

Gerry Chesser Transcript

Gerry: The ethos purpose and vision of Every Man Jack is to inspire men to take care of themselves and connect to the world around them. So we use things like social platforms and our ambassador programs to do just that, to inspire men. And it's not about having necessarily a celebrity or somebody who's an A-lister. It's about a lifestyle they can relate to.

Matt: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to The Speed of Culture. Today, we're thrilled to be joined by Gerry Chesser, CEO at Every Man Jack, a men's hair and skincare brand that strives to use as many natural and plant-based ingredients as possible. Gerry, so great to see you. Thanks so much for joining today.

Gerry: Thanks, Matt. Thrilled to be here.

Matt: Absolutely. So tell us a little bit about your background. The CEO role was one that takes on a lot of different facets, and we'd love to hear some of the experiences that led up to your current role.

Gerry: Sure. I've been in CPG for 30 years. For the first 10, I was at big CPG and in various operating and manufacturing roles. And the last 20 entrepreneurial, kind of more challenger brands, mostly in the health and wellness space, everything from operations to finance, to general brand, to general management, and eventually COO and CEO.

Matt: And how did you find yourself ending up in the CPG space early in your career?

Gerry: It's interesting. I was going to go to law school out of college.

Matt: Me too. It's what back then we thought that you had to do to be successful, right? That was what Mom and Dad told us.

Gerry: I had to do it. Yeah, exactly. And I loved the work around the law the reading and the text. But when I started talking to lawyers I realized they didn't seem like a lot of them were very happy. And so I just talked to my parents. My dad was like, you know, you're great with people. Have you thought about getting into manufacturing, which is what he was in? Manufacturing is about people. It's about organizing teams against a goal, motivating them, and achieving that. So to me, that's how I got into consumer products, kind of stumbled into it and ended up 30 years later. And here I am.

Matt: Among the many facets of the consumer products business, has there been one area that you tend to gravitate more towards, whether it's in the marketing or product development realm or innovation?

Gerry: And more on the product side of it, I enjoy both in terms of developing products, and commercializing them. What is it about that experience that the consumer is going to have

with the product? And all the operational and financial aspects of it, I enjoy. But seeing that come to life has always been exciting for me. I mean, to me, it's about tangible products. When you can go somewhere and see your product on the shelf, you feel like you're making some sort of impact there. And it's so tangible.

Matt: It's so interesting seeing something you can touch and feel like we have a software company at Suzy, that you can't touch and feel. The closest thing we have is like billboards on the side of the highway. But when people see it, there's something about people seeing things you built, whether it's a billboard or the actual product that has some type of gravitas towards it. And it makes people sort of respect in even greater detail what you've accomplished.

Gerry: Yeah. Get a kick out of it when you're able to go into a retail store and my son will pick up one of my products. Be like Dad, did you make this? It was fun.

Matt: Absolutely. So tell us about your current role at Every Man Jack, and tell us a little bit about the company and where your vision is moving forward.

Gerry: Sure. So I am a CEO. I joined just over three years ago, and I was brought to scale the company and take it from what it was, which ironically, it's been around for 17 years. And the thing that was interesting about Every Man Jack is it's been around for 17 years with a very simple proposition, which was better for you, personal care for men at a great price, aesthetics, and packaging that, I think, delivered on equities for consumers. But it was very early in its life cycle, and I think it's a little bit too far in front of the curve. So what has happened over the last 17 years is most of the growth has happened in the last four or five. And the reason for that, Matt, is really about the consumer. So that a consumer is a young man who is engaged in better-for-you products, engaged in the lifestyle type of brand that we have, outdoor-inspired, better for you. And they gravitate towards that. So although that's a brand that kind of existed really in thrived years ago, in the natural channel, what we see is that mass consumers are now really driven by Gen Z and Gen Y that are hyper-engaged, in better-for-you brands. They're looking at the back of the label. And Every Man Jack has always been that. And now it's at a mass scale and it's got that engagement for the consumer. And that's what's driving all of these challenger brands in the men's space.

Matt: Yeah, it's almost like the market is catching up with where the product has always been.

Gerry: Yeah, 100%.

Matt: So when you look at distribution and driving volume of your products, you mentioned your son's senior product in a store. How do you look at the future of retail and some of the levers that you're pulling to make sure that you're continuing to be in front of the consumer where they're making, obviously, the buying decisions? And you're able to compete in a world of private labels and competing with a lot of the more traditional established CPG brands.

Gerry: Well, I think you have to be everywhere where the consumer is. And so we are a true omni-channel brand because consumers start their journeys in different places. I think historically if you go back a couple of decades ago and when I was starting my career, you started your consumer journey in a retail brick and mortar. Now you started searching. A lot of search starts on platforms like Amazon, where they may be researching a product and they're engaging with it. They might be comfortable at a certain e-tailer site. They might like to engage

directly with a brand. So we have to be everywhere. And I think that's what we've thrived in is the ability to kind of present our product everywhere and get that message consistent everywhere. At the shelf or our D2C site, at any different platform we're existing, we're consistent in bringing that better for you, accessible pricing message of Every Man Jack and every single touchpoint. And EMJ is a very visual brand. And I think that's a really important part of our brand. If you can see from our labels, see how we present ourselves on the shelf, on the digital screen. So that consistency, I think of all platforms, but also just being available everywhere is super important in that consumer journey.

Matt: Absolutely. In that regard, I saw you posted a couple of months ago that your product is now on display in over 700 Target stores and their men's world displays. So what goes into a process like that? I guess I'm working with such a prominent retailer and getting your product featured like that.

Gerry: I mean, the process is you have to, and granted, the brand started at Target years ago. So we've always had that kind of direct engagement. And that's the case with quite a few retailers now. But how that starts is sharing the vision for the brand. When you talk to a retailer like Target and you're talking to them about where this consumer is going, this Gen Y, Gen Z consumer, the way they're engaging with the brand, the way that they're getting more into regimens than they ever have before. This generation is so engaged in different parts of personal care now. Now, if I go back to like, I'm a Gen Xer, we used bar soap.

Matt: Me too.

Gerry: Or we use probably maybe use what your mom had in the shower, what your girlfriend or wife had in the shower.

Matt: We just didn't even think about it, right?

Gerry: Didn't think about it. And these young men now are engaged in regimens. So I think what resonates for us in the men's world is the young consumer can go into that Target store. They can go into men's world and they can gauge in multiple categories. And we play across these five categories and they can gauge with the brand there. And also the way young men and men think in general is they like to go to one place and see it. And they're not necessarily like women where they may be in the beauty category, shopping aisle, or shopping features and benefits. Men are going right to what they need. If they like the brand or if they're in that need state that they're shopping, they're going right to it. So it serves us well in the sense of the full portfolio, the full regimen in one place that makes it easy for them to engage.

Matt: Yeah, it's interesting. It is much more function-oriented and it's more of a task versus activity, so to speak, in terms of shopping. So you know what you want to get and you want to get home, et cetera. So in terms of building the brand, obviously the target you're speaking of is hard to reach and they're being bombarded with messages within your category and out. What have you found to be some of the more effective tactics for building your brand and ultimately driving volume from a marketing standpoint?

Gerry: Part of the ethos of Every Man Jack, is the better for you, the outdoor lifestyle and outdoor inspiration is part of who we are. So we have a very engaged ambassador team, whether it's professional surfers, or skiers, and they have great audiences and they're engaging

at the level where they're sharing their lifestyles. And men like to see that it's inspirational. The ethos purpose and vision of Every Man Jack is to inspire men to take care of themselves and connect to the world around them. So we use things like social platforms and our ambassador programs to do just that, to inspire men. And it's not about having necessarily a celebrity or somebody who's an A-lister. It's about a lifestyle they can relate to. We have a tri-team that we sponsor, and that tri-team has a host of people that are engaged. They're not full-time, only triathletes. They're dads. They're engaged in their community, but they can share their experiences. They relate to Every Man Jack, and they can share that with us. So we utilize that, I think, very well. But I think that lifestyle is really what appeals to young men, and we have to continue to engage them in it.

Matt: So kind of moving down the funnel, so to speak, Gerry, we talked about brand building and making sure you're in a consideration set. One unique thing about CPG, especially when you were looking at channels like Target and Walmart, is you don't have that first-party data, so to speak. You can't drive that loyalty and repeat purchases. You almost have to rely a lot on the product to do the heavy lifting for you. How do you look at loyalty and making sure that you don't just have a one-time customer, but you're building those critical lifetime relationships?

Gerry: I mean, part of it is math through our DSE site. So it's not primarily commerce, it's primarily content and education. But we also try to develop a community there. So in that community, we have a large CRM program. And we engage that CRM program in things. So we don't just have them as consumers. We communicate with them. We ask them about product ideas. We use them in some cases to send them product ideas to get their feedback on them. So that's one area where we're connecting a young man to understanding what are the features, the benefits, the attributes that they like about our products. And that gives us a good-sounding bar. The other part of it is, if you look at our social channels, are we doing all the right listening? So what are the consumers telling us? What feedback are they giving us that we can then riff off of? Whether it's doing more of what they're liking, or is it more that we're listening to them about product ideas or even some of the tactics we use? So that's a piece of it. And the other is, we have to be a part of. I talked about being where our consumer is. But, I look at something like, we're one of the fastest-growing men's brands on TikTok. Well, we're there because that's where our audience is. So engaging with them, and we have a team that focuses on that. We're seeing what's happening in the culture. What are young men caring about? What are they posting about? What are they watching? And we put content out there, and we see how it's received as well. So I think there's a lot of things we get from just listening and understanding what's happening in our consumers, and then reacting to it, whether it's at a product level in terms of how we communicate with them.

Matt: So I mean, becoming one of the fastest growing men's brands on TikTok, you mentioned that almost like a matter of fact, but it's a major deal. And I'm sure it wasn't easy to get there. What was the process to engage in a new channel like that where the consumer is so fickle and you have to enter into the realm on the consumer's terms versus yours on TV where you just run a spot? And how did you, I guess, get your team to become so successful on that platform?

Gerry: Part of it is test and learn, Matt. We had to go in and see what content was being consumed and how is it being consumed. It is very interesting how these different platforms work because you could take something on another platform that is very successful and it may be too long or it may not be that interesting. So that's one thing we learned. The other is like what resonates on the channel. Once you kind of work through what it is you feel like the flow

of the content is what's most appealing. Part of it is, well, how are you delivering that content? What we found is with young guys, particularly humor matters. So you have to have a reason for them to be entertained. I think when you look at the beauty category, which we always look at in terms of trends and how consumers and when consumers think about things that any trends that we could translate when you look at that from a social media standpoint, it's very different. Women engage in things much more about education. Guys, they wanna be entertained. And then if you can give them information about your product while you're being entertaining, that is hopefully what works, and what we've seen work for us anyway.

Matt: We'll be right back with the speed of culture after a few words from our sponsors. So moving forward, when you look at the future growth of the business, obviously you have to continue to innovate. You have to continue to look at the consumer that drives your roadmap. What does innovation look like for your company? What does the innovation cycle look like? And what are some of the new, I guess, tangential categories that you guys are either already involved in or think could be an interesting area in the future?

Gerry: Well, it's interesting. Men are just in general expanding their regimens. And so they're much more interested in much more engaging categories than they ever have been. So the number of products they're using, the number of subcategories that they're engaging is well beyond what it's been. If you look at something like skincare, we've seen guys go from putting nothing under their face and maybe using a bar of soap to now they're thinking much more thoughtfully about that. They're looking at things like cleansing and hydrating. Are they gonna be five and seven steps of beauty? No, but cleansing and hydrating is a trend that we're seeing that young men particularly are adopting. And we see that kind of continuing to be relevant in skincare in a growing segment. I think fragrance always plays a big role with men. It is one of the biggest entries into the category. It's how they make their purchase decisions. So we're gonna continue to innovate on fragrances and try to stay relevant there. If you look at forms and shapes, that's another one. Across body and deodorant specifically, you've seen that. You've seen a lot of innovations in things like whole-body deodorant. So we're looking at all that and pretty relevant in terms of delivering a pipeline against that. But we're staying true to the five categories we play in, Matt. But what we're trying to do is innovate within those five, both on the fragrance side, as well as on the form side. And we'll continue to do that. We're careful about not going too adjacent with our categories, where then you're diluting some of your messages and your equities. So we're focused on the five and then innovating behind that core.

Matt: And do tastes from your audience in terms of fragrance, not taste, but like their preferences, I should say, in terms of the types of smell they gravitate towards, do you see just like shifts happening in the industry over time? Is there any rhyme or reason behind it?

Gerry: There is, Matt. And I think that's what's been a really interesting innovation. Because we've started with men taking very simple fragrances, might have just really been like the woody type of fragrances. And what we're seeing is men looking, particularly young men, again, because that's the growing audience, they're looking more in sophistication. Not necessarily gender-neutral fragrances, but more sophisticated fragrances. Fragrances that are more descriptive than men can look at that and say, oh, I can relate to that. That sounds interesting. They weren't doing that 10 years ago. And so I think that's what that landscape has changed is the proliferation of fragrances. And they're more sophisticated. They're telling a story there that I think men think is interesting. And that's been a big dynamic.

Matt: I mean, a lot of what we're talking about is we talked about what we cared about as Gen Xers. And when you look at the Gen Z consumer, they just have had so much more of a complicated upbringing. And, you know, you look at Gen Z having to go through COVID, but obviously seeing all this political divide in the U.S. Specifically, and most importantly, or most impactfully, the impact of their phone being an appendage to their body and the social media stresses and pressures that come along with it. I would imagine that that type of sophisticated upbringing is a big driver of a more sophisticated preference set for the consumer.

Gerry: It has. And I think that's what's been unique to the men's category over the last few years and how it's developed is that you have a young audience that cares what's in the bottle. And so that's where you've seen the growth of better-for-you brands like Every Man Jack. They're looking at the back of the bottle. They're looking at the ingredients. Do they see any authenticity in this company? What does this company stand for? We certified it as a B Corp last year. And we did that because we found that it's very important to our consumers in terms of validation of your products, your practices, and your policies. So it's not just about what's in the bottle, which is important. And you better show up with real authenticity there. You better have a purpose and a reason for the ingredients you use. And people better believe that those are better for you. And then in terms of who that company is, they're shopping for the front of that label. Who is this company? What do they stand for? What are they about? And so for us, a B Corp was a validation of our people, our practices, and our products. And a lot of work went into documenting the things that we were doing. It was a good validation, but it means something to these young consumers that they're getting something besides the product off the shelf. They're participating in the economy. They're participating in this company's success because they like what you're doing.

Matt: Yeah, it brings your story to life in a real way and your brand. So let's shift gears a little bit, Gerry, just to you and your role as CEO of a consumer products company. How would you describe the pie chart of your day? Because when you're talking about things like fragrances, my mind goes to like, is he smelling the fragrances himself? Like, how involved are you in that? Some people might say yes or no, but I'm just curious in terms of how you spend your day and where you prioritize your time to achieve your business goals.

Gerry: Sure. And they occasionally will ask me about a fragrance and I'll give them my opinion, but I'll always say I am not the audience. I'm very good. We have a great process of engaging.

Matt: You're every man, Gerry. You're just throwing in it. You're one person's opinion, right?

Gerry: Exactly. The older man's person's opinion. So in terms of my day, one of the things that's been important to our success and my success in other companies before this is running a disciplined company in terms of you have the how of how are you going to do things, but you have the what of what you're trying to achieve. The what for us is our purpose of Every Man Jack. So every year we have an operating plan that we put together, which is identifying all of the key objectives and then how we're defining key results against that. And we run the business according to those OKRs. So that defines the what, the how are our values in terms of how we're going to achieve that. But I run the company effectively through an OKR system. Every two weeks we have a leadership team meeting and we use that one-page document of our OKRs of how we're proceeding in the year, how we're performing against it. If there's anything we're not hitting metrics, what's the action plan to get it back on track? So for me, that structure has always been important. The departments are set up to execute against

those OKRs. Effectively, every person has OKRs down to their level throughout the company. And those all roll up to the company OKRs. So I think that's important. The one thing I'd say being a part of growing entrepreneurial, thriving companies is, that you have more opportunities than you can take advantage of. And so you have to be very selective of what you're going to work on and what you're not. And I think the ability to say no sometimes is much more powerful than what you say yes to. And we spend a lot of time on that. Cycling through our priorities and saying what aligns with the objectives we set. It doesn't mean that you ignore any new information coming in that are opportunities. But you put it through the same rigorous cycle. And you determine if it's going to change our current priorities? Does this fill? A gap that we're going to say this is more important than something else?

Matt: Yeah, I mean, that's the definition of opportunity cost, isn't it? You could chase everything and then you're not doing the core things you do well anymore. And you find yourself largely diluted. So it is having a framework for decision making. And I guess that's where it all goes back to the OKRs and having a structure, which is essentially a decision-making framework and a prioritization framework to achieve what's most important, rooting the goals of the company.

Gerry: Absolutely. And we revisit that. We'll mid-year assess where OKRs are, and we always make some minor adjustments. I think we're always really clear on one thing we try to maintain strategically, we try to be strategically rigid, but tactically we're flexible because the year changes, and the way it unfolds will change, but nothing changes in terms of what we're generally trying to accomplish to advance our mission about how we serve these young men.

Matt: So one thing you mentioned a lot during this interview is just, and it strikes me that you focus a lot on the consumer and how the consumer is changing and making sure that you're not getting blindsided by building for a Gen X audience when you're going after Gen Z. And a lot of companies do that. And they're myopic in their thinking, and they make decisions based on what's in their four walls. And then sooner or later, they just become disenfranchised from their audience. How have you been able to successfully over time, make sure that you're evolving as a professional, that you understand emerging channels like TikTok and emerging trends that Gen Z brings with it to make sure that you are leading for the audience that you serve?

Gerry: I think we always have to be asking questions. And we spend a lot of time on that internally, asking questions. We learned about TikTok a few years ago, getting into it. And I think you have to be humble enough to know what you don't know and ask the dumb questions and then do some tests and learn and work your way in there. But I think that's a big part of it is just like, stay curious. And I think we do a good job of that internally. Ask a lot of questions, ask a lot of questions of our partners in terms of what we're trying to achieve, and then align on those objectives and test and learn. But it's been pretty successful for us. I do think, though, that you have to remain open to ideas. I don't think you set it and forget it with your operating plan when your objectives. And I think new information comes in. You always have to be listening. And we try to do that in an innovation plan in terms of how we look at launching new products, whether it's we'll run some focus groups with our audience. We'll put that same information out to our CRM group. We'll go out to our big customers and to top meetings and ask them what they see as trends and then share what we see. And try to have as open and transparent a dialogue as possible. And we learn a lot. And that informs what we do.

Matt: Yeah. And when you look at sort of the success you've had in your career, and obviously, you're in a position where it's fun, you're a midsize kind of company, meaning like you're not an early-stage startup, you have real distribution, but you're also not a Procter and Gamble, where you have layers and layers and layers. So you can very much dictate the future of the company. And obviously, to be successful in a role like that takes the right level of focus earlier in your career. So when you look back at your journey, I guess, before joining this role, what are some of the things that you've done right, whether it be decisions you've made, or areas you focus on, that you think have kind of created the person that you are today, and the leader you are today to put yourself in a position to succeed?

Gerry: Yeah, I mean, I guess it goes back, Matt, to me is asking a lot of questions. So coming up in my career, I was never afraid to ask questions or raise my hand to spend that extra time to learn about something and then learn about adjacent functions. And the big part of that for me has always been having a mentor. I chose mentors early in my career and almost describe it as being selfish with their time to try to learn as much as I could. And I spent a lot of time. And so we have a mentorship program that we established here at Every Man Jack. So everyone can have a mentor or someone more senior than them. And the construct is that they can share whatever they want to share. That's not a direct manager and is to help them think through what they need to improve on with their skill sets, what areas they may be interested in, and how they can get styles of leadership. And coming up through my career, that's what I did. I was very fortunate to have great mentors. And so now at the point of my career, what I feel like I kind of need to do to give back is I'm pretty liberal with my time. And so I'll set up time with people. If you ever want to have coffee, I'll sit down with you and share my thoughts on things. If there are things that you want to bounce off of me, it was pivotal in my career that I always had great mentors and always took advantage of them. I don't know if I would be here today without being able to do that.

Matt: Yeah, I think it's something that, I think your point about being selfish with their time is such a good one. I think sometimes we get in their way, especially younger in our careers, thinking, oh, they won't want to talk to me. They're too busy. And you don't get what you don't ask for. And when you put yourself first and you reach out, just trust that if the person doesn't have time, they'll let you know. But assume that they do. Don't assume that they don't.

Gerry: Yeah. And you'll find that most people want to share their experiences. They want to give you advice. And that's a big part of what we do. And it's something I think, particularly, I think, in consumer products, been in this industry for a long time. And whether I go to a trade show or you see somebody out at a customer meeting, people are very willing to just have conversations and learn and share their experiences. And I think people need to take advantage of it. You know, and I think that's been the unfortunate thing is something like the remote work is you're losing all that face-to-face with people and interfacing and having the ability to just absorb things from people that I think is pretty valuable.

Matt: I think about that all the time. So this has been great. Just to wrap up here, Gerry, is there a quote or mantra that you live by? We like to wrap up our podcast with that consistent question.

Gerry: I would say never sacrifice the good for the perfect. And I've been a part of fast-growing companies for a lot of years. And your ability to take what you know looks like it might work and test it and move. And if you're looking for perfection or if you're looking to get

every answer, you're probably not gonna get where you wanna go. And for me, that's been a big mantra.

Matt: Yeah. I mean, I think so many companies just persevere and spin cycles while the whole market's passing them. And I think always shipping and pushing things out and iterating is the way to go, especially here in 2024.

Gerry: The Speed of Culture, Matt.

Matt: You know it. Well, we're going to wrap it up with that. Thanks so much, Gerry. It's been awesome hearing about your background and your current work. And I have no doubt you're going to be successful with everything you're doing.

Gerry: Great. I appreciate it.

Matt: Thank you. On behalf of Susan and the AdWe team, thanks again to Gerry Chesser, CEO of Every Man Jack, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review The Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Until next time, see you soon, everyone. Take care. The Speed of Culture is brought to you by Suzy as part of the Adweek Podcast Network and Acast Creator Network. You can listen and subscribe to all of Adweek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcasts. To find out more about Suzy, head to suzy.com. And make sure to search for The Speed of Culture on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts, or anywhere else podcasts are found. Click follow so you don't miss out on any future episodes. On behalf of the team here at Suzy, thanks for listening.