

How to Become a Successful Challenger Brand With BodyArmor CMO Tom Gargiulo

Creative scrappiness can take brands where no one else has ever gone before – that's BodyArmor's story, and we're diving deep into it on the latest episode of the Marketing Vanguard podcast.

Tune in as the brand's CMO, Tom Gargiulo, opens up his playbook on succeeding as a challenger brand, from how to build winning athlete partnerships and leverage unconventional media channels for outsized ROI to executing a brand rebirth that resonates with both consumers and retail partners.

What you'll learn:

- How to build a disruptor/ challenger brand positioning in a saturated category
- Why athlete-first partnerships outperform big-budget league deals if you're a resource-constrained brands
- The power of the bottling community's alignment in driving execution
- How social media ROI dramatically outperforms traditional TV
- The value of transparency and space-giving in high-performing marketing teams
- Why strategic media partnerships (Barstool, Dude Perfect, Savannah Bananas) create household brand status without massive budgets

Tom Gargiulo is the chief marketing officer of BodyArmor at The Coca-Cola Company, bringing extensive expertise in brand

marketing, sports partnerships and challenger brand strategy.

With a career spanning the NFL, PepsiCo, Danone, Kind and Coca-Cola, Tom has successfully navigated marketing across competitive CPG categories, including his instrumental role in growing Danone's yogurt business during the Greek yogurt boom.

His work at BodyArmor – including the brand's spring relaunch and the official partnership with the NHL – demonstrates how data-driven storytelling and collaborative customer relationships can drive category growth, making his strategic outlook essential for CMOs seeking to build disruptor brands within established markets.

Episode Highlights:

[10:36] The Secret Behind Disrupting Saturated Categories – Tom reveals that accessing Coca-Cola's world-class marketing tools and resources fundamentally transformed BodyArmor's ability to compete against entrenched category leaders like Gatorade.

CMOs managing challenger brands within larger corporate portfolios often struggle to balance autonomy with access to enterprise-level capabilities that can accelerate growth. The key is using these resources strategically to modernize visual identity, simplify messaging, and clearly communicate product differentiation rather than simply increasing media spend.

This approach transforms potential integration friction into competitive advantage, enabling you to reclaim disruptor status while maintaining the challenger mindset that built the brand.

[19:36] Athlete-First Strategy vs. Expensive League Deals – Tom Gargiulo explains that BodyArmor deliberately partners with rising athletes like Mike Trout, James Harden and currently Jalen Brunson, Connor McDavid and Joe Burrow,

capturing them before they reach superstardom rather than competing for expensive league partnerships.

This resource-constrained approach forces brands to be smarter about capital allocation and creates authentic equity-building moments that resonate with audiences. The strategy works because early career athletes are hungry, relatable, and their growth trajectory mirrors the brand's challenger positioning, creating a shared narrative.

When combined with media partners like Barstool Sports and Dude Perfect, these athlete relationships generate organic content integration and cross-collaborations that feel earned rather than purchased, delivering greater authenticity and ROI over time.

[24:39] How Social Media Helps You Punch Above Your Weight Class – Tom reveals that BodyArmor's partnership with high-engagement media properties like Barstool Sports, Dude Perfect, and the Savannah Bananas, combined with influencer "playmakers" and heavy investment in Meta and Snapchat, delivers 4-5x ROI compared to traditional TV spending.

For resource-constrained brands, this isn't a secondary tactic; it's the primary media strategy that enables you to reach youthful, passionate audiences at scale without matching competitors' TV budgets. The key is selecting partners whose audiences align with your brand values and whose content naturally integrates your product organically rather than forcing sponsorships – an approach particularly useful while targeting young consumers.

[29:12] Transparency, Humor and Earned Autonomy Build High-Performing Teams – Tom shares that his leadership philosophy centers on three pillars: infusing humor and fun into daily work (because "if you're not having fun, why are you doing this?"), maintaining radical transparency by sharing all available facts and decisions openly and granting autonomy

based on demonstrated results rather than title.

This approach empowers team members to make informed decisions and take ownership of their work, directly improving both engagement and execution quality. However, autonomy must be earned – if results don't match expectations or standards slip, the leader steps in to provide more direction and coaching.

For CMOs building high-performing marketing teams, this framework demonstrates that psychological safety (created through humor and transparency), information access (radical transparency), and clear accountability (earned autonomy) are the three levers that unlock exceptional performance – especially in fast-moving, high-pressure environments like challenger brand marketing.

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