

Bending the Curve With Bonin Bough

Interviewed by Christine Chirichella



During this year's Build Business 2021: RISE, August 4–6, Bonin Bough will take the virtual stage as keynote presenter. Currently chief growth officer of Triller and founder of Bonin Venture, Bough is a marketing guru who's leveraged technology to become one of the youngest C-suite executives in a Fortune 50 company. He'll share how he took brands like Oreo, Cadbury, PepsiCo, and Gatorade and helped them drive strategic initiatives and develop leading-edge marketing campaigns.

Bough has been inducted into the Advertising Hall of Achievement and appeared on Fortune's 40 under 40, Fast Company's 100 Most Creative People in Business, The Adweek 50, PRWeek Power List, and *Ebony's* Power 100.

You may know him from hosting CNBC's *Cleveland Hustles*, a business-focused reality show created by LeBron James, or his book, *Txt Me (646) 759-1837: Your Phone Has Changed Your Life. Let's Talk About It*.

During his presentation, Bough will share details and stories about his work with companies that are developing technologies and platforms to help firms unlock growth and success. You'll leave the keynote inspired to create new client relationships by combining breakthrough communications with customer data.

Marketer recently spoke to Bough, who shares some of his amazing story and insights.

Marketer: Tell our readers a little about yourself. How did you get your start in corporate marketing?

My journey is interesting, because my plan was not to do this. But at a very young age, I was lucky enough that my mom bought me a computer. I taught myself how to program and then went to a technical high school, where I continued to learn programming.

I went to college for physics and political science, with my goal to become an engineering lawyer. I opened up a web company with my roommate, and we made the first Jordache website and the first National Soccer Hall of Fame website.

After we graduated, we sold the business, and I decided to (freelance) program so I could make some money over the summer. I worked with some big places like Razorfish and ProxyComm. When the tech bubble burst in 1999, I ended up at the largest privately held communications firm at that time. They asked me to build out their digital offering and open their offices in San Francisco, China, and Europe.

From there I went to IPG and built the global digital practice, taking it from about 30 to 280 people by the time I left. I also ran the investment group and did the first investment, like Facebook, from a holding company.

I began to see where the power of the emerging tech space was—tech was kind of roaring back after the bubble break in 1999.

I left the agency side and went to PepsiCo, where I was the first chief digital officer. That was really about proving how you could take a large organization and introduce digital in a way that could move product off the shelf. We did everything from the reinvention of Gatorade to the first user-generated beverage for



Anaplan, San Francisco, CA. Fennie+Mehl Architecture. ©Emily Hagopian Photography, emilyhagopian.com.

Mountain Dew, the largest-selling, limited-time offer in company history.

After that, I went to Kraft and became chief media and commerce officer. I wanted to be the largest vendor on mobile of all the consumer packaged goods (CPG) categories. Ultimately, we shifted from 3% to about 32% digital in five years. We added \$2 billion on top line, and \$300 million on bottom line. We also changed the way we did consumer engagement across all the brands globally. And I built the e-commerce business from \$65 million to \$265 million. I lived in China to relaunch Oreo, India to relaunch Cadbury, and Brazil to relaunch Trident.

As I watched WeChat and messaging tech grow, I met the owner of the largest natural beauty business, who asked me to jump back in. I said, "Only if you let me turn it into a tech company." We

used messaging to build a database, and took the business from \$200 million to about \$300 million in 12 months. We sold it for a little under \$1 billion.

With this new partner, I started working with things I thought were really disruptive. In December 2019, before the pandemic, we ran into Triller and decided we'd like them in the portfolio. We took operating roles. Since March 2020, I've been chief growth officer.

For me, it's about chasing innovation. It's not what's next, as much as what's needed. Where are the gaps in the market where you can generate dramatic growth? It's fun, some days.

Marketer: How can firms with smaller budgets drive growth or follow in the footsteps of firms that have much larger marketing budgets?

I think it's easier when you're smaller—I've spent a lot of time in small businesses. Just because you're a small business doesn't mean you need to think small. So, that's kind of the core of it. I really think it comes down to where are those disruptive moments that you can create, both to change communications and rethink how you drive awareness.

Even at PepsiCo, it was always about creatively figuring out how I can get it done. I think most people don't value other pieces of currency or assets they have in front of them. So, we would trade when we didn't have cash to run a program. For example, we would offer up packaging: What if I put your brand on a six-pack? People loved a press release from us. I've always done this.

So, I don't think it's about budget, I think it's about ambition, and then figuring out a way to that ambition. Realistically, it's not about how big or small you are, it's about identifying what you need to accomplish and figuring out the most disruptive way to do it, that has the greatest impact. A lot of that's not going to be the way you're used to doing it, or the way it's been done before.

DC Water headquarters, Washington, D.C.
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Marketer: Our members work in professional services industries. How can you translate the product marketing you've done into providing a service?

Most people struggle with B2B—I think people tend to look at it as kind of boring. They treat B2B marketing, or even service-related marketing, as if it's different from product-related marketing. And the reality is, we're all the same consumer. What we want is to be surprised, delighted, astounded, and emotionally connected. Those age-old themes carry through, regardless.

I think back to when Volvo did a piece with Jean Claude Van Damme. He started off standing on two trucks and ended up doing a full split while they were driving. This piece went everywhere. And the funny thing was, it was really an ad for the stability of the steering of the trucks, which is a very niche market.

So, that's the irony of where people get stuck on B2B and service-based marketing. This commercial didn't say anything about steering or offer any points. But so many people feel like in every single piece of messaging, they have to list out specifically what it does. That's not what people are buying. People are buying the connection that your marketing and communication has. And there are other pieces too—the relationship building component piece and relationship referral.

Marketer: What words of advice can you give to those who are a marketing team of one and wear many hats?

Again, I'm gonna use a product as an example. There was a blender called Blendtec®. It was a heavy-duty blender meant for the home. They launched a YouTube channel called "Will It Blend?" And all they did was take the blender and drop stuff in it—marbles, iPhones—it became a sensation. And that was no money whatsoever outside of the cost of marbles and iPhones. And it took off.



What if an architecture firm did something simple, too? Or built things that just show they understand the beauty of engineering?

Also, I think LinkedIn is massively underutilized as a way to build relationships. It really all depends on the specific nature of the business, but I bet if they looked at who they would consider their top 10 competitors, they're probably not using LinkedIn.

Marketer: What would you like the audience to learn, feel, and walk away with after hearing your keynote address?

I talk a lot about growth strategy and creating value by breaking things. At the end of the day, that's what unlocks opportunity. And that's our biggest fear, right, to do things in a different way? If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

For me, it's always, how do I get you to become excited and give you some guardrails of how to think differently. How do I get you inspired and realize you have to look at problems and opportunities from all different directions? And usually the solution is not going to be what you're doing now.

And then after I send you off, everybody has my phone number. If there's a question, I'm always here to get you back on track. ■

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Watch Bonin Bough's keynote, "Bending the Curve: Tools To Unlock Organizational Growth," Thursday, August 5, noon–12:45 p.m. ET, during the all-digital experience, Build Business, the SMPS annual conference.

Read bonus interview content on the Build Business website under "Keynote Presentation."

buildbusiness.org



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