



## Ep. 12: Josh London (CAS'94), Award-Winning Global Marketing Executive

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

How far can a degree in English take you? Since earning his English degree from the College of Arts and Sciences, Josh London (CAS'94) has become an award-winning global marketing executive with c-suite experience at IDG, Ziff Davis and CNET. Josh shares a few words of wisdom centered on the gift of a liberal arts education, the power of perpetual curiosity and the importance of wandering with intention.

### Podcast Transcript:

**Jeff Murphy:** I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations, and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU Podcast. My guest today is award winning global marketing executive, Josh London. Josh earned a degree in English from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1994. Since his time at BU, Josh has held a variety of C-Suite level roles at media and tech companies including CNET, ZDNet, Ziff Davis, and most recently IDG. I spoke with Josh about his journey beyond BU and historic career at the intersection of tech, marketing and new media. Well, Josh, thanks so much for joining us on the Proud to BU podcast. It's really awesome for me to have a chance to talk to you.

**Josh London:** It's my pleasure.

**Jeff Murphy:** Get us started. If we could hear a little bit about your life before BU, where did you grow up?

**Josh London:** Well, I'm honored to be here. Thanks Jeff. I grew up in upstate New York and a town called Poughkeepsie

**Jeff Murphy:** And growing up as a kid, when you think back to that first way that you answered the question, what do you want to do when you grow up? What was the first job that you aspired to?

**Josh London:** You know I thought I would be a landscape architect. I always liked gardening and design and the strategic planning, which I wouldn't have called it then, that went into garden design and then on a larger scale as I had a number of jobs working with landscape architects really got excited by it.

**Jeff Murphy:** That's interesting. Did you have family or other sort of connections, friends that introduced you to the world of landscape architecture? How did that passion becomes something that you had?

**Josh London:** Well, my mother is an amazing gardener and was a big influence in that area.

**Jeff Murphy:** So what brought you to BU then from Poughkeepsie?

Josh London: You know, I was looking for a university that had an international cohort to it, a broad area of study. I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do when I first applied to BU or for the first year in fact, and, when I was looking for a place where I could explore where, you know, I could allow that to unfold after a period of time. And so BU really offered a breadth of disciplines that was very attractive to me and I wanted a metropolitan setting. I've always been drawn to cities and, and that was a big reason that Boston was close to my heart.

Jeff Murphy: So you, you grew up thinking that you'd be a landscape architect, but when you got to Boston, you said that you didn't really know what you wanted to do. What did you end up majoring in?

Josh London: I majored in English and literature.

Jeff Murphy: And how did you land on that? Just a passion for reading or?

Josh London: Yeah, it's something that has always been part of my life. I always loved reading. I'm an incredibly curious person and I loved novels and poetry as a window to a wider world beyond the small town that I grew up in and so, you know, when you allow yourself to become immersed in literature, you really can time travel and you really can be anywhere in the world. And so I have a vivid memory of reading a Hemingway novel and thinking, you know, at this time, while I'm lying in bed as I think it was 13, a 13 year old, you know, there are lions walking on the beach in Africa and, and just the ability to be two places at once was really exciting to me.

Jeff Murphy: I love that. I think that's the thing that I appreciate about books is that sense of other things happening in the world that you might not have thought of. So did you enter it as an English major or was that a decision that you landed on after taking some classes?

Josh London: Yeah, I was undeclared and then it was something that I landed on. I, you know, I had considered becoming a psychology major as well. And you know, the similarities are probably pretty clear between the two disciplines, you know, it really is understanding that there's something much bigger than us as individuals and finding our place in the world.

Jeff Murphy: So tell us a little bit more about your BU experience maybe outside of the classroom. First, where did you live when you got to campus?

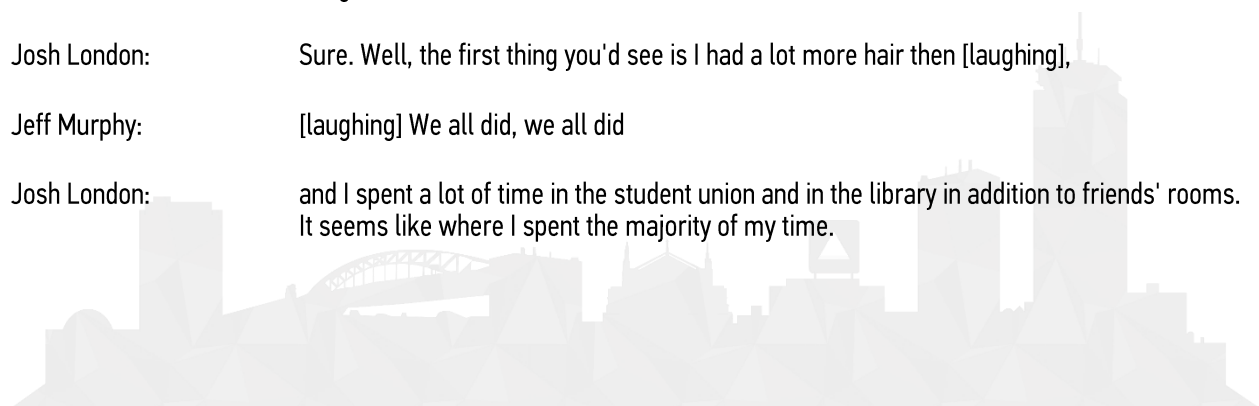
Josh London: My freshman year I lived in Warren Towers and a sophomore and junior years I lived on Buswell Street in South Campus. And then I moved off campus for my senior year. And in junior year I also studied abroad with BU at the University of Padua.

Jeff Murphy: Oh, right, right. Okay. You talked a little bit about time travel as a means of reading. If I was able to time travel back to BU in the nineties were there campus hangouts that I would find you in, did you end up having favorite places to study or hang out or any of those sorts of things?

Josh London: Sure. Well, the first thing you'd see is I had a lot more hair then [laughing],

Jeff Murphy: [laughing] We all did, we all did

Josh London: and I spent a lot of time in the student union and in the library in addition to friends' rooms. It seems like where I spent the majority of my time.



Jeff Murphy: You were in the student union. Were you studying or were there like student organizations or any other sort of extracurriculars you were part of?

Josh London: Yeah, I was mostly studying.

Jeff Murphy: Got it. Did it take you a long time to feel at home at BU? Did that happen earlier? Did it take you a long time?

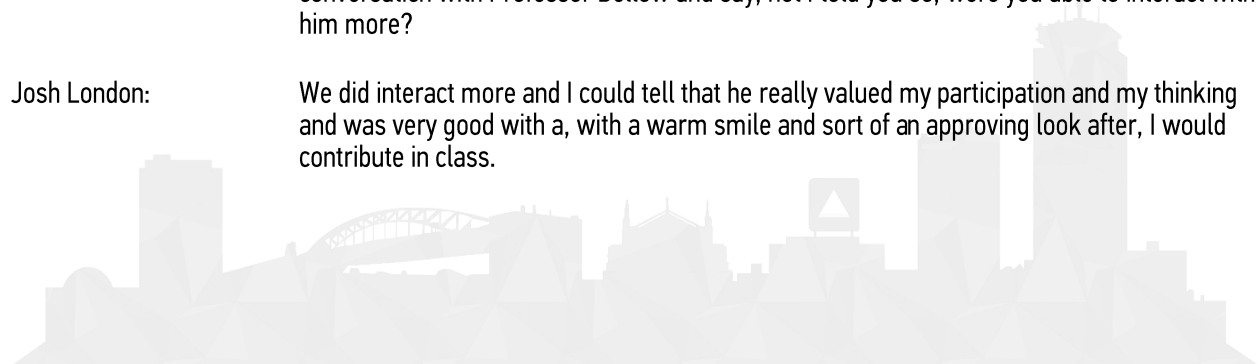
Josh London: That's an interesting question though. The first year was an adjustment for me in a lot of ways. It was obviously my first time living away from home, you know, and all of the wonderful independence that came from that. But also, you know, the responsibility that came with that independence and, and it took me some time to figure that out. You know, that no one's going to remind you to go to every class and to turn in your work on time and, and to live up to your potential. And the first semester was particularly challenging for me. After that I seem to have kicked myself into gear and then it, then it really became a lot easier to acclimate, but I think that adjustment period is something that ultimately was very helpful even though at the time it certainly felt challenging.

Jeff Murphy: Are there classes that stood out for you? Are there faculty members that you remember as in having an impact on your experience here?

Josh London: Yeah, not surprisingly. I remember my last ones more than my first, because of the function of time, but that, that is not to slight any of my freshman, sophomore and junior professors because they were phenomenal. And again, what made them so great for me was teaching me how to think, you know, one of the things that has been persistent in my life, both personally and professionally is a notion that a venture capitalist named Mark Suster calls turning dots into lines. Right? And so that is picking up disparate parts of information and turning that into a theme, and that's something that I learned pretty early at BU. I had some fantastic professors, and I'll name two of them. One was Aheron Appelfeld and he was just an incredibly warm man Holocaust survivor who taught the literature of the Holocaust and you know, became a friend. And the other was Saul Bellow and Saul Bellow is probably one of my favorite stories because I interviewed with him as a senior for admission to his class. I felt pretty confident that I would get in and that confidence fell away, you know, within, I don't know, maybe 60 seconds of meeting him. I had just come back from Italy. He asked me, well, what Italian poets do you like? I named a couple thinking know I'm really acing it. And then in Italian he cited a stanza and said, what do you think the poet meant? And I, you know, I was lost. And then he asked me a couple of other questions and said, you know, I think you're not ready for this class. And I said, look, you know, with respect I disagree. Why don't you let me try it? And if I don't perform, just tap on the shoulder and I'll leave no problem. I wound up getting an "A" in that class and it became, you know, a real source of pride for me, but also just a wonderful experience to study with who arguably was the English language's greatest living writer at the time.

Jeff Murphy: Did you have a chance to, you know, your interaction with him at first is maybe you're not ready for this class, you end up getting an "A". Did you get a chance to have a follow-up conversation with Professor Bellow and say, not I told you so, were you able to interact with him more?

Josh London: We did interact more and I could tell that he really valued my participation and my thinking and was very good with a, with a warm smile and sort of an approving look after, I would contribute in class.



Jeff Murphy: That's an awesome story. I'm glad that you're able to share with us. So, you know, I've been asking you to think about your time at BU and reflect on who you were then. Would college Josh be surprised to see what's happened in your life afterwards with in terms of your career in marketing?

Josh London: Well, I think so in some ways it was very hard for me to prescribe where I would wind up. I'm impressed with my own kids and with others when I see a sense of purpose emerge very early for a profession. That, you know, that was not my path. Mine was a lot more of a wander and I really wanted to follow what was passionate to me with some blind hope that it would work out and you know, and, luckily it has but through a lot of hard work. But you know, I think that was a real gift that my parents gave me by allowing me to pursue a liberal arts education and you know, in one that I have faith that with the right inputs it would really end up in the right direction.

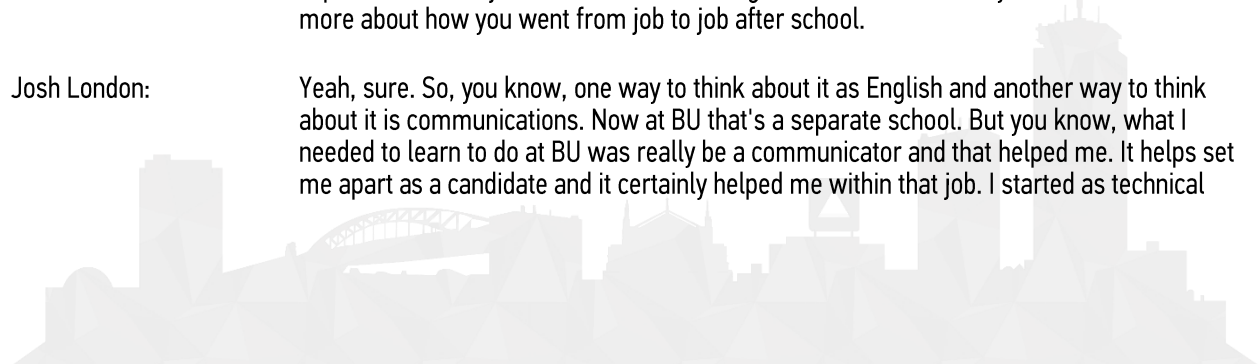
Jeff Murphy: It's interesting, so one of the things that we talk about in terms of advancing careers, particularly we talk about on this podcast, is sort of making decisions and how you go about making those decisions. Here you are thinking of yourself as kind of a wanderer when you finished your degree at BU, obviously you're, you're sort of, I'm getting the sense from you that you didn't know exactly what was gonna happen next. So what does happen next and, and how much of it is wandering versus actually making decisions in pursuing something.

Josh London: Well, you know, when I say wander, I don't mean that it was without intention and, you know, just sort of a random walk waiting for opportunity to tap me on the shoulder. What I, mean more is that I didn't have a prescribed path for a trade and I was open to different influences. So let me tell you what happened. When I studied in Italy, I had met a visiting student from Yale who became a close friend and he knew that I had learned about the Internet and particularly at the time to use the Internet you needed to learn a programming language called Unix. And he knew that I knew that because my parents had moved abroad. They had moved to France while I was in college and the way to communicate with them was via email and the way to get on email and the Internet was at the computer lab using Unix, which I had to teach myself.

Josh London: We then graduated. I kept in touch with this friend. He became a head hunter and he said, you know, there's a lot of opportunities for people with the skill set that you have. And he put me in touch with an Internet start-up. And you know, at the time this was 1994. People didn't know what the Internet was. I mean, if you did, but it's not the ubiquitous foreset that it is now. And because of that connection, I got the interview. I wound up getting a job at an internet startup working for Jim Glick. And Jim Glick was the science editor of the New York Times and the author of Chaos and of Faster and you know, other really well regarded pieces of work, and that quickly turned into a tremendous opportunity for me. And I can tell you more about that if you want detail there.

Jeff Murphy: Yeah, no, I'm also curious to know you've got this passion for English, but obviously you've, been able to obtain these sort of computer skills as well. So does that first job after graduation with your head hunter friend kind of, do you feel like you're using your BU experience or is it just other sort of self taught stuff? And I definitely would like to hear more about how you went from job to job after school.

Josh London: Yeah, sure. So, you know, one way to think about it as English and another way to think about it is communications. Now at BU that's a separate school. But you know, what I needed to learn to do at BU was really be a communicator and that helped me. It helps set me apart as a candidate and it certainly helped me within that job. I started as technical



support, you know, helping people with problems and within three months have moved to starting their web business for commercial clients and you know, at the time you could print out every .com in the world and it would fit on 13 pages. Right? So I mean these, these were early days, but because I was able to communicate the value of, you know, what it meant to have a web presence that early and the business sense of why we should be doing it to Jim and to others, you know, that moved me into that area and provided me that opportunity really quickly. And then what are you doing while you're working with different clients that all have a similar goal with needs? And that's not dissimilar from, you know, the kind of thematic work that you're looking for in literature.

Jeff Murphy: So in '96, you, I found this stalking you on the Internet and looked at your LinkedIn profile, but it looks like you got your first job as a marketing director. You're two years out of school. What skills do you feel like you really needed in those early jobs? Maybe outside of the technical ones, but what are the things about your personality and your work style that you feel like helped get you that great marketing role?

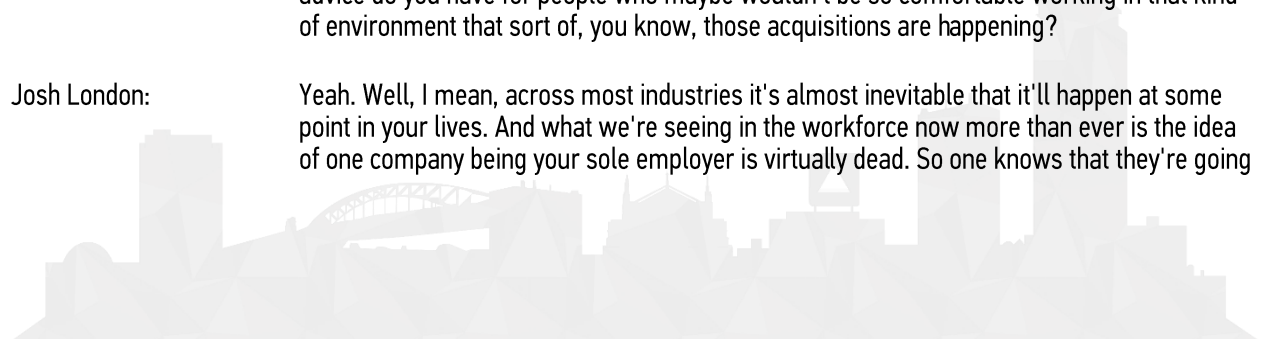
Josh London: Yeah, I mean, listen, I was very fortunate to work with people who saw my potential early and were willing to a certain extent to take a risk. What I look for most beyond hard skittles when I'm hiring for a marketer; it's not someone who necessarily studied marketing in university. I'm really looking for curiosity. Do you do want to understand how all the piece parts work? Do you want to understand how you can play a role in that and how that fits into a broader ecosystem? What's the goal that we're trying to achieve? And where are inputs coming from? And so, you know, I had some product management experience which took me from presale all the way to support and upgrade and so I understood each part along the assembly line and one of my clients that I had worked with early on in this web development that I mentioned then hired me to be their marketing director for a new division they had.

Jeff Murphy: One of the things I couldn't tell from looking at your LinkedIn job history, are you moving all over the country, all over the world for, for different positions? Are you able to stay sort of in cities that you wanted to live in?

Josh London: Yeah. Particularly during the early days, I was traveling a lot less than I am now. It's basically in New York, northern Virginia after an acquisition, back to New York, and then global. You know, one of the things that happened very early that was fortunate for me was this company that I started at after college got acquired very quickly. And, I remember the day when I received equity in the company. I had no idea what it was and in fact I thought, you know, maybe there's a trick here, some sort of indentured servitude and I called my father in Paris and he said this is a good thing, put it in a drawer. Well, you know, three months later we were acquired and the company that acquired us went public and that was my first of what has now turned into six different acquisitions through my career. And that was just an incredibly fortunate place to be.

Jeff Murphy: Has that changed? I thought that was really interesting. You told me even before we started this interview that you'd been a part of so many acquisitions. Has that changed your approach to work at all sort of being in this environment where ownership can change without, you know, maybe you are or you aren't sort of clued into that happening. What advice do you have for people who maybe wouldn't be so comfortable working in that kind of environment that sort of, you know, those acquisitions are happening?

Josh London: Yeah. Well, I mean, across most industries it's almost inevitable that it'll happen at some point in your lives. And what we're seeing in the workforce now more than ever is the idea of one company being your sole employer is virtually dead. So one knows that they're going





to be facing change, whether that's through acquisition or reorganization or something else. The advice that I give and do my best to follow myself whenever I can, is in times of change, run right to the center. It's counterintuitive in many ways because it feels a little bit scary and you might feel a little insecure when the sands are shifting. But what's most important is not to put your head down and just do your job and wait for someone to recognize you. It's really get as close to the center as you can and be proactive about the skill and the influence that you can bring. And that's served me very well. And, and you know, it's advice as I mentioned, that I give to everyone because what people are looking for regardless of level, whether you're just starting out or you know or your more experienced in your career is someone that they can rely on to bring them good ideas, to be proactive, who's not necessarily worried about making everything perfect but instead is more worried about making an impact.

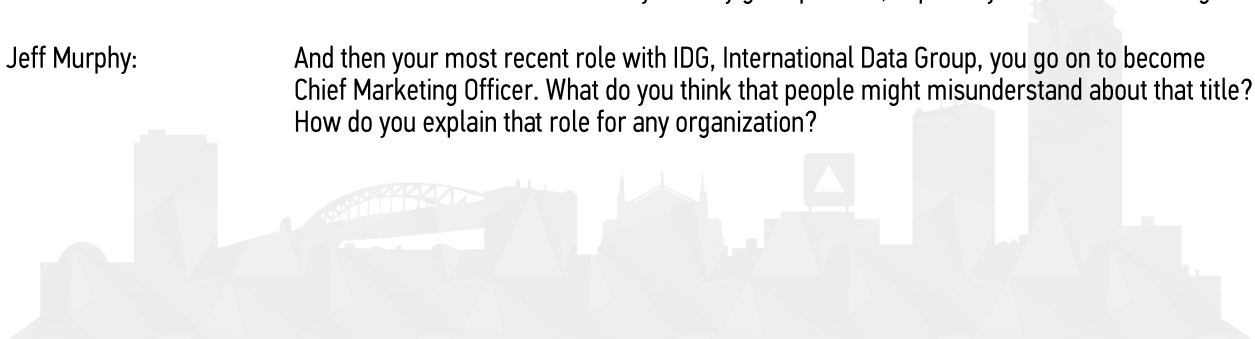
Jeff Murphy: So you've got this, you know, marketing specific experience that you're having. At some point, do you find yourself with C-suite level aspirations or is that sort of the natural progression of what you were doing on? I know eventually you went on to become a COO of a company. Was that a purposeful move for you? Were you sort of aspiring to be in the C-suite?

Josh London: Yeah, I think so. I mean it really was about making impact and so, you know, all of us at certain points have thought, hey, I can add a lot more. And so it was a great opportunity for me to move beyond just marketing and general management and partnerships and business development to really have an impact on the whole. And it was very rewarding to be able to have that kind of influence over an organization. I think if you look in general ad, you know, at marketing we're really at most disciplines within a company. They are so interrelated with one another that thinking of them as discrete does you a disservice. Marketing in particular is always at the nexus of growth for an organization. And so, being able to influence all of the levers that drive that growth was something that was very interesting to me.

Jeff Murphy: And if I'm reading correctly, it looks like you also founded your own consulting firm along the way.

Josh London: Yeah. After I sold that company where I was COO. One of the things that I got a lot of was inbound requests from people asking me if I could help. And then those turned into, hey, will you help us more? And you know, we'd like to pay you for this. And so I started a consultancy and, you know, a small consultancy and that was really interesting because it gives you access to a variety of issues and a variety of different stage companies, some of them that had early momentum and then slowed down a bit, some of them that have a great idea to two guys in a garage, you know, metaphorically speaking, but need some professionalization to how do we think about growth and not boil the ocean and others that were thinking, okay, who do we buy next, how do we integrate them, what's the operating plan look like? So the variety of that was really interesting to me and the variety of stakeholders was very interesting to me as well because all of your customers are different. It's not like when you're marketing a single product. And that served me in my next role because we had so many different stakeholders, so many different customers around the world that it was really a really good practice, especially with active listening.

Jeff Murphy: And then your most recent role with IDG, International Data Group, you go on to become Chief Marketing Officer. What do you think that people might misunderstand about that title? How do you explain that role for any organization?



Josh London: Well, that's a great question because the CMO role has changed so much over time. It really used to be someone who did not have a full seat at the table, if you will. And it has now moved where you're seeing more and more CMOs being added to corporate boards. But certainly a full member of the executive team because working hand in hand with product and with sales, they're responsible for driving growth.

Jeff Murphy: One thing that I was thinking about your path and being in the C-suite with your last role with IDG, how many staff do you oversee as the CMO?

Josh London: It varies by company. So one of the things that I did at IDG was I started a video series called "CMO Perspectives". And that allowed me to interview 60 top CMOs across the globe. Everyone from the CMO of IBM, Slack, Cisco, AT&T, etcetera. You know, you'll see organizations as small as five to 10, and in the case of IBM, you'll see organizations with 6,000 marketers worldwide. So it really varies depending on the size of the organization and to an extent the type of the company. But if you think about the roles that go into the disciplines that go into the CMO role, you'll see now communications, design, analyst relations, and investor relations. You'll see demand generation in some organizations like Slack, you'll see sales customer success, which is post sales support, research. So it really varies.

Jeff Murphy: I know in 2016 you received a big award, you were named Folio 100 honoree as a C-level visionary. What did that mean to you to get that award? Does it help you to feel successful in the work that you've done?

Josh London: It was very validating for the team. I was the recipient of that award, but really the reason I was the recipient of the award, was because of the strong team that we had built at IDG. It felt great to win that because it recognized what was a really difficult task that we had, which was to take this massive company operating in 147 countries with literally hundreds of brands in a radically decentralized fashion. And simplify, unifying, clarify that message to come up with a cohesive go-to market. And if you say it fast, it seems easy. But it was a challenge like I've never had before. And so winning that award was something that I was exceptionally proud of. And I spend a lot of time thinking about the future, if you will. What once was the Internet; now, there's a lot of time spent thinking about robotics and autonomous vehicles, about AI, micro satellites and all of the possible effects that they can have. And that award just sort of solidified that for me, so I was really proud of them.

Jeff Murphy: Again, congratulations on that. I know that you also had left IDG and are currently, I'm guessing, thinking about your next move and obviously as a visionary, somebody who has been focused on things like AI and robotics, do you have an idea of what's next?

Josh London: Marketing has always been a passion mine. I've been lucky to invest in some really forward thinking opportunities since leaving IDG. And that's been very validating personally. But when I think about, a next step for me, it's largely one that meets some of the criteria that brought me to IDG: a great company with a strong brand, multinational presence and that's looking to transform. And so, companies typically call me when they are at that point of transformation. Either they're looking to, move into a new product area or, what got them here isn't what is going to get them out, if you will. Right. They've had some success and now they need to pour gas on it. The other thing that I seem to get a number of calls for is when companies are looking for a strategic outcome. I mentioned this was my sixth exit, but packaging and presenting companies for sale is something that I've built a bit of a specialty in and so that translates into a lot of areas including private equity.



Josh London: And so when I think about a next move, it's not just a corporate multinational, you know, I think about private equity as well.

Jeff Murphy: Well Josh, on behalf of the University or we're all excited to see what you end up doing next. Thanks so much for taking time to tell us a little about your career story and share some advice. We really appreciate it.

Josh London: It's my pleasure. Thanks so much for including me.

Jeff Murphy: My thanks once again to Josh London for joining me on Proud to BU. He's obviously a really smart guy. It was awesome getting to know him and hear his story. If you're interested in connecting with him further, I'd encourage you to reach out to him on LinkedIn. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU podcast. If you like what we're doing, please be sure to subscribe, rate, and review, Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be Proud to BU. The Proud to BU podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni Relations. Our theme is from Jump and APM Music. To learn more about, Proud to BU. Visit [bu.edu/alumni/podcast](http://bu.edu/alumni/podcast).

