

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 290: WES CARTER

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of Learning in your professional and personal life. Stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm Whitney Johnson. Today's episode is about packaging, you know, the stuff that all your stuff comes in. We don't usually give this much thought, but the packaging industry has a massive influence on how we perceive products and the companies that make them. They also play a huge role in what we're doing to our environment. That's what we'll be focusing on today. Wes Carter is the president of Atlantic Packaging, which is the largest privately held packaging company in North America. Chances are if you've bought something recently and who hasn't, it was touched by Atlantic somewhere along the supply chain. But Wes sees that influences more than big business. It's also an opportunity to affect sustainability in ways that individual people, companies, and even governments struggle with. You'll see what I mean in this remarkable conversation. Enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: Wes. Would you share with us a formative story, something that happened early in your life that has shaped who you are?

Wes Carter: My grandfather was an outdoor writer, and I spent a lot of time with him growing up in Florida and got really exposed to the outdoors. I grew up on the coast, and really just the experience of being a coastal person and having a father and a grandfather who were so passionate about the outdoors. I was a Boy Scout growing up. You know, all of those connections were pretty impactful for me. I'd say, like when I was in college, I decided to do a semester with the National Outdoor Leadership School, which is an organization that takes kids in college, and you do a semester out west and basically backpack for a month and then do a climbing trip and a white-water trip and really learn to live sustainably in the outdoors. And that was a really difficult experience and challenging, but I learned a whole lot, and looking back, I think a lot of my passion for the outdoors and what I do today really kind of began with the way I was raised and in that experience at the National Outdoor Leadership School.

Whitney Johnson: When you say an outdoor writer, what do you mean about your, your grandfather and your father?

Wes Carter: My grandfather, who founded our company, he originally founded the company as a is a weekly newspaper, but his real passion was freshwater fishing. And so, when he was in his early sixties and turned Atlantic, our organization, over to my father, Rusty. My grandfather moved to Central Florida and wrote probably about 25 different books about freshwater fishing and the outdoors in particular. So, a lot of what he would do was travel around with professional bass fishermen and write their autobiographies, or he would write, you know, how to catch a bass or catch a crappie or things like that. So, a lot of how-to fishing books and a lot of autobiographies of the professional fishermen down there in central Florida. He also would just wrote lots and lots of articles, you know, in *Field and Stream* and *Florida Sportsman*. And so, growing up with a grandfather who was, you know, so ingrained in that world, I mean, kind of all my family trips and everything that we did was, was really rooted in the outdoors and his passion for it. And then, of course, my father, with growing up with a father like that, just being on the water was just kind of fundamental to, to who we were as, as a family.

Whitney Johnson: And then you took up surfing, it sounds like, as well.

Wes Carter: So, yeah, I you know, my, my parents moved from Tabor City, North Carolina, which is a little town inland of Myrtle Beach, when I was only two or three years old. And they moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, which is a town on the southeast coast of North Carolina. And I spent my summers at Wrightsville Beach, which is a place I still spend a lot of time today. I took up surfing as a young person and teenager and became really passionate about it. As I got older, and even to this day, I'm still a very average surfer, but it's something I really enjoy. And it's also been a good reason to see the world. You know, there are so many beautiful places to go surfing, you know, whether it be Central America or Southeast Asia or Africa or the United States. And so, you know, as surfing being a passion of mine, it's taking me around the world to, to some of those really beautiful places. And so, I like to say, like, it's, it's fun to find a passion that will also allow you to see the world with that, with that activity that you enjoy doing. Whether it be surfing or backpacking or rock climbing or whatever else it may be.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting. So, I think there are going to be three threads that we're going to pull on. So, you've talked about the outdoors piece and it really for your grandfather, it sounds like was a deep, deep passion for the outdoors, for fishing, not even sounds like clearly, it was. So, we've got one thread going. I'd like to go to the second thread that I think is interesting, which is there's a story that's told on your, on your website about how your grandfather was a writer and he had published some articles and took a lot of came under tremendous pressure to not publish those articles. Can you talk about that story as, as a second thread?

Wes Carter: Atlantic Packaging was started by my grandfather, W. Horace Carter. He was the first kid in the history of his high school to go to college. And he went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with \$50 in his pocket. And the way he paid his way through school was working at the university newspaper, *The Daily Tar Heel*. And so, he just fell in love with journalism. That was really the beginning of his writing career. And by the time he graduated from North Carolina, his dream was to start his own newspaper, which he did. And he started a little weekly newspaper called *The Tabor City Tribune*. And initially, this is in the late forties, and he was just reporting on tobacco farming news initially. But pretty soon, he became aware that the Ku Klux Klan was really active in that community, doing motorcades and cross burnings and pulling people out of their homes and beating them up. And all the things you read about in the history books. And my grandfather was a power of the pen, God and country, kind of guy who'd had this liberal arts education that had really been enlightening for him.

Wes Carter: And he felt it was his responsibility to use his newspaper to fight the Klan. So, that's exactly what he did. And he published articles on their activities and scathing editorials condemning what they were doing. And doing that in the deep south, in that era of our history was a really dangerous thing to do. They threatened to kill him. They threatened to kidnap his children and burn down his house and threatened all of his advertisers. And pretty much everybody he knew told him to stop. But he really believed in what he was doing. In the end, his editorials got picked up by larger newspapers, and eventually, the FBI contacted my grandfather, and with his help, they infiltrated the Klan and arrested over 300 Klansmen, including the Grand Dragon of the Carolinas, Klu Klux Klan. And that really broke the back of that organization. They were never the same in the Southeast. And my grandfather won a

Pulitzer Prize for Meritorious Public Service in 1952 for those efforts in fighting the Klan. And he was the first weekly newspaper to ever win a Pulitzer, and he was 32 years old at the time.

Whitney Johnson: Wes, do you ever get tired of telling people that story?

Wes Carter: Never. I've told it three times today.

Whitney Johnson: Ever, right? It is the best story!

Wes Carter: It is. I love that story. The older I've gotten, the more amazing it is to me that a man who was in his late twenties, early thirties with a young family, I know what that's like because I have a young family to put himself in that kind of danger and continue a fight, you know, based on nothing more than a moral compass. I mean, he did not have political connections. He wasn't doing it for notoriety. He wasn't, he wasn't doing it for any other reason than he was using the little platform that he created, which had a circulation of about 800 people, to stand up for what he believed was right. You know, and, you know, you talk about a life well lived and living a moral and ethical life. I mean, it's normally, I mean, I tell that story a lot because it was the beginning of Atlantic Packaging, too. So, when, when I'm introducing our company, I always start with that story. And most of the time, I get teared up, and I have told it 10,000 times, but it still gets to me. And my grandfather lived to be 88 years old, so I knew him well. And a lot of what drives our organization today is a sense of ethics and corporate ethics and morality. Our organization obviously has changed and evolved a lot from a small, tiny weekly newspaper. But the ethos and the energy and the soul of this company, I believe, is, is really still the beating heart.

Whitney Johnson: So powerful. And the moment that you stop wanting to tell that story, that's all that would, that would be a signal to you, wouldn't it, that something had changed.

Wes Carter: Yeah. I don't know what that would have to be.

Whitney Johnson: And not a good way. So, you don't ever want to get tired of telling that story.

Wes Carter: If I get struck by lightning or something and my brain stops working right, maybe. But no, I'm, you know, I'm very proud of that story. I guess I'm biased, but it's a great American story. It's a, you know, it's a beautiful American story. And our, our position in the supply chain today, we're in a place where, where we can have influence on, you know, some things that are, are important to our world today. You know, the company was founded during the era of civil rights, and my grandfather fought for equality during that era. And, you know, the fight is much different today. I don't equate it. I mean, I don't have people trying to burn my house down or shooting at me. But I do think using our organization to fight for environmental rights 75 years later, in the era of climate change and plastic pollution, there's a, there's a certain synergy there that doesn't escape me and gets me choked up on a pretty regular basis.

Whitney Johnson: So, it's interesting, coincidentally, but maybe not. This week in our weekly newsletter, I, the top quote was from Bruce Feiler, who wrote a book called *The Secrets of Happy Families*. And he said, "The single most important thing you can do for your family, maybe the simplest of all, develop a strong family narrative," which you clearly have. So, we have the one thread of your grandfather and your family being very focused on the outdoors and being in, in nature. You've got this ethics and morality thread. Now you've got this business that's a packaging business. And can you just talk a little bit more about the origin story? I know you've mentioned it briefly, but just touch on that, and then I want to come back to how all these pieces come together in the work that you're doing today. So, just give a very high level. Talk to us about Atlantic Packaging and how it came to be the business it is today, given that it started as a newspaper.

Wes Carter: Like I mentioned, my grandfather was, was a newspaperman, and he was the first to admit, like, hey, I'm a writer, I'm not a businessman. But in, in those days in small-town America, if you were in the newspaper business, you were also in the paper supply business. And so, you know, after my grandfather won the Pulitzer, the second part of his career, he got a lot of notoriety. I mean, he was voted top ten men in America, and he was giving speeches at Rotary Clubs all over America. And what he started doing with the second part of his career was really advocating for economic development in the Southeast. Because before that, like I mentioned earlier, it was

primarily just tobacco farming. But the, the apparel and textile industry that was primarily in the Northeast was beginning to migrate south. So, my grandfather would go up there and advocate with those organizations to bring jobs to the southeast Carolinas. And he was pretty successful in doing that. And as those companies would move south, they knew my grandfather, and we had printing presses and dye cutters. And so, we kind of had this side business providing paperboard for packaging for the textile industry, things like collar strips and inserts for shirts and underwear and socks, and a lot of the products that are still in garments today. And so, you know, this little packaging distribution business sort of grew up in tandem with the newspaper. You know, once they were selling once he was selling this converted paper board, pretty soon they were like, Hey, Horace, will you sell us corrugated boxes, and can you tell us tape and can you sell us bags? And so, this little packaging distribution business just sort of grew up around that.

Wes Carter: But again, like I said, my grandfather, although he was pretty successful in business, that was not his passion. So, when he was in his early sixties, and my father was out of college, this is probably 1971 or two, my grandfather threw my dad the keys. My dad's name is Rusty. He threw him the keys and said, Hey, I'm moving to Florida to, to continue my writing career, have fun with the business. And so, and that was a really, really fortunate thing for Atlantic because my dad was not a newspaper man but has is just an incredibly talented entrepreneur and has a brilliant business mind. And, you know, I like to say, you know, the heart and soul of Atlantic may have been my grandfather, but the, the backbone and the hands and the mind of Atlantic has unquestionably been my father, Rusty. He took our business from doing barely \$1,000,000 a year in sales to, you know what, we will probably eclipse \$1,000,000,000 in sales in the next couple of years. And you know that that's based on his keen business sense. And he really saw too that we had to diversify outside of textile packaging that that that industry was going to leave the United States pretty soon and that it's already started. And so, he began to focus on a lot of other verticals like food and beverage packaging and building products. And, and over 50 years, you know, really hired a lot of fabulous people, and attracted a lot of talent and continue to grow and add resources.

Wes Carter: And so, it was just real organic. And my dad's just a kind of a serial entrepreneur, and he loves to take calculated risks and make investments. And he just never stopped investing in Atlantic. And we've continued to grow and grow and grow. And I think one of the secrets to the success of Atlantic two is my dad recognized that, you know, he didn't want to be a commodity broker in packaging and just being a, you know, a guy that buys and sells products. He really wanted to be a company that added value. And so, we focused a lot on consulting and packaging, and that's a lot of what we do today where one of our primary value propositions as an organization today is packaging optimization. So, we work with big consumer products companies like, Coca-Cola, Procter and Gamble, Kellogg's, folks like that, and really work with those guys to show them how to package things the most efficiently that they can at the highest speeds that they can. We really focus on reducing damage and shipping. It's selling packaging equipment, it's selling packaging materials, but it's really selling packaging programs that are really integrated with their manufacturing facilities. That's given us a unique value proposition for, for quite some time. And as has also been really the thing that we've been able to build our sustainability program on because, you know, the first rule of sustainability is to use less, and packaging optimization is all about that.

Whitney Johnson: That brings all of these three pieces together now, right? So, the outdoors, the standing up, the ethics and the morality, you've got a packaging business which is potentially, and will not even potentially, has been not helping sustainability. And so, you have really focused it sounds like your dad was focused on packaging optimization, but you're now very, very focused on sustainability. And you made a comment that you said you felt like you could have a seat at the table with large CPG orgs and could have a real impact. So, talk to us about some of what you're doing there.

Wes Carter: Well, you know, I think one of the things that while I like to acknowledge my grandfather as well as my father, I mean, what my father did with Atlantic was he got us to a size and a scale that we were able to support the largest consumer products companies in the world. You know, and so, if we were just a small regional company, we wouldn't have that same level of influence. But when I look at our top 100 accounts, every single one of them is a major consumer products company across pretty much every manufacturing vertical, whether food, beverage, building, products, automotive, a lot of new ones in e-commerce. And I felt like, you know, these companies already our customers are of Atlantic and partner with Atlantic because we help them optimize their packaging. We help them reduce their packaging footprint; we help them reduce damage. I mean, that is our value proposition. It's a very technical way of selling packaging. I felt like if we really embrace sustainability as fundamental to how we go to

market as well and really build on this technical packaging side of our business, but incorporate sustainability, you know, we already have a seat at the table. We already had credibility. What I was beginning to see, too, was a lot of these organizations want to make these shifts.

Wes Carter: They're ready to do it, but they're trying to figure out how do we do this? Like, how do we do it in a cost-effective way? How do we make sure that we're making the right decisions on the types of products that we're introducing, what actually is sustainable because there's so much greenwashing out there. I felt like we had an opportunity because we sort of sit in the middle of the supply chain as a consulting company where we could actually help organizations make good, educated decisions on the products that they were buying. It wasn't exactly new as much as it was just an evolution. And building on the platform that was already there, we had to really believe in it, you know, we had to do it for the right reasons. It couldn't just be sustainable packaging is the fad right now, and so, we're going to slap that label on stuff and, and maybe it'll sell products. I mean, I felt like we really had to live it. And the fact that, you know, the history of my family is rooted in the outdoors and a lot of the problems of plastic pollution are being created by the supply chain that we're a part of. You know, it was personal to me. It is personal to me.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. It's interesting. As I'm listening to you, I have the, it's probably because I like S Curves, but I have S's in my mind of your grandfather is standing up, your father is scaling up, and you as sustainability up. We can't do up. But anyway, I'll try to do it as, as because it sounds like that's what you would like. You're I know you're still young but would like your legacy to be. Is that this idea of sustainability?

Wes Carter: Yeah. I mean, I think that's true. I mean, there's a spiritual component for me. I mean, it just feels like the organization needed all these different talents and not just of the Carters, but of a lot of incredible leaders that supported our family throughout the last 75 years. But, you know, we had to have a start that was rooted in ethics. I mean, that was fundamental. I mean, it set the, the moral compass for the organization. It set the culture of the, of the company. Then we had to have a leadership that could help the company grow to a size and scale, that it could have influence that was fundamental. And now, you know, I really see that I'm in a position to take some of my personal passions, recognizing some of the issues that I see in the world, and take this platform and move it in a, in a direction of purpose. And again, my father is still our CEO, and he's very much passionate about this as well. So, there's an interesting synergy, you know, of, of the leadership of our organization over, over three generations.

Whitney Johnson: I think it's wonderful. You mentioned the spiritual component. Can you just talk about that briefly?

Wes Carter: When you spend a lot of time in the outdoors, you know, there's a certain rhythm and balance that you experience. And, you know, for me, I have invested a lot of time and energy in contemplative practices, you know, whether it be meditation. I've got a long-term yoga practice. I'll also just spend a lot of time in the outdoors, the experience of just the reverence for the natural world. And, you know, there was also a moment for me where I came to realize that, you know, for a lot of my life, I felt like I was separate from nature, you know, like I was, you know, I'm a human being and nature is around me and I'm living in it. And then there was sort of this moment that are like, no, you are nature. You know, you're not something separate from it. You are nature. And you know, when, when that epiphany happened for me, using the influence of our organization in my own life. To be a caretaker and an advocate for the health of this thing that we all are, just became incredibly obvious, and it feels spiritual. I don't know how else to put it. I mean, it feels like, you know, the, the universe is asking all of us, not just Atlantic Packaging, but all of us, to wake up to the fact that, like, this is our, this is, this is the one planet that we have. And we have a responsibility as intelligent beings on this planet to be caretakers for it. And we are in a position to do it.

Wes Carter: We're also incredibly innovative, like human beings are radically innovative. We can do amazing things when we work together. And the other piece that has been really special for me is I think in order to solve a lot of these complex problems around climate change and pollution, it requires a radical amount of collaboration. And to me, that is spiritual in its nature. I mean, working together, dropping down our walls and differences, you know, use plastic pollution as an example. The oceans know no borders. You know, the oceans don't have different countries in different politics. You know, if we destroy the oceans, every human being on this planet suffers. You know? And so, it requires a level of humanness. I mean, it gets us back down to a level of just all being global human citizens.

And I think that's a powerful healing. And it's one of the things I love about sustainability. I mean, it is asking us to work together to heal ourselves and heal this planet together.

Whitney Johnson: That's beautiful. I love that you are nature. And it reminds me I know you said you're, you're a surfer. I remember I had interviewed Laird Hamilton, who's a big wave surfer, a couple of years ago, and he said he said something about when he was surfing and riding a wave, that he felt like he was one with the wave. And I think that that that moment that he described was a great practical moment of the more metaphysical experience that you, you just described, which I think is quite, quite lovely. Is there one innovation on the packaging side that you're especially proud of?

Wes Carter: There are several I am very proud of. I will say I'm going to give you two. Okay. So, we do business in two areas of the supply chain, a lot of business-to-business packaging, which is primarily packaging pallet loads of goods that are traveling on a tractor-trailer between businesses. And then the other area of the supply chain is in business to consumer packaging, which is like the stuff that comes to your house from Amazon or other e-commerce retailers. In business-to-business packaging, we developed and patented a monitoring device for monitoring stretch films. Stretch Film is the film that is wrapped around a pallet of goods, and historically there is a tremendous amount of waste in that, in the use of that product because, like I said, it's stretch film, so it's stretched. But to the naked eye, it's very difficult to see how much it's being stretched. And so, the yield on that product can be very, very variable. We developed a monitoring device where we bring pallets of goods into our packaging solutions center in Charlotte, North Carolina. We optimize to the lowest amount of plastic possible. And then we retrofit these monitoring devices on equipment out there in the field to be sure that there is no more waste. Over the last ten years, we estimate that we have kept 120 million pounds of plastic out of the supply chain. That's what I'm really proud of. And then another product that we are working on that we're bringing to market is a product called Canopy Wrap, which is a fiber-based product to replace traditional shrink bundling film for packaging everything from beverages to food products. And it's a product that we are bringing to market like right now. It's not actually commercially available quite yet, but I really believe that that product can be, can be a big game changer in eliminating a single-use plastic product that ends up at the homes of a lot of people.

Whitney Johnson: Let's shift gears slightly. One of the things in our work, we, we use what we call the S Curve of Learning. And it's a way to think about growth. That whenever you start something new, you're at the launch point of the curve where growth is happening quickly, but it feels slow because you feel awkward and ganglion unsure of yourself. But then you move into the sweet spot, which is that steep, sleek back of the curve, and you have the experience of everything seems to just be working, and growth is fast, and it feels fast. And then you get to the top of the curve, the mastery where your experience is, huh? I've kind of learned what I needed to learn here, and I'm not learning as much as I was. And so, growth actually is slow, and it looks actually a lot like a wave. So, one of the questions I have for you is how, you know, your father is in this the CEO role right now than your grandfather before him. And sometimes the shadow of an S Curve looms very large when you have parents who have been very accomplished, very productive, and there's a challenge of finding your own way. And so, I wondered if you could share with people who are listening, who we often talk about parents who people have to sort of overcome. But in your case, you have parents who are really amazing, stellar individuals. Could you talk for a minute just about that journey of finding your own way as a person, as a, as a businessperson, and just reflect for a moment?

Wes Carter: Yeah, that's a really great question and something that for a kid like me who's coming along in my late twenties and early thirties, you know, and you have two really, really successful role models that you're working under. And, you know, it was intimidating for me. I mean, there were times where we're out of really struggled with it, you know, and I worried, you know, like, you know, there's nowhere for me to go but down. It was about personal healing for me. It was about taking my personal healing as a real priority, you know, and working on myself as a human, whether that be the way I live my life, the relationships I have, my practices, even incorporating things like therapy, you know, like really delving deep into how can I be the best human I can be? I found really amazing mentors, which anybody who's in a position of leadership in a business, that's one of the best recommendations find a spiritual mentor. Find somebody outside of your organization that can help guide you along when you're struggling with those insecurities and, you know, some of those issues that come up for all of us. And I mean, I guess a lot of people in a leadership position don't want to talk about their vulnerabilities.

Wes Carter: But I've really found that you know, being vulnerable and articulating that it was hard for me at times, too, and continues to be sometimes, you know, has, has been a strength in a lot of ways. So, I really took my personal healing very seriously, and I took time away from work to do a lot of reflection. I spent a lot of time in the outdoors. I prioritize going on a personal healing retreat at least a time or two every year. As that process evolved for me, a lot of those insecurities began to melt away, and I started to also understand that there's not one way to be successful. And the way my father works, and I work are very different. You know, they're not right and wrong, though, you know, the world needs unique talents. And I do believe that each one of us as an individual has a unique dharma, has a unique individual talent, and that's what makes it all work. And for me, like discovering what mine was and not feeling like I had to be exactly like my grandfather or exactly like my father in order to be successful was a big, big part of my growth and continues to be, continues to be.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. I really appreciate your sharing that. I remember a few years ago having a conversation with a friend of mine, who's, whose father founded a very, very successful company, not dissimilar to your situation. And she said to me something, and she had gone to Harvard Business School and said to me that she felt, actually tremendous pressure, to live up to the legacy of her parents. And so, I just appreciate that you shared this. And also, it's interesting, your choice of words around healing. And I want to just call that out because I think it's important for everybody who's listening to the podcast to recognize that you can have wonderful parents, you can have wonderful grandparents, but it does not preclude you from needing to figure out how you yourself become a whole person. And I just really appreciate your sharing that journey that you've been on to figure out who is Wes, and how does Wes show up in the world, and how are you going to contribute in your unique way to your family, to your company, and to the world at large? So, thank you for that.

Wes Carter: Yeah. I mean, and honestly, that the, the exploration for me has been one of the great joys of my life, you know, like really, you know, as opposed to getting into that rut of always being in a comparison mode. Which I think so many of us can do, me included, where you're always comparing yourself and like really beginning to say, like I deep inside, I know that I have something special to offer to the world because we all do. Every human being on this planet has something unique and special to bring out into the world. But, you know, at least for most of us, for most of us mere mortals, at least for me, it took a lot of work to kind of figure out what that was. And as long as I was trying to be somebody else or be like somebody else, I never could get there. And I never I wasn't ever very happy either. I was always a struggle. And, you know, once I had some mentoring from, from some folks that really helped me discover, you know, who Wes Carter was and what his talents were. And really start to lean into my passions and what I could bring into the world and work got more fun. And I felt like I was able to be a better leader because I wasn't trying to be something other than who I was.

Whitney Johnson: Hey, everybody listening, you notice how he mentioned you didn't say, coach. But basically coaching, is that everybody needs a coach, everybody needs a therapist. Big fan of therapy as well. What's something that you do consistently that helps ground you?

Wes Carter: Most every single day? I spend at least 15 to 20 minutes sitting in meditation. Now, I will say, like, for me, I don't try to be perfect. I mean, it doesn't mean that I'm trying to sit there with a blank mind. Some, some mornings, I listen to a guided meditation because that just feels more appropriate for me that morning. I just want to hear someone talk me through one. Some mornings I want to listen to maybe some music from an indigenous people playing the drums and meditate while I'm listening to that. And some mornings, I just want to sit on my back porch and meditate with my eyes closed and listen to the birds, you know? But I try to have every morning some part of that morning ritual that is dedicated to like slowing down, listening to my breathing, you know, getting connected to the natural world. It's usually accompanied by, you know, some sort of prayer and ritual, not any specific religion, just a prayer to the universe for gratitude. Thank you for this day and thank you for all the gifts in my life. And here are some of the things I'm struggling with. And I could really use some help in some of these areas. And that may sound kind of simple, but I have one of my teachers that talks about start every day with a clear and simple prayer. It's not that difficult, and I found that to be incredibly helpful.

Whitney Johnson: So, our most recent book is *Smart Growth, How to Grow Your People, to Grow Your Company*. But there's a precursor to that, which is *grow yourself, to grow your people, to grow your company*. And it sounds like you are absolutely living that of focusing on, on growing yourself. So, I'm going to ask you to continue

to stay on this metaphysical track is, that you are in the packaging business and you're an expert at physical packaging. Any insights on what makes a great package on an emotional level?

Wes Carter: I love the phrase from there was a book written and I can't call the author right now called, *Antifragile*. And I think a lot of what the work that we do, our personal work, is training ourselves to be more antifragile. And so, from an emotional perspective, like one of the things that I work really hard at is being adaptable. Where I get in trouble, and I see other leaders get in trouble is we get really rigid in the way we think about things, and we feel like that we can't ever change our minds, or we can't ever switch directions because it shows weakness. And the reality is we live in such a dynamic world that things are changing so fast all the time. And what I look for in a really good leader is, is adaptability, like being willing to say, you know what, the conditions here have changed. And I think that goes in our personal life too, like, you know, the conditions of this and that have changed. And I have to be more adaptable to, to the inputs and the outputs in my life. You know, from a metaphysical perspective, I would that's how I would answer that question. When we're talking about actual packaging today, I really believe that packaging is a brand attribute. I believe that consumers like you and I, when we open up a package, we are more and more establishing what the ethical values are of the organization that shipped that package to us based on how it's done. It's not just sustainability, but I think that's a big piece. But first of all, like the presentation, I mean, how well a product is packaged says a lot about the quality of the product in the box, you know.

Wes Carter: And so, we've all opened a package before that was packaged really poorly, and you immediately have a poor opinion of the organization that you ordered that product from. So, customer experience and having packaging that catches people's eye. You know, as we've moved away from retail shopping and more and more of the customer experience is at the doorstep, organizations are really focused on that customer experience. But I also believe the most important thing for packaging these days is that it tells a story of environmentally conscious organizations. I want to open packaging that I know instantly, there's been a lot of thought that went into the products that were packaged for this product. I'll look and see that they are made from renewable resources. I see that they are curbside recyclable. I see that if they end up in the oceans, lakes, and rivers that they'll break down. You know, those are the kind of things when I, when I see those kind of packaging products from a, from a brand I know that that's the kind of brand that I want to do business with. Because they have been thoughtful and, you know, have, have been directed in the way that they're making decisions about, about their products. And in some cases, sustainable packaging can be more costly. And companies are making the decision that we're willing to invest in the sustainable options because there's also a cost for polluting the planet.

Whitney Johnson: As we finish our, our conversation, I would love to hear one or two insights that you had as we were talking. And we do this, and you probably know this from your own practices that in my coaching, it's a way to focus your brain on, to think about what's next. And so, our listeners also like to hear what you've learned. So, it might be something that one of us said, it might be something that you just thought, but what are one or two things that stood out for you in this conversation?

Wes Carter: Walking through the history of the evolution of our organization and how that corresponding evolution of my family, you know, really sticks out to me. I mean, I think I think a lot about. You know, the unique talents that every single one of us bring into the world and how all of those talents working together are how we create a better world for everybody. And, you know, talking through this with you and seeing how that has played out in my life and in this organization and in the health of this organization is something that really sticks with me. I believe more and more every day that that's what we really need to lean into, is celebrating everybody's unique individual talents because we live in a complex world with complex issues, and it requires everybody. And we need a diversity of people and talents and energies and, and insights and, and creativity. It requires all of that. And I think that talking through this with you, I mean, I see this as a great it's a great opportunity for healing, you know. Healing within the supply chain, but really healing within for the humans. I don't I really don't see that there's a difference, you know, and I hope that, that we're moving into a world where personal healing and the healing of the planet and, you know, having more ethical and environmentally conscious organizations and organizations that treat people better. And all of those things all really becomes the same thing because I think it is the same thing.

Whitney Johnson: Mm-hmm. Because you are nature, as you said. I love that. Any final thoughts?

Wes Carter: Just. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak with you. These are the kind of conversations that are really, really meaningful for me. The one piece of advice I could leave with people is, you know, whether you're in a leadership position or really any kind of position, find a mentor. You know, we all need people to lean on. We all need people in our life that have been that are a little further down the path than we are. And mentorship for me in my life has been a massive difference maker. And yeah, that would be my closing thought.

Whitney Johnson: Wes, thank you so much. It's been a delight.

Wes Carter: It's been a delight for me.

I have two big takeaways from my conversation with Wes. Number one, sustainability as a value. As you heard, standing up for what's right is a touchstone in Wes's family. His grandfather took on the KKK with his pen in the 1940s. He won a Pulitzer Prize, and his work was integral to dismantling violent racism. As Wes explained, this profoundly changed the course of their family and gave birth to an entirely new business. Now the packaging industry doesn't sound as romantic as journalism, but Wes's company stands on the precipice of a modern challenge, sustainability. And as he illustrated so beautifully, doing what's right is still very compatible with the company's bottom line. But there's work to be done there. And Wes explained, it can be highly technical as he shares, size and scale can create ethical influence because the company's products touch every link in the supply chain. Even small changes have huge ramifications. If that's not a metaphor for life, I don't know what is.

Number two, be antifragile. When we talk about business, we wax about innovation, risk hedging, and countless other strategies. But Wes' personal ethos and the longevity of his family's company illustrates what many of our guests have confirmed. Being adaptable is the most important quality for the long-term health of a business. Adaptable mindsets, adaptable management structures. Adaptable products. The only thing we know for sure is that the world will bend you. Change will come, being able to bend but not break takes work. Like any muscle, it requires exercise now for when this test of strength comes in the future. As Wes explained, being rigid is bad for business, especially in our time of unprecedented change. And the book called *Antifragile* that came up in our conversation is by Nassim Nicholas Taleb.

For more on standing up for what you believe in, listen to our episodes with [John Mackey](#), founder of Whole Foods, and Olympic champion, [Apolo Ohno](#). And on emotional resilience, listen to Harvard professor, [Susan David](#). Thank you again to Wes Carter for being our guest. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer and engineer Matt Silverman, audio editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.