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Meet The Disruptors: Caroline Meesemaecker Of Wine Services On The Five Things You Need to Shake Up Your Industry

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your "backstory"? What led you to this particular career path?

I've always been immersed in entrepreneurship, a passion passed down by my father, who is also an entrepreneur. I was exposed to it quite early during my studies, when I moved to the south of France, far from my home in Brittany, where my father had his boat. Determined to continue my passion for sailing, I took the initiative to create a female crew to participate in student sailing races, including the renowned EDHEC Sailing Cup. This endeavor required building a sponsorship proposal to raise €15,000 and pitching it to local and national entrepreneurs.

To accelerate our fundraising efforts, we even partnered with two winegrowers. We sold 600 bottles of Pic Saint Loup in Anjou through family and friends — a relatively easy task — and 600 bottles of Anjou in Montpellier, where our crew was based, which proved much more challenging. This experience taught me resourcefulness, teamwork, and determination, qualities that have shaped my career ever since.

After completing my scientific education, I further honed these skills by joining the ESCP Business School for a master’s degree in international business, spending nine months in Madrid and six months in Bangkok. This international experience opened new horizons for me, and I later applied these skills in the pharmaceutical industry, working in product marketing for major groups, both internationally and within French subsidiaries.

At the same time, wine had always been a personal interest — so much so that my father once suggested buying a vineyard when I was 18. I turned him down, preferring to carve out my own career first, but the idea stayed with me. When life eventually brought me to Bordeaux, it felt like the perfect moment to bridge my professional expertise and my passion for wine. After completing an MBA in Wine Marketing and Management, I joined Wine Services in 2013. As soon as I arrived, I felt the urge to play an active part in the success of this company, in which I believed deeply for its innovative approach, and for which I had great ambitions for the future. I was Sales Manager for almost 5 years, then General Manager of the company for 4 years. I became co-owner, then 100% owner in March 2022, while taking on the role of CEO of the company. Since 2018, I’ve been running the company, with the ambition of making Wine Services the world leader in wine intelligence.

Can you tell our readers what it is about the work you’re doing that’s disruptive?

Wine Services is revolutionizing the wine and champagne industry by addressing one of its biggest challenges: the lack of objective, actionable data across global markets. Traditionally, the wine industry has relied heavily on fragmented and anecdotal information, making it difficult for producers and stakeholders to make informed strategic decisions. We’re disrupting this norm by introducing a state-of-the-art business intelligence platform that provides unparalleled insights into distribution networks, pricing strategies, media presence, and consumer behavior.

Our approach is unique in several ways:

- **Comprehensive Data Integration:** Wine Services consolidates data from diverse channels — restaurants, wine shops, e-commerce platforms, auctions, and more — into a single platform. This allows wineries, champagne houses, and distributors to view their market performance holistically and adjust their strategies effectively.
- **Global Reach with Local Precision:** Covering over 90 cities across 25 countries, our insights provide a precise understanding of market trends at both the macro and micro levels, ensuring that clients can optimize their positioning and performance.
- **Tailored and Actionable Insights:** Unlike generic industry reports, our platform delivers customized analytics for each client, identifying opportunities for growth, monitoring competitors, and suggesting optimal routes to market.
- **Digital Transformation for a Traditional Industry:** We are helping an age-old industry embrace digital tools, turning raw data into strategic assets. From understanding customer touchpoints to

identifying key markets, we’re empowering wine stakeholders with the knowledge to stay ahead in a competitive landscape.

Ultimately, we’re not just offering data — we’re creating a collaborative ecosystem where wineries, distributors, and retailers can work together more effectively to enhance performance, build stronger brand equity, and adapt to evolving market demands. By democratizing access to high-quality information, Wine Services is paving the way for smarter, more sustainable growth in the wine industry.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

One of the funniest mistakes I made early in Wine Services was during a presentation to one of our first potential clients. I was incredibly eager to impress, so I decided to use every bit of data and every slide we had prepared. I created a deck with over 100 slides — each filled with charts, graphs, and market insights. I was convinced that the more data I shared, the more impressed they would be.

The meeting started, and after just five slides, I noticed the client looking overwhelmed. By slide 15, I saw them checking their watches. By slide 20, they politely interrupted me and said, “We trust you have all the details we need, but could you summarize the key points for us?” At that moment, I realized I had over prepared in the wrong way. I was trying to showcase everything, but in doing so, I failed to focus on what mattered most to them. The lesson I learned? Less is often more. Clients don’t need to see everything we can do; they need to see how we can solve their specific problems.

Since then, we’ve fine-tuned our approach — tailoring every presentation to the client’s specific needs and delivering only the insights most relevant to their business. As a bonus, we’ve made sure to keep humor and humility in our presentations, often joking about “the 100-slide mistake” to break the ice with new clients. It’s become a fond memory and a valuable lesson in understanding your audience.

We all need a little help along the journey. Who have been some of your mentors? Can you share a story about how they made an impact?

Throughout my journey, I’ve been fortunate to have incredible mentors who provided guidance when I needed it most. Two, in particular, stand out for their impact on pivotal moments in Wine Services’ development.

When I took over the technical team to launch our new customer platform, my partner was nearing burnout from the immense pressure of the project. At that time, Laurent Elichondeborde offered me a piece of advice that was transformative: “Focus on what will have the biggest impact in the short term for the company. Be meticulous with your clients, and don’t be afraid to push non-essential tasks to three months later.” His wisdom helped me streamline priorities and ensure that we delivered an exceptional product while maintaining strong client relationships. It was a reminder that sometimes the key to long-term success is managing the immediate needs with clarity and precision.

The second transformative moment came in 2022 when I worked closely with Cecile Bonnefont to redefine the vision of Wine Services. She inspired us to break through the proverbial glass ceiling of working exclusively with luxury producers and high-end distribution. Together, we shaped a broader vision: to become the trusted link connecting wineries, distributors, and retailers in a virtuous triangle. With this new mission, we committed to transforming how the industry operates. Our focus shifted to empowering clients with reliable, actionable information and building a collaborative ecosystem that strengthens trust and communication across the entire value chain.

These mentors taught me that leadership is about prioritizing what truly matters, fostering innovation, and staying connected to the values that drive your business forward. Their advice and support have been instrumental in shaping the success and evolution of Wine Services.

In today's parlance, being disruptive is usually a positive adjective. But is disrupting always good? When do we say the converse, that a system or structure has 'withstood the test of time'? Can you articulate to our readers when disrupting an industry is positive, and when disrupting an industry is 'not so positive'? Can you share some examples of what you mean?

Disruption in the wine industry must balance respect for tradition with the need for innovation. Historically, systems like Bordeaux's wine exchange or California's direct-to-consumer model have driven success in different ways. However, with changing consumer behavior, global competition, and evolving market structures, relying solely on these legacy models is no longer sustainable.

For a wine to appreciate in value over the long term, the essential triptych must be put in place:

1. The wine must be consumed. This is the product's reason for being, but it also allows new vintages to enter the market more easily and limits the risk of "returns" of devalued stock on exchange platforms, which can have disastrous consequences on commercialization.
2. The wine must be visible. Not all consumers of fine wines are loyal and knowledgeable customers who regularly purchase from the estate. They come into contact with the brand through various means, primarily visible commercial networks (restaurants and wine shops) or more discrete ones, in direct contact with the distributor (during tastings or dinners). A brand without visibility largely prevents new consumers from connecting with it and jeopardizes its long-term reputation.
3. The wine must be exchanged. The exchange of wine between different players in the commercialization chain offers two advantages. The product's availability allows for an almost immediate movement of stock to demand-driven markets, quickly supplying emerging countries,

as was the case with China in the late 2000s. The second advantage, linked to the first, is the price increase driven by the presence of these wines on exchange platforms, particularly in a market where demand is structurally higher than supply. Being positioned in an open market allows wine prices to rise without it being tied to a unilateral decision from the ownership.

When disruption aligns with industry challenges — like improving distribution transparency or modernizing communication strategies — it can unlock immense value. For example, by using data-driven insights, Wine Services has helped producers better allocate their wines across direct sales, market visibility, and exchange platforms. This approach not only ensures long-term value creation but also meets the industry’s unique needs for consumption, visibility, and exchange.

However, disruption becomes counterproductive when it disregards foundational industry dynamics or causes instability. For instance, introducing overly complex systems or undermining trusted networks can erode the trust that underpins the wine trade.

The future lies in hybridization — a “three-thirds” model where producers balance direct allocation, visibility-focused distribution, and market exchanges. This evolution enhances flexibility while retaining the strengths of traditional systems. It’s not about choosing one system over another but blending their advantages to create sustainable growth.

Ultimately, positive disruption respects heritage while pushing boundaries, fostering innovation without dismantling the values that define the wine industry.