



Podcast Transcript | *The Fix*

Season 2, Episode 1

Date: June 1, 2022

Guests: John Mesenbrink & Tim Ward

Run Time: 32:40

Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

[music]

Katherine: Welcome to The Fix, the podcast made for the trades where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend Doug. One of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. The Fix is more than a podcast. It's a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

[music]

Katherine: Well, Doug, we are back Season 2.

Doug: Katherine, I'm going to tell you something. Season 2, Episode 1, those of our listeners that have seen me, I'm like a giant polar bear who just came out of hibernation and I am hungry for knowledge. Today, we're bringing 45 years of combined successful trades knowledge into our space so that we are going to learn some fascinating things.

Katherine: I'm telling you, I'm really excited about it today. Our guests today we're really going to focus in on telling a little bit more about the story of the trades and its impact and then breaking through this whole era of information overload and what people in the trades have to go through and how do you mind through it. What are some great avenues to get better information? I would to introduce Tim Ward and John Mesenbrink from Mechanical Hub. Welcome guys.

John Mesenbrink: Good morning, Doug and Katherine how are you?

Katherine: Long time? No talk.

John: This is exciting. I just have to say real quick Doug mentioned polar bear. I've said if I ever did the polar plunge, I'd be harpooned because people would think I was a polar bear.

Katherine: Well, it's so great to have you guys on we're really looking forward to the conversation today. Let's start off and give our listeners an understanding a little bit more about who you are. If you wouldn't mind introduce yourself and then tell us a little bit about how you got into the industry.

Tim Ward: John, I'll let you go first.

John: Sure, John Mesenbrink, I've been covering the trades now probably for 21 plus years. I guess I could go way back is when I graduated college and I went to Portland, Oregon following a dead-end relationship with a girl and started working at *The Oregonian* newspaper. That was my first foray into journalism and print and all that stuff. When I moved back to Chicago I started working at a publishing company called Connors and they had maybe 50 trade publications business to business magazines. I worked with one, it was energy-related. It was an energy-related magazine and then I moved over to a security magazine, like private corporate security.

They eventually sold that magazine off and I had a six-week break and I was just figuring out what I wanted to do. Then there was a small publishing company close to where I lived in the Chicagoland area that hired me and they covered plumbing and heating trades. I worked there for about 10 years. That's how I got introduced into this industry.

Doug: Tim?

Tim: Well, for me, it was much more organic. I was probably four or five years old running around the warehouse at my grandfather and my uncle's plumbing contracting business in Champagne, Illinois. As a little kid, I would sneak into the trucks and play around with tools and just-- Always was fascinated by what my grandfather and my uncles did for a living. As I grew up, I helped around the business when I could during the summers, I did choose to go to college. I went to college. I was in the military for eight years and after college I got into publishing, working with newspapers.

I lived in multiple states working with newspapers. Eventually found my way into association, American Society of Plumbing Engineers in 1999, working as their marketing and communications person. I oversaw their publications. One thing led to another, I found a PR position in Chicago. I ran a small PR agency in Chicago for about 12 years that our main clients were manufacturers in the heating and cooling industry as well as some associations that I did the marketing PR with. Organically

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as a kid involved with my grandfather and my uncle's plumbing business, as well as just a lot of the career companies I've worked with over the last 20 years have been involved in this business sector.

Always had a passion for helping out the best we could with the tools that I was giving, the ability to write, the ability to market, and stuff like that. Just think about how to improve the trades.

Katherine: Yes. What a great blend in really getting to where you guys are today. I don't know this story, but how did the two of you meet? Both you're in Chicago in this space, I'm sure there's got to be a good story here. Come on, don't let me down.

[laughter]

John: As Tim mentioned he was working as a PR person for a company that dealt with companies in our particular trade plumbing and heating in Chicago so we always had that connection. He'd invite me to events and stuff like that. I can recall one for instance where we went and invited there was a live band. Remember that one, Tim? There was a live-

Tim: I certainly do.

John: -a live band I was chastised by my former employer about not wearing a suit and jacket because you just when you went to events you got to get dressed up to the nines. I said, "You realize you're going to a live band." I was wearing my casual khakis and a nice shirt and nice shoes. We got there, Tim looked at the other guys, he goes, "Why are you guys all dressed up? What's the deal here?" As it turned out, there was 30 Miles an Hour that day and they did the live band. All the ash just flew all the [unintelligible 00:06:54] and everything flew on these guys and their suits on there. Tim, do you remember that, don't you?

Tim: I certainly do and I recall not chastising them, but thinking you've got to know your audience. This was probably an opportunity on a Friday afternoon where you could have dressed in a polo and some blue jeans and been just fine.

Katherine: Absolutely. How did Mechanical Hub form and come about? Tell us a little bit about that story and how that conversation first started amongst you guys and where you're at today.

John: This started probably 2010 ish, probably about 12 years ago. I'd been working in the print trade publication for about eight and a half, nine years and I always thought there's got to be a niche where a digital-only like an online resource for plumbing and heating contractors. At this time newspapers were slowly diminishing. The younger generation of tradespeople relied more on smartphones and iPads and laptops, whereas getting a print magazine or a newspaper or things like that. I always thought maybe there's a way to create a business like this. That's where Eric Onnie comes in, he was a contributing writer for our magazine.

I got to know him. We went to a couple of trade shows. He was there and we sat and had lunch and just got to know each other, and became good friends. I said, "I've had this idea in the back of my head about doing an online-only resource like a magazine for the trades. I said that I think there's more to in the trade. I think we could update stuff every day. I think this trade is growing and there's so much information and so much interesting things happening that we could have this dynamic presence online only." Eric's very progressive. He's online, he's on social media and he was like, "For sure, let's do this. Let's do it now."

I said, "Yes, I let you know," and I went back home. I told my parents, I told my family and they were like, "No, you have to go back and just go back to work and just do your thing." I'm like, "Oh." Circumstances led to us getting together and just trying it out, kicking it off. I recall the first trade show, it was an oil heat show out in Pennsylvania. I think out east somewhere. We would go to different booths and say, "Hey, we got this site, and do you want to help support it and all this stuff?" They're like, "Oh, can we take a look at it on your phone?" and we're like, "Oh, no, it doesn't exist."

[laughter] Just take our word for it, and they're like, "Oh, come back to us in two months when you have it ready." It was getting our feet wet in this particular part of our journey and our industry. It was cool back then, I will say, well, Tim, I'm taking up your time here, but I will say that Eric and I went to this trade show and we shared a hotel room together, separate beds, of course, but when we woke up the next morning, he goes, "That's the last time I'm sharing a room with you." He goes, "You snore so damn man. I just can't."

[laughter]

John: He's like, "We're done with that part of it." We haven't shared a room ever since, but shortly thereafter we were growing and we found a need for someone else. Eric and I always said, "We need to have this dream team. Who would you want on this dream team of people to help out?" Tim was our first guy.

Katherine: Oh, here's the dreamer.

Tim: Tim was number five on the list, [crosstalk]

John: No, Tim, you remember Asby and Charlotte?

Tim: I do.

John: We courted Tim and took him out to dinner and well, I don't know drinks and parties.

[laughter]

Katherine: Tell us about that, Tim.

Tim: Well, and from my perspective, Katherine, having known John for probably about eight years at the time, we're talking 2012 ish because Eric and John had been doing Mechanical Hub, for about a year and a half, two years, and I had seen it growing. I saw some writing on the wall with the PR agency I was with. I had many manufacturers that I had created great relationships with and I thought that this was an opportunity to really grow in what we, myself and John, and Eric had talked about, what we saw for developing content, for tradespeople in the industry.

It was great working for manufacturers, but it was a point in my life where I was ready to really be more entrepreneurial, and create a bigger environment for the trades, and John and Eric and I melted our visions, and over the next, well now nine years we've been able to grow Mechanical Hub from a small little website to three websites, a robust social media platform, channels that have almost a million followers and our weekly newsletters and we work with partners like Oatey, Churny, to create content that we share with our audience. The bread and butter for us is we want to help our audience be better and smarter at what they do on their daily jobs.

Doug: That's great.

John: If I could really add to that like Tim mentioned, the three of us have our own diverse backgrounds where Eric is a plumbing and heating contractor out of the state of Minnesota. He brings that legitimacy to what we do.

Katherine: Oh, I get it.

John: Tim, he had been working with Asby. He had been working with a PR company, so he had that marketing and publishing background, and then, like I said, I had the editing and publishing background too. The three of us melted it together and have this great relationship where we all bring our strengths to the table, and I think the audience sees us as thought leaders and people who bring legitimate information and it's not just paid for stuff, it's real stuff that people can take home with them and just really chew on, I guess.

Katherine: Well, that gets me into my next question, which leads right down of, it's really one of a kind platform and digital resource, so you guys provide to plumbing heating, and mechanical pros. What sets you apart, and makes you different with your online presence and strategy so unique?

John: Well, I think with the advent of social media, it's just another aspect of the business that has grown to just new heights, Eric does a great job with the Mechanical Hub on Instagram and an offshoot of that has been TikTok where I thought it was just people dancing.

Katherine: Oh my gosh, this world.

John: People doing weird things, but it got a lot of followers on there. Our YouTube channel is growing, so I think the social media aspect has been growing and doing great things. Real, I guess I relate this, we were on a call the other day and there

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were some influencers on, and some media on, and we were with a company and they said they have this website with all the information and everything. One of the guys asked he said like, "Well, if you have a spot that people can go with information and product information, why do you need us? Why do you need influencers?" I'm like, "Because-" I didn't say this, but we all have our creative influence.

You're going to follow a Mechanical Hub because I hope you would [crosstalk].

Katherine: Oh, absolutely.

John: We're talking about, and there's a creative aspect to it. We're engaging. We're funny, we try to be as human as we can. I think that's part of why people, or what you ask, like what sets us apart is, we know our audience and who we're trying to reach, and I think it's really resonating with people through interaction and engagement.

Katherine: Yes, and authenticity,

Tim: Katherine. I would just add that on top of what John said, I think for us as a digital only platform, it's the transparency and flexibility we bring to the table, we at least, I think we try to bring to the table to our audience, as well as our partners like Oatey. We've established long term relationships over the last 20 plus years, either Eric as a contractor or John and I from both the manufacturing and communications aspect, we want to be flexible in our approach to create content that as John said, resonates with our audience and we can't do that without partners on the manufacturing side. We see ourselves as the conduit from the manufacturer to the contractor at installing the product.

Katherine: Yes, looks great.

John: Like that conduit, Tim, I like that.

Doug: Get some trade talk in there. Well, I tell you what, I'd like to say that after listening to you, gentlemen, I haven't had the pleasure of listening to or speaking to Eric yet, but what I like most is you're the everyday Joe bringing an accurate message to the tradesman, and that's what I like. You're not standing up there stiff. You don't have that suit on John. All right, and you're trying to sell me a product or anything. You're giving me real life, but you're doing it in an honest way that every day Joe appreciates. I appreciate you guys for that.

John: I will say the last time a wore a suit at EHR, some man vomited on me. I don't think I'll ever wear that suit again.

Tim: John has always learned to bring a little color in the [unintelligible 00:17:32]

Katherine: I like it.

Tim: He did. [crosstalk] vomiting.

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Doug: Tim, you had mentioned that you started off and you were tinkering into trucks with your grandfather's business and stuff. Would you say that your grandfather then was the most influential person to introduce you to the trades or are there others?

Tim: Well, he was certainly influential on that. I looked up to him as a man in general. I emulated my grandfather, not just for his work, but his daily activities. I found my grandfather to be a very interesting man that said, there along the line, one of the manufacturers I worked with, the marketing person there, Monica Levy at Xylem was one of the most influential people I got to know in the industry, how she saw marketing from a business sector as plumbing and HVAC industry. She came from a very consumer-focused and I always loved how she melded the focus of consumer marketing ideas into a more B2B trade-friendly atmosphere.

She was always a big influencer and some of my big-picture thinking, but yes, my grandfather was certainly a major influence when I was a young kid.

Doug: Okay. John, what about you? Any one person or multiple people that really just--

John: Yes, it's interesting when I said I worked for that family and company that we published plumbing and heating trade magazines. The first day of my job, they said, "Here's your office, and get to work." They shut the door and I'm like, "Oh my God." I didn't even know anything about plumbing and heating. I went through the former editor's email and the first name that came up was Bob "Hot Rod" Rohr, and I'm like, "Oh, this sounds interesting." I called him up and we've been friends ever since for the past 10, 12 years, and we keep in touch almost every day, and he's been in the plumbing and hydraulics industry for so long.

He's won awards. He now works with Caleffi North America, and he's just a really good guy. There's guys like John Barba, he's a trainer for Taco, but he's a super cool guy. He's entertaining. He's funny. He infuses music into all of his presentations, which I really enjoy. People like that.

Tim: Ironically, those are both two people in the industry that I've gotten to know over the last 20 years, that just embrace people coming into the industry and willing to bend over backwards, to answer questions and open doors and introduce you to products so that you get a better understanding. As not being a contractor, I tend to ask a lot of questions about how things work. Why that over this? Those two, in particular, have been very instrumental in helping me gain knowledge over the last 20 years. Yes. I completely agree with John.

Katherine: Yes. That's great.

Doug: Thank you. I do have one question Katherine because I have many funny life stories myself from hands-on experiences. I'm going to ask Tim and John, what is your most memorable hands-on experience that you can tell us about?

John: Oh, geez. I wish I was prepped for this one.

[laughter]

John: Hands-on. Other stuff I can't really talk about on the podcast. Yes.

Doug: If we ever do a spin-off called Oatey Raw,

[laughter]

Doug: we'll get you back on then you can talk about that, John.

John: I was just going to say, Doug, we had some experiences up in Shakopee, Minnesota with Katherine and-

Katherine: What are you saying?

John: -her team when we were shooting some videos, Eric playing with these large balls.

Doug: Yes. [chuckles]

John: There were some fun events that occurred off-camera with the team there at Cherney as with anything. When we're on-site, we're there to do a job, but we're always there to enhance those relationships. You have a lot of fun off the camera doing that stuff. There were some blue moments with some of the products at that facility.

Katherine: I also think that Eric Aune figured out that he wasn't as strong as he thought he was going to be too when he tried to pull out some of those that were maybe a little bit bigger than he was anticipating.

[laughter]

Katherine: I will tell you that opportunity for our associates to get to know the Mechanical Hub team and the time that you spent with them was so impactful. The morning you walked in and you had everyone who works in the office and works in a manager or associate role in that first room there to meet you guys and to hear your story and for you guys to meet them in the tenure. I think the average tenure was something like 20 years. As we went around the room, it was quite phenomenal. They were so proud to show you that new facility and what a beautiful place it is. It was pretty cool.

John: Yes. I think I said this on the tour is that it was so informational to me and it was eye-opening to me because we'd been on a lot of tours and a lot of factory tours, but to go on something that, that I didn't even-- I'm not a plumber and to just learn about these products and these plugs and I'm like, "Look at the size, they go from this size to like this size."

[laughter]

John: It was just-- To take that tour and to learn all about that, it was so different and it was eye-opening for me that I really enjoyed that part of it.

Katherine: Yes. That's great. I want to switch back over to a little bit about Mechanical Hub and what's on the horizon. The last couple of years digital has changed drastically and reaching out to younger generation. Any exciting new initiatives, podcast guests you have coming on, plans for further engagement with your audience? What's coming around the bend?

John: I think video is probably one of the biggest things that we're going to concentrate on. We did the Cherney video last year. We've done a couple already this year. We're in talks with other companies and contractors to come out and shoot video and increase our YouTube footprint. That's a big part of what we're doing. The podcast has been relatively new, I think a year and a half we've been doing it. It started during the pandemic and we decided that we would do podcasts. You had mentioned Eric and he does a separate podcast with a contractor out of Montana, his name is Andy Nicholson.

They talk amongst each other about the trades and being a small business owner and the trades. It's very compelling and interesting podcast. Then Tim and I obviously do one called, *Not Dead Yet* where we're just two Schmos just talking to a guest that enhances our image on our podcast.

Doug: Well, *Not Dead Yet*, I loved it because I was coming off the flu when we had a chance to meet with you. I thought that morning when I got up, I said, "Thank God, I'm not dead yet."

[laughter]

Doug: It worked out really well.

John: Wow. Yes.

Tim: I would add onto some of what John was giving an overview of, some of the things are coming around the corner. John does a really good job of these monthly contractor spotlights, where we spotlight people in the trades. I think at the end of the day, that's one of the things that we do best and we want to continue to do more of. We want to spotlight the contractors that are out there doing these really great installs that are really giving back to the trades. Be it through educational opportunities or association activity. Beyond what they're doing with their hands, what are they doing with their brains to help expand the assets that our industry gives to contractors across the country?

There's a lot of individuals out there doing a lot of good things and we want to do everything we can to spotlight that. To grow the trades. To show what the trades can do for that kid that's maybe a junior in high school. I'm not sure what he wants to do

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when he leaves high school. He's being pressed to go to college, but he doesn't want to go to college because he wants to work with his hands. We think there are some valuable opportunities out there and we want to obviously spotlight our contractors, but work with the manufacturing partners. Get that awareness out there.

John: I also think that social media has really made our tradespeople rock stars, man.

Katherine: Yes. For sure.

John: You look at some of these accounts and there's so much creativity, there's so much great work. I give credit to all these guys and girls that are just killing it out there. We try to pick out people every week or every couple of weeks and we try to highlight each of these people because I think they're just doing wonderful work.

Katherine: Yes.

Doug: Yes. I think it's really great what you guys do too because you're bringing that real-life innovation, that creativity to the mass, because a lot of people if they hear, "Hey, do you want to be a plumber?" "No, I don't want to stick my hands in toilets. I don't want to dig a ditch." There's a lot more to plumbing than that. You might not even be in the field. You could be a project manager or something even. That's one of the great things about what you guys bring and what Oatey is trying to bring is, there's a lot more to the trades than one single pitcher you have in your head.

John: Yes, exactly.

Tim: Yes. My grandfather's plumbing business is not what today's plumbing business looks like.

Katherine: Oh gosh. Yes.

Tim: Technology today based upon 50 years ago when I was a little kid running through vans at the warehouse. Totally different.

Katherine: For sure.

Doug: Yes. Absolutely. Innovation has come a long way and a lot of the innovation has come from those guys out there in doing real-life stuff and bringing those ideas back saying, "Hey, I need a way to solve this problem."

Tim: As I think John mentioned with the social media aspect of what these guys are doing, I think people today are more in tune with learning and wanting to learn. We need to be one of the avenues that they're turning to to gather that information. That's really what our core focus is.

Katherine: Yes. We talked about it when Doug and I were on, *Not Dead Yet* about the trades and supporting trades, and as you talked about there, Tim. I want to close

it out here, but I'd like to end it on similar to how we ended with *Not Dead Yet*. What would be your hopes and dreams for the trades? Where do you want to see the trades in the next 10, 15, 20 years? Tim, you want to start?

Tim: Sure. I'd expand on what I mentioned earlier. As we get more young people into the trades, those that have positions of authority currently need to do more to educate and focus training, to bring people. Organizations need to invest money into creating educational programming. Invest in marketing and supporting the awareness of the trades. Those are some of the things that I would consider. Working with partners like us and many of our competitors that are trying to promote the trades. Create a knowledge-based focus on what the trades offer so that kids want to join.

Katherine: Sure. That's great. How about you, John?

John: For me, it's always been-- I always say it as like, the conversation to get into the trade starts in the living room or in the kitchen. It's really incumbent upon the parents to say, "Listen, college is a great path. If it's not for you don't-- I get it 10 years of going to college

[laughter].

John: I joke about it. It was actually five, but it took me 10 years to do it. It was just 10 years of floundering of "What do I want to do?" When these people come or these kids come into their adult years and leaving high school and stuff. They don't know trades is a viable place to go. It's a quick path to make money. You don't have the debt and all this stuff. One thing is bring back the MEP stuff back to high schools. Bring that back and we should be telling schools that the trades is a great option. I always say this COVID was a perfect example of why the trades is so important.

Katherine: You got it.

John: These guys were chilling it for the past two years and out there in people's houses while the rest, Tim and I were in our underwear doing podcast.

[laughter]

Katherine: You got it. On that note. I would like to thank both of you for joining us today. It has been our pleasure to have you on, get to learn a little bit more about each of you, get to learn a little bit more about Mechanical Hub and all the great work you're doing there. We're so appreciative of the partnership and we're looking forward for that to continue to grow and partnership with our competitors in the market space, other brands about telling the story about the trades and gaining that interest, out in the market. Thank you both. Appreciate it. Looking forward to seeing you guys soon.

Doug: Thanks, guys.



Tim: Thanks Doug, Katherine.

John: Thank you so much for this opportunity. It was a great time. Thank you.

Katherine: Got it.

Doug: Have a great day.

[music]

Katherine: Thanks for joining us on this episode of *The Fix*. Be sure to follow us on your favorite podcast platform so you don't miss our next conversation dropping every Wednesday. If you have feedback about the show or a topic you'd like to see covered, send us an email at thefix@oatey.com or give us a shout-out on social media. We would love to connect with you. Don't forget you can get your daily fix by visiting Oatey.com and we'll catch you next time.

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