Episode 3: Jeff Kirschner
Tackling trash with data… and turning disappointment into delight

Yesh (00:09):

I'm Yesh Pavlik Slenk, and this is Degrees: real talk about planet saving careers from Environmental Defense Fund. Please don't litter! Here's how that message sounded in this popular anti-litter campaign from 1961:

Vintage Commercial (00:28):

Right? Susan spotless, every litter bit thoughtlessly dropped blemish is a bit of America. "Please, please, don't be a litter bug, 'cuz every litter bit hurts".

Yesh (00:41):

Oh, how far we've come: from Susan spotless to a global data-driven app. And frankly, not a moment too soon. The litter and the trash that we see on our streets, and we find on our beaches, is transporting chemical pollutants and threatening aquatic life at an alarming rate. My guest today is Jeff Kirschner. He's founder and CEO of Litterati, the crowdsourcing app that has helped people all over the world clean up more than 6 million pieces of litter to date. 6 million pieces! Literati isn't just cleaning up the streets though. It is the data that Litterati is collecting is actually helping to change how some companies do business. Jeff has also transformed his own career from ad exec and screenwriter to green entrepreneur. So listeners grab some coffee, and check out our conversation about how to spot moments of inspiration that are worth pursuing. Why it's easier to get up every morning for a purpose driven career. And of course Jeff's passion for solving problems. Jeff Kirschner, welcome to degrees.

Jeff Kirschner (01:51):

Thanks so much for having me.

Yesh (01:53):

The story of how Litterati was born is now well-known it was inspired by a tub of kitty litter that you and your kids found in a stream. You not only felt compelled to clean it up-- thank you for doing that---but you also felt compelled to take a picture of it and post it to your Instagram with the hashtag Litterati. You kept posting pictures of trash on Instagram and soon others were doing the same and suddenly someone posted a photo of trash they cleaned up in Beijing. And that seemed to be a moment of transformation for you. What did you feel when you saw that picture of trash being collected across the world?
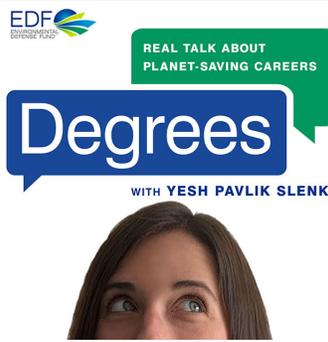
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Jeff Kirschner (02:31):

You know, that was an eye opening moment. It was a moment where I realized that literati was more than just a collection of pretty pictures. We were actually becoming a community. All of a sudden there were people on the other side of the world that were contributing to the same greater good. And that was, uh, you know, a moment that I will never forget.

Yesh (02:50):

Can you paint a picture of the moment when you decided to turn this, you know, your Instagram photos of trash into an app-- something that was really tangible, a thing. What were you thinking as you decided to take that on?
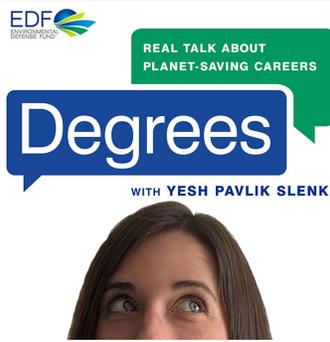
Jeff Kirschner (03:05):

You know, I look back at that moment as one of the most challenging, yet key decisions that we ever made. It was easy to suggest to everybody that I met: "hey, use Instagram to photograph a piece of litter and add this hashtag". Why was it easy? Because everybody knew what Instagram was. And so we had built the, this fledgling community on top of someone else's platform, if you will. But I knew that long-term, if we wanted to design a user experience that was aligned with our goal, we would have to create our own application. And so I was nervous making that switch. I'd spent, you know, several years constantly communicating: "Instagram, photograph on Instagram, add this hashtag on Instagram" and suddenly it was a diversion from that. So it was, uh, you know, a nerve wrecking experience to say the least. But once we made the switch and told people why the experience would be more compelling over time, it grew in value. And I think that was one of the smarter decisions we've ever made.

Yesh (04:10):

The literati app. Doesn't just capture a time and a place where a piece of litter is found. It also uses AI. So it's really smart and captures the brand of trash whenever possible. Why did you decide to build that feature in?

Jeff Kirschner (04:26):

Well, frankly, it was from feedback that we gained from the community. We started listening and understanding what types of data did people want to see? And so we like to say that the photograph tells us who picked up, what, where, and when. Well, tracking, who has done what meaning you want to see your own personal impact-- that's obvious. And understanding where things are found. You know, that map data that that's intuitive and putting a timestamp on everything that makes sense as well. But the Holy grail, if you will, is really the, what category, what are the objects?

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What are the materials and the brands, because it's understanding that level of granular data that can really pave a path to forming a solution.

Yesh (05:07):

And what have they implications been?

Jeff Kirschner (05:09):

Well, there's been a number of what we call stories of impact. So I'll give you an example of something that happened recently in Holland, the Dutch community picked up about 30,000 Antaflu rappers. It's like a Ricola or a Hall's. And they took that data to the CEO of the parent company and showed him look, here's where all of your plastic wrappers are ending up. And to his credit, that CEO committed to changing the supply chain, from plastic to paper, within one year. And that's exactly what that company did. And so now all of the Antaflu wrappers are no longer made out of plastic. They're made out of paper. And that's one example of how understanding the brand data can actually lead to change at a systemic level.

Yesh (05:55):

You're really giving people power to make change.

Jeff Kirschner (05:58):

So I love the phrase you just used: "people power". We like to say we're empowering people to create an impact because at the end of the day, I think people are starved for tools to help us solve some of these environmental problems. So in downtown Oakland, several members picked up about 1500 pieces of litter, and they learned from the data that most of that litter came from Taco Bell. Now that wasn't a big insight because there happens to be a Taco Bell on the block where these individuals were, but we looked even closer into the data. And what we learned was that most of Taco Bell's litter were their own single use plastic packets of hot sauce. And taking one closer look, we learned that most of those packets had never been opened. So now you're getting to the root of the problem, right? And you can pave a path again to the solution. So maybe taco bell says, you want hot sauce. You have to order it. We're not just going to hand out packets, or maybe we install bulk dispensers, right? Understanding the route is really what allows us to get to the answer.

Yesh (07:00):

Do you approach companies? What is, what is the reaction when you come to them with this data? What did Taco Bell say, as an example?
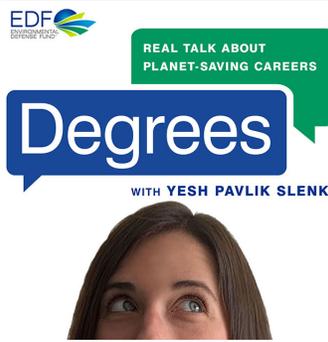
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Jeff Kirschner ([07:08](#)):

Well, talk about specifically, it went all the way to the CEO who said, we need to clean up our act, right? And specifically it was around this particular franchise or franchisee in this particular location. But what it did was it created a set of awareness with, um, their Global Sustainability Officer. As you can imagine, there are certain companies whose material, you find all over the ground and they can often feel defensive or they wonder, you know, is our intention to shame and, and go after them? Um, other companies whose material, you don't find on the ground, but have sustainability as a core pillar, they just want to get involved. And so our goal at Litterati is to really be, um, positive and optimistic. For us, it's not about shaming. Do I think there's a role for that in the world? I do, but for us, it's more about empowering people to be part of the solution.

Yesh ([08:03](#)):

I think one thing that might be helpful for our audience is to have you talk about the term "citizen scientist". Can you talk a little bit about what that is and how Litterati is inspiring regular people like me to become citizen scientists?

Jeff Kirschner ([08:19](#)):

Well, we like to call it simple and sophisticated. How do you make this tool that is so simple to use, i.e.: snap a button to take a photo, but sophisticated in the analytics and the data that it can extract? That's really where our focus is from a user experience perspective. And so can you transform any individual into a citizen scientist or a community activist by giving them a tool that is both engaging, inspiring, but can also demonstrate how change can be created with this data collection,

Yesh ([08:53](#)):

Including kids. I was really struck by your work with students.

Jeff Kirschner ([08:58](#)):

So schools have always been really exciting for us because we're helping to teach tomorrow's environmental stewards. So we offer a curriculum, and something called Litterati campus, and we're in, you know, several hundred schools around the world.

Yesh ([09:12](#)):

And because of COVID, a lot of schools are conducting classes outside, of course, weather permitting. And they're seeing just how much trash these kids can produce, which: spoiler alert is a lot. I have a toddler, she makes a mess everywhere. She goes. So I can't even imagine what elementary and middle school students are producing. I digress. I love this ABC news story about fifth and sixth graders at a
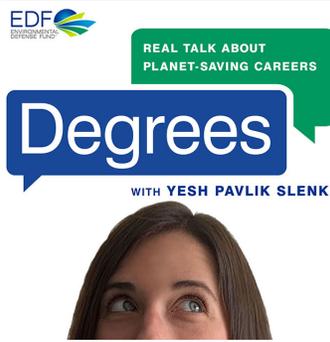
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school in East Providence, California. They're using literati to study where all of this trash comes from and then what they can do about it, as individuals.

Kid in News Story (09:50):

Personally, picking up different assorted pieces of trash isn't the most fun thing to do. But when you remember what it's doing, then it makes you more enthusiastic

Announcer in News Story (10:02):

By keeping track. They can pinpoint problem areas on campus where a new trash can might be needed, or suggest parents use less plastic when they pack a lunch, it's a lesson the students can take with them at the end of the day, to inspire others, to clean up their act as well.

Kid in News Story (10:17):

You may think that if you pick up like one or two pieces of trash, you're like, I'm not making any difference, but that's not true.

Yesh (10:23):

So cool that in such a short time, they picked up 2,500 pieces of trash and their goal is 10,000 pieces. So they're well on their way. And this one kid is right. You feel like you're just picking up a few pieces of litter and you know, what difference can that really make in the scheme of things, but collectively it makes a huge difference.

Jeff Kirschner (10:46):

If you look on the Litterati app, uh, we have a leaderboard. And there are people who routinely pick up five, six, 700 pieces a day. And it's really amazing to watch what just a few people can do. And the change that they create

Yesh (11:06):

Litterati to me is a story of transformation, right? It's a small moment that you had with your kids. And it led to something really big. That's shared by hundreds of thousands of people around the world. For our listeners-- and for me really-- I'm wondering if you have any insight on how we can spot those potential moments of impact brilliance, like the day in the creek with your kids and turn those moments of impact brilliance into something.

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Jeff Kirschner ([11:35](#)):

Hmm. That's a good question. I think that you have to, uh, be an aggressive listener, right? Because when you listen to your community, they will almost hand you ideas that you may not have thought of on a platter. And because what you're doing is you're identifying where people are stuck and when you can identify where people are stuck, where the things that they're yearning for, it really can help you craft your product roadmap. It can open your eyes to moving in a direction that you may not have seen before. So I think that's a real key is when you're working with a community really listen.

Yesh ([12:13](#)):

Yeah. Well, I'm wondering before you started all of this, you were an ad executive, and yeah, you probably had a great relationship with stories and the power of storytelling, but did you know that individuals could make the kind of change that you have started at Litterati? Or was this a totally new epiphany to you?

Jeff Kirschner ([12:36](#)):

I wasn't thinking about it like that. I don't think there was ever a moment where... I sat back and thought, what change can individuals make? I think it was more of: here's something that really bothers me. What can I do to make a difference? So let me be clear. I am not passionate about litter. I'm not passionate about waste. In fact, you hear this advice given all the time, follow your passion, and there's some truth to that. But I believe in following the problem. Because if there's something that bothers you, there's a good chance that it bothers other people. And this is something that just bothered me and granted it took a four-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy to open my eyes to it. But I think the epiphany I had was: what if I could play a small role in solving this bigger problem.

Yesh ([13:33](#)):

Now I read an interview that you did for Mashable. And you said something like, "it's a lot easier to get up for a purpose than to get up for a paycheck". Is it easy to get up and do the work that you do every day and, either way, I'm wondering what advice you'd give to our listeners who are signing up for a purpose driven career, when-- you know-- we all need a paycheck?

Jeff Kirschner ([13:55](#)):

No, it is not easy to get up. There are still challenges and obstacles and, you know, the current fire that you're trying to put out. But it is easier to get up for a purpose than just a paycheck. For me, it all comes back to: my why. "Why am I doing this? For what reason"? There's a quote in the Lorax, which I absolutely love, which is: "it's not about what it is... it's about what it can become". And for me, that's what drives me every morning. When I wake up, I know where we've been, and I know where we are,

but what excites me is where we're going. And so when I wake up in the morning, yes, filled with the anxiety of the day and the things I need to tick off my task list, those troubles don't go away, but they are eased by the sense that I know I'm trying to create a greater good, and trying to, you know, bring along a lot of other people in that journey. On the outside, looking in, I've heard people say to me, wow, Litterati is really big or look at what your team and your community have built. And there's some truth to that. But what they don't see are all the scars.

Yesh ([15:06](#)):

Tell me more about that. Tell me about a time when things weren't going so well.

Jeff Kirschner ([15:12](#)):

Last year, in the fall, actually leading up to World Cleanup Day, we were preparing to launch an update to the mobile application, and it was a significant update. One, which we had been working on for months. And we had gotten all of our partners excited and told the community what was coming, and... We were really looking forward to it. And we messed up. We released something that was not ready to be released. The app just didn't work the way it was supposed to. We just messed up across the board. And we did that because we felt the pressure of this moment in time coming, this World Cleanup Day, this one day of the year, when we knew we wanted to capture the hearts and minds of people and really try to build the Litterati membership, but we failed. And what that led to was a breaking of trust. We had spent years building and gaining the trust of our community and our partners. And within a day, a good portion of it was destroyed. To say that was difficult is an understatement. It was humiliating. It was humbling, but it was also incredibly motivating. What it taught me personally was that it can take decades to build up rapport and build trust, and it can all evaporate in a moment's notice. And so once that happens, how do you accept that? Show your vulnerability, be transparent, not only about what went wrong, but how you think you're going to correct it. You may not even have all the answers, but at least saying, okay, we understand we made a mistake and here's what we're doing to try and fix it. I specifically remember that next day, bringing the team together and saying, how are we now going to turn all this disappointment into delight? Because that's the task in front of us. And that phrase has become sort of a, a mantra internally turning disappointment into delight. I constantly wonder: what is our level of trust? And how do we consistently earn it over and over and over? That happened about a year ago. It's not, I think I ever want to go through again, but I'm really happy that I did.

Yesh ([17:50](#)):

I love what you said there: turning disappointment into delight. That kind of mindset for resilience needs to be either already in someone's DNA when they tackle a purpose-driven career or it's something they need to practice every day
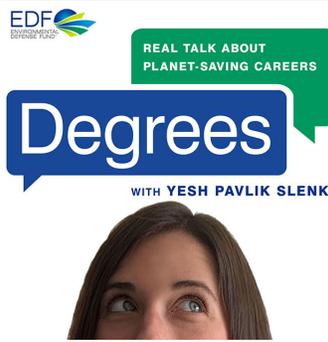
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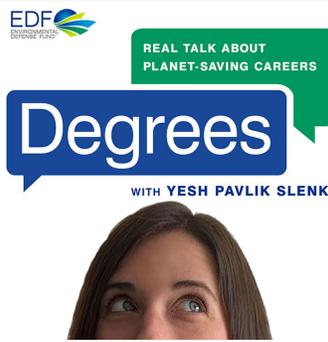
Jeff Kirschner (18:05):

When you choose to solve some of these problems, like go after the big ones, because that heartache and hurt is going to be there no matter what. So you may as well try to build something that can really shift the world in a positive way, because at the end of the day, it's those little positive, small wins that feel incredibly powerful. But just know what you're signing up for. You look at some of the younger people in the world. And these are people who are full of hope and optimism and ideas, and they want to do the right thing. They see the tragedy that is staring us in the face of the planet becoming less and less habitable. And I want to let them know that, while I'm behind them and will support them, they need to know that this is really hard. If they're signing up for this work, because they're hoping to be a headline or to draw a big paycheck, they're signing up for the wrong reason. You gotta care, and you gotta want it really bad. And you're going to get knocked down over and over and over. And that's okay. In fact, that's probably good because it tells you that you're on the right path to creating change. But how do you convince somebody who's fresh out of college to try and tackle the world's biggest problems and be up for the battle, and, and be willing to just take it over and over. Like that's, that's hard and you know, one, it's easy to be the skeptic, right? It's easy to say like, well, somebody else will solve it or, nah, I can't make a difference. It's easy to say those things. What's hard is actually doing the work, but that's what it takes.

Yesh (19:53):

Yes. It requires ownership and bravery and commitment. And it also requires you to bring other people along on the journey with you because you can't tackle these big problems alone. As both an ad man and a screenwriter, storytelling, convincing people, bringing them on the journey, has obviously played a huge role in your work. Why do you think it's such a powerful tool for driving change?

Jeff Kirschner (20:29):

I don't think there's anything more powerful than storytelling. I think it's what emotionally grabs people and takes them to a place where they didn't know they could go. I think that the way you craft your story is what attracts team members, community, customers, investors, press, and you have to tweak it a little bit different for your audience, but it's such a crucial role in everything we do. So I think stories, you know, and Joseph Campbell and the hero's journey play such a key role to understanding what drives people, whether you're sitting around a campfire or in front of, you know, a 500 person audience, how do you take people along on a path and show them the unexpected and delight their curiosity. It all comes down to a story where was this McDonald's wrapper lying? Why did that Starbucks cup end up where it did? At the end of the day for us, that storytelling is really one of the most important things that we concentrate.

Yesh ([21:35](#)):

Yes. Let's dig into that a little bit further. What alchemy happens when storytelling and data are combined?

Jeff Kirschner ([21:44](#)):

I mean, it's such a magical moment, right? Where, where you can take information in its raw form and then figure out how to massage it or manipulate it or visualize it into something that is just eye-opening. And it doesn't have to be super complex. It can be incredibly simple. In fact, I would argue that simplicity is what drives the story even further. Let me give you an example. We worked with a particular town who approached us because of the litter problem they were seeing. And they thought that the problem was because of a bunch of school kids. They thought that the problem was that these kids were walking on these trails that went from the school-- it's a very small town-- from a school to, you know, a local mini Mart. But what the data showed them was that it wasn't stuff that was consumed by kids.
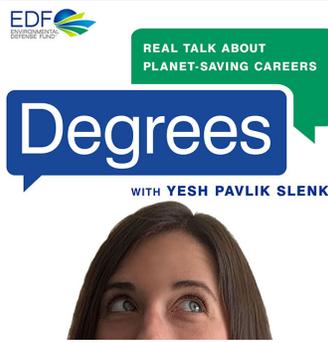
Jeff Kirschner ([22:39](#)):

It was actually litter that was consumed and dropped by a local hotel and the employees of that hotel. And so what happened was the town have realized from the data and the story that the data told that all of their resources-- which were let's educate the kids about proper disposal-- they were completely misallocated. So they redirected their focus and intention away from educating the kids and towards this hotel, and they stopped the problem. And so that to me is such a really a magical moment. Like that's where the data can lead to a story that can compel people to make a change.

Yesh ([23:21](#)):

I'm wondering what the biggest obstacle is when it comes to balancing your multiple hats. You're in advertising, you're running a green startup, you're also a father and a husband, and you're playing a lot of different roles. What is the biggest obstacle you're facing right now? And how do you overcome it?

Jeff Kirschner ([23:40](#)):

I think I probably share the same obstacles that all of us share, which is there's not enough time in the day, and don't know that I have overcome it. I think it's a constant practice. Um, and it's interesting. I was kind of joking with my wife earlier: like just when you feel like you've got things figured out life throws you yet another curve ball. My biggest obstacle is one understanding that no matter what, I'm not going to get to everything that I want to get to. So it's how do you prioritize those items that are most important? Another one that's very personal to me is: I don't like to disappoint people. And so I recognize that as Litterati grows, there are more opportunities that we just have to say no to. And that's

not fun for me. I like saying yes. But that's not a way to, you know, you end up being scattered. And so that's a real obstacle that I personally need to work on.

Yesh ([24:38](#)):

Well, as we bring this conversation to a close, I want to ask you a question. I ask all of our guests: if you could have a personal Jeff Kirschner Board of Directors, which people would be on it and why
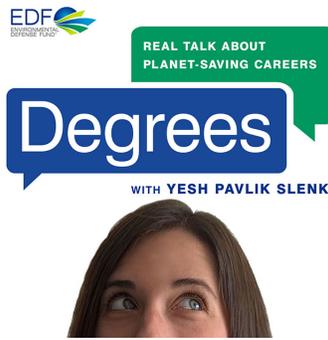
Jeff Kirschner ([24:55](#)):

This is a good one. You just gave me chills because this is a question like, I want to have such a great answer for it. And I'm sure later I'll think of, Oh, why didn't I say that person? But let me give it a shot. Here we go. So the first person that comes to mind is the Dalai Lama. And which is interesting because I don't spend much time thinking about the Dalai Lama, but the reason is that I think that having a spiritual sense to what we're doing is critical and just constantly being, you know, having that reminder is really important. And I feel like someone like the Dalai Lama would be incredibly powerful, um, to help me understand that the second group probably would be, and I'm making it a group because it would be my two kids. Because even if they didn't say anything at the board meeting, remembering when things got really, really tough, which they do all the time, just having them there as a constant reminder of why I do this would be incredibly helpful. You know, I think about somebody like Dr. Sylvia Earle, um, who has dedicated her life to the oceans and their protection and conservation and understanding them. And you know, somebody like Dr. Earle demonstrates the longevity of honing your craft decade after decade after decade, and constantly just being committed to that. Someone like Richard Branson, who might throw out the wackiest craziest idea, but it's rooted in fact, and you know, how do we move commercially forward? How do we create impact, but do so by building a sustainable business, Marc Benioff, somebody that comes to mind, somebody that is really trying to use business as a force for good. The last person I'm going to put there is my wife because, um, nobody sees the pain the way she does. Nobody understands truly the ups and downs the way she does. Can I add one more?

Yesh ([27:05](#)):

You may.

Jeff Kirschner ([27:07](#)):

So I don't know who this is, and I don't know if it's a younger person or an older person or what their gender or race or religious background is. Um, but it's a rotating person from the community. It's just someone who is always there to make sure we understand how we are working with them, to remind us of the importance of answering their needs. Because without the community Litterati is nothing.

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Yesh (27:39):

Jeff Kirschner. I want to thank you so much for speaking with me today. That was a really interesting conversation for me. And I think this'll just be dynamite for our listeners who are thinking about how to tackle big problems, how to use data, how to tell the story, how to bring people on board.

Jeff Kirschner (27:57):

Thanks so much for having me, Yesh.

Yesh (27:59):

That's our show for today. Thank you listeners for tuning into degrees. Please see our show notes for more information about Jeff Kirschner and Litterati and how you can help de-litter, the world using your phone. If our message resonates with you, please share this podcast with a friend and ask them to subscribe. That's the best way to support our show. And while you're at it, please write a review with a five-star rating on Apple podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen. Follow me on Twitter @yeshsays, and we're online at degreespodcast.org, that's degrees podcast.o-r-g. We'd love to hear your thoughts and your questions about the show degrees is presented by environmental defense fund. Our producers are Rick Velleu and Amy Morse. Our executive producer is Christina Mestre. Our production company is Podcast Allies with Elaine Appleton Grant and Lindsey O'Connor. Engineering by Matthew Simonson, and theme music by a band that is constantly on repeat at my house: Lake Street Dive. Next time on Degrees, we'll talk with singer songwriter, Cynthia Shih, also known as Vienna Teng, and how she combines a successful music career with leading a brand new global environmental non-profit. I'm your host. Yesh Pavlik Slenk. Stay fired up, y'all.