



KILLING GIANTS

10 STRATEGIES TO TOPPLE THE GOLIATH IN YOUR INDUSTRY

The Killing Giants Interviews

Eric Ryan, Co-Founder of Method

Eric was one of the first interviewees I spoke to in the research phase of writing Killing Giants. Not only was I familiar with the Method brand but several friends – not to mention other interviewees on my list – had pointed me in his direction. I originally thought the Method story was going to animate a chapter I had already titled, “All the Wood Behind the Arrow” – thinking his feedback would neatly fit into my preconception. Eric very politely kept re-directing me away from this false perception in what became one of the most impactful interviews in the entire book. It’s not about putting “all the wood behind one particular arrow” – it’s always multiple arrows. It has to be. Thus, the shift in the chapter’s title to, “All the Wood Behind the Arrow(s).”

As with previous interview transcripts, these are pretty close to raw – I’ve avoided copy editing all this so you can read the words the way I heard them, so forgive the occasionally odd way this may read. It’s how we speak! Hope you find this useful! I did.

Eric Ryan: We’ve talked a lot about sound substance and you know, it’s one of those things, I mean I think the characteristics in a lot of great brands. That there’s kind of, two things come together in a very unexpected way that you typically can’t plan for. And I think it’s a big reason why so many unique brands do come out of a founding team or a duo or just the founder’s point of view just because, you know I came from an advertising background. It’s really hard to research these things or from the strategy point of view land on them. And they’re unique because obviously they’re very new and different shaded, and that’s what makes them great. So a lot of where design and eco came together for us, basically our own personalities and abilities. And if I was not, I was originally starting the business, that was my goal, and I was writing the business plan and I was approaching it definitely much more from the lifestyle point of view. And if I had not been friends with (co-founder) Adam (Lowry) and living with him, would I have gone out and tried to seek out a partner, who was an expert in sustainability or green chemistry? No. Definitely not.

Stephen Denny: I see.

Eric Ryan: So a lot of that, those two things coming together which is what gives the brand kind of its great tension of sound substance came from our own belief. And so, the journey we went on was, you know what told me to dig here was the cleaning category was so big and everybody was so closely aligned and there seemed to be no differentiation. And then as I got into it, the big idea was connecting lifestyle to the home or home care products and this idea that okay, your home, our interests are emotional, would you care for a proper solution. So that was the basis of the business. And then as Adam started working with me on it and started bringing some of his own beliefs around environmental sustainability, I kind of went on the journey with him. And what happened was I had no

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clue or I was pretty surprised to find like how dirty cleaning products are. When you clean, you use poison. So I might have naturally gotten there anyways, as far as, like yeah, I wouldn't go to bed at night knowing I was putting pretty little bottles of poison. But Adam was the one who really championed that and brought that to the forefront of the company where I was championing lifestyle design piece of it.

Stephen Denny: Got it, that's good. That's interesting, because this idea of creating a dynamic tension within a brand, I thought was a very vivid statement. I read that in something that you had said earlier in the year and I wanted to touch upon that as well. I can't think of a lot of companies, a lot of brands that you would say now there's an example of a great dynamic tension within the brand architecture casually, unless, you're sitting in an MBA classroom somewhere. And I'm curious, you know when you approach design and sustainability, there is great tension within that. It almost feels like this is a screenwriting conversation. It almost sounds like this is a, you know you are talking about the arc of the brand here. And I don't hear that very often. As a matter of fact, I never hear that. It's usually – the brand is this monolithic thing. And it's very interesting to hear how you, had I not been with Adam, this would not have happened this way. It may have happened a different way. It may have happened in a different vector, different direction. But I find that very unique in the way your company has come together.

Eric Ryan: Yeah. And I think that's part of what it does that specialness and ability to compete. And there are a few brands out there I think they have a great tension. I mean Target did with expect more, pay less. Starbucks does it with it's just every day you know luxury moment time out, but yet it is highly convenient. And they brought that convenience and that time out together. But it's pretty uncommon and I also, from a strategic point of view, I did know that there was no way I could be successful in the long run if I launched a single attribute brand. Because ultimately, the P&Gs of the world... that's a game they will figure out.

Stephen Denny: When we talk about the giants in this category and the P&Gs and all the usual suspects, I think yes, clearly, they would be able to comprehend it - whether they would be able to move fast enough or be nimble enough to actually ever get around to doing it is another interesting question. I've worked for massive companies, I think so have you, I have read a bit of your background. I worked at Sony for a number of years and I recall when I was at Plantronics, they'd say oh my God, what if Sony was going to go into our space. And I said of course not. You know, they could look at it and they could be intrigued by it, but they'll never get around to doing it. And if they did, they treat it like an accessory. And you can see in your category, yeah P&G would do it, but you know, the guys that matter aren't looking at that. They're probably just dealing with the staff meeting coming up. They're dealing with a board meeting. It's a different mentality. How does that whole idea work? Just the fact that you started with, this was a start-up, this was your own brand, but you couldn't have done this if you were a brand manager at P&G.

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Eric Ryan: If I was inside P&G and I had the same idea... let's say if I were the brand manager for Mr. Clean, could I come up with this idea? No, definitely not. And if I did, well first of all, if I was, because I'm one of those businesses I would look at the business as an insider, I would know too much. And I would just accept that the way it's defined is the way it's defined. And I mean basically what I did was just a simple act of appropriation. And the original pitch for Method was, "Aveda for the home," and since I was naïve to cleaning, I was able to not recognize that this is how the game's supposed to play, these are the rules. And I looked outside the category and just said hey, we can take personal care, take a personal care approach at home... that's a pretty disruptive idea, that we were excited to think about packaging the fragrance and everything of that. So no, and that if I had that idea, I would have probably really struggled to be able to prove it because in order to basically prove the business case, business looks for success stories that have already occurred.

Stephen Denny: Yeah. I mean, I think it's a case of had you been a P&G you would have done a different red bottle.

Eric Ryan: Absolutely, well I would have been more focussed on my promotion to the next step so...as a brand manager I have got 18 months to lift this business by 5% so I can get my promotion, that's my priority. I'm in brand, where when you start a brand it's your own legacy you are creating.

Stephen Denny: So let's talk about design fundamentals, back up half a step and talk about that. I was in Target Store last night as a matter of fact and as if I needed another reminder, you know you pass the isles of big red gallon drums of Tide and everything else and all of a sudden there are your products like you know this entirely different feeling come over you when you see everything that you're packaging and your physical products from the color to the transparency of the actual bottles and it is a dramatically different feel when you come face to face with it. But beyond that, I ended up picking up and buying this thing, which is your soft scrub, which has what looks like a large fork tail on the top of it, there are like the notch of an arrow. Had a big conversation with my son about what that was for. And he was convinced it was for putting the sponge. I was convinced it was for squeezing it to get the stuff out and you know who cares? The bottom line is now I actually looked at this you know now this I had not seen before. And I looked at this and this is not just packaging. This is not pretty, this is remarkably functional. Whatever the hell that thing was meant to do it's different than everything else that's out here.

Eric Ryan: Your son is right, it's for the sponge.

Stephen Denny: Okay. I'll give him credit. But to me, that represents almost a second generation step, it's beyond saying that design is part of who we are and what we do. It's not just esthetics, its function. And that seems to be, is that a continuing evolution? Is that where this goes from here?

Eric Ryan: Yeah, absolutely. And you'll see we've still got the biggest launch of our lives occurring in January (Eric was referring to January 2011, to be clear...). That basically touches, it's in the laundry space and it brings a huge functional leap forward to the category, I mean it brings with it great

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packaging, excellent aesthetics, but at a functional R&D level it's just a light year ahead of where it is today. And when we really think about our product experience and we have these things called the seven obsessions, which are seven competitive advantages, we do a Monday huddle where we all get together the whole company, 8:30 on the phone for anybody, who's remote and then there's a 9 a.m. with everybody here in the lobby. We have about 100 employees. And so many different spheres at each week, its 30 minutes and we use the obsessions to stir it. But then anybody can talk within it and so like one obsession is be design driven. So I'm going to give a design update, some will give a sustainability update, relationship, retail, etc. And the one for product is, "Win on product experience." So for us it's about delivering a great experience and there's a lot of ways that that can be dimensionalized. The fragrance obviously is the big one, how well the formula works versus along with how safe it is. But yeah, how the product is dispensed and just really thinking that through and making sure that using our products are as little of a chore as possible. And at the end of the day cleaning is mundane; nobody really wants to do it so our job is to help you make it a little more enjoyable.

Stephen Denny: So is this new, is the new family, the new packaging, some of the new products at least, I know dating back to the early readings on your company, a lot was made of your partnership with Karim Rashid. Is the design in-house at this point? Is he still involved? I'm curious to...

Eric Ryan: Yeah, we brought it all in-house. Now it doesn't mean we won't from time to time and we just have it in a while work with somebody outside, you know, you don't want to breathe your own fumes or sometimes the workload is if you can't get the quality work done. We just found that we're getting to the stage to that the big challenges to innovate often are more based on engineering feeling and I mean, we sell soap, so commodity business is high volume. We outsource everything, which gives us definitely some agility, but still going in and dealing with factories that set up this fill and blow bottles a certain way. And so, by bringing the design in house, it was not only great for just the culture because you got designers walking the hallway who had to see the world a little differently. And bring some of that courage to everybody else. But it would really help us overcome these challenges and what we're finding is we're getting great designs, but we're going to execute the design it kept ending up in a place that wasn't quite as special. And so, speed to market is another core obsession of ours. So, bringing the design in-house has just brought a lot of great value. At the end of the day if our job is to set the trend and the creativity and if design is core to that, you can't outsource it. You are basically outsourcing your vision if that doesn't live here within the building. I love working with Karim, I love working with outside designers. But I had to give that up in exchange for what's better for the company.

Stephen Denny: Sure. No, I'm with you on that from my own experience of being able to ensure that all of the beautiful ideas are actually something you can produce at the end of the day. I spent too many staff meetings sitting next to the chief technology officer, who would burst a bubble every time a new design went up on the board saying we can't make that. It was so pretty though.

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Eric Ryan: We will still do those types of designs, when the person, who actually of the design is also running the engineering department. There's a little bit more incentive to dig a little bit deeper and try to figure it out than when it comes from an outside party.

Stephen Denny: Yeah. That I agree, I agree. I saw a really interesting point that you had made somewhere and it talks about this idea of stewardship within what I would call green products. And the comment that you had made some time back was we never set out to take share away from other green products, we wanted to push into categories where green products weren't currently in. And it's fascinating because I had another conversation earlier this week. I'm in the process of lining up time with Jim Koch of the Boston Beer Company, another fabulous case that I'm dying to, I am obviously a big fan of them as well. And the same story came out during a hops shortage. Completely different space, completely different example, but this idea of stewardship and this idea of it was not our job to try to put other craft brewers out of business because then it's just us and the ABs of the world. And in your case, I saw this and it just touched—it touched something there. It seemed like a common thread that I found very intriguing. At this point, you become I would say within your category of green cleaning products, a very recognizable and respected brand. Do you feel that certain sense of ownership of the category? Do you feel it's your job to carry that flag and I'm wondering if that gets animated any other way?

Eric Ryan: Yeah. It's really interesting. I do, but at the same time you're probably familiar with what Clorox has done with green world and I forgot that yeah, that is the way we've always thought of, incremental growth and growth in the category that was always what we shared with resource and how we go about our business. Because again we're we are mature category so also we want to create a great change. In Clorox, the trade keeps talking about how much share they're stealing from us. And so, it's like, eh, we do the world a better job; make the world a better place. It's a little frustrating and it's an interesting time right now because all these giant companies have come in with 1% of their offering are green. I think consumers are now recognizing them as some of the greenest companies on the planet. It was just an article I saw that consumers ranked out who they thought the top 10 greenest companies were and it was pretty much the top 10 biggest polluters like GE, Toyota, Clorox, I mean SC Johnson, who makes Raid in plastic bags and it just pissed me off to no end because here we are, we're actually the company where green is not just a product, green is the entire way you go about building a business. It's your overall impact. We make a lot of sacrifices on the profit side, the growth side in order to do what's right. And then these big companies who 1% at most of their offering, I mean look at Toyota, they sell the Prius. Not a great car, I mean it's a better green car and I applaud them for what they're doing, but they still make trucks.

Stephen Denny: Yeah, it's a rounding error, yeah.

Eric Ryan: And I believe probably one of the biggest polluters maybe in the planet because they're one of the biggest companies on the planet. And so, these three companies like Clorox and SC Johnson being consumers applauding them for being one of the greenest companies around is just absolutely appalling. It makes you kind of want to throw up your arms and give up and say human beings are doomed...

"We're actually the company where green is not just a product, green is the entire way you go about building a business..."

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Stephen Denny: Yeah. We're fickle people. And we have short attention spans. And to think that Clorox has managed to somehow put a little green veneer on itself is, it's fascinating from the psychological perspective, although, it's a little sobering when you think about as you said the longevity of the species, but you know, there you have it. Is there a risk of being sort of holier than thou out-greened? You know you forged this path I think. You could justify it really claim to having a significant leadership role and promoting this and there's always someone who's a little cleaner, a little greener, a little grittier, who can possibly tell a terribly authentic story. Does that kind of bother you or is that just the way it goes?

Eric Ryan: No, I'm really proud of all the start-ups that have kind of followed in our space and who are inspired by us and are trying to make the world a better place. So, that's where I feel great about our impact and what we do. It is great too that big companies like Clorox are actually waking up and advocating people about green. It's just their motivations of the business of course are suspect as they are driven truly by profit if they were a business, so we care about that too. But we also are human beings on this planet. So, at the end of the day, green is part of what we do. We do it because it's the right thing to do. And we could take advantage of that from time to time from a marketing perspective where appropriate, but it's not how we ultimately compete as a business.

It goes back to our being a brand that delivers a better experience. And that's delivered in multiple ways from a personality, again to the fragrance, to the formula, etc. And that's what should allow us to always be enduring as a brand, and if you look at some of those classic CPG spaces like Ben & Jerry's when it was attacked by Häagen-Dazs, which was a made-up brand. When Snapple was attacked by Oasis and Fruitopia. And they were able to really attack them on, yeah, they were all 100% juice, but Snapple had, you know Snapple was a much bigger experience, much more authentic. So, brand and personalities are usually the ones that create that emotional connection. You can copy a product – and consumers applaud you when you copy a product – but you can't copy a brand.

“You can copy a product – and consumers applaud you when you copy a product – but you can't copy a brand.”

Stephen Denny: That's interesting. You had made an earlier point that resonated with me very strongly was that that Method was a brand born of your philosophy. It was kind of a company wrapped around a philosophy as opposed to the other way around. So many brands out there in various categories, which are very often giants that we're alluding to here, are supply chains with a veneer of a story. And they will do a tremendous amount of consumer research and then attempt to mimic what they think they heard. And what you've described with your company is I think the antithesis of that, which is that everything springs from this core belief.

Eric Ryan: Yeah, and I think most companies started out of personal frustrations about something from a founder. The guiding light was a point of view about how the world should be and specifically how the cleaning world should be, and then bringing that to life. And, yeah, from Apple to Nike, I mean you kind of see that that is that point of view that drives the company and take a moment to stop and ask the consumers, “who should I be?” You better have a lot of scale that's maintaining you because you don't have much else, right?





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Stephen Denny: I think it's fair to say that those external inputs are important – we need to ask whether we are delivering on those attributes and to please tell me if I'm drinking my own bath water here. But from the formation of a brand, everything that you just said there I think rings incredibly true to a number of people. You can't bolt it on. You can't bolt personality on. It's like reading those books on how to make small talk at parties and then assume that somehow that turns you into an instant celebrity. It just doesn't work well. It has to be something that is home grown. I'm wondering if brands like yours that are a product of your imagination and your own guiding philosophy, yours and Adams, I'm wondering if a brand like that can happen separated from the founder. I'm wondering if you and Adam decided you had enough and off you went and you hired new management to come onboard and two generations down the road, if that would survive or conversely if another brand out there decided somehow that they wanted to, you know somehow create this where one necessarily didn't exist. And also feel like the chief architect needs to be at the helm of the company.

Eric Ryan: Yeah, I guess it depends on how strong and differentiated the point of view is. And I guess you think about it as when the founder leaves the business and have they given that brand that business a giant push forward that will sustain it for a long time until every little nuance of differences eventually handed away from the management team's fight over vision. It's a good question. I'm just trying to think of examples. I think Ben and Jerry's kind of frozen in time there for a while after the founders left the business.

Stephen Denny: There's one point that you had raised earlier. I wanted to come back to and it's sort of the embodiment of a cybernetic concept that one of my consulting partners hit me up with the other day, which really resonated with me from a marketing standpoint which is the whole idea of an *Eigenvalue*. "This sentence has 5 words." Articulating the point is its own definition. It lives it and breathes it and it's a self-fulfilling statement and when you talk about method in your... forgive me, I didn't catch the exact phrase, your seven principles, your seven...

Eric Ryan: Seven obsessions.

Stephen Denny: Seven obsessions. Better yet, seven obsessions. It seems that this is not purely and externally driven set of goals that again, just from reading on your website and elsewhere, the fact that your guys were sort of eyeballing carbon footprint before anyone had a word for carbon footprint, the fact that you were, this was not externally focused. This was DNA level philosophy. I'm wondering how, if you, for example, you know an outlier that will very often get people stuck... do the seven obsessions translate into your human resources policies? How you hire, does it translate into the way you look at IT? Does it...

Eric Ryan: Oh yeah.

Stephen Denny: Tell me about that.

Eric Ryan: So, if you can ever visit Method, when you walk in, it looks and feels exactly how you'd expect Method would from an environment perspective. Open offices, nothing is closed, we also

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have long desks together, a lot of white boards. It's very much open. And then I could argue that the head of HR, who we call the head of people environment, is the most important marketing person in the room. Because if you don't get the right culture behind the philosophy of the company and the right people on the bus, it just makes everything difficult. So, the way we go about that is before anybody gets offered a job here, they typically go through about 7 to 10 individual interviews. And it's over a cross functional team. And then the last step to getting a job here, which everybody from CEO to admin has done, is called the homework assignment. And the homework assignment is basically you get asked 3 questions and you're given an hour with the audience that you interview with, which is lots of people, if 1 hour you can do a PowerPoint, interpretive dance, whatever you want, we just love your point of view on these three things. And one is very strategic, one is very tactical to their jobs, and the last one is always the same one, how we help keep Method weird. And the weird one is about the culture and are you willing to put yourself out there and creative thinking and it is such a great predictor of success for an employee compared to an interview, given the choice to do the interviews or just do the homework assignment and make a decision from that, I would always do the homework assignment.

Stephen Denny: That's great.

Eric Ryan: And what it did was, first thing, it raised the bar on everybody here. We brought it in maybe about 5 years ago. So, if you were pushing a candidate to hire and they get up in front of ten people and are not strong, it reflects badly on you, so everybody starts raising the bar real quickly.

And then there are people who are great at interviewing but turn out to be lousy employees. I can argue some of the best interviewees are the worst employees because they had the most practice interviewing because they bounced around. And you can't hide in a homework assignment, like you really get to see how someone thinks, how they react, what is the chemistry, when you push back on them, do they get defensive or how clever are they. And you completely prototype the relationship before you hire somebody.

Stephen Denny: And it isn't the case of finding the best stand-up comic in the room. It's beyond presentation. It's as you say, it's more about the way they handle the feedback almost more than the bone jarring insights they can come up with in 60 minutes.

Eric Ryan: Yeah. It's not a test of their presentation skills. I think to be a collaborative individual in a company that's trying to build a brand, that's important. Communication skills are pretty key. And if you're a wallflower and you're painfully shy, yeah you're not going to get the job no matter how smart you are in your role, because you're not going to be effective in your collaboration within the company as a whole. But now it's not how much you can entertain us, it's how you think, and its chemistry. You know how, the cool thing here is afterwards you talk about a candidate and discuss whether we should we move forward or not. But I know half way through whether the candidate is going to be moved through just by watching their body language in a way.

Stephen Denny: That's a perfect answer to that question and I like that. It's a subject that I'm very intrigued with. And whether it neatly fits into the Killing Giants project or it becomes something else I think this is, if you're scanning the marketing news out there, you see a lot of this marketing function floundering, and really struggling for self-identity. A bit ironic given the fact that you know identity is one of the main reasons that marketers draw a paycheck from wherever they work. It's like the cobbler's children having no shoes. Seems to be this great loss of confidence in it is a function that's

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supposed to be really good at thinking on their feet. But the idea of dropping marketing down to the bottom of the ladder and saying it's not about shouting a message, it's about embodying a brand in every single possible way that a customer might interact with you. It seems to be a little bit more holistic, a little more genuine than the typical PR story that gets told today.

Eric Ryan: Yeah, and you know, I mean I talk a lot about branding from the inside out, and building a culture, and that's probably the hardest reason why again, if I was at P&G or Clorox and I wanted to do this, it gets, the culture will work against me. It's not that it's a bad culture by any means, but it's just a culture that is orientated a different way.

Stephen Denny: All the white blood cells would come out and surround you.

Eric Ryan: Exactly.

Stephen Denny: You made a wonderful statement about shifting the conversation. You said you can't outspend the Goliaths – you can't out-market them on claims. We've got to try to use their legacy against them. And you used Windex as example in this particular interview where you said they own the conversation on glass streaking, we can't come and join them and do a better job. We've got to move it. Talk to me a little bit if you would, about how you approach shifting the conversation. I understand that you have got a different conversation. But I'm very fascinated in this idea of using their strength against them and how you approach that.

Eric Ryan: Yeah, easier said than done. Did you ever read that Malcolm Gladwell article in the New Yorker a couple months ago about David versus Goliath? Just a wonderful article. He talks about the whole idea; he used the analogy of the full court press in basketball.

Stephen Denny: Yeah, I did read it. Yes. Yeah, my partner's daughter was one of the losing teams. So, yes, I remember that article.

Eric Ryan: Great article and I think it's easier said than done as far as changing the conversation. So for us, we try to look at what the legacy issues are, what the strengths are, what the things we'll never ever win on are, and then push them aside. We look for the things that we can talk about or make matter that our competition will do one of two things about. Either they'll decide that they can't talk about it because they can't win there or they would never waste their breath talking about it because it's a small thing that they could never justify. You know the Pete's Wicked Ale story where they talked about steam cleaning bottles? And they steam clean all the bottles for their beer. But just the fact that they talked about it made the assumption they did it, nobody else did it. I think Budweiser would think that of all the things they could say, they wouldn't want to talk about that. So, for us too, it's about the conversation, but it's also what are the things they can't do, so we can brand block because we're building a master brand where a hand wash and a spray cleaner can live together. Your Colgate, you can't do that. You can't put soft soap next to Ajax and have it make any sense to the consumer.

Stephen Denny: Yeah. So, we've established pretty well here, you are very clearly in the business of Killing Giants and it's, appreciated your time here. What do you feel at this moment is your big obstacle? Your big challenge, what is it that's consuming you right now?





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Eric Ryan: We've been clearly attacked. Goliath has woken up and has come after us pretty aggressively. And it came after us at the same time of the recession. And as private label woke up to attack Goliath, Goliath woke up to attack us, so we kind of had the perfect storm, which I think you know, when we look back at the history of Method, we will be so much stronger because we had to deal with these all at once. And out of desperation sometimes comes your best thinking. And so, the products we're launching next spring are great examples of that where we've definitely taken some bigger risks, very calculated risks. So, our biggest challenge is like finding fight or flight. So, trying to find a right balance between standing our ground and owning the space that we've built, and continuing to push out that differentiation and innovate.

Stephen Denny: Excellent. So, I appreciate it very much. I know you got a lot of things going on, not to mention 5 people outside your conference room door right now.

Eric Ryan: The laundry space is so big, if you can come up in December, I'd be happy to show it to you. It's the ultimate David versus Goliath story.

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