

Pivot Perfect

A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group

Ali Wing: Keeping Pace with an Architect of Healthy Disruption

Ali Wing possesses a dynamic set of personal and professional experiences, and a never-ending curiosity, that have shaped her into the ideal type of leader to identify customer opportunities in the spaces of consumer technology and sustainability. Ali gained valuable brand management and strategy experience at Nike, followed by practicing law at Gunderson Dettmer. She shifted back into consumer products at Runway, LLC. before launching her own digital-first, omnichannel baby product company, *giggle*. Later, Ali joined Ascena Retail Group as Chief Marketing Officer and EVP, Digital for Maurice's, before making yet another ambitious pivot to the healthcare industry as Chief Consumer Officer at Bright Health. Her newest endeavor as CEO of Oobli (formerly known as Joywell Foods) sees her leading the charge to create more environmentally-conscious, all-natural protein-sweetened treats, combining her passion for consumer products with her desire to make the world a better and healthier place to live. Additionally, Ali serves in Board and Advisorial roles at Casey's General Stores, Learn to Live, and Loop.



Tim Boerkoel at The Brownstone Group had the pleasure of speaking with Ali about her career journey. The discussion will not only provide readers with a thoughtful illustration of her impressive professional shifts and goals, but also an incredibly interesting *science lesson*. We're pleased to present her story as our first **Pivot Perfect** feature for 2023, which will resonate with anyone who hopes for a sweeter, more sustainable future.

Timothy Boerkoel (TBB): People always stand out as a common denominator in any successful business formula – the ability to develop a strong team, collaborate with others, teach and learn simultaneously, and create processes that allow for growth. How do you consciously cultivate this environment everywhere you go?

Ali Wing (AW): Any good leader knows you are always working on that formula. It is a muscle I will always be building. Fundamentally there are three things that are key to my leadership and important to the philosophies that guide what I create.

First, and characteristic of my whole career, I love building - businesses, people, and teams – and facilitating the development of growth and

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progress. Second, I like people and genuinely enjoy working in a social space and process. I really get jazzed by an environment with teams that offer so much more capability than I do. And third, I am grounded in a non-negotiable fundamental belief that teams are smarter than any individual, and there isn't a hero player. In today's world, we've aggrandized CEOs as pop culture. My best work is the best work of others, as I come from a long line of servant leaders, a philosophy that is deeply rooted in me and is cultivated in every team environment I lead. I was raised in a small-town American, Protestant, work-ethic family, which means you leave your ego at the door, and you take care of your neighbors. We didn't have a lot when I was little, but we had everything we needed; and that tells a story.

Although my father earned a college degree, he was the first one in his generation who did. I became motivated to create change that had an impact far greater than economic success after witnessing this in my parents – they walked the talk. As one of 10 kids, with six adopted from five different countries, we share a unique sense of family. My parents got married young in Northern California. They soon moved to Montana with their first kids because my dad loved the parklands and wanted to live close to them. The rest is their story – I was just a kid in it. I do realize, however, that my family experience informed my worldview and is why I cherish the differences in people.

As I reflect, I think of Bob Gunderson, someone I considered a mentor early in my career (Gunderson Dettmer, international law firm). He was in Silicon Valley in the early growth days and did a few interesting things – he embraced service on the legal side and was an incredible dealmaker. I recall Bob saying, "There are two ways to be successful with me – you'll be a partner or a client." I've been a client for many years, and I often think about how his partnership model influenced my thinking. In my

role as CEO today, I am tasked with building a larger framework for everyone involved to solve the problems we face. I liken the structure to the gutter rails for kids' bowling lanes. My job isn't to say how to throw the ball – it's to provide the support, so the whole team is working at the same time at different levels with all the checks and balances in place to allow the business to keep moving. Having spent much of my career in disruption, I've learned that a solid framework allows a more agile environment for everyone to flourish. Especially as a leader at a venture stage or pre-revenue company, you don't just get to tell people what the vision is: they also must see themselves in it.

My teams often parrot back to me one of my favorite Ali-isms – *the only guarantee of a plan or a forecast is that it is wrong; the only thing you know for sure is it won't go exactly as planned*. Once we know this, our team can put a philosophy of measurement and checkpoints into failing fast. This establishes a virtuous cycle of understanding the problem, recognizing its components, and measuring them. You must have the willingness to pivot against the fails and craft a climate where the entire team is aligned and sees the same gaps. You must always create an environment where it's okay to fail.

My career experiences have been with distinctive companies (big, growth, pre-revenue) where I am hired to disrupt, build growth, or transform – you don't hire me to simply run or maintain. I've created cultures of comfort with failure, and a willingness to take bets. This is really evident with our Oobli team. Our products are ultimately going to go up against CPG products (Consumer Packaged Goods) in the market and we are not going to out-muscle companies like Nestle or General Mills. Instead, we will have to harness our "secret sauce" – a recipe of technology and willingness to take the bets that they can't. That is such an important part of disruption and growth. It requires a human

component and a level of leadership to cultivate this environment where smart failure is measured and is an expectation without penalty.

TBB: You've been described as an architect of sorts – building teams, managing, and developing talent, collaborating with organizations for advancement, and creating a network where the data and the consumer connect. Share with us your blueprint for making this all happen?

AW: I love the word “architect” and that may have been a path of mine had I known differently. I learned my love for the creative side of brand or consumer when I worked at Nike. It was during this time that I realized I've appreciated and enjoyed design as much as data and learned that I am both a visual and quantitative thinker. When I consider comprising organizational architecture, I see three components. The two commonalities to building are the need for a solid foundation and a strong design philosophy. In addition, organizational architecture is built upon an effective team.

A foundation for the right data architecture requires a big enough problem impacting a significant number of people in order to consider solving it. There is exceptional complexity here at Oobli – combining biotechnology and food technology while tackling global obesity and diabetes – it's both a big problem and a big opportunity. This is the foundation needed in order to justify the economic investment. Oobli is also on the path to finding the sweetener alternative to sugar that tastes good and is also more sustainable (sugar is one of the top 10 harmful crops on the planet). Precision fermentation can alter the equation, making sugar an “input” to the process and making the “end product” a protein, while dramatically reducing the acreage used.

We are in the midst of a global health issue around sugar. The sweeteners today are small molecules, and proteins are large molecules. To summarize for

you: small molecules create a metabolic interaction and issues in the gut microbiome – but proteins don't. Our body is made up of 50% protein and therefore is good at ripping it up and digesting it. Consumers have developed a level of trust with proteins, and now it may be one of the sweetness solution options. It is super exciting to be dealing with such complexity, and that's why I need a *blueprint* - I've got taste in a consumer product, global sustainability, and health at some of the biggest levels. Our design philosophy then defines the problem, determines what capabilities are necessary to build a mechanism for a solution, and identifies the gaps – all within an agile structure.

The final piece within organizational architecture is building the team, and in knowing the age-old venture axiom that says, “no great disruptions happen from inside the industry,” I was selected as prime for the part. I have moved across five industries, honing the skills of seeing commonalities quickly and being a pattern recognizer. I've learned how to quickly identify patterns, with *an outsider's view to an insider's problem* – which allows me to see them differently.

The culmination of my industry-pivoting career has led me to where I am today, working between two industries – food tech which has less than a ten-year history, and biotech which is in the midst of a transformation that has never been experienced. We have this unique intersection of three industries – technology enabled; food and regulations (health, FDA); and CPG and branding. There is no mature, long-term network or perfect model to refer to. They need thinkers that have worked through different models of innovation in order to be fast at failing fast, are comfortable knowing there is not just one approach to a problem, and are not afraid to question it all, because it's first generation. The faster we fail, the faster we learn and improve.

We have such a deeply shared vision of bending the global health curve with Jason Ryder as our Founder and CTO, and he was very clear on what he needed in a partner to combine technology and branding. I knew what I needed, having looked at many “food as medicine” companies. We both were searching for the right combination to unlock the best of tech and branding and build scale.

The team that we have today has undergone tremendous transformation. We were once an R&D company with the table set a certain way for over six years, and suddenly now a commercial team enters and begins architecturally re-designing. My most important job this year is to nurture the collaboration within the company.

TBB: There was a time when customer-driven was a popular term and a way of driving an organization and creating vision for a team. We seem to have evolved into a metrics or data-centric world. How do you see these worlds interacting in your business today – do they intersect, collide, or harmonize?

AW: I think of myself as brand and consumer-first, with a love for the data application side of businesses; having specialized in Decision Sciences during my MBA. I don't think you can be customer-driven today without being data-driven. The shift in the last 20 years is unmatched – the wealth of customer data; the speed of information; the pattern recognition capability; and the test-and-learn components. If an organization is built around the consumer, they also have a data center that is built around the consumer. It is not an easy change to shift from the traditional sales and inventory organizations built around POS structures and reporting. Consumer data now comes from many 3rd party network systems and data sources, which must normalize the data to be quick, make associations with the consumer, and connect it with

the inventory in a timely way. It is a work in progress for many companies.

After building my own children's retail and digital brand, *giggle*, I joined Ascena Retail Group (a large specialty apparel conglomerate) as they worked toward transformation in taking their data across all nine brands in an attempt to improve agility with the consumer and leverage an online presence to better engage each brands customer. It was the first time I veered from the spaces of health and technology. The big lift for complex organizations like Ascena is to quickly and nimbly receive the data and bring it all together to make timely decisions. Currently, with Oobli, I am in Phase One of building the commercial stage, which is very different from re-architecting a big company. My law background has served me well in working with technologists and engineers, as we speak in languages with a methodology that is data focused. We are now able to build an infrastructure that is virtually in the moment with a different volume of testing and analysis. This means basically engineering the “science of the consumer” by applying what we know of one consumer times 1000s to identify patterns.

My Nike “grow-up” years provided me with a deep understanding of building an organization around the problem you are solving. They were ahead of their years in building around the consumer, never around a channel. Their mission-based strategy had a huge imprint on me and influenced my philosophies. Dean Porter, formerly of Nike and Nau, Inc. was one of those leaders who saw both talent and partnership in people. He plucked me out to help form the first corporate development team at Nike. He knew I loved the consumer and brand and wanted to increase velocity. I was grateful for his vision, and he is a mentor I truly respect. I've had a bounty of experiences and Nike and Dean were an important part of launching me to where I am now.

TBB: The United Nations defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability can be applied to individual care of health and wellness along with the more common environmental thoughtfulness. This has been a focus of yours for many years. Could you share with us the direction of Oobli and how it will impact the scale of sustainability?

AW: Sustainability has long been a focus of mine and has evolved throughout the stages of my career. As I participate on many Boards now, my view is also from the stakeholder/shareholder seat. I simply don’t believe business is a zero-sum game - *you can do well and do more*. The history of most of the great builds in this country included some social contracting and I’m a big advocate of that.

Oobli considers the zoomed-out view of global sustainability, the food supply, and our outstripped precious resources. Demand is certainly outpacing the supply of planet resources, and the climate is reacting. There is a mandate for us to consider whether we can economically feed a growing world and do it with a different kind of imprint. The question is - *can we do it healthier, with climate consideration, and in a way that’s affordable for the whole world?* There are a number of great companies working on precision fermentation solutions in the food tech and biotechnology industries leading to the ability to use plant-based or otherwise (a lot of different philosophies), with knowledge from the genome system of the planet (DNA from a plant) and actually produce similarly to how we create beer or wine. Sugar has a purpose; we just need to use it less as an end product and more as an input in order to reduce its footprint and increase its return. This is what Oobli is realigning.

Sweet proteins are nature-identical and grow in hard-to-reach places, making it nearly impossible to

agriculturally harvest. They produce one tiny protein in each plant. We are taking that DNA and using it to cost-effectively ferment (using a local sugar source for the feedstock) in any region of the world and turn it into the output that sweetens your favorite candy bar or beverage. This impacts the sustainability equation - for every 1% that we reduce sugar, we can give back about 650,000 acres of sugar land. And on a weight-to-weight ratio, they are 2000-5000x sweeter than sugar. Oobli is more broadly defining the space of sustainability and climate and creating a huge opportunity around access and affordability.

The Oobli trifecta is what excites me – we can deliver on taste, create it affordably in a plant-friendly way for the entire world, and help bend the global health curve of diabetes and obesity by replacing sugar with protein. Sustainability is a complex problem that requires an architect’s approach to integrating all the layers of impact. Our ultimate goal is to create a simple wayfinding for sweet proteins that consumers can both understand and trust so the large consumer goods companies can rehabilitate their food supply seamlessly with the comfort of taste, the comfort of demand, and the motivation to make it happen.

TBB: Community is clearly a part of who you are; personally important in your love of all your “neighborhood” provides; and professionally as you pay forward on Boards sharing your time and expertise. Your involvement has leaned highly children-centric – is that a coincidence or is there a method to how you choose your associations?

AW: We’ve covered my core bias – I grew up with a strong family influence and started at a young age with community as a part of my life. My mom would say I could lose myself in what I do. I’m very passionate and have always wanted to be a part of what I know is important. These big world problems like climate change require great togetherness. I

would argue that a bigger threat is that 40% of the world's population lives at sub-optimum health. People are our biggest asset, and we can't solve any global issue without working together optimally. And if the pre-diabetic & diabetic trend rates continue, it just makes sense to start with our kids.

As I've mentioned earlier, Jason Ryder, my most important partner at Oobli, and I share many similar points of view, including people as an asset. He is teaching the next generation of scientists at Berkeley CAL because he knows we need more of them. Jason has referred to the two of us as photo negatives; I am to the consumer what he is to the technology. We actually speak a similar language and methodology because I've spent a career building consumer solutions around technology, and Jason has spent a career knowing that he can only do as well as his understanding of the problem to be solved. We have a special partnership that I am grateful for. We also share a little bias for our responsibility to the ecosystem we live within. For me, it is a fundamental result of my childhood to be passionate about food as medicine and what exists around us on our planet. My next ten years will be spent with a food-focus and a kid-focus, somewhat organically, but also purposeful.

TBB: Your education and career background are extremely diverse, clearly showing your passion for continuous learning and your innate curiosity in a wide range of industries and fields. As we understand Oobli, it sounds like an advanced chemistry lab course. Walk us through how your previous roles have prepared you for what you are building today?

About The Brownstone Group

The Brownstone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting, and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 25 years of retail, consumer, hospitality, and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for startups and global corporations alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members and C-Suite talent. Brownstone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.

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AW: My five-industry career wasn't intentional – it evolved from my love and passion for solving problems, seeing the harmony within, and unlocking it. I specialized in this intersection of complexity and was always willing to take those bets. This move to food tech was calculated for me though – I know we need these solutions, and we need leaders who can challenge the lessons that industries have already learned, take some new things on, and figure out how to make it all easier to understand. The hardest part of what I do at Oobli is to attempt to un-complicate things for the consumer. There are about 50 forms of sugar out there that consumers don't understand or trust - I don't want us to be in the sugar conversation. Consumers already trust proteins - I want to introduce a protein that is sweet and claim that category. I'm interested in giving them what they want in a whole different way. But that's easy to say ... but to build that through channels that already exist takes many iterations of work. The food technology industry is very young, and I'm new to it myself, so I come with great humility and confidence in this pivotal moment. The opportunity of disruption is when you can see things differently while the foundation is being figured out by the players in the game. My previous roles have provided me with both maturity and excitement. I'm less beholden to feeling like I need to know it all, and I'm now able to recognize what is vital and weave that into what we do. I thought I was a servant leader before – and now by mandate, I know I am one.

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