, they're still sharing that mind share in areas that may not be great value adds back to the customer. So for me, that ROI is all about how do I get the mind share back towards the customer, back towards supporting that customer experience and the pet parent experience and quality, and back to allowing some creativity so that we and our centers are continuing to, I would say, optimize the business for our communities and our markets based on what their needs are, not necessarily what corporate says.

Andy Sack: Great, Jennifer, thank you. I think we're approaching the end of our time here. And so just want to thank you for coming on. Thank you for being a customer of Forum 3. And thank you for sharing your insights as you've gone on your AI journey at Destination. But Adam, I'm curious, as you've both worked with Jennifer and now just listened to her talk, what jumps out for you that you want to highlight for our audience?

Adam Brotman: Yeah, a couple of things. You know, it was a good talk when I'm writing down notes during our podcast episode. So one is, first of all, I loved how Jennifer on what Jennifer was saying. So like, for example, one, I loved hearing Jennifer, you framed up this conversation by saying as a CEO, you, you had a slight, I'll call it misunderstanding of AI and you had an aha moment.

Andy Sack: What'd you write notes on?

Adam Brotman: Right? You described your aha moment was when your chief growth officer came to you and said, look what I did. Like he, I like he framed it. Like a lot of times those aha moments come from, they don't come from like reading about something. They come from like using it or seeing it with your own eyes, with your own hands. And so like, I thought that aha moment stuck out to me. Andy is one thing that Jennifer mentioned. The other thing I loved was, you know, Jennifer, you said over and over that and we didn't prompt this. We just like, how do you think about this? You're like, you use the word co-intelligence and augmentation over and over. I couldn't agree more that a lot of folks, they make the mistake of wanting to jump right to the, I'll call it the application layer.

Like, what's my chat bot gonna be? They think about like old fashioned AI, which is not old fashioned, but like this, know, highly vertical manufacturing supply chain optimization, and didn't realize that this is like a consultant in your pocket that can, that you can use for, you know, being a thought partner for co-intelligence. I, that was the second thing that I took note of. And then the third thing that I just absolutely loved is your discussion just now on ROI. Like I, I feel like it's the, it's going to become a very important topic for CEOs, but executives of any kind of business over the next year that if they're going to go through an AI transformation that the, you use the word nonlinear ROI, which is, which is great.

And how you were like, look, I want to. I effectively want to free up my team to be better and to have time to do the kinds of things or even spark creativity, as you said, to do the kinds of things that really bring the humans on your team to be better. And, and, and that's invaluable. And it doesn't, but it doesn't mean you said you use the words, you know, so in 12 months from now, there'll be all these things that will be the fruits of that. And you took a very, I'll call it sophisticated approach to nonlinear ROI that I wrote notes on that I just loved. And I loved your sparking creativity point. I it was a great point. So Andy, that's what I took away from that.

Andy Sack: Two things that I want to highlight. One is just as though was the beginning, is, you know, this is destination pet. This is a pet vet, pet resort, you know, white lotus of pet destinations.

You know, and really Jennifer's skepticism about like, you know, what can AI do for me in this business? And the fact that a year later, she's like the entire exec team is using this and she's on our podcast and advocating. think that that, I mean, that resonates certainly with our, our business, it's, you know, CEOs of businesses where you're like, what can, what can this technology or this AI I've heard about it?

What, how could that impact me? And really just that aha moment a year later. so that's one thing I'd highlight. The second is, is really just Jennifer's focus on how the productivity leads to better customer experience. And I think that's increasingly a focus of AI and a secret weapon of those people that start to unleash AI for a whole host of reasons, segmentation, feedback, speed of iteration, etc. And they're just productivity translating to a better customer experience. So the customer wins. So with that, those were my two takeaways. I just want to thank you again, Jennifer.

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