0:00:02.3 Wayne Brown: Hello, I'm Wayne Brown and welcome to the ET Project. We're delighted to be delivering this podcast for executive talent all over the world, who we're affectionately referring to as Team ET. In our episode today, we're back in Hollywood, and this visit, we're connecting with Mr. Swire Ho, otherwise known as hashtag the promo guy. Mr. Ho is co-founder of the company Garuda Promo and Branding Solutions, where they help their customers grow sales, retain employees, and thank clients with custom branded products. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Swire immigrated to Los Angeles in 1996. He's a proud Chinese American who speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. He trained as a sound engineer, working at recording studios and entertainment agencies, before starting his own firm, Hellman Productions, Inc. In Los Angeles way back in 2003. In this operation, Swire and his team successfully produced attractive, personalized DVD and CD cases and custom merchandise such as T-shirts, earning the Score Award in 2009 for small business success.

0:01:20.3 WB: That business, Hellman Production, eventually became so popular, he decided to sell in 2013 to focus exclusively on the promotional product industry, and hence the birth of Garuda. During our conversation today, you'll hear us speaking about how Swire applied the 80/20 rule, otherwise known as the Pareto principle, to analyze his business revenue several years ago, which led to refining his approach and placing more energy with those major clients that were willing to pay the full price for his products, and avoiding those looking to squeeze his company's profits.

0:02:00.8 WB: And we cover so much more, looking at topics such as situational fluency, sales in general, and even the art of generating referrals. Our discussion also leverages another of Swire's strengths, as we discuss the power and value of combining fitness and business. Swire is a certified kettlebell instructor, and we look at the parallels in setting yourself goals and milestones when training, as well as in operating your business. Overall, this is a thoroughly enjoyable episode, so please join me now as Swire and I unpack today's topic, The Art of Identifying And Focusing On Your Key Clients.

0:02:46.5 Speaker 2: Welcome to the ET Project, a podcast for those executive talents determined to release their true potential and create an impact. Join our veteran coach and mentor, Wayne Brown, as we unpack an exciting future together.

0:03:03.2 WB: Good morning, Team ET. Welcome to another week and another guest. This week, I'm really excited because we're going to be going into an area that I haven't touched on in this podcast before. We're going to be looking at how to grow your business. And our guest is Swire Ho. Swire has a hashtag, the promo guy. And we're going to talk a little bit about his business, of course. But Swire is sitting over in LA at the moment. Welcome to the ET Project, Swire. Great to have you on the show.

0:03:40.5 Mr. Swire Ho: Thank you for having me, Wayne.

0:03:42.9 WB: You've probably heard the podcast. You know I always like to start by asking, do you have any fun facts?

0:03:51.5 MH: Fun fact is, let's start with my name, Swire. A lot of people actually think that, "You're Chinese, but your name is Swire. How did you get that name?" A lot of times when people try to call me, they stutter. They don't know, "Can I ask for a Swire, a swine? Or whatever that people call me". I actually got the name, my dad used to work for a company called the Swire Group. It actually is a big company in Hong Kong, they used to own Cafe Pacific and a lot of properties, so he actually named me after the company.

0:04:22.9 WB: He thought that the wealth of the company might rub off on his son.

0:04:26.8 MH: Or maybe he wants a promotion, whatever.

[laughter]

0:04:32.0 WB: Just as a sideline, I believe the business that you have, Garuda Promo and Branding Solutions, you started this business with your wife. Is that correct?

0:04:42.7 MH: Yeah. We've been business partners for almost 20 years now and still going strong.

0:04:49.6 WB: I know that's probably an anomaly for many business people that have started a small business with their partner to think that it could last for 20 years. That in itself is quite astounding. So, well done.

0:05:01.7 MH: Thank you.

0:05:06.3 WB: The next question would be, anything happening in your life or around the world at the moment that's got you excited?

0:05:10.9 MH: In our product, we do a lot of clients who attend trade shows, who give around the holiday season, give to employees or clients. We see that people are coming back, people are more generous. They're going back to the office, depending on where you are in the world. We do see that business are picking up this year, so, we want to continue that trend. I think it's looking pretty good for the next year as well.

0:05:39.3 WB: That's great news. Just to elaborate on your business, so you do a lot of merchandise and promotional product. Is that correct?

0:05:47.5 MH: Yeah. A lot of people, when they think of the promotional product industry, they use the word SWAG, which actually stands for Stuff We All Get. My point of view and try to help clients is not to give everyone, but to give your VIP and your ideal client a VIP type experience and using promotional product, you can actually plan when you try to prospect with them, when they sign on to be your client. And then after you finish the job with them, how can you smartly, using promotional product to make sure that they're happy with you and they will consider giving you a repeat business.

0:06:24.1 WB: Yeah, I like that. You just reminded me that I need to speak with you more about something after the show.

[laughter]

0:06:28.9 WB: I'll just make a footnote about that. If you look back over your career, and I guess your career, interestingly, is 20 years thereabouts. You're still very young, by the way, so you started early. But if you look back over your career, is there anything that really jumps out to you that has launched you in this direction? Is there a milestone or some sort of catalyst that you can think of that's taken you in the direction that you've gone?

0:07:00.4 MH: I think I always wanted to find out since I was young, how can I do more with less? When I was young, probably it's because I want to be lazy. How can I use the minimum effort to do the work that needs to be done? Maybe homework, maybe other projects that I do. But right now, I have kids, I have a business and I have a family. So really, it also comes down to the point that how can I utilize what we have available and to attract the most amount of clients? And then it somehow got me into that in the beginning, I get upset when a job didn't go to my way or my client tells me that we are not going with you, we're going with your competitor, and then I get upset multiple times. Well, you know it's not a good feeling when clients say, "I don't want to work with you, I want to work with someone else". But I come to a conclusion that there are such things as a good fit and a not good fit.

0:07:58.5 MH: Chances are the world is big out there, as probably you will know when you consult with clients around the world. There are always the perfect client, they are willing to pay full price and happy to work with you, treating you as an advisor. They count on your ideas and expertise. But there are always outside that, poor 10 companies and they want to ask, can you match this price? And you're dragging to pick up their phone call. I'm still in searching for that perfect client. How can I really associate ourselves and our company to the ideal client for the company that will pay full price of a service and are really happy to work with us, and I would enjoy picking up the phone every single day? So I think these are the things that I'm working on myself.

0:08:46.5 WB: I want to come back to that, 'cause you highlighted a very interesting point there. But just as a sideline, I noticed in your write-up or in your bio somewhere that you do kettlebell fitness training or you're an instructor for kettlebell fitness. And I can see just looking at you, the audience can't see, we're only doing audio, but I can see you're quite fit. I'm somewhat older, let's say I'm a little bit more senior than you. And I grew up, of course, with dumbbells. And the kettlebell is, I would say, a newer offshoot of that. But it has a different purpose, if I understand. So it's more about building core strength and building endurance. Do I have that correct?

0:09:31.9 MH: Yeah. I love training kettlebell. I got certified on the session called StrongFirst in 2019. So kettlebell, really, if you only have one tools available, you can only use one kettlebell and it can give you... Can train your arms, you can train your core, and you can train your legs. So it will give you the ballistic movement that you're moving for. And then if you train it right, you could really ramp up your heart rate really quickly. An ideal training will be less than 20 minutes. If you put your work into it, 20 minutes is done, you don't have to sit in a gym for two hours to try to get the work done.

0:10:12.6 WB: It's fascinating. And there's a reason why I asked that question, which was one of the things that we all have to be conscious about is our health as much as the business. And they go so closely together that the opportunity, when I read your bio, just jumped out that I've not made that connection before with the audience, that we need to be conscious of our health as well as trying to grow our business and run the business. And I can see, just looking at you on the screen, that you have this blend somehow working nicely. How do you find the time, by the way?

0:10:52.9 MH: Well, I really like that question, Wayne. Not only health is very important, but I'm also training to become a barbell instructor, by the way, I'm going in for my certification next week, also with StrongFirst. So I like the practice, no, it's not easy. And I like you could actually relate to your physical training into your business. For example, you want to be better at public speaking, you want to be better at sales. And you are horrible right now with customer service, and you want to be better, this is your 2023 goal. So just like doing a kettlebell, maybe I cannot press over a 32-kilo kettlebell today. Doesn't mean that I cannot do it next year. Maybe my goal, and I actually set a certain goal for physical fitness for 2022, and I covered two of them.

0:11:39.7 MH: I still need to work on my one-arm push-up, haven't got that yet. So in your practice, you can actually break down, right now, you cannot achieve that task. Same for business, you cannot do whatever that you're trying to do right now. But with your strategy and you have to set goal, how can I break it down in smaller pieces so I can work on this every day? If this is something that you really want, you do it every day. So you might not make great progress, you know, open eye success, you might be lucky. But if you have a goal that you actually work on in practice, you know, I used to work practice and not a workout. So it's actually set out where you want it to go, and then you do this day by day. And then you see and track your progress as you move on. So I could totally relate, you know, what I do in fitness into my business journey.

0:12:29.2 WB: Yeah, that's an excellent connection. And hopefully everyone picked up on the whole construct there of what we're talking about. So it's looking longer term. It's not looking for the immediate solution, but being able to build and have that strategy and that goal that you're working towards to actually make that progressive improvement. You can do that with your fitness as well as with your business. And I think that's, that's fantastic.

0:13:00.5 MH: I think we should set long term goal like somewhat the dream goal that you have, whatever that you dream pick off, you set that as a goal, but also set smaller goal that you could... You know, you could achieve maybe, you know, going back to the fitness example, if I able to practice every single day for two weeks, that's a win. In business, if you're able to close your sales, 10 client at a time, then it's a win for you. Celebrate all the wins, then you build momentum, and then you build confidence. Because when you go in and you tackle that really big goal that you have in the beginning is scary, you might not know what you're doing. So by breaking down to really small bite size goals, and then once you achieve those, celebrate, tell everyone about them, and then your people will support you and it will be easier to achieve your big goals.

0:13:49.4 WB: Yeah I hear you. I did my first live broadcast yesterday...

0:13:53.3 MH: I saw that.

0:13:58.0 WB: So that was a minor, a minor step forward for me that I'm fully on board with what you suggest there. Let's transgress into the business itself. Your business is dealing with small commodity products, I guess, and therefore, I imagine I don't know your business, but I imagine you have a large number of customers to support the income stream, rather than have individual large customers. Would that describe how the business works?

0:14:32.9 MH: It's kind of interesting, I think at the point now that things get interesting, because you're right, you know, the promotional product industry, if you think of that, is a commodity business. But just as I was telling you before, where, I want to keep people happy, and who's going to pay me full price? Because there are hundreds, if not thousands of companies that do what I do. And then it's easy for a prospect nowadays to do a Google search, and they could say, "Can you match this price?" Then my margin gets squeezed. But also, I found out that there are type of clients that will pay me full price, plus more, and they only want to work with me. I'm like, "Wow, I'm onto something". You'll realize there is such rules called 80/20 rules. For listeners, so that means that 20% of your client giving you 80% of your business.

0:15:25.3 MH: So I actually use QuickBooks. So I actually load up all the clients that we have in terms of the revenue and what they order from us for 2022. I found out that amazingly, top of our 10 clients give us 76% of our business. So I'm like, "Wow, I'm onto something". So I looked at the year prior and two years before, it's 70 and 74, so it's in the 70's. So I know that obviously, I want new business, and if you send me new business, I always welcome. But if I'm only servicing this top 10 client of ours, we'll be pretty good already. And if I'm able to maintain and grow that relationship, if I'm able to grow 10% of our top 10, then I could actually cover everything for next year already.

0:16:13.8 WB: So it's an interesting awareness. How do you then work on that? What are the actions that you do? Do you spend less time with the rest of the client base and focus most of your time on that top 10%? Or how do you approach it?

0:16:33.2 MH: Realizing that help us in a number of ways. For example, as an entrepreneur, you get bombarded with all the new gadgets, new tools, or new something, right, that can potentially help you grow. What I looked at is how this top 10 client found us. Did they find us on our website? Is it on LinkedIn? Is it on some ads that we do? So we actually looked at all that and eliminated some of the platforms that none of them ever found us on. So we actually are eliminating what we don't need. And then as a small business, we can't be everywhere at the same time, just not enough budget. So then it gives us the focus that we need. It depends on your business, right? If they're only finding us on our blog, then I would put more focus on our blog. If they only see us going live and maybe I go on podcast, they listen to me, then maybe that's all I would do. Every industry is unique, but by looking at my actual paying client, I'm able to say this is really how they found me. And I also looked at what are their job titles. They are from different companies, but it seems like all the people that order from me are from a larger corporation and their job title is mostly executive assistant, secretary, and what we normally call it in sales, a gatekeeper.

0:17:54.0 MH: I work with gatekeeper. So it's nice that you go to the CEO or you go to the marketing director. But somehow, even if I made that connection, the person who ordered from me is that executive assistant. So then I know that I have a profile for my ideal client. Not saying that I will stop doing business, but I'm gonna look out when I go outside networking, am I able to find the similar job title and similar description? Chances are they might have the same pain or needs that I can solve. Because going back to the commodity, promotional product for those bigger companies is a really, really small piece. As much as I think I'm important, for them it's really small. That's why the executive assistants are doing it, but it served me well already. And if more executive assistants from other companies will order from me, then I will be pretty good.

0:18:44.7 WB: Right, you really highlighted some sales techniques there that I think are really crucial for becoming good in selling. Regardless of what your niche or your market is, you need to know who your customer is. You need to know where their interests lie, what their pains are, so that you can be focusing your effort in addressing those needs. And focusing your effort to serve those clients, the ones that are using your service. Whereas I guess it's fair to say and I'm generalizing, but typically as salespeople we go out and we try and take the shotgun approach. We try and cover everything possible that moves and hope that we hit the target and we get an order. So you're now zooming in with your focus and identifying say, where is my real client base and how do I serve them better? If I understood what you're saying.

0:19:52.1 MH: Yeah because when we are... Especially I'm a salesperson so with what I do, I can say we can help everyone. Everyone needs a local hand. But if you do that approach then really who do you, going to reach out? You don't have so much time in a day, you are limited in your resources however big you think your companies are. I think the most important point I looked at money because you're in sales. Who are willing to pay you full price? If you're going to your audience knowing that they would want 50% discount in order to work with you, you might want to look at other areas too depending on how hard you look and depending on how motivated you are. For listeners who are listening, I'm just starting out as zero customer right now like what can I do?

0:20:37.8 MH: What you can also do is you can dream of your perfect client. Whatever product and service that you offer who are they, Job title? What type of company they're in? And especially with your product and services what kind of pain and how can you help them? Because people don't want to just buy a promotional product, they want to buy a promotional product because they wanted for example, grow sales, look good in front of their client. They just... No one just want to buy a promotional product, they have a purpose. If you are able to help them to achieve what they're trying to do, then you have a customer that are willing to listen to you.

0:21:20.6 WB: Very true. In the sales training that we deliver we talk about a thing called situational fluency, that essentially means that we understand our customers' business so that we can talk with them about their business, not about our business. And therefore we can have a deeper understanding about their needs, their pains and their visions, therefore we can satisfy that. I think that's some very good advice for everyone listening. You really need to have this awareness as you start to build your business. You've been operating Garuda for how long now, Swire? It's several years right?

0:22:00.9 MH: Since 2003, so next year will be our 20th year.

0:22:06.5 WB: Interesting. Progressively, have you been able to track any sort of sales growth over those periods and if so, was there anything that stood out to you as you start to examine your business and you examine year by year? Is there anything that jumped out to you apart from picking your right clients that we've been talking about?

0:22:31.4 MH: I think in our type of industry, there are trends involved. Prior to that when the company first started we... I am actually in the CD, DVD replication business. So if you're old enough like me, you have CDs in your shelf still and you still have movie connection on DVD, that's what we're in. Because we're in Los Angeles, there's a lot of film companies, there's a lot of music labels, so we actually make copies for CDs and DVDs. Along the way, they ask if we do merchandise when they go on tour for musicians or do we do gift pack for red carpet? So somehow we got into the promotional product industry around 2013 we... Hindsight is 2020, I think we got lucky, we sold the CD, DVD part of the business to a local competitor and focused exclusively in promotional products. So on and off, I think it's been a long journey. But the product is always gonna be changing. What's working today, might not work even two months from now. But I think going deeper and longer in the business, I think the relationship is what's count. People remember you, people might not need your service. I go to a lot of chamber of commerce meetings.

0:23:39.8 MH: I talk to people who might not need my service today, but a few years down the road, they might change their role or maybe they are starting their own company. Now we can begin to talk, but we have that relationship already, we go past that trust first phase. Because you have to trust someone in order for you to open up, because the more opened up your clients are willing to you, the more you can find out what they're really pained on and to see how you can help them. But initially, when people go out, they don't want to give you anything, right?

0:24:06.2 WB: Sure. I can imagine. You touched on an interesting point there, which is probably around the area of referrals. And I'm wondering how relevant are referrals for your line of business?

0:24:25.5 MH: It is very important. I belong to two different chambers of commerce, and then I'm also the ambassador for the chamber. So what I do as an ambassador is I will go and talk to a lot of members. I'm shy as a person when I go to the public, so being an ambassador kind of forced me to... Because one of the requirements, I have to go out and talk to all the members, I have to call on all the new members. So this one is actually... I think it's very interesting, I can find out who is coming into the chamber, what kind of business are they in? Especially my focus is not just tell them all about what I do, my call is actually to find out what they're trying to achieve, what are their goals. And if I'm able to connect with those people, I will do in my power to meet them at what they're trying to do. So I'm building goodwill, and then when you build a goodwill and people start to trust you, I think the question will ultimately come, what is it that you do Swire?

0:25:17.9 MH: Tell me a little bit more about that. And then it gets me to talk about my goals a little bit, my ideal referrals a little bit. They might not be in the same industry or in the market for what I do, but they might have a spouse or maybe they have a friend or know of a colleague that needs what I do. So I think by letting a lot of people know what you do and become what I call the go-to-expert in the industry. I think I am the only promotional product company that's ever been active in the chamber for I think the past 10 years. So when you go to the LA chamber, then my name gets thrown around when you talk about promotional products. What are some of the organizations? What are some of the networking opportunities that you listener are listening right now that none of your competitors are there? And maybe that's where you want to be.

0:26:16.8 WB: Yeah, I like that. Find your niche, find your differentiators and leverage and build on... Build off those. You're very focused in the LA area, but I'm guessing your business, the type of business, you're also a global business. So you have the online element as well for sure, I presume?

0:26:43.5 MH: Yeah, I think it's funny and you don't really coach that when you're an international traveler too you've been in multiple countries. So I would say our views are somewhat different if you just grow up and never been outside the country. It's a big world out there, so I sometimes joke like I'm the modern day Marco Polo. So I'm finding interesting stuff that are really trending in other countries where we don't have it here. Or we're trying to bring in something that is really popular in America where other countries it's not picked up on yet. So if you can find a match and then you have the advantage, because you are the first one, I'm able to see trends that are kind of outside the box, and people like that idea. They don't want to just buy the same old, same old item, they want to see what's new out there. My number one question is what kind of new stuff do you have? Tell me more.

0:27:33.5 WB: Yes, growing up in Australia, I traveled to America quite early in my life. And it was around the time where computers were just becoming popular in Australia. But in America they'd been regular household items for at least five years. And what I observed was Australia follows the American trend by a lag of about five years at that time. And CDs, as you mentioned CDs, CDs were just becoming a big thing in America and we had no idea about them in Australia at that stage, at least not me. [chuckle] And I saw the Encyclopedia Britannica, the complete set on a CD. And I thought, this is revolutionary. And I can still remember coming back thinking to myself, "How can I capitalize on that fact that there is this product over in this country and it doesn't exist here?" And I didn't do anything with it, but it was along the lines of what you were just talking about. It's about finding those differentiators, finding things where you can capitalize and leverage to make the most of growing the business and becoming successful. Is there anything about the business or anything we haven't touched on in our conversation today that you would like to share?

0:29:00.1 MH: The point that I wanted to give the listener is, you might want to plan for your goals for 2023. If you have the capabilities, do you print out reports? And then examine who are your top 20 or top 10? Who give you the most business? We go back to that point that I mentioned during the conversation. Answer yourself honestly, why did they buy from you? They have choices, I don't care what industry that you're in, you've got to have competitors. Why did they choose you? Have you even tried to answer that question? If you couldn't figure out, I think since they're your top 10, you should call them. That's very simple and very old school so to speak. But really, you're actually building a relationship. For example, you just finished a job for them, maybe you finished your service for them. Do you check in with them not to ask for a referral, you want to check in first, are you happy with what we provided? And then you want to keep your mouth shut and you want to listen. Sometimes they say, "Oh, everything is perfect, everyone is happy". But once in a while, they will tell you that, "I really don't like how the communication is or the color didn't turn out the way that we hoped it would be".

0:30:04.7 MH: If it is within your capability, and if you could fix it, fix it without them even asking, if there's something to add on, if it's just a replacement for example, in our case, fix it. Then you now have a happy client who are loyal to you, because nowadays when you complain, when you voice your concern to your company, especially a large company, you know it's going nowhere. They sound really nice on the phone, and then they take your email, never, nothing's gonna happen. What if really you show them that you care? Whenever they mention something, you fix it, you do it better next time. So then now you have a loyal client that are really happy with your service, then you go for the ask. Do you happen to know a colleague, friends, or executive in your company that can also benefit from our services? Mind to connect me with them? So that's how you approach for the referral, and keep on doing it. So in the beginning, it might be scary. They might tell you things that you might not want to hear. But then don't get defensive, really, they're really telling you really good points because they order from you.

0:31:13.3 MH: Don't you want to know why people order from you? You can guess, right? You could survey. But it can never beat full live conversation or people telling you why they choose to work with you. I think if we could all do that, at least for your top client, if you want to start, then I think we could all be better next year.

0:31:40.7 WB: Sound advice, wonderful wisdom. Thank you, Swire. Where can people go to connect with you and to learn more from you, even from a client point of view, where can they find you?

0:31:52.5 MH: Thank you, Wayne. Like I said, I like networking. I live on LinkedIn, so if you go to LinkedIn type in my name Swire Ho, happy to connect with you. And if you wanted to find out more about work and what I do. I gave myself hashtag the promo guy. And if you actually Google now my exact name, Swire Ho, hashtag the promo guy, everything that I do related promotional product will come up. So that's another way I would suggest people will know, especially if you have a common name or mixed with... The worst case like a celebrity who has the same name as you do.

0:32:23.3 MH: How do you position yourself that... We have the Internet and people are really smart with the phone, with online search right now. What if you could own the space and the industry that you are in? If people Google your name or your hashtag or your nickname or your company, what information are they going to see? You wanted to do it so that when people Google Swire Ho hashtag the promo guy, they're all about promotional product. They're all the blog posts and podcasts that went on to talk about promotional product. Then it gives my prospect the credibility. This person he's not just some guy selling promotional products for just a day, he's actually been on different podcasts and he's been doing things that relate to the industry. I think that's another advice that I would suggest, own your space. And when people Google your name, only show them what you want them to see.

0:33:16.8 WB: That's great advice, something I don't do either. So thank you for that. I will be investigating straight after this conversation. Fantastic having you on the ET Project. I've really enjoyed the conversation. I'm sure the audience have got a lot of great tips from you. I hope they connect, I hope they reach out. You have a wonderful business, it's all about promotional merchandise and we all use it. Do yourself a favor to all the listeners, look up Swire and see what he's all about. Connect with him and you won't be disappointed I'm sure. So thank you Swire. Thank you for your time and I look forward to staying in contact.

0:33:36.0 MH: Thank you Wayne.

0:34:03.2 Speaker 2: Thank you for joining us on the ET Project, a show for executive talent development. Until next time, check out our site for free videos, e-books, webinars and blogs at coachingforcompanies.com.

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