

Pivot Perfect

A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group

Beau Lawrence: A Spirit of Adventure – Creating a Brand Through Storytelling

Beau Lawrence is the visionary Founder and CEO of **Ace Rivington**, a premium denim lifestyle brand based in Santa Barbara, CA. Born in Tennessee and raised in California, Beau studied math and science before pivoting to fashion design, graduating from The Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising in Los Angeles. His early career included menswear design roles at The Territory Ahead and Union, and a notable tenure at Guess? Inc., where he rose from assistant menswear designer to global men's denim designer and finally to Director of Product Development for Guess Factory and G by Guess.

Bringing formative experiences from this corporate foundation, Beau joined Shaun Neff at Neff Headwear as Vice President of Design & Merchandising. In 2013, he embarked on a remarkable entrepreneurial adventure, beginning with a French terry sweatshirt inspired by a fictional character he created: the adventurous pilot Ace Rivington. This creation marked the launch of a brand that has since opened a flagship store in Santa Barbara and soared to new heights through direct-to-consumer sales, wholesale, and collaborations.

As “C.E. Beau” of Ace Rivington, Beau channels his deep connection to the film industry and the art of storytelling into his brand’s ethos. His genuine care for others shines through in the brand’s numerous philanthropic endeavors, both local and global, and in offering customers full tailoring services and a lifetime warranty on all jeans. The Brownstone Group is enthusiastic to share Beau’s story, emphasizing themes of authenticity, a commitment to exceptional customer service and experience, and the power of turning dreams into reality.

Timothy Boerkoel (TBB): You have been quoted as saying, “After years of experience in the apparel industry, traveling through many worlds of design and development, I learned the value of being surrounded by the right people.” You also described the fabric that inspired your future as “homespun ... the feeling of something your grandmother may have knitted you.” These words sound as if they come from someone

deeply rooted in security and comfort, allowing for the *freedom to dream*. Tell us about your personal history and where all of this began.

Beau Lawrence (BL): As a child, I was fortunate to have creative grandparents who influenced and inspired me. My grandmothers were talented and taught me how to paint and sew, and it was about the age of four that I began to crochet and learn to craft things. From an early developmental



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perspective, I now understand the tactile experience that occurred from my blankie or my little bunny rabbit, and especially from the afghans my grandmothers would knit. Those feelings instilled around safe experiences began to create a connection for me between comfort and feeling safe and the sensation of textiles. The creative spark continued to expand as my grandfather started teaching me how to make things with wood. He gave me a hammer and some nails, and I fell in love with woodworking. In 2nd grade, I wrote a book report on Frank Lloyd Wright and that opened my awareness and perspective around the profession of an architect, and from then on, I was hooked. From a very young and carefree age, I had a clear understanding and focused life path built around *making things*. I felt excited, a release of emotion, and a pure joy and passion that I associated with being able to build something and show it to my parents or my friends.

I later took drafting classes in high school and my first college degree was in math and science; all with the intention of pursuing a path in architecture. When I was 20, I decided to leave school for a year, spending it driving my VW camper all over North America. I spent time focusing on action sports and snow skiing and seeing different parts of the country. Along this journey, I found myself without peer influences, and with the confidence to do things that I thought were right for me without having to consider other people. As I think about it now, it was a pivotal experience for me personally. By the time I came home, I was able to see the bigger picture of life, and through a broader lens. It was then that I realized my parents were not in a stable financial position, and I wanted to fix it. As a young 20-something, this was a level of responsibility out of my realm, but it's where my heart was, and it remained in my thinking.

Soon after, while at a graduation party in Newport Beach, my best friend offered me a job that would pay between \$5-6/hour to receive 2% of his screen-printing company. I thought about the offer as I wandered through all of the surf shops at the pier the next morning. As I was looking at the brands, (Rusty, Quiksilver, and Billabong – very significant brands especially in the mid-90s) I thought to myself – these guys are smart, but I'm smart, too; I can do the same thing. And in that moment, my mind was made up. I drove back home to Valencia, CA and told my parents that I was no longer going to be an architect – I was going to be a fashion designer.

That decision launched my search for the best school that would fast-track the path that was in my mind – landing a job, paving a path, and building a company. I identified FIDM (Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising) as the best school for me, and Barbara Bundy, our VP of Education, along with several other really incredible people, was instrumental in helping create the right platform of opportunity for me, allowing me to be aggressive and just go for it. And that I did: I worked ten internships while I was in school, allowing me to begin understanding the distinctive functional aspects of the industry, and introducing me to a variety of manufacturers.

When you're hard-working and open to receiving all the experience that is presented, opportunities arise. One within the film industry came along, and I began to manufacture costumes for films, even before I graduated from college. My largest project was making all of the U.S. and Russian Navy costumes for Kevin Costner's *Thirteen Days*, about the Cuban missile crisis. Then shortly after graduating, I spent four months writing a bid to design and create the costumes for *Pearl Harbor*. Although I wasn't awarded the project (and was about to look for a pizza delivery job at that point), I

soon got a job designing girls' pajamas for a company called Slumber Partee (pronounced *par-tay*) with big eyeballs as the "Es". I had to draw a hangtag of girls jumping on a bed of all things, and I'm not an illustrator. It might sound like such a horrible experience, but it's in those moments of perseverance where opportunities can become amazing. Within six weeks, Guess, Inc. called me to join their team, and that was my first step into the world of men's design.

I began as an entry-level men's design assistant with my designer saying to me in week one, "Let's see if you last a week" [*Beau laughs out loud*] ... she was tough, but there were so many others that were wonderful and supportive. Joie Rucker (who later launched her own brand, Joie) was Head of Design at the brand at that time, and she created fantastic opportunities for me to start my path at Guess. Later, Silvio Marceca joined Guess; a hard-core, Italian, denim design guy with tremendous focus on attention to detail. He was a master at his craft, and I said to him, "I want to be your assistant." And it happened, which was when I definitely started working on my *PhD in Denim*.

As I think about your question and the *freedom to dream*; it is unleashed when you are surrounded by the right people; there is no substitute in life for that valuable gift. Growing up, I had a strong foundation, and I don't take that for granted. I learned from my mom how to develop and keep relationships, and simply how to be a good person. My mom was the PTA President for our elementary school and I took cues from her on how to create a nurturing and approachable space. My dad modeled these qualities as well, with his lessons being a little more business-centric. There are many formative traits, especially around service, that I absorbed by witnessing my parents as a kid. The way they interacted with the sales staff at a store and the

attention and interest they gave, and therefore received, has played a significant role in my understanding of service. It has brought me great joy to establish a standard working process for our business today that centers on service; the kind where you feel that people really care about their customers. It is not common today, but it is deeply rooted in me – in my daily personal life and how we operate Ace Rivington.

TBB: You created Ace Rivington as the figurehead of your brand (or the main character, some might say) – one who others may aspire to *be*, to *follow*, or to *get to know*. You see your customer as one with a "spirit of adventure" rather than from a particular age group, demographic, or income level. This is a unique approach to traditional brand development. Speak to the pivot from the corporate world to "Kickstarter" and your confidence in driving your business with such a unique approach.

BL: When I started fashion school, the first two words in my marketing textbook were "Home Depot." This was ironic since I was actually awarded "Employee of the Month" three times in 18 months while employed at Home Depot, and still pursuing an education in architecture. I could tell you all kinds of things about nuts and bolts, but I knew nothing about marketing. This was a sign of my *spirit of adventure* as I headed off into the great unknown.

I grew up in a storytelling home, gaining an understanding and perspective around the *gift of gab* and the ability to command a room, create interest, and entertain. My father, Claude Lawrence, worked at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, TN from 1965 to 1975 as stage manager for the *Johnny Cash Show* and *Hee Haw* (both television music and variety shows). His career progressed, and the day after I was born, he put our St. Bernard in the station wagon and drove from Nashville to Hollywood to work on the television shows *Dallas*, *Knott's Landing*, and *Eight is Enough*.

Once I got out of the incubator, my mom and I followed, arriving a month later. I grew up learning firsthand about the dreams and failures of Hollywood. My day-to-day offered solid building blocks and perspective around storytelling and character development and left me truly inspired.

While working at Guess, I gained a corporate foundation, where I had a number of opportunities as a result of how hard I worked and how deeply I cared. During this chapter of my career, the brand was significantly growing under the leadership of the Marciano brothers and Carlos Alberini, and later with Michael Prince. Guess was expanding from wholesale to global retail, and then e-commerce, as well as into new licensing partnerships. We extended the brand to Marciano, G By Guess, and Guess Kids, and developed design hubs in both the U.S. and Europe. All of this activity gave me a broad and unique understanding, from a corporate perspective, of how to present multiple brands to the consumer through so many different avenues.

When these two perspectives converged in my head (my storytelling upbringing and product design), I began to envision an opportunity to create synergy between the two. At Guess, the company primarily expressed creativity through product and marketing. But when I started Ace Rivington, I began building a story around a character, diving deep into his lineage, all the way back to his great grandfather and the boat that he traveled to America on; then his first job working in the bike shop to help the Wright Brothers get off the ground. My confidence and entrepreneurial spirit kicked into high gear.

I created a collection of stories around different characters' experiences within the world of Ace Rivington. He's this modern-day private jet pilot who travels all over the world – a character that I made up to help the world *see the good*. The story is less about someone that people want to be, want to follow, or want to get to know ... and more about what the *dude* is wearing – wives, girlfriends, and

partners wanting their guy to be *that guy*. He is cool and effortless in a Steve McQueen kind of way. My unique approach and confidence lie in the importance of this style in fashion today. Denim is such an important part of the story because life as we know it has moved out of the office and into a more casual way of living and making things happen. All of this story has been built around creating a product experience and desire through the aspirational character Ace Rivington.

I've been so fortunate to fill up passports during my time at Guess, traveling the world and developing jeans, experiencing different places, and understanding different cultures and people, and afterward, I wanted to create a brand that was tied to the theme of making the world a smaller place. Through travel, we begin to understand that we're all the same. I love using the analogy of "What happened in Afghanistan today?" – the answer is that someone was married, someone died, and someone was born. And it's the same thing that happened here. If more people had the ability and patience to see and understand this perspective, the world would be a better place. I never would have dreamed that I'd have an incredible wife, with some of our family as far away as the Middle East. It is through my own experience that my world has become a very small place; and every day in our store at Ace Rivington, we have the opportunity to share a kind spirit and offer exceptional service to people from all over the world.

TBB: *Persuasion* may be a term of the past in terms of how to create brand loyalty, with *inspiration* as the new emotional "heartstring". How do you, as a CEO, inspire your team with authenticity and consistency – and how do those values translate to the quality, service, and sustainability components that the customer directly experiences?

BL: It starts with overpaying my team – and I'm really genuine about that. That can be translated to: I truly value the people I have chosen to have around

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me to help build this brand. Any inspired opportunity comes from being incredibly authentic to everyone you deal with every step of the way. Whether in team building, experience creation, or product creation, authenticity through quality service and sustainability is critical. Investing in your people and your product, and doing it with intention, is what will build a history ... a legacy. I'm not looking for a revolving door in anything that I do in life. I am blessed to be heading into year 15 with my wonderful wife [*Beau shows us his wedding ring with a big smile*] and stability is everything for me. My goal is to continue to build the brand in a way that creates growth and opportunity for my team and for our customers. Mentoring those around me on their individual aspirations and modeling the values I believe in at all levels of the business are the pillars that Ace Rivington has been built on. This is where a lifetime warranty on our jeans comes into play – I have confidence in our high-quality materials and craftsmanship, along with the people who create our products, to continue the story of sustainability. I care in meaningful ways about the lifespan of our product, in addition to our product's end of life.

There are a lot of products you can buy that may have a wonderful story but are not going to last – and that is not something that I am comfortable creating. My vision is to build something that will look cool in your closet for the next 10 years, and as we approach our 11th year as a brand, I've been able to see and understand the full consumer experience with our goods. I make really cool clothing that lasts; that I'm proud of. And I build good relationships that last. I intend to do the same with our team – I care deeply, and with intention and investment, together we will reach new heights.

As you consider the many different founders who have created their own companies, there are different levels of connection that each founder maintains with their business. For me and my brand concept, I'm as "all in" as one can be – every waking,

sleeping, and breathing moment. My whole family is woven in the threads of Ace Rivington, whether it's the role my wife Yasmin has within our business, or our 10- and 13-year-old daughters here with us on Saturday as we are talking about a new store location. Ace Rivington has been a character for their entire lives, and I'm grateful for the opportunities the brand has created for me to teach. There have been many lessons in persistence and service for our kids and our customers – many who have remained tremendous supporters since our Kickstarter campaign.

TBB: Robert McKee, a well-known screenwriting lecturer and author, celebrates a principle he calls "Classical Design – timeless and transcultural, fundamental to every earthly society." There seems to be a commonality between storytelling (screenwriting) and design when thought of in this way. What key principles have been the mainstay of the growth and following of Ace Rivington?

BL: Another notable film figure who celebrated these same fundamentals was Steve McQueen. He epitomized the "King of Cool" style, with his effortless, timeless attitude. He was more well-known than Robert McKee because of the stage he lived on, but both depict the relationship between storytelling and design. As a young designer, I was always drawn to the simplicity of jeanswear, and the effortless attitude that came with the uniform perspective of the right jeans and the right fit – to look great without looking like you're trying too hard. For me, that's been the pillar that I've built the Ace Rivington brand on - the ability to make people feel good about themselves for the way they look, the way they dress, and simply by having something tailored uniquely for them. It's such a powerful thing.

Another key principle is my understanding of inclusivity and the power of feeling good about yourself. My father was a very large man and never had the opportunity to fit into our jeans. I have so

much respect and consideration for size, and the pressure or point of view it creates for people. If I sell you a pair of jeans in a size 39 or 40, and you lose two sizes, I'll replace the jeans for free. Whatever the reason may be, especially for health reasons, I really care. I want people to feel good about themselves, feel confident, and not feel like they're trying too hard. Effortless style with a sustainable level of quality has been at the core of my vision and is the mainstay of the future of Ace Rivington as a brand.

Being sensitive has always been a formative part of who I am, and I've always been authentic about that. I've also had a very clear vision of myself, my path, and what I wanted to build. Even considering leaders like Walt Disney or Henry Ford or Ralph Lauren, ones who have had huge impacts on their industries, I look at them the same way I look at the brand founders in the surf shops in Newport Beach. They are all people, and so am I, and I can do the same thing – that's a powerful feeling.

I love owning this understanding of myself and sharing it with others – because we can all change the world ... we can all make a difference. As young people, we have such confidence and naivete, because we don't know much about the world, and therefore we feel like we can change everything. The challenge with growing up is that we start to believe less in our ability to change the world based on our realities and our life path. As I've grown up, I certainly have not lost sight of the fact that I can make crazy things happen, and that's really inspiring to me and those around me.

TBB: Great storytellers have a deep understanding of characters and a vision for the direction of their story; one might say the same for great leaders. They select the right people for the right parts, engaging them in an authentic understanding of their dream. You have thoughtfully woven together a company that embodies this both internally and externally,

making a difference through philanthropy. What does "community" mean to you?

BL: Community is both local and global, for sure ... both incredibly important, sharing similarities and differences at the same time. Community includes some of the philanthropic endeavors we've played a role in since starting the company – there was supporting Nepal during the horrific earthquakes several years ago, and fundraising to raise tips for the service workers in the bars and restaurants in Santa Barbara, and contributing to the local food bank, as well as a number of other areas with needs, like Ukraine and Venezuela. I wake up with an innate desire to do anything to help. Being clear on community, and understanding the people that I want to support, whether I know them locally or not, has been a guiding perspective for the way we approach philanthropy as a brand.

One benefit of having my own business is understanding that I don't have to ask anybody for approval to make a difference. When I have a feeling or an interest in supporting a group or an effort, I can do it. It's been just as incredible to see how our customers over the years have embraced "community" with us in a thoughtful way. I lead with my heart and with intention, and in doing so, the community around me offers their support as well.

Community and philanthropy are deeply rooted in Ace Rivington – it's not an afterthought or an add-on – it's tightly woven into the fabric of the brand as we service every customer. Whether something happens locally or on the other side of the planet, my wife and I wake up discussing these issues every single morning. It is a formative part of who we are and ties back to how this brand is an integral part of me. I've given so much of myself and my own core values into the way I think, position the brand, and make decisions. Philanthropy is just an important

part of what we are supposed to be doing as humans.

More importantly, Ace Rivington as a brand is a platform to provide lessons, and that's such a significant responsibility. The opportunity to communicate these thoughts and ideas is so important because they will influence the points of view of other leaders and how they choose to guide their organizations. It will reach some of the biggest leaders in the apparel industry and confirm the value of this cultural perspective of philanthropy and community within their companies. I'm grateful for any opportunity to reinforce what we're supposed to be doing. It's not always about making Wall Street happy. We all have a right to care about each other – and that's not just a local right, it's a global one.

TBB: As you stand in your design studio, surrounded by new colors, fabrics, and sketches, along with the results of all the successful products you have developed in that space, share with us what has landed on the “cutting room floor” (whether it be screenwriting cuts or fabric cuts) and what those cuts have taught you? And what is Ace’s next adventure we can look forward to?

BL: There have been so many ideas crafted in the past 11 years for this business ... I certainly think about the TV series concept as a significant part of the journey. Tremendous effort and energy was infused into that conception, including developing a model of building stores that serve different thematic experiences of each unique episode. I dreamed of fabricating a specific experience for consumers walking into an Ace Rivington store, whether it was Cuban-themed or Alaska-themed. The entire endeavor was a steep climb, and I reached a peak of understanding that there were two distinct sides of this project – one was *product* and one was *entertainment*. I realized in that moment that there are not many people on the

planet who sit at the top of this mountain and truly understand both high-format entertainment (movie making and television) and high-format product creation (apparel and other items) and how to create merchandising synergy between both sides. It's really hard. I knew I needed to pick a side. Having invested 25 years of my career into making jeans, I picked the denim side – it's where my passion first ignited and continues to grow.

Letting go of the thought process around the story and allowing it to *fall on the cutting room floor* was definitely significant for me. It allowed me to apply more focus and intention to the products that we create and has freed my creative spirit to be much more successful.

Flexibility around storytelling has absolutely been an important part of the growth of Ace Rivington. The messaging that I want to deliver now is about the effort we pour into creating our goods, teamed with the quality of workmanship and materials, all with the intent of longevity and sustainability. This is my focus today. Perhaps one day the storytelling part of the business will be rekindled in the large format style that I've always dreamed of, but for now, my heart is *all in* building great product and expanding the business globally.

We have an incredible partnership with Diadora and have their footwear in our Santa Barbara store, as well as belts from the Colombian brand Macondo. We're also proud of multiple collaborations over the years, including amazing partnerships with Alisal Ranch, Cole Haan, Madewell, and U.S. Polo Association, and we continue exploring opportunities to partner with more brands. We've engaged in exclusive product support initiatives with retailers like Nordstrom and The Buckle. And we've been fortunate to have some incredible folks championing and representing the Ace Rivington

brand – for example, the actor Harry Goodwins has been a longtime supporter and model for us.

Currently, we are evaluating licensing strategies to expand to regions like the Middle East, Northern Europe, the UK, Asia, Southeast Asia, Mexico, and Canada. The vision is expansive, but as a U.S. business, it is critical that our path is thoughtful. Our goal is to expand retail across the globe with the same consumer service-oriented functions that we offer in our Santa Barbara store.

We're working hard to build Ace Rivington into a full lifestyle brand. The momentum will continue to build as we see significant retail expansion interest, wholesale growth, and unified commerce. As of now, we'll have 50 stores selling our products by the end of this year, and more projected going forward. There is nothing small about our expectations for Ace Rivington and the *sky is the limit* for the potential of our next chapter. Our team continues to be driven by the "spirit of adventure" and attracting others along for the ride.

Visit www.acerivington.com to join Beau's adventure.

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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