

## Something Extra EP 091 – John Ruhlin

**[00:01:30] Lisa Nichols:** I am thrilled to have John Ruhlin on the show today. John is the co-founder of the Giftology Group, the co-founder of the Ruhlin Group, and international keynote speaker, author, and entrepreneur. John, I am so excited that you are making the time. I know that you are just crazy busy from being the CEO of Giftology, to an author, to a speaker. Thank you so much for gifting your time today to be on the *Something Extra* podcast.

**[00:01:58] John Ruhlin:** Well, thanks for having me, Lisa. I wouldn't give it if I didn't think that it was going to be used and spread and multiply by 100X, so I'm excited to be here.

**[00:02:06] Nichols:** You and I first met years ago through a gentlemen that I know we both love, Dr. Tom Hill. Since then, I will tell you, and I don't know if I've told you this story, but one of your proteges had reached out to me a few years ago and gave me this gorgeous, beautiful carving knife [laughs] with Technology Partners and my name on it. Literally, it has been sitting on my desk probably for about four years. It's so beautiful. I don't even want to use it. [laughter] We're going to get into that. Before we do, I know that you did not grow up in St. Louis, you grew up in Ohio, right?

**[00:02:44] Ruhlin:** Yes.

**[00:02:44] Nichols:** On a farm. I want you to talk to us a little about how you grew up, and then we'll get into more about what you're doing today.

**[00:02:51] Ruhlin:** Yes. Well, sometimes when people hear that we work with the Cubs or pro sports teams, they think that we grew up in LA or New York. I grew up milking goats every morning. One of six kids, we had a 47 acre, very much a working farm, one-acre garden, heated our house with wood. It was like Davy Crockett growing up.

I didn't like blue-collar stuff, so I was like, "I need to do whatever I can to get out of my town of 400 people in Ohio." I thought I was going to be a doctor. My mom was in health and wellness, and she was buying things organic before there was Whole Foods and all that kind of stuff. I went to Malone, small Christian university pre-med, straight A's all the way through school. My life changed because of somebody I met in my sophomore years, my girlfriend's dad. He was an

attorney. When you're poor, you notice when people are really generous. He was this over the top, he would do radical things. He'd find a deal on noodles, then everybody at Sunday church, the next Sunday would end up with 20 cases a year supply of noodles. I'm like, "Paul, that was 30 grand. Are you nuts?"

He was just always doing this. I noticed he was super successful, referrals and deals, and access, even in dips and depressions, he was still doing really well. I looked at him at 60, I'm like "I want to be Paul when I'm 60," and I'm 20. I remember I pitched him. I interned with Cutco, the knife company, which I had no idea what Cutco was. I was desperate to pay for med school. I didn't realize they had the best sales training program in the world for college kids and had worked with 1.5 million college students. I thought maybe Paul would have mercy on me.

**[00:04:20] Nichols:** Buy a knife? [chuckles]

**[00:04:21] Ruhlin:** Yes, buy pocket knives for a hundred of his clients. These are \$80 pocket knives. It's not from China. Cutco is made in New York. It's like the Rolex of cutlery. He changed my life forever. He said, "John, I don't want to order 100 pocket knives, can I order 100 paring knives?" I'm like, "You want to give a bunch of dudes, a bunch of CEOs a kitchen tool? Why?" He said, "John, in 40 years in business, I figured out that if you take care of the family and business, everything else takes care of itself." That was my lightning bolt, my pivot.

It's very popular. I'll talk about pivots. I pivoted away from med school and basically, created a business around the idea of using generosity and gifting, we have a gifting agency for the last 20 years. It all started back with those midwestern roots and understanding that Paul really didn't care about the knives. He cared about relationships. Everybody says they care about relationships, but most people aren't very good at them.

**[00:05:15] Nichols:** Is Attorney Paul still with us?

**[00:05:17] Ruhlin:** He is. Unfortunately, people are like, "Hey, did you marry his daughter?" I'm like, "No, that relationship crashed and burned." Paul's impact on me, and I've stayed in touch with him over the years, I haven't talked to him recently, but he served as a board of trustees, chairman of the board at Malone.

Ironically, now, my business partner is the youngest chairman of the board of trustees at Malone who owns half of Giftology. I still have close ties to his family. He was one of 10, 12 kids, and

some of his brothers and sisters, I see occasionally when I'm back in Ohio speaking or whatever else. No, I haven't stayed in close touch. It gets a little bit awkward when it's--

**[00:05:51] Nichols:** When it's an ex?

**[00:05:52] Ruhlin:** His daughter married somebody else and I married somebody else, but I still have a huge amount of respect for him and really his legacy and impact on me. I shout him from the rooftops any place I go.

**[00:06:03] Nichols:** Right. Well, he definitely changed the trajectory of your life. Gallup says people who donate their time and their money show lower levels of stress and have a deeper sense of well-being. That's really the message that you proclaim today. Do you want to get into Giftology because it's just not gifting. You've got another quote. It's not just a thought that counts, it's the thoughtful thought. Unpack that for us.

**[00:06:31] Ruhlin:** In business, everybody says relationships matter, it's relationships with employees, relationships with clients. At a core level, whether you believe in a God or not, God's wired us to be in relationship and community with people, whether if that's at church, or at the country club, or at the ballgames, or whatever. We're not meant to be siloes. We're meant to be in community and with other people.

People will say, "Well, I checked the box at Christmas," or whatever else, but if you think about people would do things in their business life that they would never do in their personal life when it comes to these relationships. They'll send out stuff to their top 20, 50, 100, 1,000 clients, and then they'll slam a logo on it and they'll call that gifting and marketing. They'd never go to a wedding, and a couple's getting married and you give this Tiffany's vase and complements of Technology Partners on the side. That'd be the cheesiest thing the world, but we do that in business.

What we don't realize is that if you tell your wife or your husband, "Hey, I got you this gift card. Go pick out your own gift." You would never say, "Well, it's the thought that counts." No. It's the thoughtful thought. It's taking the energy and effort to show a relationship that you care about them, that they matter. What we found is that people will be like, "I get this ROI on Facebook ads." Or, "I get this ROI on trade shows or marketing." I'm like, "What's your ROR?" They're like, "What are you talking about?" "Return on Relationship."

For me, especially in valleys, it's usually a few dozen people, not millions of people, that make the difference of whether or not you thrive and survive. It's a handful of people. If you don't take seriously how you show gratitude and appreciation and love to those people, whether that person is personal like your spouse or a friend, or whether that's in business and your client, your supplier, your investor, your board of directors, your employees, then people start to realize you say you're in the relationship business, but really, you're a transactional person because everything that you do is a tit for tat: "I'll give you this gift if you give me a referral. I'll give you this gift if you stay with me for 50 years as an employer."

That's not how relationships thrive. God's wired us that when we love on people unconditionally, no strings attached, you do it strategically, but you do it no strings attached, they want to reciprocate, oftentimes, 10X or 100X. It's huge. When people say, "Oh, it's the thought that counts." I'm like, "No, you can't hold back. You can't make the gift about yourself." Really, Giftology is just another word for love. Most people have read the book for *Five Love Languages*. There's a lot of different ways you can show love. We just focused on the tangible element because people suck at it so bad. They think they're like a 7 out of 10 when it comes to gifting, and really, they're a negative three.

If you start to do this one little thing well, along with the other parts of your business, all of a sudden, we've seen people get 1,000X ROI and ROR because people are so bad, the bar is so low, that when you start to be really thoughtful, people just melt and they want to run through walls for you. That's really what we want, is we want relationships, employees, clients, referral partners to go out of their way to be actively loyal, not just stick with you, but to go act on your behalf. That's where people mistake what loyalty is, like, "I have loyalty. I have employees that have been with me for 20 years." I'm like, "Are they recruiting their family and friends to work at your company? Because if they're not, then they're not actively loyal. They're collecting a paycheck."

A lot of the things that we bring to the table when we're talking about this is you have a financial plan, you have a marketing plan, you have a health plan, a fitness plan, what's your relationship plan? Because if you don't have one, then somebody else is probably going to take your people and take your clients away because they're being intentional and strategic just like you would any other part of your business.

**[00:10:18] Nichols:** Right. Oh, gosh, I just love that, a relational plan. [chuckles] I want you to talk more about that, but I want you to tell the Brooks Brothers story.

**[00:10:27] Ruhlin:** Yes, I'll be happy to. Well, I'll tell you an anecdotal one and I'll tell you one that actually has real data attached to it, because people are like, "Show me some hard numbers of what this has done for clients." Because people will hire us to do all their gifting for them, and it's not to check the box and make themselves feel warm and fuzzy. As an entrepreneur, you don't have unlimited resources. You want to put a dollar in and get \$10 back out.

One of the examples, early on in my business, I joined EO, Entrepreneurs Organization. Heard a guy speak, Cameron Herald had written five books, had spoken in 20 countries, just this incredible guy. He'd grown three companies over \$100 million in revenue as the COO, 1-800-GOT-JUNK was one of them. I had this feeling, I was like, "If I can get Cameron, not just to be a client, but a mentor and advisor, a coach, I can't afford this \$20,000 a month coaching, all this stuff, my life could change. My business could change."

I find out he was coming to Cleveland, which is where I was living at that time, to speak. I'm like, "Oh my, gosh." The night before he speaks for EO, I have lower level seats for opening night for LeBron, we'll go to Morton's, we'll have a steak dinner, and by the end of it we'll be brothers. That's what I'm thinking in my head, strategically. When I asked him if he wanted to go, his response was the most underwhelming response. He's like, "Sure, I guess I'll go. I don't have anything else going on." In my head I'm thinking, "Duh, almost every business leader, we take people golfing, we go take people to dinner. We do the same travel entertainment stuff. The playbook is the same for almost every business leader. It's like, trips and fishing and cigars. It's all this experiential stuff.

I'm like, "Gosh, I got to do something else." I said, "Cameron, what else are you going to do when you're in Cleveland?" He said, "Probably going to go shopping." I said, "Where at?" He said, "Well, there's not a ton of Brooks Brothers in Canada where I'm from, I'm going to go to Brooks Brothers." On the spot, I'm like, "Cameron, I'm a jock guy, I want to send you a shirt. What's your shirt size?" He looked at me bewildered, like, "Does this guy have a man-crush on me? Why is he asking me my shirt size within three minutes of meeting me?" But he was from Canada, kind of that Canadian charm, like all shucks.

He told me, long story short is, three months go by, Cameron's flying in, his flight gets delayed. We ended up going up to Brooks Brothers. I ended up tracking down all of his sizes and put the Amex down, and bought everything in the new fall collection on the jackets, suits, belts, pants. It

was \$7,000 in clothes, and outfitted his hotel room at the Ritz to look like a Brooks Brothers store. Cameron got in from traveling. He didn't want to go to dinner and a ball game with me. When he came back down from taking a shower and seeing his room, he said, "John, whatever you want to talk about for as long as you want to talk about it, I'm all ears. I've never had anybody treat me this way."

We continued to send him gifts. I didn't talk business that night. I just listened and learned. Every quarter, for literally a decade, I'd send him different gifts. It probably totaled \$20,000. People are like, "\$20,000 on one relationship over a decade?" I'm like, "Well, I did the math, and seven figures has come from referrals of Cameron, every client he has, every CEO." When I was begging to speak for free, Cameron got me my first \$5,000, \$10,000, \$15,000 speaking gigs.

We just got back from Australia speaking, and with travel and books and speaking, we've got \$85,000 to speak. I don't say that to brag. I say that because Cameron became my sales agent, my speaking bureau. He's gone out of his way to make sure that I landed those gigs before I had a book or before I'd had any credibility. He became the advocate in my corner. Show me something else where you can get a 50X ROR and ROI. For 20 grand, I couldn't hire Cameron for a month, and I've got him as an advocate for life.

That's where people are like, "John, what's the benefit of this?" I'm like, "Well--" They're like, "How many sales reps do you have?" I'm like, "A couple thousand." They're like, "Well, how do you afford that?" I'm like, "Well, I take a half-million dollars and invest it in the gifts. I turn all of my clients by loving on them, no strings attached, all these CEOs, I couldn't hire for \$1 million or \$2 million, they become my sales reps advocating for me because of how they feel and how they're inspired based upon our relationship."

That's where people say, "Well, I'd play the long game." I'm like, "Your long game is days. A long game is decades." When you're willing to reinvest back into your relationships for that multiple decades mindset, which I learned from Paul, because a lot of his big deals came from 20 years ago that he planted a seed, and then that person was in a position of power, over time, who do they think about? "Better call Paul." They wanted to come back and love on him based upon how he had shown up for them.

**[00:14:56] Nichols:** I love that because it's really truly the thoughtful thought. It's really seeing that person, just seeing that person. We were gifted with something this Christmas, I'll never

forget the person or the gift. It's just so unique. It's a bear that was made by a really awesome chainsaw artist.

One of our Practice Directors found this guy and had this specifically made. The bear's holding a Technology Partner sign, I'm like, "That is just the coolest gift." But it was really that I knew that he took the time to really think about what would Greg and Lisa like. I love this, and I cannot wait to talk about more.

**AD:** We're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with John Ruhlin.

**[00:15:44]** Are you a rising IT leader? Could you benefit from a network of like-minded peers? Let me introduce you to the St. Louis Technology Leadership Experience. This one of a kind program gathers cohorts of IT professionals for three workshops: Peer small group problem-solving, one-on-one mentoring by IT executives, and multiple networking events. You'll be prepared for your next steps as an IT leader by gaining core leadership competencies and a strong, powerful network of peers. To apply for our next TechLX Cohort, visit [tbi.co/tlx](http://tbi.co/tlx).

**[00:16:16] Nichols:** Welcome back. John, a lot of people think we send out great gifts. We're doing the Giftology thing already, but sometimes they're not doing it very well and they don't even know it. Can you tell us a little bit about the recipe in your mind for Giftology?

**[00:16:34] Ruhlin:** Yes. Well, I think what's interesting is it's a difficult thing to measure because nobody ever gets the cheap bottle of wine and writes you a note and says, "Dear, so and so, I thought less of you as a person by receiving your thing, your token, your trinket, your tchotchke, your promotional item, whatever it was." People give the token, thanks, but they don't realize what's really going through somebody's head because it feels rude to say like, "I didn't like your gift," or, "I re-gifted your gift," or, "Your gift ended up at Goodwill 37 days later."

That's oftentimes what happens with a lot of those things. People will say, "John, I do Giftology, it didn't work." I'm like, "Well, did you follow the recipe?" They're like, "Well, I kind of did. I did get Giftology-ish." It's like baking bread. You either follow the recipe, if you don't put yeast in, that one little thing, you don't get bread. If you don't follow the methodology, and there's a strategy, there is a science and an art to what we do. A lot of the things are simple, but people think that they can leave them off, like the personalization.

If I had went to Cameron and just said, "Hey, here's a gift card, go pick out your own clothes." The response wouldn't have been the same. The fact that they were in his size and

personalized for him-- We did an interview with the *New York Times*, they're like, "What's the hot, new, sexy gift?" I'm like, "The stupid knives." They laughed. They're like, "No, you don't still do knives." I'm like, "We do more knives, millions of dollars knives than ever before." They're like, "Well, how does that work?" I said, "Well, I can send the same knife set to 10,000 people, but based upon it being personalized to that person and including their family, their significant other, it lands differently."

You can always personalize something with somebody's name, leave the logos off, because it's not a business thing, you want to connect as a human being. Inner circle was a big part of the recipe because a lot of the executives get taken to Pebble Beach, go to nice steakhouse dinners, stay at the Ritz, and get treated like royalty. My wife is taking care of four kids. She's gets the worst side of being in business. She gets treated like arm candy. If somebody wants to get to me, they can either spend tens of thousands of dollars on me, or they can spend 1/100th the amount on taking care of my wife because she is a major influencer in my life.

One of our clients, I remember I met this guy who was one of the top financial advising coaching companies in the world. He met me at this mastermind, it was like \$25,000 event. He's like, "John, the gifting thing's cute, but I don't think it works." I started to send him gifts and I included his wife Chan on every gift. He called me six months later, he said, "John, thought your gifting was cute. I didn't really think there was anything to it, then about three months ago, my wife started asking, "Hey, have you done anything with John Ruhlin lately?" Then a week later before bed, "Hey, have you done the lunch with John?""

This happened over and over again, week after week. He's like, "I feel like I'm sleeping with your sales rep. My wife is your advocate and she's never even met you." I'm like, "Yes, because of this. You have to include the spouse. You have to include the assistant." I call it the inner circle. It's the spouse, it's the assistant, the kids, and the pets. That's where 80% of our budget, when a client hires us, they're like, "Oh, our clients like golf." I'm like, "I don't care what your clients like. What does their spouse like? Do they have a family? What's their assistant like? How often do you take care of that person?" They're like, "Well, we've never done that." "Guess what? None of your competitors have either. If you want to stand out with your clients, your employees, your partners, you have to take care of the inner circle."

We did this for him targeting 200 of the top seven-figure financial advisor clients. We sent this off to all of them. We did knives, but they're all personalized with spouses and followed our methodology. When he got the referrals back, the forms back, he's like, "John, I would have

been happy with a 10% bump in referrals because each client we get is 25 grand to 50 grand a year in coaching fees. Our referrals, we didn't do anything different other than your stupid gifts. We followed your methodology. Even though I fought you the whole way. Our referrals went up 107%. I can't believe the impact of following this and pouring into our relationships, but especially including the inner circle."

One of the other things is timing. A lot of people will give gifts at events or they give gifts on birthdays or anniversaries or Christmas. Those are fine. But it's like, if you have a spouse, if I only show up for my wife on Valentine's day and on her birthday and on Christmas, that's the only time I say, I love you or send a gift or do flowers, those are table stakes. Those don't give to any brownie points.

If you start showing up for your relationships as a just because, so it's not a tit for tat, people are like, "Oh, I do referral gifts." I'm like, "Are you in a transactional business?" They're like, "No." I'm like, "Somebody gives you a million-dollar referral and you give them a \$250 Starbucks gift card, does that feel good? That's a tit for tat." Sending your relationships, a gift in the middle of July, in the middle of October, not because of a deal's done, not because of an anniversary or birthday or Christmas, just based upon the value of the relationship. Now, all of a sudden, that person receives it, and is like, "Wow, Lisa is so thoughtful."

Now you could have sent the same gift to 10,000 people, but every single person who receives it based upon it being personalized with their name and their family name, showing up at a random time and being best in class are like, "Oh my gosh." Oftentimes, what we show people when we're doing the recipe, they think we're like this extravagant expense. What I show is that it can be budget neutral if you start taking your biz dev, your marketing, your HR, all these things. Nobody's employee brags about their 401(k), but we do things for our employees, like we pay to have their houses cleaned every other week. People are like, how do you afford that? I'm like, we budget in as a part of the pay package. When you start to think creatively and start to show up for people differently than anybody else it's not about spending more money it's about being more strategic, more creative, more thoughtful.

Even with your spouse they don't need you to necessarily spend more money but oftentimes it's the handwritten note that took you two hours to write that is actually more valuable than the gift itself. The gift is just the tangible reminder of the relationship. The handwritten note or the video that you send with it is what creates that emotional, meaningful connection. Oftentimes, we're actually able to save people overall marketing dollars and overall HR dollars by just shifting and

saying, how can we be radically different and show up for people in a way that they wouldn't show up for themselves?

**[00:22:40] Nichols:** Well, you talk about surprise and delight when they get this personalized, well-thought-out gift, but then surprising them when they don't expect it.

**[00:22:49] Ruhlin:** If I tell you I'm showing up with dinner next Tuesday, all of a sudden you're thinking, "Man, I hope it's Annie Gunn's." I could show up with Imo's on some random Tuesday and I didn't tell you, and you're like, "I don't have to cook. This is amazing." The expectation, people are like, "The surprise and delight doesn't matter. I'll just ask my clients, here's a catalog, go pick out what you want." I'm like, "You ruined 50% of the impact by not making it a surprise." We all love to be surprised and delighted. That's the Ritz-Carlton mentality.

Most surprises in business are not good surprises. You get a good surprise and it's thoughtful and personalized and you can take home to your spouse, that's a good thing, that's lasting, that doesn't get consumed like food, or wine, or alcohol that's gone in 15 minutes. We all crave that acknowledgment, that story, that surprise. That's where the ripple effect of this, people start to realize, "Oh my gosh, I want to be top of mind, liked, and trusted."

We crave that acknowledgment, we crave that specialness and that unusual. We all love that VIP treatment that feels like we're the only one to receive that. When you can add that surprise element, that's what people are like, "I can't believe you did this on just some random Tuesday," versus, "Oh, everybody gets this gift because it's Christmas, and I have to and we made money this year." That's not how you wow somebody and inspire somebody to act on your behalf.

**[00:24:10] Nichols:** For sure. I am going to leave the listeners with a cliffhanger. You have to purchase the book, *Giftology*, and you have to read about the surprise that went wrong. That's all I'm going to tell you.

**[00:24:25] Ruhlin:** The engagement story that almost killed me.

**[00:24:27] Nichols:** Story that almost killed John. We don't have time for it today, but I want you to read that story. My goodness. John, you have something to give to our listeners.

**[00:24:37] John:** You wouldn't be a very good Giftologist if you're stingy and not generous. I don't care if it's good times or bad, showing up for people in the valleys is more important than

showing up for people on mountaintops. I feel like being generous and inspiring people to go love on people and double down on generosity, that's what's going to get people through, is doubling down on relationships. We have our entire process, the Giftology system of who to gift, when to gift, how much you should budget, why?

Basically, everything. You don't have to do anything other than follow this roadmap and relationship plan. Your tribe can go download what we charge thousands of dollars to walk through clients with giftologysystem.com. Everything is there, there's no like, "Oh, if you pay this, then you get bonuses or goodies." It's 100% there for them to go execute if they don't want to hire an agency like ours to do it.

**[00:25:24] Nichols:** Thank you so much. I know our listeners will appreciate that as well. I'm going to go download it myself. This is something extra, John. What do you believe is this something extra that every leader needs?

**[00:25:35] Ruhlin:** In most relationships, people hold back because they're afraid to be taken advantage of. What I saw in Paul, and even in my business partner, Rod, was to give more than is reasonable. When you're generous and you don't hold back that 5% or 10%, relationships thrive, people feel how you show up and how you're present. I think as leaders, being able to feel like when your back's against the wall and you're backed into a corner, who has your back? We all want to feel like our boss, our clients, our suppliers, our vendors have our backs. I feel like when you show up as a giver, when you show up generous, instead of having a bullseye on your back, you have people who want to see you succeed and lift you up because they know that you're going to come back and pull them along with, and that's how God's wired us to be in community with each other. I feel like showing up radically generous and giving more than is reasonable is one of those things that really rallies people, and you become this magnet for just naturally more good things into your life.

**[00:26:32] Nichols:** I agree. Proverbs 11:25 says, "A generous person will prosper, whoever refreshes another will be refreshed."

**[00:26:41] Ruhlin:** It's old school wisdom. It's been around for 5,000, 10,000 years that people have forgotten about, that still apply it in 2020.

**[00:26:48] Nichols:** So true. John, I cannot thank you enough for being on the show today. Thank you. I cannot wait for our listeners to hear your story and just hear your amazing wisdom. Thank you for making the time.

**[00:27:01] Ruhlin:** Thank you, Lisa, for having me!