

A Front Row Seat at the Revolution

VOLUME TWO
12 (MORE) PROFILES IN DISRUPTION

BRAVE ROBOT

BRIGHTLAND

CLEVELAND KITCHEN

HIGHKEY

HUMBLE SEA

MAGIC SPOON

MIKE'S HOT HONEY

OLIPOP

REEL

STARFACE

SUNDAY

VACATION

PAUL EARLE

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and to all.



Innovation Leader is an essential
resource for those who seek to drive
productive change, and create what's
next. We are grateful for your support
of this work.

Over the past five years, a full scale revolution has fomented in the consumer products world.

Rules are being rewritten. Orthodoxies, busted. And virus be darned, the uprising shows no sign of slowing.

Curious to learn why and how, a research assistant and I carefully selected 12 new brands that best symbolize contemporary innovation. Informed by personal interviews with the leaders of each, we celebrate these brands here, along with the people behind them and their incredible stories.

A bit of background. As some know, over the period of 2017-2019, I interviewed the founders of 12 extraordinary new consumer brands changing the game in their respective categories at that time, and recorded their origin stories. Whether I should be a stock picker or just got lucky, the inaugural class ended up being a veritable “who’s who” of radical progress makers; four would later become billion-dollar unicorns (Peloton, Beyond Meat, Allbirds, Harry’s), and others achieved spectacular events of their own in the measly “nine figures club” (Olly, Hello, Halo Top). Others, like Hippeas, are tracking there.

Now, make way for a new class of mavericks. And wouldn’t you know, they are running playbooks that have more in common than one would intuitively think.

Might Brave Robot ice cream, Brightland olive oil and vinegar, Cleveland Kitchen foods, HighKey snacks, Humble Sea brewing, Magic Spoon cereal, Mike’s hot honey, Olipop beverages, Reel paper products, Starface acne care, Sunday lawncare, and Vacation sun care share some DNA? You bet.

Might you be able to apply inspiration from these brands to your own adventures? Ditto! We cover that in “What We Can Learn” on page 27.

Without further ado, what follows is the next wave of daring entries, bold plot twists, thrilling science, stunning creative turns, wake up calls, end arounds, and “oh no you didn’t” unexpected combinations that are turning big established categories upside down.

Brave Robot

**BRAVE
ROBOT**
ANIMAL-FREE ICE CREAM

Waking up one day yearning to make a greater impact in his career and life, Paul Kollesoff summoned Joel Goodson, and made his move. Now Kollesoff and his partners at The Urgent Company are making hay by making... whey. You read that correctly: they are reimagining dairy by using a non-animal sourced protein that creates up to 97% fewer greenhouse gas emissions than traditional dairy. "Technology is the future of everything," Kollesoff told me. Their first expression: Brave Robot ice cream. The food is delicious, and the irreverent gonzo brand world is the epitome of productive anomaly. Is the world ready for it? Yes whey: the brand has sold more than one million pints since its July 2020 launch. Using Perfect Day's flora-based protein platform, they further plan to enter new categories with new brands in the future.



Brightland

BRIGHTLAND cA

There are no certain wins in business, but the closest you can get is to enter a visually ugly category with something gorgeous. Aishwarya Iyer did just that. Applying the playbook she learned earlier in her career in the beauty business at Lancôme and in other high end experiences, Brightland is shaking things up in the monotonous, spiritually dead olive oil and vinegar space. “I wanted to instill some emotion, a feeling,” she told me, further delving into the brand’s promise of “living in a golden state” (a triple entendre, and wonderful). She’s also instituting the highest ethical standards of sourcing, pointing out something I didn’t know: a lot of incumbent oils are cut with junk, and are anything but “virgin.” Iyer said business is booming.



Cleveland Kitchen



Hello, Cleveland! Mac Anderson and the team at Cleveland Kitchen Co. are reimagining the fermented foods business (think sauerkraut, pickles, kimchi and such). With its fresh story and high culinary approach, they are bringing energy and innovation to a space that hadn't seen any news since the Roosevelt administration (maybe the first one). Prototyped at farmers markets throughout the Rust Belt, the brand carries forward a homespun feel with authentic charm. Anderson said their kraut is now the top premium offering in the United States, their kimchi is a popular and growing item, and their growth plans are ambitious. Suffice it to say: Cleveland rocks.



HighKey



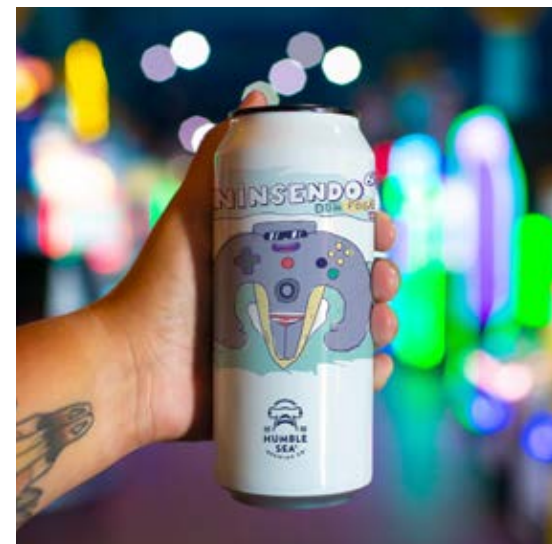
Joe Ens and his team at HighKey are rallying against a very well-defined and formidable villain: sugar. And nothing brings people and teams together like a common enemy. The challenge is to create alternatives that actually taste good. They have done it, and are reaping the rewards: Ens says their “crave-worthy” snacks are fast movers at Amazon and major brick-and-mortar retailers like Target, Kroger and Costco. Not bad for a company that is barely over two years old. Also playing a role is HighKey investor Ryan Reynolds, the actor and marketer extraordinaire who seemingly couldn’t miss if he tried. Reynolds hardwired the brand for engagement and disruption in many ways, including creating and voicing over an antihero antagonist that is a sugar-crazed anthropomorphic panda (because, of course). Ens talked about the company’s growth prospects as it matures. “We’re evolving from ‘move fast and break things’ to ‘move fast and break fewer things,’” he quipped.



Humble Sea



"Maximum creative output" is how Santa Cruz, California-based Humble Sea brewing cofounder Frank Scott Krueger describes the operating philosophy at one of the hottest breweries in America. Not just another craft brewer, Humble Sea is different: extraordinary liquid that is garnering attention coast to coast, a wildly inspired design world, and a pace of new product introductions that is downright dizzying... even without that high ABV stout. They produce nearly 200 unique brands per year (that is not a typo; the only people who like Humble Sea more than beer drinkers must be their trademark attorneys). They are rapidly opening new locations, with a contrarian site selection strategy that Krueger described as "creating experiences that are as inconsistent and as unique as possible." I've talked about the power of productive oddity before, and Humble Sea leans into this literally by referring to their fans—and the fans to themselves—as lovable "kooks." Also part of the Humble Sea story: opportunism. The team set up its first brewing operation at the cofounder's grandmother's house in a remote mountainous area, leveraging a "glass is half full" interpretation of state alc bev regulations. Cheers.



Magic Spoon

**MAGIC
SPOON**

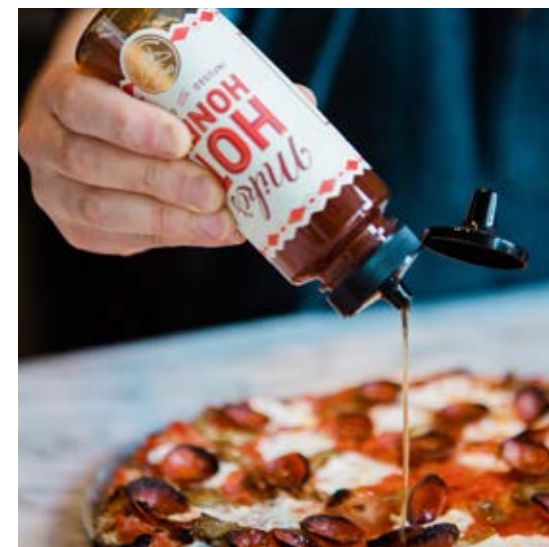
Enter breakfast cereal, a declining category on which three behemoths have a choke hold, and where a large box front size makes shelf space even harder to win than normal? And you're priced three times higher than baseline? "You have to be completely and totally out of your (expletive deleted) mind," an inquisitor said to Magic Spoon cofounder Gabi Lewis. That inquisitor was I, and Lewis' explanation made perfect sense upon further review. "We were talking to people about why there was no innovation in cereal," Lewis said, "and the answers were completely unsatisfactory. Nobody was talking to the modern consumer." Lewis and partners developed a "grain free" alternative and a breakthrough orthodoxy-busting design aesthetic that Lewis said exploited the "false choice between old kiddie characters on one end, and stalks of wheat on the other." As for the pricing? "People will happily pay more for something that is truly new, and better," Lewis said. The direct-to-consumer brand is growing so fast, they can barely keep up with demand, Lewis said. Magic.



Mike's Hot Honey



Steve Jobs famously said that innovation is not about “new ideas”: there aren’t any, only new combinations of existing ones. Is Mike Kurtz the Steve Jobs of food? The stunning success and growth of his Mike’s Hot Honey brand suggests that maybe he is. Combining honey with chili peppers makes zero sense intuitively, but boy does it score when you taste it. Kurtz said his creation was the classic “long hunch” first seeded when traveling through Brazil as a younger person, and observing how they mixed various foods down there. Later as a pizza master at the famous Paulie’s slice shop in Brooklyn (no relation to the author), Kurtz began experimenting with drizzling hot honey on his pies as a kicker. “People loved it instantly,” he said. Kurtz used his home and anywhere else he could find to scale the operation completely on his own at first. When did he know he had a winner? “When we were moving so much volume, I became worried about my UPS driver,” Kurtz quipped. Mike’s Hot Honey is now in over 15,000 stores and over 2,000 restaurants. On behalf of all who love invigorating and unique new taste experiences: obrigado!



Olipop

OLIPOP™

Good golly, a brand new line of beverages that do much more than taste great and quench thirst. Olipop, only a few years old, is on a mission to promote gut health for all. “We have an unwavering belief that what we are doing is important,” said cofounder Ben Goodwin, talking about a “life mission” to leverage the microbiome to drive wellness. Goodwin said Olipop was inspired by his not-so-healthy own past, and a drive to improve matters for himself and others. Goodwin and cofounder David Lester said their direct-to-consumer business grew by over 1,000% last year, and Olipop is now in over 7,000 stores nationally. One key, beyond its unique product and artistically delightful design world: shelving near old line drinks, providing consumers with a recognizable point of comparison. Pop goes the volume.



Reel

reel

There is no such thing as an uninteresting product category. Only uninteresting brands. Livio Bisterzo and his team are proving it with their introduction of Reel, adding news, purpose and aesthetic zest to... toilet paper. "We're paper with a heart," Bisterzo said. The tree-free paper is derived from bamboo plants—an approach that is better for the environment than incumbent sourcing methods— and has a robust social mission program that helps provide toilets to people in need around the world. A brand on a mission, Reel presents itself as something people can "join," not simply buy. Curious to discover what bamboo toilet paper feels like beyond the balm for the soul, I tried it and can report that physically it works great. (I'll leave it at that.) Data indicates that Reel is a fast mover at Target and Amazon. Up next? Reel recently extended to paper towels and may grow as aggressively as bamboo itself.



Starface

STARFACE

One of the impacts of a significant category disruption is a twist in the conversation between people and brands. Hello, featured in volume one of this work, did this in oral care by flipping war bluster (“fight” cavities, “destroy” plaque, “eliminate” germs and so on) to a warm and friendly exchange (starting with the brand name). Starface is doing the same in acne care. Cofounder Julie Schott, who was a writer for ELLE prior to entering the business side of beauty, wants to remove the stigma from how people talk and feel about pimple management. How? Ditch the shame of what she called the category’s “we will fix you” mindset, and instead overtly recognize blemishes with decorative stars. Wow! Schott’s objective: “create the most honest brand ever.” Part of the Starface magic is a brand world—featuring a lovable character they call “Big Yellow”—that further brings a smile into what used to be the dark recesses of embarrassment. Schott said the direct-to-consumer business has been strong, and the brand is already a popular mainstay at Target stores. The future of acne care? Look to the stars.



Sunday

sunday

In the pre-revolution environment, it was generally accepted that only a fool would dare enter a category dominated by a short list of long-entrenched, well-financed behemoths. Today, the principles of old school business strategy are being defenestrated (look up that word if you don't know it). Take Boulder, Colorado-based Sunday lawn and garden care, quite possibly the first ever viable, feasible, desirable and scalable alternative to incumbents like Scotts Miracle Gro and Monsanto. Founder Coulter Lewis, an entrepreneur, engineer and formerly a designer at the famous innovation consultancy IDEO, studied the level of pesticides going into residential lawns—which he points out are America's third largest crop—and decided to act. "Many things that we learn to accept as 'normal' actually are not normal," he told me. As an example, he pointed out that the lawn care section of home improvement stores... stinks, literally! (Upon reflection, he's right. It's all the chemicals.) What doesn't stink: the state of the Sunday business, sprouting up fast via its direct-to-consumer subscription model and elsewhere, and with lots of green following it in the form of investor money. Lewis and I discussed the Sunday name. It is a bit abstract and in fact it did not test well at first, he said. But "Sunday" is highly differentiated, and evokes deep feeling. I love it (and as a naming practitioner myself, my bar is almost impossibly high). The design aesthetic is clean and airy, and as such is a welcome break from all the alleged "rules" of the space. Sunday, funday.



Vacation



Is it entertainment content? Is it a product? For many great new brands today, the answer is: yes. Enter Vacation, an outlandish new line of sun care products cofounded by Marty Bell, creator of a popular 1980s-themed Internet radio station called Poolside FM (now Poolsuite), and entrepreneurial marketing wizzes Lach Hall and Dakota Green. Every last detail of the brand riffs off of the vibe of the music and a physical world the founders describe as “Miami, 1986.” By every detail, I mean every detail: the website features real footage from low budget old beach movies on VHS, and even the shipping receipt evokes the dot matrix continuous printer paper of the era. The allure of Vacation resides not in a singular big idea, but as a composite of lots of smaller ones. “Our community loves it,” said Bell. “They crave authenticity and we deliver it to them.” As for the product itself, the founders believe they can win on both fragrance and efficacy. “We obsess about everything,” Bell said. Back to the content-product merger (Prontent? Contduct?). Innovators seek the almighty flywheel for its “rotational energy”: the gears of separate components driving each other. Vacation has this energy in abundance. It’s in the details.



**“Nothing—no force on earth—
can stop an idea whose
time has come.”**

VICTOR HUGO

As a lifelong student, teacher and practitioner of innovation, I have always been fascinated by the quest to understand *how* extraordinary new products and services come to be. To find signal through the noise. What does John Lennon have in common with Bach and Banksy? What behaviors do Thomas Edison, Ben Franklin, and Tim Berners-Lee share? What does Magic Spoon have in common with Peloton and Brightland and Humble Sea? The answer to each question is paradoxical: nothing... and plenty.

Here are five lessons we can take from the Volume 2 cohort of “Most Compelling New Brands.”

1. Constraints can be productive.

I confess, when the pandemic hit last year, I was deeply worried that it would kneecap entrepreneurs in all corners, especially in the consumer sector. I am thrilled that the innovation doom never materialized. Necessity is the mother of invention, and hardship has forced the incredibly brave and industrious people behind the companies above to find a way forward, no matter what. “What were we supposed to do?” asked Magic Spoon founder Gabi Lewis, reflecting on the onset of a global lock down. “Quit? No. We actually used the constraints before us to make us better.”

Each one of these companies could become a rampaging bull as the world normalizes. Any team able to propel a concept airborne in a down cycle will reap the benefits later.

Persistence amidst adversity is always a marker of people or companies successful in anything, but it is especially apt here. Forged by crisis, each founder with whom I spoke is now capable of succeeding in any environment. Their stories almost read like those of Marvel superheroes. Or at least MacGyver.

2. “Normal” might not be.

Contemporary entrepreneurs are becoming much less accepting of category conventions, if not downright rebellious. Where is it written that a new entrant to compete with Heinz ketchup is not allowed? (The answer: antiquated MBA strategy books, which frown on such actions; good thing the team at Sir Kensington never read them). Back to our subjects here: Aishwarya Iyer took a look at the olive oil aisle, the ultimate “sea of sameness,” and then a closer look at the sourcing practices in that business, and decided she would not accept them as normal. Brightland is born. The identical spark led to Coulter Lewis and Sunday lawn care. Joe Ens and the team at HighKey chose not to accept low/no sugar products tasting awful as a given; enter a crave-worthy alternative. Julie Schott and Starface are flipping the bird (with a smile!) to the long-entrenched convention in acne care that a pimple should be a secret you bear in shame.

Stop accepting “normal” as normal. In all likelihood, it isn’t. Here is one exercise, inspired by the entrepreneurs here and plenty of my own experiences. Whatever the category you’re studying, write down all the “rules” (quotes intended). Then suspend any engrained knowledge of the space you may have, and ask critically: are they really “rules”? Can they be broken? We never recommend any rule-breaking on matters of product safety, but most other so-called rules are actually there for the flouting.

3. God is in the details.

One of my creative partners often discusses the Grateful Dead as a design case. It is not just a brand; it’s a brand world, and a wildly vast and rich one at that, full of too many unique elements to count (think bears; lightning bolts; skulls; roses; and so on). There are many reasons why the Grateful Dead, even

years after Jerry Garcia passed away, remains one of the most engaging brands of all time, but its brand world is certainly one. What detail!

In this cohort, Vacation is a great example of a new brand for which no product or design detail is too small. Everything matters to them, and it’s working: they have one of the most enthusiastic followings I have ever seen. Part of their commitment to breadth of experience is their origin on the content side of the equation, a component every new brand ought to consider from the outset.

Detail counts on the product side too. Mac Anderson and his team at Cleveland Kitchen are bringing the same level of culinary craft to mass marketed products as they learned from mom (yes, in their kitchen, which happens to be in Cleveland).

4. More is more.

If you want to see me become visibly agitated, pitch me the model of companies going through a lengthy planning process in search of the almighty singular “BIG BET,” a magic pathway to \$1 Billion in revenue, mapped out in detail from the outset. Searching for Bigfoot would be a more productive exercise (not to mention much more fun). Modern brands and companies don’t do “big bets”; they do lots of smaller ones. Design thinking becomes design doing; growth looks like a portfolio of experiments.

Magic Spoon launches new flavors almost monthly, providing constant news to their fans. Being a direct-to-consumer brand helps: no brick-and-mortar retail planogram to worry about. Humble Sea’s volume of new product releases seems downright impossible (it’s possible: I have verified it). Olipop has an enormous lineup of flavors for such a young brand. “We can’t always know what will work,” cofounder Ben Goodwin said. “So we try them all.”

It is time for companies to rethink their innovation strategies. They ought to be running a large group of small experiments instead of holding off for one unicorn that in all likelihood will never materialize. Only in-market trial can predict future brand success, and it's a numbers game to find ideas that engage. Sorry, Mr. Van Der Rohe: when it comes to innovation, more is more.

5. Product is king.

The first few shots fired in the revolution unfolding were largely brand and business model-driven. The belief: if you have a great name and fancy approach to go-to-market (DTC! Subscription! Drones! Oh my!), product uniqueness and quality don't matter much. A lot of brands—Casper, I'm looking at you—rocketed to enormous valuations and sensational headlines based on the premise above. One problem: it turns out that product does matter. Again, Casper, I'm looking at you. And your share price.

Contemporary disruptors understand this and are going to market now with better mousetraps, not just beautiful brands. For one, Generation Z consumers are saying loudly: either your product has to be truly sourced and produced in a better way, or your social mission has to be out of this world, or don't even talk to me. Brave Robot is an example of a new brand that is truly without peer in terms of how it is made; there is real science behind it. Reel, too, walks the talk when it comes to the ethics of its supply chain and give back program; you might say that Reel is real. So is Mike's Hot Honey, which will show you exactly how its incredible product is made, down to where the bees are. And from a taste experience, it delivers hard on "honey with a kick."

One impact of the new world order on the innovation community is the raising of the bar. Brands alone aren't enough. We are in a "yes, and" world where product counts too. A lot. The best new brands these days invest heavily in research and development.

#

The great trail blazers above spent time on this project in order to inspire you to be the best you can be, and move the entire community forward. "Community" means all of us: in fact, my own company and partners are launching a number of our own new brands this year, and we can only hope that they would be deemed worthy of inclusion in this set.

Innovators typically shun "zero sum" thinking and instead subscribe to abundance theory: share all you can, and be a go giver as much as a go getter. We all now have a few plays from today's successful game plans. Time to get after it. See you out there.

To the future,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Earle', with a stylized, flowing script.

Paul Earle
Chicago
November 2021

Thanks

Thanks to the superhero entrepreneurs who agreed to be interviewed for this project, cape and all. In order of appearance: Paul Kollesoff, Aishwarya Iyer, Mac Anderson, Joe Ens, Frank Scott Kreuger, Gabi Lewis, Mike Kurtz, Ben Goodwin, David Lester, Livio Bisterzo, Julie Schott, Coulter Lewis, Marty Bell and Lach Hall. Each one of you is incredible.

I am grateful for my own venture and creative partners, as well as my colleagues and students at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. You all make me a better teacher, writer, and professional. I am merely a reflection of you!

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And finally, special thanks to the designer of this book, Brody Boyer, for his great talent, highest level of professionalism, and for reminding me that the logo doesn't always have to be bigger.



Paul W. Earle, Jr. is an entrepreneur and educator whose mission is to populate the world with great new brands, and help others do the same.

He heads Earle & Company Inc., an Evanston, Illinois-based futures lab that advises clients on matters of branding and innovation, in addition to developing its own properties. As a principal and venturer, E&Co. had a major role in creating, from scratch, three new-to-the-world brands launching in 2021: GOODLES® macaroni & cheese, Betr® over-the-counter remedies, and Big Nose Kate™ western whiskey. More is on the way.

Earle is also a faculty member at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, where he works with both MBA students and executives in areas such as corporate innovation, new ventures, design, and creativity. His writings have been published in *Forbes*, *Fortune*, the latest edition of the widely-read *Kellogg on Branding* "how to" book, and elsewhere.

Earlier in his career, Earle held a variety of roles at global creative agencies Saatchi & Saatchi and Leo Burnett; Kraft Foods, Inc.; and River West Brands, a brand acquisition company he founded.

Earle sits on the Board of Trustees at Hadley, a top learning platform for the blind and visually impaired, and is active in a number of other professional and philanthropic enterprises. He lives in the Chicago area with his wife and two boys.

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Here's to What's Next.

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