

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 12 - Building a Personal Brand with Justin Gold

Justin Gold: You're creating a company that you want to go to work in, and then all of a sudden the company becomes a part of who you are, because you create this environment that you really want, and then you attract the people who also want the same things. And before you know it, that company environment turns into a culture, and that culture helps reinforce the brand, and then everything just feeds into itself.

Ethan Wattes: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. I'm Ethan Watters, and on this episode we spent some time with Justin Gold, the founder of Justin's, the company known for its nut butters which come in jars, squeeze packs, and nut butter cups. We actually have two interviews with Justin for you. We talked with him during a hike to the foothills of Boulder, but let's start with an interview conducted in the company's headquarters in downtown Boulder.

The Justin's office is as relaxed and bohemian as you might expect. There's not a suit jacket in sight, multiple dogs roam the office, cold brew coffee and kombucha are on tap near reception. It's a place where locals pop in just to say hello, and also grab a few free samples that are always available.

If you know anything about the food industry these days, you're aware of what a remarkable accomplishment it is to create a new product, get distribution and build a company that can support a national brand. Entrepreneurs have to withstand a withering series of rejections and work through endless technical, financial, and business roadblocks. Tens of thousands of people try to do it every year, and only a tiny percentage achieve the goal. Needless to say, we wanted to know just how Justin managed to pull it off. So we started by asking how he began his journey.

So we gotta get the origin story, and I know you've told it a lot. A story into the legend of the company, and whether its still the same story you told back then in the day.

Justin: I'm happy to. I'm really proud of it. I'm living in Boulder, I'm waiting tables, I'm mountain biking, skiing, running, really enjoying the life here, and as I'm living here, I'm a vegetarian and I'm really active, and I was at the store buying a ton of peanut butter because vegetarians, a lot of them live off of nut butters, and right away curiosity kicked in.

Why is it that there are only two types of peanut butter? Smooth and crunchy, right? Why is it when I buy a handful of almonds it tastes amazing, but when I buy the only almond butter out there, it was a disappointment, it didn't taste good. And you can grind your own nuts at the store, so I figured, how hard can it be to make your own nut butters? So I just started making my own. I went out with a food processor and I would put the nuts in the food processor and I would add everything from fresh banana to dried banana to banana syrup to chocolate chips to cinnamon to pumpkin spice to cayenne pepper to honey, and create these concoctions. I'd put them in the cupboard, put them in the fridge, my roommates would always steal them and eat them, and then I had to put my name on it. Justin's.

After a while, my roommates were like, man, these are really great, have you ever thought about selling these at a store? So I ended up getting these food processors, and it's really easy to make nut butters at the store, so I'm going okay, how hard can it be, I'm just going to try this myself, I'm just curious to see if I can do it.

Ethan: You created a brand that has personality. It is your personality. It's Justin's... I'm curious to get you to talk about the value of doing that in this day and age when the customers seem to expect that authenticity and personality, and the difficulties of keeping that going maybe, and the personal weirdness of having your personality so associated with a product that everyone knows.

Justin: Yeah, it's been awesome. It's been crazy. I didn't understand the value of a brand persona, perse. If this was just called Colorado Nut Butter, or Boulder Nut Butter, it wouldn't have the same charm, the same charisma, the same authenticity as it does by putting a name behind it. And I didn't think about that. It just kind of evolved into Justin's. Originally my original product was Paragon Peanut Butter and Paragon Nut Butter. And none of my friends knew what Paragon meant—a paragon is a natural model of perfection, and so I thought, oh so this is the natural... The pinnacle of peanut butter is paragon, and this is what we'll be, it'll be great! And no one got it. It was like an inside joke and no one was on the inside.

So it just became Justin's because I was writing my name on the jars. And the benefit is that, when you start your own company, right, you're in control. You're creating a company that you want to go to work in, and then all of a sudden the company becomes a part of who you are, because you create this environment that you really want, and then you attract the people who also want the same things. And before you know it, that company environment turns into a culture, and that culture helps reinforce the brand, and then everything just feeds into itself.

Ethan: I love that idea, that virtuous cycle that goes around and goes back into the brand, back into the business. I'm wondering if it comes all the way back into your personal self, that the brand in some ways keeps you truer to those beliefs that you put into the business because you come to work at the business every day, it reminds you of the best self you wanted to be.

Justin: You nailed it. Your brand becomes your idealized self. That's the blessing. The curse is, you can't have a bad day. You're not allowed. If you have a bad day, you have to leave it at home, but you can't share that with your family, you've got to tuck it away. Being your idealized self for the brand means that you've got to bring your best day every day, which is inspiring and is awesome and is exhausting. But you nailed it.

Ethan: So you were kind of at the vanguard of a remarkable innovation and energy into the food business. Now there's tens of thousands of new brands every year coming to market. How is it different from when you started to now?

Justin: What's interesting is, the rules have changed. It's the same game, but the rules have changed. And what I did fifteen years ago might still work today, but it probably won't, right? The tried-and-true method of, you know, you start at one store and you grow to five stores then you get to fifteen stores, then you're in a region and from a region you grow out regionally, then nationally, takes ten years to get there. I don't that's going to work today.

And the other thing is that these retailers, there's so many brands that are infiltrating so quickly that they can't bring them all in. They can't give them each a shot, so they really have to pick the ones that they think are going to drive sales. At the end of the day these retailers are out there to turn product and make money.

Where it's really amazing is the whole direct to consumer market. Where a brand can really build out their consumer base, their story, their authenticity, their culture, and share it and communicate it and build a brand, is online. Going to direct to consumers. And that's what scares me the most. That's where competition is going to come. I'm not going to see it at a grocery store. By the time I see new competition in a grocery store, it's probably too late. They have all this momentum by sharing their story directly to the consumer, and that's where the game has changed. So it's really exciting to see brands that are rebuilding this social awareness and are connecting to consumers online, which is what we're really trying to get better at, and so I tell a lot of young brands, you got to do both.

Ethan: Great. So you've gone from needing mentors to becoming a mentor for other people. I'm curious, what advice do you have for young entrepreneurs, food entrepreneurs? What mistakes do you tell them to watch out for, what do you tell them when people come to you for advice?

Justin: So what I always tell young—or anyone, not even young folks, anyone—is when you find someone who has something that you really desire, and it can be something from starting and running a successful business to managing people to having nice things, whatever it is that you really want, is you develop a friendship with them first. And then that friendship leads to a sense of trust, and then the trust will lead them down a path of giving you advice. And then you have to decide if the advice is good or not.

Ethan: So you got into the food business because you wanted to make a difference, you wanted to see a food system that was ethical, sustainable, equitable. You've gotten more experience. You've now partnered with Hormel. How optimistic are you that, as a culture, we're going to make the right choices and we're on a good path? Do you wake up at night worried about it?

Justin: Of course.

Ethan: But are you optimistic at the end of the day that changes are being made?

Justin: At the end of the day, it all comes down to the consumer, right? The consumer drives everything. And if consumers decide that they want products that are mission-based, founded in deeper principles and values than just the bottom line and earnings for investors, then consumers will buy the products that support those values and those values will continue to grow and infiltrate larger organizations. And those companies will succeed and those values will trickle down and, hopefully, help stimulate communities, environmental impact... It will impact communities, it will impact the environment, and it will impact the companies, because their bottom line will continue to grow.

If we don't win, then everyone has the right to say, hey, what you're doing isn't working. The vision you guys have for the future of food isn't reality. But if people continue to support Justin's and we continue to grow, then not only do we have a voice, but we have credibility. And that's where real change can occur, so right now we just have to walk the talk.

Ethan: As you can tell, Justin is passionate about the environment and the outdoors. So we wanted to learn more about how his connection to nature informed his innovative approach to the food business. It seemed a shame to have that conversation in an office, so while we were in Boulder we arranged to meet

him and his dog, Moby the Doggie, on an early morning hike. We met at the centennial trailhead not far from town, when the sun was just coming up.

Justin: Look at this sunrise coming up.

Ethan: Holy cow. Is this your everyday morning routine?

Justin: No, I'd say this is my weekly routine.

Ethan: Right. I get the feeling that you're the type of person that gets inspiration and ideas while doing this sort of thing, and I know you've told stories about that. Do you know what it is about getting out and moving your body in nature that makes your brain fire up and think creatively?

Justin: Yeah. I think it's a lot of things. I think, when you're in nature there's a sense of freeness, which I'd say is comparable to the entrepreneurial spirit. And I will say that just even moving, you can get some great ideas just because you're out, you're moving, and on a treadmill it's very linear so your thinking is very linear, right? Whereas when you're out trail running, you're free-flowing, it's very dynamic, and so I think that really leads to a lot of dynamic thinking.

Ethan: It's not like dream logic, but it allows your brain to go in different... It connects different parts of your brain, or allows it that lateral associative thinking that you're sort of thinking around issues and problems as opposed to going straight at them.

Justin: Yeah. Agreed.

Ethan: It's sort of a hard thing to describe.

Justin: That is gorgeous. The way the light's hitting that right now.

Ethan: Yeah.

Justin: Boulder has this really entrepreneurial, innovative, let's say, lifestyle. Because so many people move out here or live here, I should say, for that very reason, that the environment and the setting provides this entrepreneurial, free-flowing creative atmosphere that a lot of companies have plugged into.

This area is called Red Rocks Cathedral, and as soon as the light hits it, it's going to turn blazing red. I have to admit, I've been taking all this for granted. I forgot how pretty it is.

Ethan: It is nice to show people your city. You remember what's special about it.

Justin: What's really fun about living in a community like Boulder is a lot of business meetings take place on hikes or on bike rides, so instead of classically going golfing, you can research what kind of activities people enjoy that maybe you want to get to know. And so there was one mentor in particular that I really sought his advice, and found out he was a big trail runner. So in order to not interrupt his life, I integrated myself into it and found out that he likes to run a particular trail, so for a meeting I

recommended that we run that trail, and that turned into a really wonderful friendship and we would run the trail many times together, which has been a lot of fun.

You know, I'd say Justin's, as of today, is a manifestation of me. And I'd say that Boulder, and Colorado in general, is a huge part of who I am, so I would have to say that Boulder and Colorado is a huge part of the company. God, what a nice day.

Ethan: Oh and now there's a rainbow. What are... Did you set all this up, man?

Justin: I did call in a few favors.

Ethan: You couldn't have done a double rainbow for us? That wasn't....?

Justin: There is, if you stand right here, you can see both of them.

Ethan: Are you serious?

Justin: Only because you asked, Ethan.

Ethan: Oh man, I see it.

Justin: You know what's funny is I've probably run this eighty times, two hundred times, and I've never seen a rainbow here.

Ethan: That's maybe one of the prettiest rainbows I've ever seen.

Justin: Wow, you can almost see the whole rainbow.

Ethan: Justin, are your kids getting an understanding of what you do in the world? Are you sharing that idea with them of what you create and what you have created as they grow to understand who you are?

Justin: Yeah, great question. They don't get it yet. One of the reasons why it was so important for me to stay so involved with the company was, I want my kids to grow up being proud of the company that their dad created, and not just watch it change into something that maybe I wouldn't be as proud of. And so one of my motivations is to do right by them.

So what I do is, I have three points on this run where I do a meditation. One of them is the tip of that rock, I do a meditation. The other one is up, it's kind of where that rainbow ends, is where I do another meditation. And I end the meditation by just thanking the community. On this side I thank the mountains. On that side I thank the people. And it's just giving gratitude at that moment. And I use it for everything, for business, for being a good father, being a good husband, a good citizen, all those things. God it's so pretty.

Ethan: So tell me a little about the decision to partner with Hormel Foods.

Justin: Our biggest challenge was around food safety and food quality, so having that mentorship was really important. So now you have an opportunity to really change the world through scale. I mean, now you have tremendous resources around innovation, around scaling, around food safety and quality, potentially around marketing, and even sales organization... You can really reach a lot more people.

I'm proud of you guys, coming in from sea level, wearing civilian clothes.

Ethan: We hope you enjoyed our conversation and hike with Justin Gold. Please join us again on Our Food Journey™ podcast. For more about Hormel foods and our engagement with our customers and partners, please visit hormelfoods.com