

# Legacy in the Making

THE HONEST  
COMPANY

In 2011, The Honest Company was born from a passion to create a healthier, safer world and to fill a void in nontoxic baby products. Recently, the Legacy Lab spoke with **Christopher Gavigan**, co-founder of The Honest Company, and current chief products officer, to learn the story of how in less than four years this modern brand launched to become a leader in consumer goods for a new generation of socially conscious parents. In our talk, we covered some history but, consistent with the brand's worldview, always with an eye toward modern history and legacy in the making.



body and your home. It is where you are sleeping. It is what you are putting on your skin and in your mouth. Environmental health is all about how the immediate world surrounding you impacts your overall health and wellness. At Healthy Child Healthy World, we were trying to help parents live more nontoxic lives and guide them through this great moment of awakening that often happens in parenthood.

It is challenging because as a new parent you are willing to do anything on behalf of your baby. But you are also in a state of massive confusion. The marketplace is telling you one thing. Your friends, peers, mother-in-law and everyone else are giving you tips and solutions. Parents don't want to be weekend toxicologists. Parents just wanted to know the answer. 'Just tell me what to buy,' is what I would constantly hear.

I would point people all over the world to resources and companies, and ultimately, I started vetting companies myself. I looked around the globe to source the best eco-friendly products. Then, in 2008, I wrote a book on the topic called, *Healthy Child Healthy World: Creating a Cleaner, Greener, Safer*

## Can you tell us about the origins of The Honest Company?

■ I had been the executive director and CEO of a nonprofit called Healthy Child Healthy World for seven years. The organization's charter as a nonprofit was to help

educate, inspire and empower parents to create healthier, safer environments for children. The thinking about the environment and around environmental health required change. It is not somewhere out there. It is not in the wilderness or the woods. It is actually in your

Home. People magazine celebrated the book with a launch party to talk about this very important issue. There were great doctors, researchers and influential parents who had contributed to the book and could also draw attention to it, like Tom Hanks, Gwyneth Paltrow, First Lady Michelle Obama and Sheryl Crow, many of whom were attending the party. Then Jessica Alba arrived to the party.

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I had never met Jessica before. She said, ‘Christopher, thank you so much for writing this book. I’ve been doing a ton of research learning about you and your organization.’ She then said, ‘I just had a horrible reaction to a laundry detergent that my mom gave me. It’s her conventional laundry detergent. I broke out in hives, and I’m appalled.’ At the time, she was eight months pregnant. She asked, ‘Please, what do I buy?’ Again, the question came back. Parents don’t want to be weekend toxicologists. They want someone to outsource their trust to. That was a really big moment for me.

Jessica kept coming back and asking questions. We remained connected. She’s a mom who wants to do what’s best for her family and baby, and so do tons of other parents nationally and internationally. I really wanted to create a universal place of wellness and health that parents could turn to and say, okay, when I arrive here I can outsource my trust to these people, this company, this brand. Jessica was excited about doing it in a way that was beautiful and high-design, but also making it highly accessible. It felt cool and hip and young, hitting a new millennial audience that was also very on trend or even pre-trend. And so, we started to build The Honest Company.

**How long did it take to launch The Honest Company from conception to reality, and what were some of your first steps toward making it real?**

■ We worked nights and weekends for about two and a half years. It was a very pivotal time. In the spring of 2011, Jessica and I stomped on Capitol Hill, asking key senators and legislators to push the Safe Chemicals Act through Congress. At the time, you saw a lack of political will. You saw no real willingness to change the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act. *[When the TSCA was enacted it grandfathered in over 60,000 of chemicals already in use, making them exempt from review].* In fact, the new act that’s on Capitol Hill right now is actually written by the American Chemical Society, which is essentially a group that is funded by

“big chemicals.” No one really wants to regulate how we talk to consumers, nor how we bring certain ingredients and certain chemicals to market.

Back then, I felt here’s this moment when a company can actually set the standard. We can self-regulate and self-impose the criteria that we believe should be in the marketplace. Wouldn’t it be great if, in turn, others mimicked us, copied us and followed us because we got big enough and to scale fast enough that we became the de facto standard?

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**How did your beginnings impact what The Honest Company would always stand for?**

■ For me, there are three big pivotal points for change: consumers, legislation and business. You lead by intersecting with all three of these very important pieces. When we launched, consumers were changing. We were working to change legislation, and our business model was different too. We started with the idea that being a social enterprise with a purpose-based DNA was viable.

In our mission statement, we don't talk about products. We talk about creating a healthier, safer, happier lifestyle. It is through the experience of our products and experience of education, as well as how we execute, that determines how well we do and the brand impact that we have.

After we came back from that trip to Capitol Hill, we synced up with Brian Lee, chief executive officer, and Sean Kane, chief operating officer, and launched Honest.com.

**Talk about the name The Honest Company. How does it encapsulate what you see as the vision and, ultimately, the legacy of your brand?**

■ It was one late summer night when we were working at Jessica's house. She had her friend Daniel there. We kept going back and forth on names, and Daniel was very quiet the whole evening. He said, 'Wow, it just sounds like everything you guys keep coming back to is really authentic and honest.' It was like a lightning in the bottle moment. We were like, that's it.

Honest represents being available and open and transparent, being willing to share and willing to be real and human with your personality. For me, that's what 'Honest' forces us to be: very focused on being truthful.

What I loved was to put 'The' and 'Company' next to it. When you

think about 'Company,' there is a general sense of alienation and lack of emotion, trust and connection to a company. When you insert 'Honest' into it, it immediately makes it feel warmer, more inviting and more participatory. When 'The' is inserted in front of Honest Company, it allows us to say that if everyone is trying to be genuinely themselves, why can't a company be genuinely itself as well?

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No parent is perfect. And I always say, 'We are not the perfect company, we are The Honest Company.' There are imperfections, challenges and strife for certain. And there's improvement. If you're really honest with yourself, I think innately everyone wants to continually lean into the day and get better. For me, it is always about getting better.

**Can you give an example of how this brand idea, honest but not perfect, is expressed to the customer?**

■ From a people perspective, we manage and internally operate all of our customer service right here in our own space. We have 125 people inside: 75 people in Santa Monica, California, and 50 people in Austin, Texas. We are handling anywhere between 4,000 to 6,000 customer calls a day, and we don't write scripts for our customer service calls. Our philosophy with customer service is to be your true self on the phone. Educate, converse, talk with the customer. If you don't know something, say, 'You know that's a great question. I don't know that answer. Can you hold on a second and let me get that answer?'

From a product perspective, we are also real and honest, but again, not perfect. I do want our brand to be strong, resolute and positive. I want to be an educational resource. Are we trying to source a better preservative for our laundry detergent? Sure. Is bacterial contamination in laundry detergent harmful to your baby? Yes. Do you want bacteria in there? No. Do we have to use .0007% of synthetic preservatives? Yes. Am I constantly searching for a better or more natural one? Yes. I will tell you what's actually inside, and I will tell you exactly what we're trying to do. It's being grounded in reality but hopeful about the future. I think people really need to gain a sense of trust and believability in a company.

So, we are working to ground people in real facts, real education and Honest products.

We are only three and a half years old. There are a ton of areas related to people and product that create learning and opportunity. There are places you fail, and where you fail fast, but you get up and move on really quickly.

### What do you see as the brand's role in culture?

■ As a company, we take a very strong position and stance of really shining the light as opposed to casting the shadow. It would be easy for us to call out people for wrongdoings across other companies, for being disingenuous or making false statements or being dishonest in their marketing practices. We could easily do that. But, I don't think that's the way you build great reputations and become iconic over time.

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I think it's really our job to allure people by building a bonfire that's

purposeful and strong that draws people in through our education, our voice, our tone, our beauty, our design and our standards.

### Is building a modern legacy something you are consciously thinking of as you are building your brand and moving forward?

■ You want to step back and ask, 'What's the impact I'm having on the world? What is the world that my children are inheriting?' For me, legacy is getting it right and being proud of what you're doing day in and day out.

But, at the end of the day, if we are not big and strong as a brand, we are not going to have the impact that we want. If we are going to be change makers, and if we are going to unseat major categories and major multigenerational institutional players, we are going to need some resources. We need human capital. We need great people thinking in different ways.

Even looking at the words on our website, our promise and what to expect, our manifesto and what we deliver, all those words were written two and a half years before we launched. Those words are the foundation of this company. That is who we wanted to be, and that is who we still are. It makes me really proud that we haven't shifted at the foundation. We are grounded in who we are and, hopefully, where we are going. For me, it is guardianship.

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### What role does purpose play for you, for your co-founders and for the people who work with you?

■ I would say that the purpose runs across the three pivotal points of change in consumers, legislation and business. I would absolutely say that we [with co-founders Jessica Alba, Brian Lee and Sean Kane] all align around purpose and being the best people we can be. Doing that means being a company that stands for something other than product. Our products are the tools we use to educate, empower and change behavior. We want a broader awareness around health and wellness, around solutions to a more nontoxic life.

If you walked in here and asked anyone across the company, they would say we are pursuing a higher mission. The mission is to really impact the world in a very positive way. It is not about selling shampoo. Yes, the shampoo needs to be amazing and great and nontoxic, work and be natural, but it is really about how you create healthier and safer lives for families. It happens that right now we are selling products. Five years from now, we could be doing something totally different. Right now, we are using the products as tools to ignite the conversation.

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**How do you envision making sure that the next 350 employees or next 3,500 employees have the same sense of what that mission is?**

■ You are really hitting on my biggest fear and point of concern. How do you maintain that, right?

I was involved in a lot of sports growing up, and I played collegiately at a high level. I was fortunate to be connected to a lot of great leaders and coaches. I always loved the opportunity when a coach or another stated leader on the team would lead through strong action. And I’ve applied that idea, of leading through action, to building the culture at The Honest Company.

Personally, I hold a lot of training sessions and my book is a required reading. There’s a big, brand innovation and training session I conduct called ‘Kombuchas with Christopher.’ I am not in a separate office because I want to be connected. I intentionally walk through the office every day and think how do I impact a person to get them more excited about what they’re doing at work that’s in tune with our mission? Because if I’m not doing that, then they’re not getting it. And if Jessica, Brian and Sean aren’t doing it, then they’re not getting it to the point where it’s going to carry forward.

**What advice would you give to others trying to build a successful brand legacy?**

■ I think there’s a sense of trusting in yourself in the sense that sometimes, as the John Burroughs quote goes, ‘Leap, and the net will appear.’ In a world where you have a lot of people trying to do a lot of cool things and there are a ton of great ideas, sometimes you just have to jump in with two feet and work a problem.

For me, it’s remaining focused and knowing who you are and where you want to go, and just going for it. I feel like The Honest Company is exactly what I should be doing, and that feels really good.

*In under four years, The Honest Company has trailblazed into the world of nontoxic products and has quickly become iconic in the premium category of consumer goods. The Honest Company strives to shine a light and lead by example: mobilizing employees around a shared purpose; elevating standards and expectations to inspire other companies to step up their own game; activating consumers and helping them navigate a confusing and complicated world; revealing and maintaining their ethos behind The Honest Company name; and recognizing the passionate core of advocates already onboard and building more every day.*

*The Honest Company is shifting culture by embracing living happier, healthier, safer lives for today and for generations to come. The Honest Company is a brand that is truly writing history every day.*

BY MARK MILLER

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