

Pivot Perfect

A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group

Eric Ryan: Disrupting the Ordinary – The Art of Reimagining Everyday Things

Eric Ryan, a visionary entrepreneur and founder of brands including Method, Olly, Welly, and Cast Jewelry, has built a reputation for transforming everyday products into cultural icons. His career has been defined by his ability to blend creativity, purpose, and design to make wellness, cleaning, and lifestyle products more accessible, delightful, and sustainable. Eric's entrepreneurial journey began in the advertising industry, working for Fallon and Hal Riney & Partners. Later, with the founding of Method, he revolutionized the cleaning industry by combining eco-consciousness with a fun, fresh aesthetic. From there, he expanded into the wellness space with Olly and Welly, making vitamins and band-aids approachable and joyful. One of his most recent ventures is Cast, the aspirational and luxury jewelry brand that has captured the hearts of A-list celebrities and jewelry lovers of all backgrounds with its vibrant and playful spirit.

Eric's approach to brand building is rooted in a deep belief that the best products are those that resonate emotionally with consumers, creating lasting connections through innovative design and a commitment to sustainability. With each venture, Eric has been at the forefront of reshaping consumer expectations, proving that businesses can thrive by challenging industry norms and infusing unexpected delight into everyday experiences. The Brownstone Group had the pleasure of interviewing Eric to explore his unique career path, his leadership philosophy, and his insights into the future of brand creation.



Timothy Boerkoel (TBB): Looking back at your childhood and formative years, what were the experiences or influences that signaled early signs of the creative and visionary entrepreneur you would become? What ultimately led you to study at The University of Rhode Island?

Eric Ryan (ER): My entrepreneurial roots were embedded early. I come from an entrepreneurial family, and I think that leaves a legacy imprint. My great-grandfather dropped out of pharmacy school to work for Ford back when Henry Ford himself was

still there. My grandfather also left college early, and the two of them ended up founding a machine and stamping company in Detroit that, at one point, produced 90% of the vinyl molding used in American cars. I grew up around that industrial legacy — big presses, manufacturing plants, the hustle of building something from scratch.

I was that kid building Lego office buildings instead of spaceships. In school projects, I wasn't just doing assignments — I was figuring out how to commercialize frozen English muffin pizzas. Also, I

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learned there were many ways to earn money — at one point, I even went door-to-door selling buttons. I was always reading about entrepreneurs. It was in me from a young age. Now, my daughter is at NYU and tells me she's unsure about what she wants to do, and I remind her, "You don't need to know yet. I just happened to figure it out early."

For college, I attended the University of Rhode Island because I was passionate about sailing. That's what drove my college decision. Most top sailing programs are at Ivy League schools, and since that wasn't in the cards for me, I looked for the best sailing team with the lowest academic barrier to entry — enter URI.

When it came to choosing my major, I always knew I wanted to study business. My dad was an accountant, and I worked constantly as a kid: bagging groceries at Kroger, working at Little Caesars, even bookkeeping for a CPA on Saturday mornings. But once I started taking introductory business courses, Marketing 101 hit me like lightning. I remember flipping through a textbook and landing on a Nike case study. That's when I had this realization: I want to be an entrepreneur. I want to build brands.

Later in life, I visited The Walmart Museum in Bentonville and saw that same Marketing 101 textbook on Sam Walton's desk — the exact edition I had. I still have my copy!

Ultimately, I ended up switching my major from business to communications in order to graduate on time, though I still graduated a year late because I'd already started working. That pivot also brought me into contact with creativity for the first time. I didn't grow up in a creative family — ours was really focused on finance and business — but during an internship program in London, I interned at one of the first integrated ad agencies. It was small, but they had design, PR, and strategy all under one roof. Being around creatives in a professional setting energized me, even though I never saw myself as a creative person. It's interesting though, because

today, AI is changing that. I treat AI like a creative team, and prompt it the way I would a designer or writer — it enables me to be creative in ways I couldn't before.

TBB: In the '90s, advertising was a powerful cultural force, and you immersed yourself in that world, working at agencies like Fallon and Hal Riney & Partners. How did the lessons you learned in advertising, particularly in account planning and consumer insights, influence your desire to launch your own ventures?

ER: As I mentioned earlier, from a pretty young age, I knew I wanted to at least try to be an entrepreneur and in high school, I studied so much about people like Victor Kiam, the famous entrepreneur who had bought and sold Remington Products and the New England Patriots, and Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart and Sam's Club. Early on, I understood that most first-time ventures fail ... so I wanted a safety net for a career that would not only support me if my startup dreams didn't work out but also expose me to how great ideas come to life.

That path led me into advertising, and more specifically into planning, which ended up being the perfect training ground for entrepreneurship. As a planner, I learned how to take a consumer insight and translate it into a big creative idea. Unlike traditional research, which often looks in the rearview mirror and "what it was", planning is about "what could it be". It's about understanding where consumers are going, not just where they've been.

The discipline of planning taught me how to turn insight into execution. That sweet spot — between great consumer insight and great creative execution — is the foundation of many brands I admire, and every brand I've built.

I'd worked at three agencies, starting with one in London. I was so young — I looked about 12 — but landed a full-time job after an internship, which meant graduating late (which really freaked out my parents). But I was all-in. I had initiative. I

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remember cold reaching out to companies like Clorox, and Hidden Valley Ranch, just to try and get new business. That drive to create something new, even when it wasn't asked of me, has always been part of who I am.

But it also got me in trouble. At Hal Riney & Partners, I worked on the Saturn account — my Detroit roots made that especially exciting. I started spending a lot of time at the tech center, talking to car designers. I was like a kid in a candy store. To me, better product leads to better marketing. But my account leader pulled me aside and said, "Eric, stop doing that. We don't make money by helping them build better cars. We make money by creating ads." I couldn't believe it! Why wouldn't we want to help them make better cars ... which would then make better ads?

That moment clarified something for me: I really loved product... and I saw product as marketing. I didn't see the difference between the two. That realization fueled my decision to eventually go out and become an entrepreneur.

Even while I was still in advertising, I was doing things outside my scope of responsibilities. At Hal Riney, I created a training program called "Riney Rules". I brought in outside conferences. I connected dots others weren't seeing. I didn't fit the mold of a typical account planner — and people told me, "You're going to be an entrepreneur someday." I may have been perceived as annoying, but it was because I saw white space and couldn't help but chase it.

TBB: You have a knack for taking ordinary categories – Method soap, Olly vitamins, Welly band-aids, Cast jewelry – and injecting them with culture, personality, and playfulness. With one of your more recent ventures, Cast, how have you applied the insights gained from your previous ventures to create a jewelry brand that is exciting and distinct in the marketplace?

ER: I'm happiest when I'm on a high learning curve. After building three CPG (consumer packaged goods) companies — Method, Olly, and Welly — I had a good grasp on that playbook. So with Cast, I wanted a new kind of challenge. Something that pushed me to think about the full retail experience, space, and storytelling in a more immersive way.

I don't start with one idea ... I start by studying categories. And jewelry caught my attention. It's a category that should be joyful — you're buying something beautiful, often as a gift — but the experience is sometimes cold, intimidating, and just so transactional. I remember earlier buying jewelry for my wife and thinking, *That wasn't a great experience.*

What if walking into a jewelry store felt like walking into a candy store? I wanted it to be full of imagination, self-expression, and joy. That insight became the anchor for Cast, and once I had it, the concept just flowed. Sometimes simple ideas are scary, because you ask yourself, "Why hasn't anyone done this yet?" But for me, that's how I know I'm onto something.

With Cast, we focused on the category of "fine fashion", targeting people who are buying for style, not just milestone moments. The challenge of building retail stores, signing leases, and designing full physical experiences for jewelry pushed me in ways I hadn't been pushed before. Boy, what a challenge ... and I'm loving it.

Watching my daughter at Claire's, versus watching my wife shop at a traditional jewelry store, gave me another clue. That joy, that excitement — it's what the jewelry shopping experience *should* be. We try to recreate that with our "sip and shop" events: caviar, champagne, great music. It's fun, it's social, it's human.

At the heart of it, my playbook stays consistent. I obsess over two things: people and product. Culture comes first, and the product is really just a souvenir

of that culture. If you get those two things right, everything else gets easier — not *easy*, but easier!

I've been fortunate to work with great people across ventures, and I often bring the same team with me. Whether it's Cast or Tandy (our emerging functional candy brand), I build companies with what I call "artists and operators." Artists are anyone who creates what the consumer touches, like formulators, package designers, or marketers. Operators are the supply chain, finance, logistics. But both sides need to support and understand each other.

And I use design and creativity as a competitive advantage. Even our board decks are designed with care. If you want to be a design-led organization, it has to show up everywhere — from how your office looks to how you present internally. *Everything* is design, and it's either good design or bad design — so why not make it great?

I was watching this documentary on Jimmy Iovine, the co-founder of Interscope Records, and he used the phrase, "I bear no gifts"... and I was like oh my gosh, that's me! I bear no gifts! Sometimes I feel like I have no real strengths, or "I bear no gifts," and therefore, I rely on the gifts of others. I know how to get the best work out of people — and that, I think, might actually be a gift in itself. I can get in front of a team, set a vision, and motivate people... but then quickly get behind them and support them from backstage. Watching this Jimmy Iovine documentary was refreshing, because I realized that I, too, love to nurture everyone else's talents to make things happen.

TBB: Your success thrives on an ability to balance creative intuition and data-driven strategy. In building brands, you've emphasized emotional connection while also leveraging market data and trends. How do you personally navigate this left-brain/right-brain tension in decision-making?

ER: Both sides of the equation — the left and the right brain — I respect deeply. Just before this

interview with you, I was preparing for a venture fund meeting, looking at sales data, digging into numbers, and then switching gears to analyze creative and brand positioning. I'm constantly toggling between those two mindsets. Maybe it's because I'm not naturally analytical or naturally creative that I rely on both. I see myself somewhere in the middle. And I've learned that great ideas often come from cross-pollination: stealing from one world and applying it to another.

With Method, I borrowed from personal care and housewares to elevate the look and feel of home cleaning. With Olly, I pulled from the beauty aisle to reinvent supplements. With Welly, I looked to the past at metal tins... and also to active lifestyle brands like North Face to reframe bandages as accessories. And with Cast, I drew from Dylan's Candy Bar. It's all about appropriating from adjacent worlds and remixing them to spark something new.

It's a way of mitigating risk, too. If consumers are already responding to something in one category, why wouldn't they respond similarly in another, if it's done well?

And when it comes to building a team, I like to hire experts within the category AND outsiders who bring fresh eyes. And how I do that depends on the stage of the company. Early on, you need whoever you can get. At Method, we were just two guys in our twenties with no consumer products goods or brand management experience. We were begging people to join!

But I've learned to be intentional about building teams that blend insiders and outsiders. For Cast, Rachel Skelly (co-founder) and I were outsiders. But then we brought in experts in the category like Kate Harrison, our Chief Product Officer, who had previously had a long tenure at David Yurman. About half our team had deep category knowledge, the other half had none... and that mix worked beautifully.

Disruption often comes from naive eyes. You need people who are just ignorant enough to try the impossible. But you also need insiders who can keep you from making dumb mistakes. There's a phrase I love to describe this sweet spot: you need a mix of "new horses on old courses, and old horses on new courses."

And a cultural fit is crucial! I really like to bring low-ego, high-energy people on board ... because startups don't have time for high-maintenance talent. You want *doers*. You want people who *give* energy, not take it. When we hire someone, I always tell them, "You'll be very valuable in your first 90 days." I want all their naive observations, because it gives us all a fresh perspective.

TBB: Many entrepreneurs dream of building one successful brand, yet you've built multiple. With success comes a certain expectation, sometimes even pressure, to replicate past wins. How do you approach the paradox of experience – balancing your expertise with the willingness to take risks and try something new? Is there an industry or product category you'd be particularly excited to disrupt next?

ER: I never take past success for granted. There's that famous disclaimer that "past success doesn't guarantee future results" ... but I truly live by that. Sure, you create your own luck to a degree, but luck is always part of the equation. With Method, we had tons of near misses. With Olly, everything just clicked almost too perfectly — it went so smoothly, I actually sold it earlier than I probably should have because I thought, *This can't possibly continue*. Startups are always hard. But what keeps me going is the love of building. And I walk into every new venture with eyes wide open.

And even within each success story, there are failures. At Method, our first personal care line, Bloq, didn't do well. At Olly, we launched protein bars that didn't really catch on. Every venture has hits and misses. But it's like a sports team trying to

win a championship. You rack up wins and losses along the way, and you learn from both.

I've said I'm done with startups — this new venture fund I'm launching will technically be my seventh startup — but my wife doesn't believe me. She's probably right! If I ever start something new, I'd love to go into the marine industry. That's where my roots are, like I mentioned earlier. At one point, when I was still in school, I even tried to buy Hobie Cat! My finance professor failed me for it — he didn't believe I was actually trying to raise capital. I kept telling him, "I'm actually DOING it! I don't have time to study!" That world still calls to me and could be a passion project for me someday.

I'm also loving what we're building with Tandy, our functional candy brand. We're launching chocolate this fall — I'm going full Willy Wonka. And I love pizza. I'm on the board of Flour + Water, and we're building something special there. What's great about pizza is that it's just so universal. Everyone agrees with it. It's primal, social, and just so joyful.

Another dream? Reinventing the American diner. Imagine the optimism and design aesthetic of SoulCycle meets the tradition of IHOP or Denny's. A modern third-place concept rooted in joy and community. If anyone wants to partner on that, reach out to me!

TBB: Great leaders often collect wisdom and pass it forward. Looking back, what are the most valuable pieces of advice you've ever received, and how have they influenced your leadership style? And when guiding others – whether in leadership, business, or personal growth – what are the key lessons you find yourself sharing?

ER: It's funny because I can vividly remember the pieces of advice that were given to me over the years, but when it comes to what I pass along to others, I tend to draw a blank.

One piece of wisdom that really stuck with me came from Todd Waterbury, who was the longtime creative director at Target. Todd had this beautiful

way of distilling big ideas into simple truths. He once shared a framework that contrasted altruism with narcissism, which was a concept that immediately resonated with me and how I was already thinking when I started Method.

Back then, I realized that most Americans didn't care deeply about green cleaning or the environment. So, I thought, how do we Trojan-horse something good into people's lives? Method products were designed to be irresistible for narcissistic reasons — great fragrance, beautiful design, and performance. And afterwards, we could promote the extra benefit: products that are good for you, good for your home, and better for the planet.

One of the proudest expressions of this was our partnership with Whole Foods, where we created the world's first bottle made from recycled ocean plastic. We sponsored beach cleanups, collected the waste, and turned it into packaging. Most people don't feel personally affected by plastic in the ocean, especially if they rarely see the ocean at all. So, I asked myself: How do we make this personal? That's when we launched the "Save Sushi" campaign — because losing nigiri spoke to people more than environmental issues. It was about finding that hook that made the cause feel relevant and immediate.

Another influential figure for me was my friend, the late Tony Hsieh from Zappos. Tony was all about radical empowerment and company culture: *if you want your team to go somewhere bold, you have to go there first*. You have to model it. At Method, we had this core value: "Keep Method weird." I came to understand that as a leader, you need to create a culture where extreme differentiation is welcomed. If I set the expectation that I want "weird," then unconventional ideas don't feel so risky. It creates psychological safety. You need to push boundaries to get people to innovate.

And when it comes to advice for brand building, James Joaquin, one of the co-founders of Obvious

Ventures (and an executive who was instrumental in the development of Welly), uses a phrase that really resonates with me: "More brands die from indigestion than starvation." This means that they take on too much, too soon. Their pace of growth is too fast. I keep this in mind for every brand I build ... and to remind every brand builder I advise.

When it comes to the advice I give, especially to entrepreneurs, I usually begin by asking them what they want. Often, I encourage them to make a fundamental choice: do you want control, or do you want financial success? Because, more often than not, the two are at odds. Many founders are obsessed with control. They've got a vision, and they want to see it realized their way. But in doing so, they could limit the talent around them. They suffocate potential. I always say: stop thinking like the quarterback. Start thinking like the owner. Your job is to build the best team possible to win — whether you're the one throwing the ball or not.

You don't have to give up your vision, but you do have to give up control of how you get there. Empower your people. Let them bring their skills and creativity to the table. That's how companies scale. Personally, my leadership style is about helpful energy. I like to think of myself as the one who plants the flag at the top of the mountain. Then, I run back down and help everyone climb — like a sherpa.

In that sense, I often see myself as a producer. Sometimes I play the director. Sometimes I jump in as an actor. But the heart of my role is to produce: to pull the best out of people, to set the stage, and to make sure we're all telling a great story and creating something incredible.

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 30 years of retail, consumer, hospitality, and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for global corporations, private equity, and startups 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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