

EPIISODE 008

HOTEL TANGO DISTILLERY

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Bryan Judkins, Young & Laramore

AND

Travis Barnes, Hotel Tango Distillery

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

BRYONY GOMEZ-PALACIO

Hi, this is Bryony Gomez-Palacio and welcome to episode 8 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on the identity and packaging for Hotel Tango Distillery, an artisan distillery in Indianapolis, IN, making bourbon, whiskey, vodka, gin, rum, cherry liqueur, orangecello, and limoncello. The distillery was started by Travis Barnes, a veteran of the Marine Corps and his wife and business partner, Hilary Barnes — she is the H for Hotel, he is the T for Tango.

The project, designed by Indianapolis-based Young and Laramore, was posted on Brand New on April 29. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast008 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast008, all in lowercase. This project is a little older so you might need a refresher this time.

This week we are joined by Bryan Judkins, Principal and Group Creative Director at Young & Laramore and Travis Barnes, Founder and CEO of Hotel Tango Distillery

In this conversation we learn about why Hotel Tango needed a new brand despite having a pretty good one already; how Travis' history, personality, and no-BS approach informed the new brand; and how Young and Laramore bottled all that into a fantastic new look built around the design of the pre-packaged food rations used by U.S. Armed Forces.

Now, let's listen in as Armin follows up with Bryan and Travis.

ARMIN VIT Welcome everyone, today we have a very, or the most Hoosier-like podcast episode we'll have because everybody here, including myself and the guests we're all from the state of Indiana. So welcome to The Follow-Up, Travis and Bryan.

TRAVIS BARNES Thank you for having me.

BRYAN JUDKINS Yeah. Thank you.

ARMIN VIT So, Travis, we're going to start with you. There's a lot to your story about how you started Hotel Tango and your life as a soldier before it. Can you give our listeners the abridged version of that?

TRAVIS BARNES Sure. I'm from Northeast Indiana, town, uh, of Albion. I grew up there. I graduated in 2001, started college, 9-11 happened, felt the calling dropped out of college and enlisted in the Marine Corps. I ended up doing three tours in Iraq with 1st Recon Battalion. I got out, came back home, finished up school, went to law school where I, I met my wife and, uh, about halfway through, I realized I didn't want to be a lawyer. And, um, I was already doing distilling as a hobby in the backyard and the law was changing for the first time since prohibition in Indiana. So we kind of put a business plan together and took the hobby to, ah, actual business. And we opened our doors in 2014, uh, here on Virginia Avenue, just selling out of there. And, uh, we have since grown it to over 12 States, over 2000, uh, retail locations. We're on, uh, over 120 military installations throughout the United States from DC to

Honolulu. So we're growing, uh, you know, sometimes at a breakneck pace. It's a very cool industry to be in—it's been a pretty wild ride thus far.

ARMIN VIT What attracted you to distilling in the first place?

TRAVIS BARNES I was curious, and I think if there was a challenge to it. Uh, I've been doing beer previously and this was kind of the next step. And I felt like the beer industry was kind of saturated. And, I don't know, I always just preferred spirits anyway. And this was kind of in my wheelhouse growing up. Yeah, it was really just a challenge to see if I could make it at first. And then I built my own still and it was doing it in the backyard with a Turkey fryer and some garden hoses. And then I put it in little tiny barrels and gave it away as Christmas presents or birthday presents or whatever. And folks said, this is pretty good, man, not bad. That was the catalyst really to take it from hobby to actual business was that there was anecdotal feedback that the product was good and that people enjoyed it. So from there it just encouraged me to go... keep pushing.

ARMIN VIT Yeah. So from this hobby, you already had a design in place before you took on this redesign. I'm guessing last year, 2019—excuse me. And you had a pretty decent brand with a good logo and nice bottles that you could have probably kept using for, you know, at least a decade. What made you want to redesign?

TRAVIS BARNES I think it was the, the realization that the message wasn't being communicated. It was, I think in some ways, a little too straightforward, but it was almost inside baseball where you had to understand some of it to get it right away. Otherwise it left folks, I think a little confused on the connection between military and distillation, but we couldn't really articulate what that disconnect was. I mean, again, it was all pretty anecdotal. We, we felt like we understood, but, uh, we just didn't get it. And that's when we engaged with a Y and L.

ARMIN VIT All right. So that's a perfect segue to turn to Bryan. How did Y and L, Young and Laramore, get involved in this project and how did that relationship evolve from that first contact to starting to work together?

BRYAN JUDKINS Well, we've been secret admirers of... and well, and bare faced consumers of Hotel Tango for years, they've got a great story. We also saw an opportunity to help them amplify that story. Our process started with interviews, strategy—we interviewed many people, Travis, right? I mean, we interviewed all around. We interviewed consumers, we inter— interviewed spirit drinkers. We interviewed bartenders. We interviewed distributors... all to get the, like just kind of full view of Hotel Tango and, and how the military message was working. Because that, that was a little bit of an issue... we noticed after we started talking to people that the military connection was a bit of a disconnection that people felt it was a bit of a novelty that that was like, oh, that's interesting. That's really cool. I'm going to get that from my uncle because he's in the military, but not for, not for me. I never considered drinking it myself. So it was then that we started to come up with the idea that Travis' background in the military and his time there would lead to the really easy connection to the meticulous process of distilling. And now that gives a reason for the consumer to understand why this is going to be a good experience for them. And that's what we came up with the phrase "Distilled with discipline". Just kind of our core, like tagline thought. In general, we just really tried to lay out how we were going to work. And we could talk later about the process too, about how we kept Hotel Tango very involved throughout, which I think was really key to the outcome and our relationship. But I think we hit it off pretty instantly and knew we were going to be working together for years to come.

ARMIN VIT Nice. So Travis, what attracted you to Y and L in the first place?

TRAVIS BARNES Well, I would say some of their past work, uh, definitely I think made them stand out some of the past projects that we just knew that they were a part of, uh, without even going to ask them about it. We actually went and talked to some other folks out in the alcohol world

and really, you could just see it on the shelf, uh, the difference that it made, uh, for these other folks. Uh, initially they just listened, uh, from the interviews and learning about the core company, and the people in it, and the story, and how they really did a good job of kind of taking everything, um, and then using that as the foundation to build upon everything else.

ARMIN VIT And did you consider using other design firms or were you just from the start just like focusing on one and seeing how that went?

TRAVIS BARNES No, I would say that, uh, we definitely, I don't know if you want to call it an RFP, but we, we definitely solicited and checked out other folks and, uh, Y and L just seem to be the, the right group, the right fit for us, I think because they listened the best. I think that their team, they listened before they started being creative, I guess, is how I would say it. And then that, that was what attracted me... is how much time they wanted to spend learning about the story before just throwing shit against the wall.

ARMIN VIT Yeah. I think that's ah, what designers first impulse to just create and ask questions later, and see what happens. And what's it important to work with a local firm or was that not that big a deal?

TRAVIS BARNES We wanted the right firm. I think that was the most important. It didn't—it's really nice that they're five blocks away, I can tell you that! If we need to talk or hash something out, I mean, it's, it's great to have them right there, but no, I don't think that that was necessarily anything. I think it was truly the fit and this was our first time doing a big partnership-expansion, money-spend like this. So it was a little bit of gut feeling to be honest on who was going to be the right, who are we marrying to change, change our baby?

ARMIN VIT Yeah. Well, uh, after seeing the result, I think it's clear that you made the right choice. So good call on that. Bryan, you already talked a little bit about this, but you know, given Travis' background and then the previous design, I would imagine that the goal from the start was

to keep the military theme. Like I'm getting at no point where like, oh, just going any other direction that you want to, how do you first approach this aspect of the redesign?

BRYAN JUDKINS Yeah, because of the strategy, the goal was definitely to keep the military theme, but we also knew we needed to elevate the look-and-feel of the brand to feel more premium. And our first step in that process is to make a ton of mood boards. We split up a war room in our building. One half was all military inspiration, uniforms, insignias, stencils, military documents, and the other half was just inspiration from the spirits world, mostly high end premium spirits. That's—we just kind of started to bathe in that it was like just like method acting, just absorbing that world around us. And also, it was really important that we capture Travis' personality as part of this brand. We have a phrase that we say, which is "Bottling Travis", and, and when you meet Travis, he's a very straightforward, no-bullshit kind of dude. That's how we made the connection to MREs and other types of military packaging, because it's also just so simple and straightforward, and that gave us a way to communicate a connection to the military, with the cliché use of flags and camouflage, and overly aggressive Eagles.

ARMIN VIT You mentioned briefly about how, um, how you, you involve Travis and the Hotel Tango team along the process. So in this phase of doing the mood boards was the making of the mood boards in collaboration with Travis and/or, and his team? Or did you just do, we're going to do mood boards and then come and see them?

BRYAN JUDKINS I think our, one of our number one goals, because we were new to each other and Hotel Tango was still pretty new to the process in general, was to avoid any big reveal. That was our number one thing, and just become partners and take you through the process very slowly. We had a lot of minds to tear from inside the building of Hotel Tango. There were a lot of strong opinions over there, not surprisingly. [laughter] And so we went through every step. So not so much, did we build the boards together, but we narrowed the boards together.

We started to agree and come to consensus together about what was working for them. What was going to feel like Hotel Tango. Sometimes there's a little bit of like in anything where your choice is fish. This is what you're eating tonight. This is it. We believe in it's so strong enjoy, but for the most part, we really didn't do too much of that. We just did that together. I think Travis and Hillary, the H in Hotel Tango, they were in our basement many, many, many times as we were going through into our war room and walking through these things.

ARMIN VIT And Travis was this, ah, mood board process new to you?

TRAVIS BARNES Yes, absolutely. I guess conceptually, you know, from theory to practice, I guess in my mind it was more going to be like a madman, you know, kind of thing. But no Bryan and his team, they're gentle lovers, they were very good about not shocking us, you know, with a big, big reveal. It was a cadence of listening, building a foundation, and then, you know, showing that to us and saying, is this the foundation we want before we put another layer on top of it? And I would agree with Bryan that, yeah, I think that there was a lot of nudging from those guys and in good ways that I'm, I would say initially we were a little hesitant to, because it was our baby from the start. So any change was going to be contemplated and thought about, and yeah, we didn't agree initially on everything. And I think that's, again, I like that there's healthy pushback, uh, on the, on that side, because if there wasn't a little bit of rub, it wouldn't be important.

ARMIN VIT Yeah and I think part of the process of designers that we sometimes go through with clients is a little bit of soul searching on the side of the client. We ask questions that are sometimes not necessarily uncomfortable, but things that you haven't thought about in a specific way about how then those things would manifest in a design solution. So I think the mood board stage is really helpful in hashing out those things, as you mentioned before, adding on another layer of complexity and things that will actually come to market. So, um, it's, it's nice to hear that the process was beneficial to you. Now,

Bryan, you already mentioned and alluded to MREs, which for our listeners, for anyone that doesn't know, or my accent is not clearly understandable, they stand for Meal, comma, Ready-to-eat, which are the prepackaged food rations used by U.S., U.S. Armed Forces. How do you start the process of moving for their ext— from their extreme utilitarian look to something so... nice?

BRYAN JUDKINS

Well, there's a lot of beauty in straightforwardness. There's also a lot of randomness in the layouts and typography of MRE and military packaging like ammo crates or coffee instant and tin-to-bacon. And that beauty of something so utilitarian is its simplicity and its boldness. We started there. Then we thought, how could we bring some subtle things to the MRE-look to just help bring it to life? We leaned heavily into fun type and typography. We started putting some color behind to help modernize the look, but also differentiate the product lineup and help that stand out on a shelf. Honestly, we needed to win on the shelf, whatever that shelf is... on premise, off, or even just like a personal liquor cabinet. Shelf presence was a huge consideration throughout the design process. What's great about the MRE-look is that it's pretty much yelling at you to look at it and not just look at it, but hold your attention.

BRYAN JUDKINS

We took advantage of that MRE-style and that typography to just fill the label full of words from edge to edge, we spent a ton of time crafting language on the labels. It's just begging to be picked up and read and speaking of picked up, like, the bottle shape helps too. It's a big old broadside and it holds like a flask. If you ever held-hold the bottle, it's got a curve on the back end. It feels a little bit military. It's got subtle military cues to it. Also, another small point it's grabbable, it's passable. And we were looking for ways to communicate that sense of comradery that Travis brought to Hotel Tango from the military, that Hotel Tango exudes every day. So we got there via a ton of small choices.