

WTC 'Supporting Champions' with Aaron Witt

[00:00:00] **Angela Gardner:** Hello, this is Women Talk Construction and I'm Angela Gardner, and I'm here with my co host, Christy Powell. How are you doing today, Christi?

[00:00:11] **Christi Powell:** Hey, doing really good. Thank you.

[00:00:14] **Angela Gardner:** And we're here with Aaron today. How are you doing, Aaron?

[00:00:16] **Aaron Witt:** I'm really good. I'm happy to be here.

[00:00:19] **Angela Gardner:** Great. We're happy you're here. We always like to start talking about like, you know, what we've got going on.

And you know what, because of the time change and just everything and Christy and I are kind of our accountability partners when it comes to being healthy and just. You know, trying to be conscious about moving our bodies. What have you been doing, Christi, to help?

[00:00:37] **Christi Powell:** I was gonna, I have been walking 10 miles a week, but this travel in three cities in the last, or three states in the last few days, has put a damper on that.

But today, I'm gonna make sure I get my, at least get three to five miles in. Oh, that's cool. How

[00:00:52] **Angela Gardner:** about you, Aaron?

[00:00:53] **Aaron Witt:** That's my kind of schedule. Usually I'm bouncing around like that. I've only made it to one other state this week, so it's been a slow week. But this morning, I swam. I, I exercise every day, um, no matter where I am.

And then I had some bacon and eggs, so it doesn't get much better.

[00:01:11] **Christi Powell:** Awesome. Well, I mean, that's why I work out sometimes, so I can have the bacon and eggs. The bacon. Eggs are good. Bacon

[00:01:18] **Aaron Witt:** is Bacon's good for you too. It's It's

[00:01:21] **Christi Powell:** protein. Yeah, I know. It's good stuff. Protein, man. Oh, yeah,

[00:01:24] **Angela Gardner:** yeah. And I, and you're a marathon guy too.

[00:01:27] **Aaron Witt:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. A lot of running. Um, this year was triathlon. So I did an Ironman, full Ironman, uh, in September, which was an adventure having to practice two other sports. But now I'm back to running. I have a running race in February. So that's my, that's my focus as of now. Nice.

[00:01:44] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. Well, and you don't just travel in this country, you actually travel globally.

So where, where was your last global trip? Was that a conference? Yeah. It was a conference.

[00:01:56] **Aaron Witt:** I think my last trip outside of the United States was to Chile. We went to go see some copper mines in Chile. And this year, by the end of the year, I'll have been to Australia three times, uh, Canada, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and then, uh, South America, like I said.

[00:02:12] **Christi Powell:** Nice. Yeah. I think this is a good opportunity for you to introduce yourself and tell everybody why you're traveling all over the world. Oh, yeah, for

[00:02:19] **Angela Gardner:** sure.

[00:02:20] **Aaron Witt:** Sure. Yeah, I, um, I grew up not at all blue collar, but fell into the construction industry when there was a cool construction project in my neighborhood.

And I figured the best way to be around construction all the time was to get a job in construction. So I called the owner of that company by finding the office number on Google. Um, and asked for a job. And, uh, fortunately he gave me a shot, uh, right out of high school. So I started on a, a pipe crew as a labor and fell in love with what we call the dirt world now.

Um, and so my goal was to be a contractor, to move dirt for a living. Uh, I went to engineering school, worked for five different heavy construction companies while I was in college, went to work in road building in Texas, out of school,

just a few months after I graduated, I started to share pictures on social media and that really started to snowball and I quit, moved back in with my parents before my 23rd birthday and started a company that is now known as BuildWit.

What we do, I started with just pictures and, um, began really just telling the story of, of the construction industry. Because I thought if, if we're going to expect the next generation to join the industry, we at least need to educate them on what it is that we do, because they don't know. Uh, and so. I started with storytelling and now today, after six years, we have a marketing business that works with contractors across the United States and some abroad.

We have a training software to help contractors train people more effectively on. How to do basic skills like laying pipe or how to lead effectively, communicate effectively, take care of themselves physically. Um, and then we just hosted a leadership conference for the industry as well with about 800 industry leaders in Houston, Texas.

So we're, our, our business is all about the workforce challenge, the construction industry is facing, and we're trying to provide as many solutions as possible. Cause it's not just one thing that's going to help solve the problem. It's a, it's a whole, whole long list.

[00:04:24] **Christi Powell:** I'm sure our audience would love to know when and where the next big event is

[00:04:28] **Aaron Witt:** going to be.

So the next, uh, Ariat Dirt World Summit will be, I believe, November 4th through the 6th in San Antonio next year. And we're expecting over a thousand next year. It'll be the second year. It'll be twice as good as this year. And The feedback this year has been amazing. A lot of people have said it was the best event that they had been to this year.

And there's been a lot of other big events. So it was cool to see and next

[00:04:53] **Christi Powell:** year to be. Congratulations. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:04:56] **Angela Gardner:** Wally actually posted a brochure he handed out, I think, at your event and I asked him to send me it because I want to see it. He's kind enough to do it so I can see it, but okay. So I'll get started with the next question.

Christy recently, ABC national magazine wrote this article and it's, it's about branding marketing, which is the world you're in. Um, and they talked about the marketing budgets B2B, you know, is typically 7.8 percent overall budget and in a mining and constructing construction sector, they say that it's around 3.

8, which is. They suggest this is the bottom of the list. And this is from a construction company talking about this, you know, being a social media influencer, aiming to transform the industry. How do you feel like our companies are embracing marketing still? Like are they, do you see that happening more now?

Do you see them increasing their budgets?

[00:05:56] **Aaron Witt:** So that, that 3.8 percent is probably not even, uh, marketing in a traditional sense. It's probably going to somebody that works on proposals, for example. Uh, yeah. Yeah. So most companies don't even have marketing, uh, even big construction companies. I think they've always looked at it as a waste of time and money because they get jobs by bidding on them.

And so it doesn't matter what people think about their brand or who sees their brand. It just matters if they can go get the next job by putting a price on it. So it's all about production, uh, and delivering work. But the world has dramatically shifted over the past few decades and there are less and less people for positions because we have an aging population.

We have a declining birth rate in the United States, so we have less young people than ever before as a percentage of our population. And those young people have never worked in their lives because they've never had to work in their lives. Um, and so we don't just have less young people. We have less equipped young people for for the work that is in this industry.

And now contractors, because that dynamic has shifted, uh, need to market themselves, not from a get work standpoint, but for an employment standpoint, and that is what they're starting to figure out when I started. Posting on Instagram seven years ago. I think it was there were very few companies construction companies on on social media which which made it hard and I like to think that I've helped urge quite a few of them to take Yeah, and and build a social presence with with our work But it's still Obviously lacking, uh, that said, there's the companies that are going to lead the charge into the future, like a CW Matthews, uh, like a Hoopla, the, the great companies out there are going to be the ones telling the story about the industry.

Those are the ones that are going to attract the workforce they need. Right.

[00:07:48] **Christi Powell:** And us, right? Women Talk Instruction, 84 Lumber, Hill Electric. Like we really care about the industry and the more voices that are out there doing what you're doing, Aaron, the better. So if you haven't been shouting on the mountaintop, how great are.

Industry is you need to start now, right? So yeah, yeah, I have a really important question for you. How do we encourage these companies that are really not looking at the need for marketing or the need for their BD people when they start to see a decline in production? How do we encourage those companies that have sensibly done business without social media?

They don't see a need for it other than being, obviously, we're being a good example, right? Us that understand how important marketing and BD folks are. How do you do that? How do you encourage folks to consider marketing and BD as not the first thing you cut when revenue starts coming down?

[00:08:49] **Aaron Witt:** The best way I can explain this is, Christy, if I told you, you should go to therapy, how would you respond?

Would you be positive about that? Who are you to tell

[00:08:58] **Christi Powell:** me that I need therapy?

[00:09:00] **Aaron Witt:** Wait a minute. Like

[00:09:01] **Christi Powell:** who are you? Where'd you come

[00:09:02] **Aaron Witt:** from? Yeah, and that's, that was my approach in the first few years was I thought I knew best and you construction company that's been successful for 75 years needs me. You need marketing.

You don't know what you're doing. You need social media. You need to spend money on this. You need to hire somebody for marketing. You need to hire me for marketing. And, uh, shockingly it, it had mixed, mixed results. And, and so nowadays my approach is a lot different and it is really just showing off the great companies that are absolutely killing it and showing off the marketing they're doing and showing off why they're so successful and showing off.

Why they don't have a workforce challenge and why they're more profitable than ever before and why they're growing faster than ever before. And so I've

been trying to teach and show a good example by putting others, uh, on that stage and showing others why it's valuable. I think the smart companies too, they're already getting ready for a pullback if it happens.

I think a lot of people are assuming history, repeat itself. Agree. But it doesn't, it's not gonna be 2008, it's not gonna be 2010. It, it could be similar, but it could be completely different at the same time. Mm-Hmm. , because the world is way different than it was even just three years ago because of something that happened in 2020.

And so even if there is a pullback, a lot of companies, they're being disciplined now so that they can market more when there's a pullback. So they can find those great people that the less disciplined companies are going to be laying off because it's inevitable. Uh, and so that'll be an even bigger opportunity for them when it comes to marketing, storytelling and grabbing those great workers is when the less disciplined companies start to start to shed some, some good people, which is unfortunate, but that's how the industry's worked for a long time now.

[00:10:51] **Christi Powell:** It is. What great advice. That's awesome. Oh yeah. Just looking at it from a different perspective than what we've been doing. Like I think in our industry, we tend to go, we've done it this long. Why are we going to change it now that that's kind of our first thought and then, and then you get people around you going, what, what are you talking about?

This doesn't fit here anymore.

[00:11:11] **Aaron Witt:** But if, if, uh, contractors are very competitive, so if you can play into that and say, well, your, your competitor is doing a great job over here, then they, they notice that's how we in part got 800, almost very, very busy construction executives to an event that had never existed prior to this year.

Was. We would get the early adopters and then we'd go to their competitors and say, Hey, your biggest competitor is sending a team. You, you might want to think about it too. And miraculously, a lot of them, a lot of them said, yes,

[00:11:39] **Christi Powell:** we do like to be better. Like a little healthy competition is good. Right?

[00:11:43] **Aaron Witt:** Groundbreak

[00:11:51] **Christi Powell:** Carolina. is focused on connecting the design, construction, economic development, and commercial real estate communities in the Carolinas. Our wide range of exclusive content and thought leadership is intended to help design and construction related businesses be successful. Groundbreak is the only platform that reaches key AEC decision makers and influencers in our two state region.

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[00:12:25] **Angela Gardner:** Speaking of that event, how do you see that Event like growing and transforming over the years. Cause I'm sure you've thought about

[00:12:31] **Aaron Witt:** that. I have, I want to make it the event that represents where the future of the industry is going, where the industry is going. I don't want to be looking in the rear view mirror.

I don't even want to be talking about today. I want to be fully focused on. Where we're going and, and that's why we created it because there wasn't really a product out there. I think the other things are important. All the other industries and events are great and, and provide a product that, that we don't provide.

But I think if, if we can go become a champion for the industry, um, and, and, and celebrate the industry and look forward is, is really the goal. And, and. I don't want it to just be a leadership event for executives. I want that to be a part of it, but I think future state, and I don't know when this will be, but I think we can go create a massive event.

That's that's for operators. That's for people in the industry. That's for families, for kids and, and create a celebration of the industry in one place. Cause I. There are great events out there like these construction career days or these, these, these big dig days and dozer days that I see across the United States popping up everywhere.

But there still isn't one event that is a celebration of how cool the industry is and where it's going. And I think we can, we can create that.

[00:13:51] **Christi Powell:** I love that. And I don't know about you, but I am somewhat tired of the, you know, all the meetings, right? The sitting meetings. And, um, I love education, but I think we need to, like, switch it up a little bit

because you know, everybody's tired of being on, you know, sitting down and listening for an hour.

You're just not keeping people's focus like you used to be, you know, you go to a conference, you go to four. Educational classes and you just, you know, you network, right? It's, it's boring. I'll be honest. Like it's getting boring. Like when you do it over and over and over again, a celebration sounds a whole lot more fun.

And I think you're going to drive a whole lot more

[00:14:29] **Aaron Witt:** people. Well, I can't, it'd be fun. It's a, it's a like, that's when I, that's what I looked at storytelling. It's when we began, it's like marketing doesn't have to suck in this industry. It's so easy to make it cool. Like why don't we make it cool? Because it is cool.

And I think it's. I think it's yeah, it's tiring to sit down and listen for a day. It's more tiring though to go to the same event and listen to the same thing you did last year and the year before that and the year before that. Agreed. It's just like, Hey, let's sing a different tune here because what we've done up to this point, okay, it's got us here.

It's made us very successful, but we all know that it's not going to get us further because if it was going to get us further, we wouldn't be sitting there asking, how do we get this next generation engaged? And everybody knows it. And as I say that, and everybody nods their heads, like, yeah, let's, so let's do something different.

And that's what we tried this year is, Hey, let's just, let's just do something different. And, um, the industry responded very positively because it is not what they're used to.

[00:15:35] **Angela Gardner:** That's awesome. I'll, I'll go on ahead with the next question. Um, so your travels have allowed you to meet lots of different people in the dirt world, and of course, ask tons of different questions.

What are the most exciting insights or stories that you've discovered, you know, through these interactions? And how has it helped you to shape the industry through hearing those stories?

[00:15:57] **Aaron Witt:** I post stuff on social media, as you've alluded to, and so many people all the time are just like, that's wrong. And it's like, how do you know that's wrong?

Uh, maybe it's wrong where you work. But you've only worked in what, like, a 60 mile radius for 30 years? You've never seen what's, what's beyond your backyard. So how do you know what's right or wrong? And I think that's one of the coolest things I get to see is all the different right ways to do the same thing.

In all different, in all different areas. All different methods and, and different approaches, and I just get to see the creativity of the industry and the people of this industry, uh, illustrated in, in so many different ways. And they're I've been to, at this point, I don't know, thousands of job sites now, on four, five continents, and almost every state in the union, and every time I go to a job site, I'm still learning something completely different, or still seeing something that That I haven't seen before or a new approach to something.

And it's, it's really cool. I think that's one thing to the pride in, in building stuff is universal. And I know that because I've seen it in the United States, but I'll go to Saudi Arabia. I've been there twice. I'm going there for a third time in December. I don't speak the language there. I don't speak Arabic.

I don't speak anything even close to Arabic, so I can't communicate with these operators and yet I can still bond with these operators and feel that their sense of pride when I'm taking a picture of their bulldozer. And they stop and they get out, you know, they're gesturing for me to take their picture and they're posing next to their bulldozers.

Oh, and then they're, they're trying to give me their WhatsApp number and, and, and, and very broken English trying to get me to WhatsApp the pictures so they can show their family. Everybody's proud of this industry. And if they're not, they should be because this is, this is the world that keeps everybody else, everybody else going.

Yes.

[00:17:57] **Christi Powell:** Yep. And that's one of the things you hit on something that I want to share is I've always been very curious and I spent 10 years of my career doing something else before I fell into construction. And the fact that it is always something new, it's always something new to learn. There's always something to not only learn professionally, but personally in our roles every single day in the industry.

And that's what kept me in the industry for 30. 33

[00:18:26] **Aaron Witt:** years now. Yeah, I grew up around all kinds of people that have were very, very successful and saw real estate and doctors and lawyers and businessmen of all sorts of fortune 500 companies. But I think what's really just drawn me into this, this lifestyle is just the humility and camaraderie and the, the not political correctedness and, and all the kinds of stuff that comes along with this, this world, so special.

And, and it's, it's only really created by hard work and solving problems and working outside and working along people. It's, it's just a cool, cool place. It is a cool

[00:19:06] **Christi Powell:** place. Uh, we love it. And we want to see more women entering. That's why we're doing what we're doing is just to show the rest of the population that you can do it too.

And this next generation, you can do anything you put your mind to. I've been in the industry for 33 years. Who'd ever thought, right. And I was the only one back in the day, literally the only one. Absolutely.

[00:19:26] **Angela Gardner:** So what, what piece of advice, Aaron, would you give to a young person or to anyone wanting to start the entrepreneurship journey, which is what you've done?

Because there might be some listeners out there and hopefully there are women and men that are getting ready to start their own construction companies.

[00:19:44] **Christi Powell:** Or just thinking about it.

[00:19:46] **Aaron Witt:** Yeah. Thinking about it. I think my biggest piece of advice that I've learned, so I were by no means a big business, but. I do help employ over 70 people full time now, and we've been able to, to build the business substantially over the past six years, I would say to people, it's, it's easy to start a business in this industry, and that's not necessarily a good thing.

You really got to want it. And if you're questioning it at all, probably not, probably not your, your way to go. And honestly, it's, it's a better quality of life overall. And more balanced quality of life working for somebody else, and there's still so much opportunity working for somebody else and, and getting on with the right people to work for, uh, because, you know, not everybody and not every company is the same.

And so finding a great company, if, if you want, you know, a good family, a balanced life, the, the RV, the. The, the fun that is, is a great, a great lifestyle. You're better off being within a great business and working your way up within a great business. And, and if I can talk you out of starting a business, not for you.

So if you're telling, if you're listening to this, wanting to start a business and you're thinking, screw this guy. Okay, cool. Yeah, it might be for you, but there's, um, there's a price to pay and. A lot of people to get into this trap when they start a business, they just grow and grow and grow because they think growing is winning.

Now we've had to grow. Uh, because I, from the beginning have always said, I want to be the most influential business in this industry, not the biggest, but the most influential. And that's going to require scale. I can't do it without scale. But there's a lot of people that get started with these construction businesses.

And then they just, because they like digging holes, for example, and they're really good at it and they're in the machine every day. And then they end up with 75 people and they're stressed out all the time. They're miserable. They hate it. Uh, and they're, and it's just like, you'd probably be making more money with a lot less stress with a crew of five, a crew of 10.

I think it's important to, okay, if you're going to start a business, figure out what you want first and the quality of life you want and what you're willing to give up. Because the more you want, the more you have to give up. It is directly proportional. There's no, there's no way around it. And I've tried to get around it and everybody was like, yeah, you know, you're going to have to pay, pay a price.

There's, there's a price to pay. Then you're young. You're like. Yeah, no, I'll, I'll pay what I got that easy. And then, you know, your girlfriend breaks up with you because you work too much. You're like, that sucks. And then you go get another girlfriend. Then your girlfriend breaks up with you because you work too much.

You're like, it's, it's, it stings. And my dad hasn't talked to me in two years because of the business, we had a great relationship before the business. He hasn't spoken with me in two years. And so if you would have told me that's the price that this costs, I probably would have questioned it beforehand, but I'm still willing to pay it for what I, what I want and what I think I need to do.

So I would just say, really, really think about what kind of life you want. It's oftentimes not the best way to have a great life and is only for, for a very few. Uh, limited group and, uh, if it is for you, think about what you want. If you want that thousand person operation, awesome, because there's more opportunity to do that than ever before.

And if you're willing to do it, you can do it here without a college degree, no matter your background with 2, 000 to your name, I've seen it done. Or if you want that 10 person company, you want to take home 300, 000, 400, 000 a year, live a great life, be with your kids a lot more. That's the way to go to, uh, there's no right formula for, for anybody.

[00:23:20] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. And the path isn't easy. It's not, it's not for somebody. Entrepreneurship is not for somebody who's not serious or maybe even passionate. There has to be something that ignites your fire because you're going to have a lot of days that your fire is not ignited. Just trying to get to where you you've gotten today, Aaron.

And we give up

[00:23:39] **Angela Gardner:** too, by doing this podcast a lot, so yeah, we understand. Yeah,

[00:23:45] **Aaron Witt:** it's not just business either, but it's like, I'm six years in, I'm still living above somebody's garage right now. Yeah. Like I'm, I'm, I'm by no means living large. Uh, it's, it's just, that's the kind of stuff you don't really recognize.

Uh, when you're starting out,

[00:23:59] **Angela Gardner:** but it's great that they need to hear that because they need to understand it before they go down that road. And even for me, I found out by working in my family business that I preferred. It's called an intrapreneur, which is that's an inside the organization, making a lot of really cool stuff happen.

And so that's also a

[00:24:17] **Aaron Witt:** direction, right? At our company, there's a lot of people that make more money than I do. A lot of people because they're valuable. They're, they're, they're, they have a much more balanced lifestyle than I do.

They're building the business alongside me internally, but they don't have all of the risk associated with it.

Right. Uh, it's, it's a good deal. It's a really good deal. Um, and that's, that's the path I would recommend to people over, over doing this.

[00:24:43] **Christi Powell:** Thank you for that honesty. I'm sure that the folks that are listening that are thinking about entrepreneurship now are at least doing that checkbox in their head. You know, do I really want to give this up?

Do I really want to give that up? And, and it is a sacrifice if that's something you want to do. Is it worth it? Yes, absolutely. I would say it's worth it now, but I still have days that I wonder.

[00:25:05] **Aaron Witt:** Sure. Yeah. So they, that's what people tell me. I mean, Hopefully fingers crossed,

[00:25:11] **Christi Powell:** but you're making such a big impact and we can't thank you enough for doing that.

You're making our industry look like it's the funnest industry to work in and it is. And so we appreciate you and the fact that you are so okay. So what do we tell our audience that's listening that wants to get you out of the top of a garage? Um, what is it that you need as a company? Like you need more contractors using your marketing skills?

What is it that you need? Throw that out there to our audience.

[00:25:40] **Aaron Witt:** Well, you know, I, I say the garage thing. I'm, I'm there by design, fortunately. Um, but yeah, I, you know, just people following along is, is more than helpful or, or not even, you don't even have to engage with our business to help us. Just talk about the industry is, is, is fast.

Post about the industry, your job on social media. Talk about it at the, at the dinner table. Do your kids know what you do? If they don't probably a good place to start, show them some pictures, some, some, some videos. Everybody in this industry has cool stuff on their phone that probably no one but them has seen talk about it.

Um, I think that that helps the more people talking about this world, the better off we'll be. Uh, and that's probably the biggest ask I can make.

[00:26:22] **Christi Powell:** So how does everybody follow you? Tell our audience how to follow you and comment, or, you know, maybe just start following you to get some ideas on how they can promote the industry where they're at.

[00:26:35] **Aaron Witt:** Uh, yeah, my social media is just Aaron, A A R O N, W I T T, wherever you have social media, um, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and then, um, YouTube, and, uh, we have our podcast Dirt Talk, where I talk to dirt world professionals every week, it's a ton of fun, and even not dirt world professionals, last week I had a Navy SEAL, so all kinds of fun stuff nowadays, just really cool opportunities.

[00:27:02] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. I love our industry and the people in it. They're so interesting. And I think that's why we're having so much fun with all these guests, right? We get to learn a little bit about them and just learn what makes them tick and what they, I love hearing stories about anyone that's in our industry.

Absolutely. Thank you so much for taking time to pour into our audience. We can't thank you enough for that and keep doing great work. And if there's anything that Women Talk Construction or Angela and I can do for you, we're here for you and we really appreciate you. Um, just sharing your wisdom with our audience.

Yeah. Thanks

[00:27:36] **Aaron Witt:** for having me.

[00:27:43] **Christi Powell:** Well, that's all for this episode. Thank you so much for listening to the Women Talk Construction Podcast with your hosts, Christy Powell and Angela Gardner. See you next time.