



Liz: Hi everyone welcome to waste three 60s nothing wasted podcast on every episode we invite the most interesting people in waste recycling and organics to sit down with us and chat candidly about their thoughts their work this unique industry and so much more so thanks for listening and enjoy this episode.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Liz: Hi everyone. This is Liz Bothwell from waste 360. With Josh Cohen founder and CEO of JunkLuggers and Remix Market. Welcome Josh and thanks so much for being on the show.

Josh: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity.

Liz: So please share with us a little bit about your background and how you found yourself on this quest to rid the world of junk in a responsible way.

Josh: Thank you. Actually, our new tagline is “saving the world one leg at a time”.

Liz: Oh I like that. Thank you.

Josh: So yeah, I got started actually generally 15 years which is crazy. I started when I was 21 years old and I was I was drinking box wine around a campfire during a study abroad in Australia and a friend said he made a hundred bucks hauling away neighbor’s refrigerator and I thought “what the heck. That sounds like a great idea. Why can’t I do that and earn some extra cash?” I had an internship lined up that summer when I got back but I knew it may not pay all the bills. Or just another opportunity to do something.

So, I kept thinking about it as soon as I got home. I just went to my parents computer, print out some flyers “21 year old college student wants to help you haul away your junk” and then donate to goodwill recycle as much as we can and then bring the rest of the dump and I just went and started going door to door handing it out to my neighbors and I started to pick up business. I was using my mom's Dodge Durango SUV to get started, charging 50 dollars for the first car load, 30 dollars for each additional. My love for the business and understanding that it was so much more than hauling junk really happened right away. When I started to work you know hand-in-hand with some of our customers who are going through some major transitions in their life.

Liz: Oh wow. And then I read somewhere that your first customer was an older woman who was grieving her the loss of a spouse or something.

Josh: Yeah

Liz: And then you realized how important the value of her possessions were, right?

Josh: Yeah that was one of my first customers and she is an elderly lady deter her family lives all not living locally. And she had the job of “Alright. We've got to downsize now I've got to clear out all of these memories from my basement.” And you know when I when I went over to her house I was going up at 6:00 in the morning before my internship started and then at the end of the day hopefully before the sun went down and we were just taking out boxes and boxes of all these things that you know she had stories behind and she was talking about with me, you could see it in her eyes how much of a difference it made. I was listening. And that's a skill that we share with our all of our service professionals who are in the field. And then I was taking care of this stuff. So, avoiding as much of it just being thrown away and basically throwing her memories in the trash.

I was really trying to do the opposite. And that was a really pivotal point for me in the business.

Liz: Oh, I bet. Wow what a learning experience. And I've read that you have this big hairy audacious goal of keeping 100 percent of items hauled away out of landfills by 2025. Do you think that's still doable?

Josh: I do think it's doable. It's definitely big hairy and audacious. And if there's anybody listening to this podcast who thinks that they can help. We're looking for all the help we can get. You know we're not getting necessarily one or two consistent types of materials. We get all kinds of stuff. A lot of it's bulky and we're just looking for more and more ways to divert things that are just being thrown away. We've started we have a number of initiatives that are really pushing the needle. Some of the simpler things like we have designated, a not a processing, but a sorting center at our facility where we separate specific items such as mattresses, which we collect in bulk and then recycle properly electronic waste, computers, laptops, cell phones, all that stuff, metals, plastic, paper and cardboard. We mostly just work with a couple of facilities that force our people when we go out to dispose that we're actually separating items properly. And then of course, we track our progress.

And then the other big initiative that we've taken over the past few years is we started something called Remix Market. It was really something we started out of my brother in law's driveway doing weekend tag sales because what was happening is that one of the big pieces of our business and really what's been part of our mission since we started was donating, donating as much as we possibly can right. Because if somebody else gets to use it has a second life. And what we've been finding, and we've been franchising across the country now is that more and more donation centers are full. They're picky. They don't want something as a scratch on it. And so, we decide to take matters into our own hands a bit more and say "Hey we got all this good stuff here. We don't want to just throw it away and we don't have enough options of where to bring some of it." So, we opened up our own facility, which has now expanded into multiple locations with some of our franchise partners and our flagship store here is about 12000 square feet. We're really just repurposing items a lot. We do have a restoration center will restore furnish certain pieces and then we just sell them back to the community. We donate a portion of all proceeds to local charities, which really again aligns with our mission of enhancing lives the community and the environment by donating recycling, up cycling and supporting local charities. So, it's right in line with that and it's been that you know all of these things together are ways that we're pushing the needle to achieve our bigger scope.

Liz: Oh that's that's fantastic. And speaking of goals, I mean you've had impressive growth in the last few years and it sounds like franchising is a huge part of that. So are you in markets all across the country?

Josh: Not yet. We're leaving great business partners across the country. Yeah, we're growing.

I mean we're growing aggressively, and we are now in about 60 territories or 60 markets in the country. Our goal is to really triple that just within the next year or two. And so, we're just looking for great partners who can be good business people are coachable can follow a system but also have kind of that fire in their belly and want to be in business for themselves but not by themselves right.

Liz: Ok. Okay. And so, I figured you would be a great person to ask this because I feel like you started at such a young age before a lot of these technological tools and innovations were in place. So you've had a bird's eye view of this technological adoption. How do you think technology has changed or improved your business over the last 15 years?

Josh: Well first it was door to door handing out flyers, but then we really got into direct mail in a big way. And I'm sure as a lot of the listeners on your podcast can attest to, while we still feel direct mail is a piece of the pie. It's really really kind of marketing and gone very much focused on digital and there's so many ways to do that. So, it's forced us to grow or die. And so, we've had to like many companies, you know, really understand what that means and how to get the name out there online. So, I think that's one big way.

In terms of technology in general, you know, when we started, I think Gmail was just coming out. And so, our first official software program after pen and paper was Google Calendar, which is still a great tool. But what I've seen over the last bunch of years is that there are so many more great software opportunities, third party software options, out there than there ever were. And we're really leveraging the ability to use those. to pivot from one to the other, as we see other advantages and to connect them through API to use the best systems for each type of thing we're trying to achieve with the company.

Liz: Sure. And then you mentioned marketing and kind of moving to digital and I know you've credited some of your success to a really integrated marketing plan. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Josh: Definitely yeah. And it's something that we talk about a lot with our franchise partners too, right? Because I think what I hear from a lot of people is well we're online. We have a website, or we run a Google AdWords campaign. But, you know, that's really only a piece of the funnel. And you know anyone in marketing knows that you have to be out there, and you have to hit people multiple times in multiple ways to really resonate with them again in their heads. And so that's what we try to do, and we use a combination of when I say digital that there's a whole bunch of things that play into that. But then we do we do a lot of traditional stuff. We're at events all the time, meeting face to face with people. We do a lot of direct mail. We do some radio in affordable markets look to expand from there. And we still do a decent amount of guerrilla marketing, you know, using our trucks and we have these needs to really stand out for a reason. And so, we'll do things like parking the trucks, waving to customers as they drive by, taking pictures thrown them on social media. Again, a lot of attention.

Liz: Oh yeah. Your trucks will really gain attention. I see them on the roads and it always turns my head. So that was brilliant. Now I have to ask did you benefit from the Marie Kondo tidying up craze right after the New Year.

JoshL You know it's hard to say we got but we've got a great article in The New York Times about JunkLuggers and Marie Kondo and, you know, I'm hearing about it more and more and more. We've definitely been using the Marie Kondo philosophy and some of our PR and social media posts and educational material to our customers. So yeah, I guess with how being able to quantify, yeah.

Liz: OK, makes sense.

So back when we spoke to you in 2017 when you were one of our 40 Under 40 award winners. I don't even know if you realize that the time, but I just gone back and read some of the interviews that we've done with you. You foresaw more regulations and limits on recycling coming. I'm not saying that you predicted the recent China or India

bans. You certainly had an accurate feeling that something big was coming down that will change how we deal with recycling. How has this affected your business?

Josh: Yeah. Well expense. It's been a big thing. It's, you know, even just talking locally with our company location here in Connecticut, in New York, you know, we used to recycle for free and now we pay for it at the same rate that we're paying for, mix solid waste. So, it's challenging it takes away some of the financial motivation, for sure. It has brought some challenges, it's unfortunate, but I think that what I'm hoping for and what we're working towards at Remix Market is finding ways to repurpose as much as we can. And so again, just like with donation centers this may require us to get even more creative and find ways to repurpose certain items that we used to just recycle.

Liz: Sure. You've been pretty active on social media and I see you being helpful on sites like Quora. And you recently said that recycling has taken on a passive role in our lives. Could you talk more about that and what you mean by that?

Josh: What I mean by that is a couple of things. So, I think that you know over the last few decades people got used to, in a lot of locations but not all, and I'm actually surprised at some of the more progressive cities that don't even offer recycling yet. But they are thinking about it. But a lot of locations a lot of areas they require recycling, right? So, people got used to it and it became a thing. And we have recycling bins now, but I think where what I've seen is that the continuous education around what can or cannot be recycled. What happens to the items once you put them in the bin and also just the importance of caring about it. It's just something that you don't really hear pushed. And I think that in order to combat all of these things that we hear about in the news all the time about climate change and fossil fuels and all this stuff is just not on our minds because it just so much easier to dump things in the trash. And I just don't think it needs to be that way.

Liz: And you say do you think education is key?

Liz: Yeah, I think education. But I also think we've basically gotten no recognition or support at any level from the government from private businesses. And I feel like a business-like mind and others who are trying to do things that are helping the environment and the community, we need more support. And it can be really tough, and

it takes a lot of willpower which we have, to take a lot of willpower and also, you know, investment to be able to create solutions that just don't exist.

Liz: That's a good point. Hopefully that will change. So, can you and JunkLuggers... You guys do so much for your local community. What types of charity work are you guys doing? Could you give us a little insight into that?

Josh: Yeah definitely. We've done a lot of stuff, so we have hosted an event to raise money for Make A Wish. Where we had about, I think we had a couple hundred people here and raised enough to grant a wish for a child in need. I'm a part of Make A Wish, I'm a part of the board here in Connecticut and definitely the cause is near and dear to my heart and many other people in the company here.

We also work and support Mikey's Way through Remix Market program. It's another organization that helps children who have life threatening diseases and delivers them toys and games directly in the hospital. We actually have our staff and myself, we go on some of these visits and hand out toys to kids in hospitals and kids still love toys and especially when they're stuck and they can't leave the room to get visits and gifts. It goes a long way.

We've done fundraisers for the Boy Scouts every year where they'll have large, large, large tag sales like you've never seen. And then they need the other items picked up to either be donated or are hauled away.

We do a lot of community cleanups, parks and gardens and street. So, it's nonstop. It feels like we're doing things to the community. You know, weekly. It's a nice way, you know, not only to be a part of the community but I feel fortunate to have built, to have the opportunity to use my business as a tool to give back.

Liz: Oh that's wonderful. So, you've spoken a lot about the importance of listening and making sure that you're doing that. And I know that you promised that the trucks will always be on time. So really service is such a part of your organization. How do you make sure that's instilled your business as you grow and expand into all these different markets by franchising?

Josh: You know we do a few things ourselves. We're constantly talking about our mission our vision our values our core values. Talk a lot about wowing our customers incredible service. We have standard operating procedures within the company that hold people accountable. And we have accountability programs to get feedback from customers and we don't meet that, right? So, we need to show up on time and if we're not you better call the customer ready let alone know you're running late because nobody wants to sit around wait. And also, we all automatic discounts should we be late. But again, that's only about 5 percent of the time. But we value our customers time. We want to let them know that both in the price and just being courteous. We do a lot of training and a lot of our training starts with and ends with talking about the customer, the customer experience, ways to improve the customer experience. For instance, when you show up look professional. We now wear collared shirt with a green collar because we're green collared professional. And the initial appearance makes it makes it a big difference if you're trusting somebody come in your home and work with your valuable possessions that you're taking away, your memories. Teach you how to look like a customer in the eye, address them by their first name. Shake their hand, present an estimate in the right way. Those are things that improve the customer experience and allow somebody to trust us in a way that they want to do business with, and they feel good about working with us.

And I think the other big thing we do is we really put a lot of emphasis on the Net Promoter Score. That promotion with our customers, and we survey every customer right after they complete a job. We have a great response rate. I think close to 45 percent of our customers respond to surveys. And if we do a good job, we will get a 90 percent net promoter score. We'll hear about it. That's great. We don't do a good job. We hear about that and we have a policy where you need to follow up the same day with those customers into reported back to us. There are actually stipulations in our franchise agreement where if you're a net promoter score falls below 10 points of the average then the franchise system, you've got to come back for training you're out of compliance, we take it very seriously. And we also share reviews daily for all locations across the entire company to hold everybody accountable and to make sure everybody's aware of how each other each location is doing with their net promoter score.

Liz: Oh that's great though because accountability goes a long way.

Josh: Yeah. You can't manage what you can't measure, right?

Liz: Exactly. So, what's next for you and your businesses?

Josh: For us, we are ready. We are growing and we are going to keep pushing that. We are talking with some very strategic partners, who we're going to grow with and who are going to help our franchisees to add more jobs on their calendar. But we plan to expand in the top 50 markets within the next two years. So, we're really focused on that. And we're really focused on improving the Remix Market model as part of our business model and really making sure that that's well integrated into the whole system because it really provides a well-rounded ecosystem for our business. Right. We pick things up and then we need places to bring them that meet our mission ideally. Growth, growth, growth.

Liz: I love it. That's fantastic. So, what is what does your mom think. I mean helping you start. She loaned you her SUV, helps you with the printer, and now a smashing success. What does she think about this?

Josh: What does my mom think... Well I'll tell you both my parents think, I guess, that's a good question. I'll tell you when I first told my father that I was quitting my job to be a junk man full time. I think his jaw fell to the floor you going to believe it. He had helped me get that job at the real estate firm and I was making decent money. Why would I want to put back on my overalls and start schlepping around?

You know, I was using a trailer at that time to haul things, but I just thought that's where my heart was, I wanted to bleed green. And so I think that it took a few years for him to get it, but now that you know they're both proud of it and it's great and it's been a lot of fun and I think every time my parents come to visit in our headquarters here in Connecticut, they're really just amazed at not only the vibe, and the culture and the excitement, the spirit that you can feel around the offices, but just how much we've got going on. I think when they think back to me painting, you know, hand painting, and hand extensively, our first truck and our first trailer to seeing you know a fleet of 20 vehicles just in the parking lot here and a call center that you know looks like a football field. I think it is a little surreal to them like that.

Liz: That's amazing. And they've watched evolution. That's amazing.

Josh: Yeah, they've supported it too.

Liz: Oh that's great. So, what advice would you give to professionals entering this industry?

Josh: I think my advice is especially for someone who's not only entering the industry but maybe entering business for the first time or owning their own business. And if I can answer it that way. Yeah, I can tell you first of all you're in a great industry. There is a there's a big demand for people to help other people with the stuff that they need hauled away especially when you can do it in a way that is environmentally friendly and is friendly to the customer. And I can tell you, I've had a lot of people who even within the junk removal industry, there's a lot of people who've come and gone and I'm sure a lot of the listeners here can relate to that within their respect aspect of businesses. And you know that's for a number of reasons. It's not just who's got the biggest piggy bank or who's been in business the longest, but it's about will power. It's about passion. And I have more passion for this business than anything else and I eat sleep and breathe it. And if you want to be successful whatever you're doing that's the ingredient.

Liz: That's great. And that seems to be a common theme. And I think that's what makes this industry so special really.

Josh: I agree I agree. And I think it's often overlooked, and we are doing special things every day.

Liz: Definitely. So, what else do you think we should be paying attention to in the world of waste and recycling?

Josh: At least in my world, you know, I'm not in the everyday trash or recycling pickup so again I'm more in the random stuff that you have stored in your basement or your attic for 30 years.

I expect that as natural resources continue to be depleted as landfill and disposal tipping fees keep increasing that there's going to be a need and a requirement for people to pay more attention to the things that we're doing and that so my peers in the business are doing to divert items from going into landfills, of course, but I think with the challenges and recycling as well, that we just talked about, I think we're gonna need to see a lot more solutions there in order to create a circular eco-system where we can just keep reusing items again and again and there's no reason that we can't keep doing that right to a much, much higher level.

Liz: So, how's your canine in chief doing? Is he keeping busy?

Josh: I'm looking at him right now. He's on his fleece blanket on my couch at work here. He's going to be 17 this year and he is doing well. I think we all could learn from him about how to live a stress-free life.

Liz: I love that. You have such like, you mentioned, the vibe in your office and the feeling that people get when even when they go to your website and look at your team, I'm guessing that comes from you and oozes out that way. Is that something you intentionally work on? Is that feeling in that culture in your office or is it just natural and then you attract that type of person?

Josh: I think it's probably a combination of the two. You know, I've been in business like I said for a while now. So again, like any of the listeners, business is an evolution and we've had some we've had amazing cultures, like its family. We've had times where the culture has actually gone pretty sour and we've had to start over again. But I think you know as we've been able to grow as a company, we've have been able to also be more selective with who we bring onto our team and to attract really good talent. And I think that, you know, for me in the past one of the mistakes I've made is going strictly after experience and it's just never work no matter how much they've achieved. You know, somewhere else they got to be a good fit because you have to work with others, and you have to get people excited to work with you. And so, I think that we've been fortunate, we've had some great hires, we have an awesome culture. We've had some bad hires, we've had to move them off the bus. But I think one of the things that attracts people when they come into the office is that culture and is or is not a feeling like "hey

this is a place for me". And we have a pretty rigorous hiring process, a number of steps and that allows us to really see if we're aligned in a lot of ways.

Liz: That's great. Good for you. I hope it keeps growing and you maintain that that wonderful vibe.

Josh: Thank you.

Liz: So, what keeps you busy outside of work?

Josh: have twins they're four years old. So they definitely keep me busy and so they just learn how to ride their two wheelers and they're very proud of that. Oh, and we live near the beach, so we spend a lot of time at the beach now riding bikes and just being outdoors and they're going to kid all over again.

Liz: Oh, I bet. That's so good for the soul. That's fantastic.

So how can listeners hear more from you and JunkLuggers? What do you want to share your Twitter handle or your URL?

Josh: Sure. Yeah, although, I'm probably not as active on Twitter as I should be.. @JunkLuggerJosh but I'm on LinkedIn, Josh Cohen JunkLuggers. The website is junkluggers.com. We have a section there if anybody's interested in franchising, just search for franchising and JunkLuggers and you could always show me an e-mail Josh@junkluggers.com.

Liz: Oh that's great. Well this has been fantastic, Josh. Thanks so much for such a great conversation.

Josh: Thank you I appreciate it.

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