



Interview with Chris Aarons



[Business Transformation in the Digital Age with Chris Aarons](#)

Chris Aarons is the co-author of *Wall Street Journal* and Amazon best seller *The Digital Helix: Transforming Your Organization's DNA to Thrive in the Digital Age*. He has helped launch dozens of companies and products using a unique mix of digital, sales, and marketing strategies.

In 2006, he launched one of the first social media departments at AMD and later wrote the book, *Social Media Judo: The Essential Guide to Mastering Social Media and Delivering Real Results* also teaches digital marketing at the University of Texas at Austin and has won numerous awards for his digital programs while working for clients such as Adobe, Amazon, AMD, Cisco, Dell, HP, LG, Microsoft, Philips, and others.

[Learn more about Chris](#)

Top Takeaways

- Look at micro opportunities instead of life-changing opportunities to determine your personal and business trajectory
- Every person/business hires companies, products or services to do a job – game changer in marketing
- Bring level of expertise – find a way to do it differently and exhaust it – add to the idea and make it better
- Watching customers transforms the simple answer into the complex reason and opens opportunities for innovation
- How do we get buy-in from out of the box thinking by talking to customers and becoming the focal point for insight
- Stillness is a strong management trait
- Ask the “what if?” questions until you find the gap and the opportunity

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Q: How have you found time to carve out expertise in digital?

Chris:

I don't think of it as spare time. I've always been opportunistic. Things are always being presented and I've looked and searched out opportunities. When I created the social media department at AMD, it was a full year before Twitter was even a thing. I saw the need to take advantage of social media and try to do something at a very high level. It was a real opportunity. I saw a need and found a way to learn on the fly and do it. The same is true for digital. Digital has been coming fast for some time, and early on, I got to the point that I had to learn and expand my thinking with all the changes around us. If you talk to enough people and you're inquisitive, really listen. You'll see there are opportunities everywhere. But so many people go through life with blinders on and just kind of take things as matter of fact. Or they don't see how to connect and bring things together to create a new opportunity or even up level.

Constantly look for the gaps. The best leaders always have a keen eye to try to build a better mousetrap. I look for micro-opportunities, as opposed to life-changing ones. Because I think it is easier to put a few micro ones together to get a bigger opportunity.

Q: How did you see and get in front of the curve?

Chris:

The best way is to constantly look for the gaps. I think strong leaders always have a keen eye on how to build a better mousetrap. Many people do it from an entrepreneurial standpoint, "Can I turn this into a business?" I tend to do more from a strategic standpoint and from within a job. If it seems like people are getting by with a makeshift answer, but really want X, maybe there's a better way to get them what they need.

I look for micro-opportunities, as opposed to life-changing ones. Because I think it is easier to put a few micro ones together to get a bigger opportunity. I look at these small pieces like a series of Legos. They don't come together to form the complete and perfect structure in one fell swoop. I think that's a good lesson for a lot of people who may miss the smaller pieces and thus the big openings.

Q: How do people combat the challenge of seeing a good idea but thinking, "Why bother because somebody's probably already doing it?"

Chris:

That's a loser fallacy and it prevents us from moving to that next step and up leveling ourselves. Yes, somebody has probably thought of it. But they may not have thought of it the way you'd do it or to the level you would. Also, they may not be executing in your area of expertise or skill.

I'll give you a great example. I'm a big fan of the "jobs to be done" theory, which talks about how every person or business hires companies, products or services to do a job. If you have this mindset, it really transforms how you go about marketing and selling your products, as well as how you innovate in your markets. When I first read about this theory, it was all about innovating products. But as a marketer, I said to myself, "No, this transforms how you market products as much as innovating them." So, I started that day creating tools and frameworks to make this philosophy a game changer in marketing. And yes, somebody's probably thought of it. In fact, it was Clayton Christensen, who, to me, is a god in business.

I found a way to make it something unique for me. But more importantly, develop something that addresses my clients' needs and rise above my own level of expertise. Don't let somebody stop you or be held in by artificial walls. Find a way to exhaust your ideas to see where they can go. I can't tell you how many times I have been told, "Yes, we're doing that." Well, then I can add to your idea. I can make the idea better together. There's always a way and I think having that drive is what makes people and society better. We all have ideas. But you need to have the drive to do something with it or find a way to put it into play with some other ideas you find.

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Q: How do you come up with an idea that people are going to want, but also have confidence to see what's coming around the corner?

Chris:

Let me give you an example that I am using for a marketing course I am teaching. I just prepared the whole lecture on this. McDonald's wants to sell more milkshakes because milkshakes are high volume and high profit items for the franchise. So, they asked Clayton Christensen's team to help them figure how to do this. His team starts by sitting and watching customers at McDonald's for hours on end. And they notice something McDonald's should have. A disproportionate number of milk shakes are sold between 6.30 and 7.30 in the morning.

It all comes back to this intellectual curiosity. Just keep investigating, reading, listening to podcasts like this one to get ideas and see where the opportunities are to push your thinking forward.

If I asked any marketer or business leader, "Why do people buy milkshakes?" their answer would be because they're thirsty and want something sweet and/or cold. That's the easy, simple and incorrect answer. Because that answer doesn't get to what "job" the milkshake does for the customer. It turns out that 90% of the milkshakes purchased during this time are by men with a long drive ahead of them. Now, put those things together and ask a few more questions of these individuals and you realize the job to be done is, "I need a breakfast that's easy to eat and that keeps me busy." Because milkshakes take forever to drink, they keep these men occupied on their long drives. The job is basically "breakfast entertainment."

We have to look at the competition. Here again, the answer is not simple. It is not just Burger King or Starbucks. Their competition is jelly donuts, bagels and bars, all of which are too small, too quick or too messy to eat in a car. In fact, they don't do the "job" as well as a milkshake. The first inclination for McDonald's was to suggest creating a breakfast shake, which again, is the wrong idea. The right idea is they start billing their shakes as "triple thick" to promote the "job" they are hired to do. The insight of just watching and talking to customers can transform how you think about your business. People need to realize customer behaviors are always more complex than the simple answer. And, if it works with milkshakes, damn it, it works with everything.

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Q: How do we overcome getting a great idea out and getting buy in from true decision makers?

Chris:

Because it's not an opinion. The idea comes from customer insight based on the experience they want from the brand or product. One of the things that I love doing for every client is sitting down and just talking to customers. If you own those insights as a marketer, you own and see the path forward. You just need 10 or 20 of the best customers for your organization. Then, you become the focal point as the expert, as opposed to a person who has an opinion.

It all comes back to this intellectual curiosity. I would be thrilled if I had an idea and it was perfect the first time. Bill Gates predicted 20 things in 1999 and 19 have already come true. I'm not that guy. I just keep investigating, reading, and listening to podcasts like this one to get ideas and see where the opportunities are to push thinking forward. When something hits me, one of my big tricks is to get in a room, turn off the lights and close my eyes to just think about the problem. I find that I start thinking about things that would not be readily apparent, if I was distracted. In that isolation, I produce better ideas and can start poking around the edges. Then, you go test, talk to people and see if there's anything there.

Q: What is the book you are currently reading?

Chris:

I am re-reading Clayton Christensen's *Innovator's Dilemma* because I'm using it for a lecture in my marketing class.

Q: What is your leadership superpower?

Chris:

I would say it's connecting, seeing next steps and making things greater than the sum of their parts. That is my superpower because I can put things together and come up with new ideas, insights and ways to solve problems.

Q: What is your motivational quote, philosophy or mantra, something that you live by?

Chris:

"This is no time for timidity or doubt. This is a time for boldness and energy." This was said by John Kennedy, August 30, 1960. This was 59 years ago, yet the sentiment behind it is timeless, especially in the Digital Age.

Q: What is the book that you most often gift to friends, family or colleagues?

Chris:

It's probably most often *Good to Great* by Jim Collins.

To learn more about Chris, connect with him, [visit him on LinkedIn](#) or go to his website at [ChrisAarons.com](#).

To hear the complete interview with Chris Aarons as well as other leaders on my podcast, [click here](#).