

Latest Episode of Epic By Nature: "Epic Experience: What Comes Next"

BROOMFIELD, Colo., Sep. 22, 2026 — What brings guests back to a mountain year after year?

For decades, the ski industry competed on access: bigger terrain, faster lifts, and more places to ski. Today, guest expectations are evolving. Increasingly, success is determined not only by where guests ski, but by how they experience a mountain once they get there.

In the latest episode of Epic By Nature, CEO Rob Katz sits down with his chief of staff to share why Vail Resorts is investing in the guest experience as the next frontier of growth in the ski industry. Together, they discuss rising guest expectations, the importance of loyalty, and how Epic Experience is designed to create more seamless, personalized, and memorable experiences across the guest journey.

The conversation also examines the critical role employees play in bringing Epic Experience to life. From creating moments of genuine hospitality to helping reduce friction throughout the guest journey, our teams help build the lasting connections that keep guests coming back year after year.

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Full Episode Transcript

Rob: Welcome to Epic by Nature. I'm Rob Katz, CEO of Vail Resorts. For decades, the ski industry competed over access, more mountains, bigger terrain, and faster lifts. Those things still matter, and they always will. But today, guest expectations are evolving, and increasingly we believe the future of growth will be shaped not only by where guests can ski, but how they personally experience our mountains once they get there. That's what today's conversation is about. Over the past several months, we've talked about Epic Experience, our company-wide commitment to delivering the most exceptional and differentiated experience in skiing and riding. But today, I want to focus less on what we're doing and more on why we're doing it. Why do we believe guest experience has become a critical source of growth and differentiation? Why is loyalty so important to the future of our business? What does all of this mean for our guests, employees, and investors?

To help explore those questions, I'm joined by someone making his first appearance on the podcast, my new chief of staff, David Ganick. Many of you may remember Sarah Schwandt, my previous chief of staff, and I was sorry to see her go, but she has moved on to an incredible role overseeing our Vail Resorts retail organization and overseeing the development and transformation of our My Epic Gear opportunity. I can't wait to see what she does in that role. But I'm also thrilled to have David in this role. David and I have known each other going back over a decade. David has had so many different incredible roles in our company, and I am lucky to have him now in this chief of staff role. David, welcome to Epic by Nature.

David: Thanks, Rob. Thanks for having me. I'm definitely excited to be here, and I'm excited to talk about Epic Experience. I'm also excited today to maybe ask you some tough questions and see if we can get some candid answers from you and learn a little bit more about how you're thinking about this next chapter.

Rob: Awesome. I can't wait to go at it with you over this podcast and the podcasts to come. Let's start.

David: All right, so let's start with something you said at the very top. For much of the ski industry's history, companies competed on terrain, lifts, snowmaking, and destination appeal. Why do you believe that's no longer enough?

Rob: Yeah, I think it's a great question. And obviously I've been around the industry now, started this kind of business relationship with what was then called Vail Associates back in 1991, so 35 years. And I have watched an incredible progression

in the industry. And I think it's important to highlight that, of course, terrain, lifts, snowmaking, destination, these are all critical. It's not like these are going away. These are still very important and our company, and I think everybody in the industry still needs to make sure we're making progress on that. But when I look back, what I really see is this arc.

And that really was started, I think, with the season pass and the efforts by us and others to really ensure that both ski resorts and the communities could have greater stability by putting more of their lift access and their visitation onto a product that was committed before the season started. And I think that's worked out well for everybody because it's given more certainty to ski resort companies, us and others who have then used that certainty to invest more in lifts and snowmaking.

But that is the past. And I think as we look to the future, there's more that we need to do. And the reason why I think it's no longer enough is because of the state of travel. The good news is that people do want experiences and they're continuing to travel. And we see that in almost every economic survey you can look at, but they want more. They want to see how you can use technology, how you can use new processes, how you can use people to elevate their experience and take the challenges out of any trip. And I think for skiing and riding, there are many challenges and logistical hurdles that you have to jump over. And I think guests today want to see ski resorts and everybody in travel, but ski resorts really make the investments, come up with the innovations so that they feel like they are getting the best of a ski vacation, that time on the mountain, that time with family and friends, but they're not necessarily having to go through all the challenges that they may have faced over the last number of years.

David: Yeah, thanks. Makes a ton of sense. And I've heard you talk a lot in the past about the need to drive guest loyalty and the need to drive guest satisfaction. And I'm curious to hear you talk about the difference.

Rob: Yeah, I think there is a difference. I think guest satisfaction is obviously really important. We track it religiously. We track it not only in a broad basis like with a net promoter score, but we also track each and every aspect of our business. It's one of the things that when I look back over the last number of years, I think our company has really done some great work on. A lot of it's starting with the investment we made in talent and better staffing.

But yeah, to see record guest satisfaction scores last year in a year that we had really tough weather and tough conditions was amazing, but I don't even think that's enough anymore. I think guest loyalty means that they feel not just that they had a good experience while they were on our mountains, but it means that they feel a loyalty to the overall network, the overall experience that kind of transcends one visit. And I think loyalty means we know who the guest is and we can treat that guest differently based on what they want, what they need, what they tell us about themselves. And I think for the ski industry, that's something that we absolutely have to get better at. And I think we're now at a point within our company where we have an incredible network, an incredible platform, and we can put the time, effort, and investment into elevating those components that really make guests feel like they are part of the company and our experience in the mountains, not just necessarily having a good time when they come, which of course is still critical.

One of the other things about guest loyalty that's critical is how it's important to our business. The ski business is not one that's going to ever grow very fast. I think that the most important opportunity for us is just to keep maintaining growth. Our ability to drive our company and our share price goes right to that guest loyalty and guest experience point, which is to the extent that we can create better guest loyalty, we will pick up more visits and more trips from our guests. They will use more ski school. They'll use our gear business more, more food and engage with other products. To the extent that we can do that, that allows us to really hit the kind of growth targets that we have as a company. And that's why to me, Epic Experience is so important to who we are as a company because it speaks to the future of the experience that we can provide, what the ski industry needs to look like, and how we drive value for our shareholders as well.

David: Got it. So, what are some of the ways that you see the company being able to really drive that guest loyalty?

Rob: Yeah, I think obviously one of the early ways we did it was with season passes and bringing people into a program that meant more and delivered more to our guests than just a lift ticket. But now I think there's a real opportunity to take that same approach to every other part of the ski business. So you think about what those core components are and it's things like gear,

first and foremost, ski school and lessons, food, guest engagement, how we communicate with our guests, how we deal with feedback, and then certainly lots of other areas around how to navigate the village or parking, the arrival, all of that. And so what I'd say is I think that there are pieces of each one of those that can really be transformed with better process, better technology, better investment. So with gear, this has been at the forefront for us because everyone who gets on one of our mountains needs gear, skis or snowboard.

And I think the way people use gear today hasn't really changed in the last 50 years, which is there's some people who want to know what gear they're going to get when they're on the mountain and they own gear. And for some people, sure, a small percentage, they're skiing 50, 100 days a year and they make good use of that. But for a lot of people, they are skiing five days or 10 days a year, but they own gear. So that gear is just sitting in their garage, it's not getting tuned, it's not getting updated or waxed or anything like that. Then you have a bunch of people who may not care as much about the gear that they're using on the mountain, so they're renting, but historically the rental opportunity was much lower quality gear, wasn't as comfortable. And I think it actually created a barrier to getting new people into the sport.

So the opportunity with gear in my mind is really to flip it on its head and say, well, wait a minute, we can get the right gear for people where they need it, when they need it for the kind of day that's out there because we have that size and scale. And so it's really a transformation of how people use and access gear that makes it easier for everybody. And it's something that I think it is one of the biggest pain points for everyone about skiing and riding is gear, either going through the rental process or schlepping and carrying or traveling with your gear to a mountain. So if we can solve that, I think it's a big opportunity. Lessons, really ski lessons are amazing, but we haven't added anything to that lesson again in 50 years. And so over last year and now this year, basically digitizing group lessons so people can watch and follow their progress, either their own or their kids.

And then we're also adding this concierge service, this kind of high touch service to private lessons for people who want that experience where every single aspect of their trip has somebody supporting them. And for that clientele, we feel like that's an amazing opportunity. Food. Obviously we serve and deliver a lot of lunches primarily across our resorts, huge volume. But I think because of the network that we provide, we can actually elevate the quality and ingredients. And so this year we're really trying to take the ingredients to the maximum they could be while still being able to serve the volume that we do. And then ultimately bringing technology into how people move around and find a seat or go through to get their food and check out. And so really to try and elevate that dramatically. And then last, it is really that guest communication piece where we need to be able to communicate with guests.

There's a lot of information that's important to guests throughout their trip, weather, grooming reports, lift line wait times, things like that. And so we need to provide all of that in a format to guests that they can easily use it, access it, and then leverage it for their trip where they're not really having to put any effort into that because we're serving it up to them in a way that can be used right off the bat. And I think we've seen lots of other people in travel and cruise and airline and hotels do great jobs with that, and I think we can do that as well.

David: Thanks, Rob. All that makes a ton of sense and certainly resonates with me in terms of the experiences. How do you see staffing and how do you see what's the importance of talent in these strategies?

Rob: Yeah, I think it is the entry point. I think unless in the end, this is an experience, as much as technology and process and everything can make a difference to people's day, it is the people who ultimately really provide the experience. And we've seen that across the board. I mentioned earlier that we had record guest satisfaction scores this year. That was because we had record staffing scores this year. We saw that was by far the biggest increase that we saw. So it's very clear that if you want to deliver a great experience for guests, you have to be fully staffed and you have to have the right people. And I think one of the reasons why I feel like this is the right time for our company to now be launching Epic Experience is because of the investments that we've made over the last three to four years in staffing, starting in 2022 where we made \$175 million investment in wages and staffing to make sure that we would be fully staffed, which we have been every year since.

We also have done some things to improve the return rate, like how many people who worked for us last season will come back

this season. And so what's happened is that we've taken those two things plus more efficient scheduling, meaning that what we've done is we've implemented technology and said, "Hey, we have somebody who's working as a scanner in the morning. They might be able to also get another job or a few hours in the afternoon doing rental returns or they're working on one of our restaurants at one point in the day and then they're working as guest engagement during other parts of the day." We couldn't do that manually, but now that we have this broad-based system, we actually are using less employees, but giving those employees more hours. So they're making more money during the season, but we're hiring less employees, which means we're putting less pressure on housing in our resorts.

And we're also hiring less people every year because we're retaining more each successive season. So then we have been able to be more selective with the employees that we're hiring to really try and hire people who naturally have an affinity for guest service and guest engagement. And so in my mind, you have to do that well to even earn your ticket to the game, so to speak. You can't really try and do all these other amazing innovations if you don't have an incredible staff. And so that always has to stay front and center for us as we go forward. And actually, I think hopefully what we see over the next few years is this flywheel continues where last year we accepted only 11% of the number of people who applied for jobs for frontline staff, which is kind of funny. It almost sounds like an Ivy League school of sorts, but that's the key to keep doing that every year to get better at that.

David: So Rob, how do you think about the tension between standardization, which is required for all of the experiences and to deliver those experiences that you just talked about with ensuring that we're not homogenizing the mountain experience and ensuring that each resort feels different?

Rob: Yeah, it's a great question. Certainly one that's come up a lot over the years. And yeah, I think one, the success of our company depends on each resort being unique. And when you think about our season pass, one of the key reasons why we were acquiring resorts over the years was because we wanted to provide people more choice when they bought a pass. And so it was critical that people saw the mountains as different. One good thing is that each mountain is very different. The physical structure of the mountain is totally different. The other piece is that a big component of the experience is the local cities and towns and communities that our mountains are in, and they're all very different. And so the feel and vibe of each one is very different. But what I would say is that as we go across our mountains to try and let's say elevate staff, to bring people in that have a bigger passion for guest service, to ensure that we're fully staffed and giving people the most hours, that's all great, but that doesn't take away from having people's individual personality come out as they engage with people throughout their experience.

And over the years we've had a lot of different efforts around our service culture, but one of it has always been around personalizing it, making it something that's personal because we know our mission is that we're going to provide an Experience of a Lifetime to our employees so that they can provide an Experience of a Lifetime to our guests. And that Experience of a Lifetime is something that's unique and personal. We want somebody's passion to come out, so we have to always bring it out. I'd also say that eliminating the hassles of skiing, I don't think homogenizes the experience. I think it makes it possible for people to really experience the uniqueness of each mountain better and more clearly and without hassles and more time on the mountain, less time in lines, less times going through a checkout line, less time going through a ticket line, less time going through a rental line.

And to the extent that we can eliminate all of that and get people up on the hill, that is what makes each of these mountains so unique is the skiing and the terrain. And so I think that's, in my mind, at least a pretty easy win. Guest engagement, being able to communicate with our guests better, getting them information quicker, getting them better gear. These are all things that I think regardless of what mountain you're skiing on or riding on, I think everybody will appreciate. And so although I understand people talking about that tension, I think as we actually move forward to execute this, I don't actually think these two things will be in tension. I think they will actually be complementary.

David: Yeah, it sounds, I mean, what I hear you saying is that actually by removing some of those hassles and barriers, you actually elevate the unique aspects of each resort and really allow a guest to truly enjoy those components versus having lines or some of these other hassles. Why do you think it's important to own and operate the resorts versus having partnerships like

some of the other models within the industry?

Rob: Yeah, I think this was obviously something we've talked a lot about, and I think there's a lot of hassle in owning a resort and running a resort. It takes a lot of work and investment, people. But when we were building the company way back when, I think we were thinking that this was more than just about selling passes. Selling passes was just one part of the ultimate goal for what we were trying to create. We were trying to create an Experience of a Lifetime.

We can make a difference in ski school and guest communication and guest support and service and guest feedback and recovery, all of those things. We clearly couldn't do that if we were just doing pass partnerships. And there's nothing wrong with a pass partnership. Even on getting people to the mountain, one of the things I think we're seeing is that obviously the pass market is maturing and as we go forward, it's going to be important that when we bring people to the mountain, we are driving both. We're driving people who want to buy a pass before the season or people who want to buy lift tickets and we can seamlessly move back and forth on that.

It's also critical obviously that we're getting the data, so we get a chance to watch how people are using the products and what their feedback is. And again, that's not something we could do if we were just about pass partnerships. So for us, it's been a pretty critical component of how we built the company in the first place.

David: Okay. So three to four years down the road when Epic Experience is working like it's supposed to, what does that look like?

Rob: It should be a real sea change. And obviously I think we're definitely thinking big and we understand, look, this is an operational company. It takes time. We have 55,000 employees, most of whom are seasonal, so we only have them for four months of the year. And so getting people on board and trained, making the investments in the technology and all of that's going to take time. But as we look out a few years, we're really seeing a very different experience that we can provide, which is around one, an app and websites that give you an amazing opportunity supported by AI to browse and look for the resort that really meets your needs and getting you all the information across this whole network, not just, again, lift access, but every part of the resort, every part of the experience. So you can put together the information and make a decision as to where you want to take your trip, and then obviously start the booking process and do it simply and easily either on an app or web for any of the resorts or products, and that we would know who you are.

So when you come back every year and you're trying to pick where you want to go skiing, we remember where you went before, we remember what you liked, and so we can make it easier for you to go through that process. And that hopefully takes the hassle, the worry down quite a bit. And in our mind, I think it not only makes the experience better for the current skiing and riding community, but actually creates a much better entry point for new people who want to try out the sport. Because one of the things we know in our sport is that we do have a lot of people that try it out and then don't come back. And a lot of that is because of gear or their experience on the lesson or the hassle of it. And so to the extent we could do this, we think it's actually a way to grow the sport.

David: So that's a pretty exciting view of the future, exciting for me as a part of the team that gets to deliver on it and certainly as a skier and snowboarder. So why do you think we are uniquely positioned to deliver on this vision?

Rob: Yeah, I think because we've spent the time and effort to build the company to deliver on all aspects of the vision where we said, "Hey, we're going to bring our resorts together under a common technology platform. We're going to hire using best in class technology and systems. We're going to have a gear business that is all integrated and allows us to leverage all of these pieces and obviously owning and operating the resorts as we talked about earlier, but it really is that it was not easy to bring everybody together under one roof, so to speak, under one culture, under one approach, but this is where we get to show what that can deliver for skiers and riders. And actually, I think, yes, it is more challenging for sure for other people who are built differently and take different approaches. But like with season passes, it took the industry maybe 10 years after we started to get going on season passes.

Yeah, my hope would be that the industry over time actually does follow us in their own way because I think this is better for the sport overall.

David: Thanks, Rob. All right, new ski season, a new chief of staff, and we're going to mix up the routine a bit. So we're going to try something new today and incorporate a special mailbag moment in our show. In this segment, I'll have you answer questions from our listeners and employees. Sounds good. Okay, Rob, the first question in our mailbag moment comes on the heels of us spending time with our Epic Service winners, where obviously a key theme was around service. So what's something a frontline employee once did for you that changed how you think about service?

Rob: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question and it goes, I think, to the heart of who we are and what we stand for and what we talk about. And by the way, the experience with our Epic Service Award winners was amazing ambassadors. They were incredible. But to me, I think it was a moment where I had both of my kids, they were younger. We were trying to get to the lift. I was skiing with the two of them. They were maybe five and six or something like that. And I was not in uniform, so nobody knew who I was. And my younger son, I think, dropped his gloves as we were going through lift line, and I didn't even realize it. And we were now, I don't know, way back. Now we're at the front. I've got these two kids that I'm with on my own.

And yeah, one of our scanners saw that and there was not a huge line, admittedly, at that time, but he ran back. I didn't even ask. He just ran back, picked up the gloves and ran back and gave it to my kid. And yeah, I think as a parent, it goes back to this other thing. It's hard. It's a hard sport. It's an even harder sport when you have little kids. And yeah, to have somebody do that without asking, while you feel like you've got your hands full and you're trying to get your family off on their day, it makes you feel like you're being taken care of and people are really looking out for you. And to me, yeah, I think that's always stuck with me and I've had a lot of moments like that on our mountains. And I think it's one of the things that makes going skiing and feeling like you're in part of a community when you're at our resorts.

And it always keeps me focused on what's most important, which is our people and the kind of impact that they can have on providing an amazing experience and bringing family and friends together on the mountain.

David: Thanks for that answer, Rob. To any of our listeners, if you have a question for a future podcast, you can submit your question to podcast@vailresorts.com.

Rob: David, thanks for the time today as always. If there's one thing today's conversation demonstrated to me, it's that the future of our business will increasingly be shaped by the relationships guests build with our mountains. And those relationships are built on the exceptional experiences and service we need to provide as a company. Epic Experience is ultimately about strengthening those connections, reducing friction, and creating more reasons for guests to return year after year. It's a pretty bold vision, but I think it's the right vision for our company, ultimately for the industry and how we drive value for shareholders. David, thanks for joining me and thanks to all of you for listening. And I will see you all out on the hill this season.

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