



In this inaugural episode, we talk about the basics of being a GS1 Canada small business subscriber. Learn how global standards relate to barcodes and supply chains and why it's important to work with a Trusted Strategic Partner. The discussion covers how a small business can plan for future success with a strong starting position. Gain insights and information from people with lived experience from industry knowledge to post-pandemic growth and resilience.

Host:

- Teddy Wilson, Media and Television Personality

Guests:

- Christian Horner, Owner, Fire in the Kitchen Spice Co
- Miki Velemirovich, Entrepreneurial Leader
- Eileen Mac Donald, CEO and President, GS1 Canada

Teddy Wilson:

Small businesses are the backbone of the economy and the heart of communities across Canada. They represent our innovative spirit, our diverse cultures, and our common needs in support of the small businesses who tirelessly keep our economy growing and those who proudly carry their products. This is Barcodes and Beyond an original podcast brought to you by GS1 Canada. For anyone interested in small businesses and entrepreneurship.

Welcome. I'm your host, Teddy Wilson. Most small businesses start with a dream, a deep desire to share a passion, a cool product, or a unique service with the community. But turning that big dream into a reality can sometimes be daunting. And this is where GS1 Canada comes in. Helping small businesses like yours get it right from the start. We all know what barcodes are, but only GS1 barcodes are globally recognized and ensure that your products are uniquely identified and traced back to your company, locally and around the world.

In this episode of Barcodes and Beyond, we figure out how to get the basics right with our guest. A firefighter turned spice blend master. He's the president of Fire in the Kitchen Spice Co, Christian Horner.

Hey, Christian, how you doing?

Christian Horner:

I'm good, Teddy. How are you?

Teddy Wilson:

I'm great, and I'm excited to talk to you. I want to start at the very beginning. Tell me a bit about how your mom influenced your passion for food that eventually led to this business.

Christian Horner: Basically, I have to thank my mom for all my culinary skills and experience. She was a fine food caterer for 30 years in Toronto. Self-taught, amazing cook. She would do parties of gourmet dinners for five people up to the CBC one year for 5,000. Well respected in the city, and just an incredible scratch cook. She was a special, special, soulful person and her spirit was incredible and that resonated with a lot of people, and I sort of fall in her footsteps.

I think my first time working with her and using a knife, chopping parsley and prepping food for her was when I was like seven years old. I couldn't escape it. So, it's naturally ingrained in my world and body. I resonate back to food all the time.

Teddy Wilson: I understand it was a big party that really sparked this idea for your company and your product initially. Tell me about that.

Christian Horner: A good buddy of mine, his wife was turning 40 and asked me to cater her birthday. And I did 200 wings with a seasoning that I've been trying to perfect, and people were just over the moon about the flavor. So, my buddy, the next day, called me and said, "Christian, I want this in a jar." And that's when the lights went off.

Teddy Wilson: So, you're making these rubs, you're serving them to people, to some friends. You're getting all this positive feedback, people telling you, "Hey, you got to sell this." How do you take that passion, that hobby at the time and transition it into a business?

Christian Horner: I'm not going to sit here and tell you I'm a businessman. I'm more of the creative side of everything and the innovator of the recipes. I never had any expectations for Fire in the Kitchen. I had my career with the fire department, this was a hobby that became a business without any projections. I didn't know where I was going to be year to year. I just let it grow organically and it grew.

I was living in Port Credit, Mississauga at the time, and my local butcher, who was literally a five-minute walk down the street, Ali from the Elmwood Meat Market, great guy. I brought a sample to him, and I'd created a logo and I found a little jar and I put the exact recipe in the jar and I called it, One Rub. It's a multipurpose season for everything, everyone needs one rub. I brought it to Ali, and he loved it and asked for a case. So, I sold him a case and he sold that case in a week and asked me for another one. And then gave me the best advice I ever, it was just, Christian, if you want to take a stab at this, you got to come up with a line and you can really do something here.

Teddy Wilson: So, you're a firefighter by day and at night in your apartment, you're mixing spices?

- Christian Horner: Yeah, we have interesting time off. So, you average about two 24 hour shifts a week. And then in that time off when you'd be recovered from sleep and that kind of thing, I would mix and match and blend, I just went ballistic. In the beginning, went to the Bulk Barn and grabbed a couple hundred bucks worth of raw ingredients, and I dropped it all down in these white bags and I'd have these big mixing bowls and a whisk and spoons. I would grab certain things like chipotle powders, chili powders, like smoke flavors, and I would just experiment. My tongue and palette got pretty raw half the time when I was doing it, and you would get to the point where you don't know what you're tasting anymore, so you got to take serious breaks between it all.
- But yeah, it's a fantastic process and then we'd blend it. Then you'd have to jar it, cap it, label it, pack it, and set it on a pallet and ship it.
- Teddy Wilson: Wow.
- Christian Horner: And I did that for years.
- Teddy Wilson: So, you've got one big bowl in the middle, you've got a ton of little bowls with different spices, and then you're just trying combinations.
- Christian Horner: Just trying combinations. Honestly, like a mad scientist. And so, I would experiment with stuff that was good for flavor and I would experiment with stuff that was good for color. Because I wanted the aesthetics of the blends to be appealing, as well. Flavor's my number one priority, but when you're cooking and when you're learning from such a great cook, like my mom, a culinary artist, you want things to look good on the plate, as well.
- Teddy Wilson: It sounds like the culinary equivalent of jazz, you're just like riffing and trying new things.
- Christian Horner: Yeah, no, you know what? There is a really massive creative element to it, and I think that's part of what I love most about it.
- Teddy Wilson: You make your spices; you get this positive feedback from friends. You start selling them through Ali, the Butcher, so you're getting some momentum. Where did your business grow from there?
- Christian Horner: I just started pounding the pavement to local butchers and food shops. And I think my first year I did about 8,000 in sales. And from that point on, every year I doubled. Which was incredible. I was at the point where I think there was about maybe 20 of them in the GTA. And then I had an opportunity to present to Longo's, and that was the big ticket for me at that point.

My first serious contract with Longo's, it was more opportunity based. My sister and brother-in-law are both retired police officers from Peel and Longo's has heavy presence in Mississauga and Peel. So they come together every year and do an annual charity event. And my sister had asked me if ... I was running Fire in the Kitchen if I wanted to be part of the vendor market. And I said, "Absolutely."

Any opportunity that I could capitalize on to share my recipes and my blends, I would jump all over it. I had the booth set up and Jenny Longa was there. She came by the booth and talked to me and was interested in the packaging and I was sampling and she fell in love with the product, liked the packaging. And at the end of the night, it was made very clear that she wanted to see this stuff in Longo's. Talk about excitement. I think I probably carpet bombed her for a week with emails about how do we do this? What do I have to do? Tell me what to do.

And that was a big learning stage, how to get involved with a grocery chain like that. I've been very fortunate through the development and growth of this company that every step along the way, the reactions and feedback I get from people that sample it and try it on their food has been validating. It's like the gasoline of the engine.

Teddy Wilson: So that deal with the first grocery chain seems like it was a real turning point for you.

Christian Horner: It was a huge turning point because their initial purchase order for 23, 24 locations is huge. So, it's like, okay, now what am I doing? How much do I have to blend? I was blending by myself at that time. I was jarring by myself at that time, labeling by myself, packaging everything on my own. I did that for years and delivered to each ... direct to store delivery to each location.

Now my spices are blended in Burlington, they're co-packed in Burlington in a different location, and then they're shipped from a different location. So, we don't have our own facilities, our own warehouse. Finding those proper supply and vendor partners is a huge challenge, especially when it's such a crazy fast-moving market in the grocery world.

Teddy Wilson: Yeah. I'm really curious as to what your pitch is when you're trying, for example, to get your product in a grocery store. What do you actually say to people?

Christian Horner: And so, I would go in and I would explain where it came from, how I developed it, why I developed it. And I would send them all at least three or four samples to take home and share with their friends and family. As we always say, the proof is in the pudding. That's why we do in-store demos. Once people try it,

they buy it. And for example, we could sell eight units in a Loblaws in a week, let's say. We would do a demo and we'll sell 45.

And that's feedback that legitimizes what we're doing, and it makes me realize that we're on the right track.

Teddy Wilson: But you did get to a point where you almost lost it all, right?

Christian Horner: What happened is I had a business partner at the time, and we just got to a point where we're butting heads. We just opened up the US market and we expanded fast. Maybe we put the cart before the horse. And when those breakdowns of those relationships in my life, we couldn't fulfill. Our reputation was getting tarnished because things weren't functioning logistically, and account management and cash flow and things just started falling apart. And we decided to go our separate ways. I almost got to the point where I had to throw in the towel, but we got saved.

Teddy Wilson: And you didn't have to throw in the towel, you pulled it out of the fire as it were.

Christian Horner: Luckily, I found two new strategic financial partners. We found a good corporate investor. Now we're fully funded and up and running and ready to rock and roll. So, it's a really exciting time for this company.

Teddy Wilson: Relationships in business are so important. For you, where are they on the hierarchy of what really matters in business?

Christian Horner: I don't know if it's my customer service experience or just the catering and the hands-on approach. For me, building relationships is the bottom line of trust. And in business, I mean, I don't think there's anything more important than that.

I don't shop for services. I meet somebody that supplies or is one of our service suppliers, a co-packer, a blender. And I create that relationship and then I go and see until they let me down, I have no reason to search for anybody else. It's also understanding each other and getting to know each other on a personal level too. It doesn't have to be all business all the time.

Teddy Wilson: Relationships seem like the key. So, tell me about how your relationship with GS1 started. What led you to become a subscriber?

Christian Horner: As far as I knew, GS1 was a national company that supplied barcodes, UPC barcodes so they could scan at the grocery store. That's as much as I knew about GS1. As we grew and it became a necessity to use GS1, it became obvious that they were like a national program, more than just a barcode supplier. They

were a program that helped out legitimacy to our products. I mean, we're GS1 certified and using their platforms and have the codes. People look at us as a legit, proper, reputable company. And it helps us in the national market, and it helps us in the global market.

I'm still navigating everything GS1 has to offer. But the network and the community, the communication and how we can grow our business and engage with other people doing the same thing through the platform of GS1. It's an awesome service.

Teddy Wilson: You've had a lot of success; you've built this from the ground up. So, what sort of advice do you give to aspiring business owners when they come to you seeing the success that you've had?

Christian Horner: The common cliché, if you don't shoot, you don't score. That was my biggest thing. You just have to go after things and don't be afraid. And fear is your biggest enemy. And you have got to connect with the right people because if you're good to somebody, they're good to you, they're going to help you out. And I met some really good people in the beginning, and they wanted to see me succeed.

Teddy Wilson: Yeah, it really seems like a case of the rising tide lifts all boats, right?

Christian Horner: Yeah, I like that.

Teddy Wilson: Knowing what you know now, all the ups and downs, would you start this journey again if you could?

Christian Horner: A hundred percent. There's nothing more exciting about an initial creative process, about putting a product together that you absolutely love and you spent your entire life basically experimenting with. There's nothing better than finding that space within yourself and realizing that you've got an entrepreneurial bone in your body and you want to do something that's going to reflect who you are. And that's what this has become for me.

Teddy Wilson: What a fantastic story of passion and resilience. Christian, thank you so much for sharing your journey with us.

Christian Horner: My pleasure. Thank you.

Eileen Mac Donald: Hello, I'm Eileen Mac Donald, CEO and President of GS1 Canada. I hope you're enjoying the podcast. For more information on how GS1 Canada can help you get started, keep listening. We are here as a trusted strategic partner to support businesses like yours.

Teddy Wilson: There's so much to think about when launching a business, but that shouldn't dissuade you. With the right partnerships in place, success is attainable. Which leads me to my next guest. He's an entrepreneurial leader who's passionate about business and innovation. Please welcome Chief Marketing Officer of Strategizer Inc, Miki Velemirovich. Hey Miki, how are you?

Miki Velemirovich: I'm doing fine, how are you?

Teddy Wilson: I'm good, thanks. We just heard Christian's story, and of course, we all know that being an entrepreneur can be really difficult. But I hear that you've got a framework or a roadmap to simplify things for business owners when they're trying to launch a new business. So tell me about that.

Miki Velemirovich: Yeah, I call this framework the four Cs, and it contains company, customers, competition and category. So company is all about, what is your business model? How is your company going to make money? And then customers, what gains are they trying to achieve? And so how does your value proposition match what they need? And so understanding the customer is so critical in getting this business off the ground and making sure that it fits. Number three is the competition. So what are they doing? How are they positioning themselves in the marketplace? What promises are they making to the customers? And I'm not suggesting that we need to look at our competition and copy what they're doing. It's more understanding how are they positioning themselves to the customers. And finally, the fourth C is the category, which is what are the trends, developments, things that are really happening in the industry and the category that you play in.

So the four C framework gives you this overall view of there is this idea, this spark, how do I build a business model that the value proposition matches to what my customers really want? That sets me apart from my competitors, and that really allows me to understand how I'm going to succeed not only today, but for years to come.

Teddy Wilson: Another element of business is obviously having partners, supportive partners. Can you talk a little bit about the value of bringing supportive partners on board in the early stages of growing your company.

Miki Velemirovich: It always fascinates me when I talk to a lot of small business owners in their beginning stages and you ask them, "How's it going?" And they say, "Oh, it's amazing. It's great, it's great. But man, is it hard." And you start to delve into it, well, why is it hard? And they're like, "Well, it's just me trying to do this thing." And I said, "But wait a minute, but what do you mean it's only about you? I mean, what about others?" And they say, "Well, I'm solopreneur. I'm just starting this thing out."

But oftentimes they forget that they have a network, partners they can rely on. The first set of partners are their peers, other small business owners. They've gone through the same challenges and leaning into that learning, having that first level support when things get really tough, when you sort of just have to ask those questions. What did you do in this case? Or how did you get through this? Or did you ever run into this situation? I have this analogy that it's always a lot easier to walk through a forest at night with other people next to you than alone because you sort of feel like there's always going to be someone that can help me.

Teddy Wilson: A lot less scary.

Miki Velemirovich: Exactly. A lot less scary. But small business owners often also forget, there's really two other really big partners that they can rely on. Number one are the brands that serve them. So whether they're talking about accounting software, whether they're talking about telecommunications equipment that they need, IT equipment. A lot of these big brands have a tremendous amount of great content that they're giving out, not only on how to use that particular product or service, but even goes beyond what they're doing.

And then the third, and this is associations. And associations are like the biggest bank for the buck, in my opinion. Think about GS1 Canada, these are the barcode people, but they do so much more than that. I mean, there's so much tremendous value that business owners can really gather out of an association, a partner like GS1. You step back and you think you're alone, but really in reality, you're not. You have your peers, they've done this, they've been through it. Brands that can really, really help. And then associations like GS1, can really be of tremendous value throughout that entire business journey.

Teddy Wilson: I think that's really interesting. So what are some of the important details that business owners should know, but maybe typically don't when they're starting out? Especially if there's somebody like Christian who are coming at their business from a passion side as opposed to a pure entrepreneurial side.

Miki Velemirovich: I always share this with a lot of small business owners that fall into the category, what we call sort of 'the crafts'.

A long time ago I ran a marketing agency consultancy that helped big brands market the small businesses. And we always used to tell them, you have two types of small businesses that you're going to face. You have the artisans and then you have the crusaders. And the artisans are people that have a craft, they're so good at doing something, they're passionate about their product, like Christian is about the rubs that he is making. But they don't really know everything else about business. And honestly, that's okay. They're not supposed to know. They're not supposed to figure out every aspect because they're not

an accountant, they're not a financial planner, they're not a marketer. And even though they're going to start to really learn that they can a hundred percent lean in on the partnerships.

We did talk about associations like GS1 Canada. I mean, even in his case, if he's trying to figure out how do I figure out the supply chain? How do I figure out, how do I get my products on the shelves of various stores, not only in my province but across Canada. There's a tremendous amount of help that can be provided, that he can lean on, so he doesn't have to be an expert. These associations and partners and brands are the experts in what they do, and they can really show them the way.

I just want to make sure that a lot of small business owners and entrepreneurs don't feel like they have to learn everything. Because sometimes when they do that, they take their eyes off the craft and the craft is what got them there in the first place.

Teddy Wilson: Get a crusader in your corner.

Miki Velemirovich: Exactly. You got it.

Teddy Wilson: So Christian told us there that he didn't think about the future a lot when he was starting. How important is it for small businesses, especially in the early stages, to think about the long-term and to kind of get into that mindset?

Miki Velemirovich: It's critical, really. To me, long-term sustainability it's wholly based on how good your business model is from the beginning. What's my revenue projection? What's my cash flow going to be? Keep asking questions, keep figuring out. Do I have the right bits and pieces or those elements in place? You want to make sure you're almost building this invincible company.

Teddy Wilson: Christian did mention that he didn't have too many backups in his supply chain. So how problematic can it be for small businesses if they don't think about the supply chain in terms of having backups and having redundancies built-in?

Miki Velemirovich: In all honesty, it can kill a business. If a business has one key partner that is providing such an important part of their product that they're developing or their service they're providing, it can literally stop everything.

We all kind of lean back and think, well, COVID was hard on us, but it was really, really tough on businesses, and they felt exactly what that means. If you don't have supply chain backups. If you don't really have more than one supplier partner. Because many things can happen to many of them. And the beauty about the supply chain is that they're fellow business owners. Then they're so happy to be there and it's perfectly fine to say to someone, "Hey, by the way,

you are my number one, but I do have a backup. I have a number two and a number three."

In fact, if I was a key component in somebody's supply chain, I would want them to have a backup. And it's perfectly fine to say, "Hey, listen, I've built a network because I'm just trying to build that sustainability in my business model."

Teddy Wilson: Yeah, you're not going to offend other businesses. They're going to know that you've got a solid plan.

Miki Velemirovich: Absolutely.

Teddy Wilson: Christian was super passionate about his product. I know that he was over the moon when he got into the US market, but he almost lost it all. Can you talk about the degree to which businesses should be cautious about growing too fast?

Miki Velemirovich: It's tempting. It's tempting to jump into another ... particularly another geography. And it happens a lot where the assumption is, well, if I'm doing so well here in this market, it's got to work somewhere else.

And in reality, it probably will work. But if and only if you've got everything set up in the right way, in your initial geography, in your initial market. Or initial customer segment or initial product or service category. So really figuring out all of the components in your initial business model and then translating that to a new geography.

So I think in Christian's example, it's this allure of, wow, I'm about to enter a market that's 10 times bigger than Canada. So therefore, there's going to be 10 times the revenue and improved margins, and there's so much money down there. But you're also entering a completely new world. There's new competitors, there are going to be the new categories, new cost structures and things that could completely set you off.

Then lean on those that you know can trust and honestly, anywhere in the world you want to go, your fellow small business owners are always going to be super helpful. So they're going to be the ones that tell you, okay, here are some of the things you got to look out for in this particular market, this particular geography.

Teddy Wilson: That's true though. That promise of growth that comes with new markets can be so tantalizing for small businesses, but it sounds like you really got to lean back on your strategy and I guess just think more strategically overall about how you're going to grow.

Miki Velemirovich: Absolutely. It's just really kind of having that open view into understanding that it will be different, that it will be challenging, that it will take your focus away from what has made you successful, what has made you get to this point. And growth, it's tempting. But I think slow and steady is always going to win the race.

Teddy Wilson: It's so great to have you and your brain here. You've got such great advice and great insight. Any kind of final pieces of wisdom or advice to share with our listeners?

Miki Velemirovich: The number one always is that element of, always go back to the fundamentals of business. I think a lot of times small business owners will also ... we talked about growth and fast growth, and maybe there is a way to say, "Well, I'm going to accelerate that through getting funding and things like that." And forget about fundamentals of what makes a business run fundamentally, which is what does the customer want? Do I have the product service that serves that need? Meld that together and promise you, that you'll be successful each and every time.

Teddy Wilson: Miki, that was so insightful, such great wisdom and perspective there. I think entrepreneurs and business people are going to take a lot from what you said, so thanks for joining us.

Miki Velemirovich: Thank you.

Eileen Mac Donald: Hello again, it's Eileen. Thanks for listening to Barcodes and Beyond. In this episode, Christian touched on the importance of building relationships when you're a small business. We couldn't agree more.

GS1 Canada is a neutral non-for-profit association providing trusted tools that support small businesses like yours, an absolute priority for GS1 Canada. We've been listening to small businesses across the country resulting in GS1 Canada introducing new initiatives designed to meet your needs. This includes flexible subscription options for your barcodes and education resources and e-learning modules. Additionally, we've been working closely with government to provide a trade readiness certification program that helps small businesses.

Now, this is a real key component to the overall program because we hear back from your potential trading partners that one of the issues they have is that we meet with so many phenomenal entrepreneurial small businesses, but they are not trade ready. And we, GS1, within this program will help you get ready to meet your trading partner requirements with the first meeting.

Something you may not realize is that for over 50 years, GS1 standards as an example, the barcode are the most widely used system of supply chain

standards in the world. When a single system of standards is used along the supply chain, communication is easier. As all constituents in the supply chain are speaking the same global language of business. GS1 standards ensure that manufacturers provide the product information that retailers, distributors, food service operators, marketplaces, and more need to simplify their listing process.

Thanks for listening. Don't forget to tune in to our next episode on Getting your Products to Market.

Teddy Wilson:

I'm Teddy Wilson. Thanks so much for listening. This is Barcodes and Beyond, an original podcast series for small businesses, brought to you by GS1 Canada. A not-for-profit association, committed to providing small businesses with trusted tools and support to successfully bring their products to market. To learn how GS1 Canada can help you start and grow your small business, go to GS1ca.org.