Inc.

E-BOOK SERIES

How I Did It Stories From the Bumpy Road to Success: Sheryl Sandberg, Arianna Huffington, Jack Ma, and More

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Michael Dubin conjured Dollar Shave Club initially as a way to help a friend's father offload a surplus supply of razors. The idea was good; the marketing, genius. Propelled by an insanely viral You-Tube spot featuring Dubin and his dry wit, the company took in more than $3.5 million in revenue in 2012. Sales topped $225 million by the time Unilever bought DSC, for a reported $1 billion, in 2016. *–As told to Lindsay Blakely*

Michael Dubin | Dollar Shave Club → Men's toiletries

How I Created a Billion-Dollar Company

I HAVE A BACKGROUND in media, marketing, and brand development—and I did improv training with the Upright Citizens Brigade for eight years. So I did the bulk of Dollar Shave Club's creative work in the beginning. I wrote the script for that first video spot, and a friend of mine from my improv days shot it in one day for $4,500. It was very scrappy. The day it went live, our site crashed from all the traffic—but within 48 hours, we received 12,000 orders.

"As the CEO, you have to realize you can't do everything yourself anymore," says Michael Dubin about Dollar Shave's, and his own, growing pains.

We moved pretty quickly beyond selling just razors. Our members definitely let us know they wanted more, and we always knew we would do other products. In 2013, we came out with a shave butter. Then we launched butt wipes, something that we learned through our research that a lot of guys were secretly using already. I don't think anyone saw that coming. Since 2015, we've launched in at least one new category a year—shower, hair care, skin care products—and the prep for these launches starts years before they happen. The marketing element is critical to DSC—it's so vital that we get that right. Great storytelling is why we've been able to grow so fast. That and the pretty low barriers to entry when it came to men's grooming products.

In the beginning, you're figuring things out on the fly and everyone is wearing many hats. For a good part of the first year, we were all doing the same things—responding to emails, printing labels, making trips to the warehouse in the middle of the night.

By late 2014, something started to shift in the company. You get to a point—usually it's between 50 and 80 employees—when you need to start bringing in some process and organizational discipline. As the CEO, you have to realize you can't do everything yourself anymore. And teams need strategists, but they also need the right layers above and below to execute in specific areas. And I don't mean stacking people on top of one another hierarchically. I'm talking about ever-deeper layers of specialization and focus.

Around this time, I started up an internal creative agency. We needed to build a really robust campaign for our first made-for-TV spots, which poked fun at how hard it can be to get into the "razor fortress" in most retail locations. I found some entrepreneurial creatives who could do more with less—we still had to be pretty scrappy—and an incredible project-manager who could keep us on track.

A lot of companies outsource much of their creative work. We don't. We wanted this expertise in-house precisely so we could be more nimble. This small group has grown to about 20 people. I still lead the team, help brainstorm, and give final approval, but instead of doing 75 percent of the work, like I did in 2013 and 2014, now I'm involved in probably about 20 percent of the work.

Our viral videos are basically our bible, and they help the team maintain our unique voice. The marketing has probably been the hardest thing for me to delegate as we've gotten bigger. It's tough to realize that you need to hire people who can do things better than you, especially when you have some expertise in a particular area.

Then again, it's also challenging to hire people for positions that you have no expertise in. I made that mistake with my first senior engineering hire, back in 2012. I just didn't understand the necessary qualifications because of my own inexperience. It became clear pretty quickly that it wasn't a good fit. Ultimately, if you want to build a big company, you need talent for every department that matches the much higher level you see at more mature companies. The more experts you have, the faster you can move. Instead of doing the work yourself, you have to shift into a role of inspiring and motivating people to drive the right results. It's one of the most important shifts a startup needs to make on the road to becoming a big company.

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Last year, we developed our Wanderer line of shower products. Our team had teased out a couple of di erent angles for the campaign, and then we settled on one we really liked. It was around the concept of the shower's being the best place for your mind to, you know, wander. Four days before the shoot, someone on our creative team noticed that a competitor had just released a campaign for a similar product— and it featured a guy daydreaming in a shower. There was definitely a moment when we said, "Oh, shit—what do we do?" Obviously, one option was to just run with our original creative anyway.

But you can never be precious about your darlings. (I forget who gets credit for that quote.) The team got back in a room and immediately started working some new scripts that could make use of the talent and directors we'd already booked. The fact that they were able to scrap three months of work and redo the campaign in a matter of days had everything to do with the expertise on that team. I also think creativity thrives when you have to work within restrictions.

I know from my days of doing improv and sketch writing that improvising makes you a great synthesizer of ideas. I look for people with that natural ability. You want to know how they deal with challenges. If you're the right type of synthesizer and solution builder, you'll find a way.

I feel like we're still in the process of shifting from startup to larger company. We're always trying to build the ideal structure. We can do more, faster, now that we're owned by Unilever—and now that I don't have to spend my time fundraising every year. But we operate completely independently. I don't discuss creative decisions with Unilever. DSC is DSC because of the decisions we have made in-house, and Unilever respects that. ■

Bryn Mooser | Ryot → Immersive media production

How an Earthquake Led Me to a VR Startup

PHOTOGRAPH BY RYAN PFLUGER

Bryn Mooser is the co-founder of Ryot Films, which produces media for immersive formats like virtual reality and 360-degree video. He started thinking about transformative technology while working as a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa, living on the edge of the Sahel in a region that had cell-phone towers–but had never had landlines. Ryot initially published news stories that enabled readers to take social actions, and then pivoted into immersive video. In 2016, Mooser and his co-founder, David Darg, sold Ryot to AOL. *–As told to Jeff Bercovici*

AS SOMEONE WHO'S COVERED humanitarian crises as a journalist and a filmmaker for years, I've always felt that traditional filmmaking and photography were limited. When you walk into a war zone or someplace after a natural disaster with a traditional camera or video recorder, you can capture only one thing. That's frustrating. There's nothing like actually standing where you can understand the scale of these things. When I saw VR for the first time a couple of years ago, I thought this could be an incredibly powerful medium to give people a totally new perspective.

We were the first group to show a VR film at the Tribeca Film Festival. It was about solitary confinement. At the after-party, a friend showed me a prototype of the Hero 360 rig, which is just a bunch of GoPros in a 3-D-printed case. That was when the light bulb went off for us. I knew all of our filmmakers around the world could shoot on GoPros and, more important, that they knew how to fix them in the field. I knew we could figure out the stitching part with our postproduction team.

Then, the next day, the Nepal earthquake happened. My business partner, David, was going there to provide humanitarian aid. I called up the kid who had the camera and David took it with him. Anytime he wasn't delivering aid, he put the camera on. I'd worked in Haiti with Susan Saran-don, and she agreed to do a voiceover. About a week later, we showed the video outside a film festival in Telluride. We couldn't get it programmed in the festival, so we just set it up on a park bench with a Samsung VR headset and we put it on people.

We called it the Nepal Quake Project. It was the first time VR had been shot in a natural disaster area. Every day, we'd go to the street corner to set up and there would be a line of people waiting, and a lot of those people, when they took o! the headset, they were crying.

Our gamble was mobile-first, 360-degree storytelling for socially distributed platforms like Face-book and YouTube. If we could make more 360 films than anybody else, then the second those platforms launched, all those publishers and brands would call us. Sure enough, the day after Facebook launched Facebook 360, we got inundated with emails from media brands and advertisers.

As the company was growing and we had more interest in what we were doing, we were about 20 really scrappy kids in a garage in Venice, California. There were six of us at the time, including myself, who were sleeping on the floor of the office, because we were investing every single dollar back into the company. When our film Body Team 12 was nominated for an Oscar, we had no money for an apartment, no money for a tuxedo. I had worked in Haiti with Kenneth Cole, the designer, so I called him and he made tuxedos for David and me. I think I was probably the only Oscar nominee who didn't have a home to go back to.

What AOL loved about us was that spirit. At the time, a year and a half ago, we weren't really thinking about acquisition. We were focused on raising a Series A. We had a lot of options, but I realized I just couldn't raise money anymore. I couldn't go to another lunch and have a Cobb salad and iced tea and talk about how great my company was. It was taking me out of the field and out of being with my team. What we wanted to do was stop raising money and just put our heads down and start building big.

At Oath, which is what the merger of AOL and Yahoo is going to be called, you have two big companies that have their own ways of thinking about original content and branded content. I'm helping them rethink production and how original content is made and also bringing a lot of new formats to all the brands with virtual reality, augmented reality, and 360. We still bring the same spirit to our work every day. But now I can afford a house. ■

Sheryl Sandberg | Facebook → Social media

How Work Helped Me Overcome Personal Tragedy

By early 2015, Sheryl Sandberg seemed to have it all: a powerful role as the chief operating officer of Facebook; an influential voice for women in corporate America as the author of *Lean In*; and a happy, supportive family. Then her husband, SurveyMonkey CEO Dave Goldberg, died suddenly while on vacation. Devastated, Sandberg started publicly chronicling her grief and her family's struggle to resume life after loss. Her widely shared Facebook post, published 30 days after Goldberg's death, turned into this spring's *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, which Sandberg co-wrote with Wharton professor Adam Grant. "I'm still getting through this," she says now–but she's also sharing what she's learned.
–As told to Maria Aspan

I'VE LONG BELIEVED that we have to take our whole selves to work, as I wrote in *LeanIn*. Because it's just not the case that we're professional people during the day and emotional people at night and on weekends. Then when I lost my husband suddenly, I had no choice but to take myself to work—but I couldn't get through a meeting in the very early days without tearing up.

"Long before Dave died, I had learned that parenting was the most humbling job in the world—and now I had to relearn how to do it alone."

I feel so lucky. My boss, Mark Zuckerberg, didn't just give me the time off I needed— and that's something I think is really important for businesses to do—but he also built me back up. When I thought I couldn't do my job, he was the one who said, "No, I think you made a good point in that meeting." And so he helped me, both by acknowledging the pain I was in and by telling me he still believed in me.

I know that so many colleagues have faced hard things. And I think when we are there for one another—not pretending hard things aren't happening, but acknowledging them and supporting one another explicitly—we build better communities, better companies, better workplaces. We need one another. I never could have gotten through this—and I'm still getting through this—without relying heavily on my colleagues and friends every day. I'm hoping that *Option B* can help break open conversations so we can be more of our authentic selves in the workplace.

What I've learned is that we don't have a fixed amount of resilience. Resilience is like a muscle we build, but we don't only build it in ourselves. We also build it in one another, by acknowledging the pain people are going through and by being there for one another. ■

Rachel and Andy Berliner | Amy's Kitchen → Organic frozen-food entrées

How We Found Organic Food Sources–and Helped Start an Industry

In 1987, Rachel and Andy Berliner launched their organic vegetarian frozen-food empire with a single pot pie out of their Petaluma, California, kitchen. Rachel, then pregnant with their daughter, Amy, was told to stay off her feet–and out of the kitchen. After being disappointed by the frozen dinners Andy brought home, the couple realized they could do much better. Amy's Kitchen pioneered the market for organic vegetarian frozen meals. Today, it generates $500 million in revenue in the U.S., the U.K., and France, and is expanding into Asia and Australia. Now grandparents, the Berliners are determined to keep Amy's a family business, and to protect its core values while developing a chain of drive-thru outlets. *–As told to Stacy Perman*

WHEN WE STARTED, our goal was $2.5 million in sales. We thought we'd have enough income to live on and maybe help pay for Amy's college education. We didn't plan this whole thing out. It wasn't until our fourth year, 1991, that we began turning a profit. We didn't envision building a half-billion-dollar business. We just thought there was a niche to be filled. At first, Rachel's mother helped us, and friends helped with the recipes. We went to natural-food shows; people thought our pot pies were delicious, and there was nothing like them in their stores. That's how we got distribution. In the beginning, the biggest problem was sourcing quality ingredients. Nobody was doing organics. When we started, we worked with small farmers, and they grew with us. Today we have contracts with farmers who cover 20,000 acres.

> "In the beginning, the biggest problem was sourcing quality ingredients. Nobody was doing organics. When we started, we worked with small farmers, and they grew with us."

We still make our food like we're in our personal kitchen—it's just on a bigger scale. Our chef still comes to our house to try out new recipes.

All the big food companies at one time or another have made an offer or shown interest. But we always knew we wanted to stay private and family owned. Andy had previously owned an herbal tea company and sold it early. We saw that everything we had worked for was pretty quickly destroyed, and that motivated our desire to keep this under our control. We don't have pressure from investors, and this allows us to stay true to our core mission.

Our other main challenge has been the supermarkets. We don't have a marketing budget. The grocery chains want us to do promotions and discounts. But our products sell very well without them. It's a bit of a fight. We say we're growing by double digits and the companies that spend money on marketing and promotions are declining; we're doing something right.

We're a small family. We've heard stories of large families, and it gets very complex regarding the next generation. Amy is very involved in the sustainability of the company and its culture. She and her husband, both board members, are dedicated to seeing Amy's carry on. However, neither of them aspires to be a CEO or to run the business right now. They are interested in ensuring the culture, the values, and the mission. We can't bear the thought of doing things differently. ■

Tom Russell | Founders Entertainment → Concert promotion

How I Weathered the Biggest Storm of My Career

The New York City music festival market is tough to crack, thanks in part to the competition for limited real estate. Tom Russell started Founders Entertainment along with two friends, Jordan Wolowitz and Yoni Reisman, in NYC when they were in their mid-20s. Founders stages the Governors Ball Music Festival on Randall's Island, situated in the East River, and the Meadows Music and Arts Festival in Queens. In 2013, the Gov Ball was in its third year and growing when a tropical storm threatened to ruin everything. "We were hoping the storm's path would veer east or west," says Russell, "but the day before the festival started, it became clear it was going to hit us head-on." Did it ever.
–As told to Kevin J. Ryan

IT WAS A HECK OF A STORM: a lot of rain and high winds. When you have 40,000 people on your festival site, which is grass, and you have five to six inches of water descend upon that site within an eight-hour period, the result is a field of mud. There's not much you can really do to combat that. We laid down plywood, sand, and landscaper's hay, but everything just sank. Around 8 p.m. on Friday, when we started getting 40 mph wind gusts, we knew we had to cut the show. Kings of Leon had their headlining set canceled that night, and they were scheduled to fly to London for a gig they had on Sunday. We gathered in our trailer backstage with their booking agent and managers, looking at Saturday's schedule and trying to fit them in—which bands we could shift, who had to shorten their sets. We ended up squeezing them in in the middle of Saturday.

> "When you're a small-business owner, you have to balance customer satisfaction with protecting your bottom line."

We knew a lot of the Friday single-day ticket buyers bought their tickets mostly to see Kings of Leon, so we messaged people to tell them Friday ticket holders could come in on Saturday. In the days after the festival, we got on the phone with every person who emailed us asking for a refund or criticized us for the experience—a few thousand people in total. When you're a small-business owner, you have to balance customer satisfaction with protecting your bottom line. We tried to give tickets for the following year to as many people as possible. We gave some customers their money back, but in most cases, people were OK with the comp tickets—or just wanted to have their voices heard.

We had to repair the park and return it in good condition. We incurred $750,000 in additional expenses because of the weather, but still finished in the black. At the time, we were a three-year-old business, and I wasn't even 30. I had never been through anything like this before. It was a tough weekend, financially and emotionally. But you make it work, and you come out of it all the stronger and all the wiser. ■

Arianna Huffington | Thrive Global → Media and wellness

How I Learned to Focus

Arianna Huffington, the cofounder of the Huffington Post, surprised many when she announced last year that she would be stepping down. She is throwing her energy behind a second startup, Thrive Global. In just under six months, New York City-based Thrive has signed deals worth "multiple millions of dollars." Clients include Uber (where she's a board member), Accenture, and Airbnb. Thrive recently doubled its sales targets for 2017. The company generates revenue primarily by charging businesses for its workshops and seminars focused on health and wellness, and via branded content that runs on its platform, the Thrive Journal. It also sells some consumer products, such as a $100 iPhone bed. The biggest challenge, Huffington admits, has been learning how to focus. *–As told to Zoë Henry*

THE BIG CHALLENGE HAS BEEN prioritization. I'm the kind of person who wants to do it all and work with every company that comes to me. Early on at Thrive, though, we needed to decide what to focus on.

On the corporate side, we made the tough decision to create what we call "below the line"—potential partners that we'll get to, but only after we take advantage of the big opportunities. For example, we recently launched with SAP, which will put us in front of more than 3,000 corporations in one fell swoop. We are also developing a digital coaching program with IBM's virtual assistant, Watson.

"These early decisions about what to prioritize, like all decisions you make as a leader, required a combination of data and gut. It's very important for leaders to realize that it's not all data-driven."

On the media platform, we had to be narrow. That was a big shift for me, coming from HuffPost, where the goal was to cover everything: Be it James Comey's firing or Beyoncé's twins, we were supposed to be there. Our media platform, Thrive Journal, is like HuffPost in some ways—we encourage outside contributions, for instance. But it's different in that we focus solely on this one thing: How do we reduce stress and improve well-being?

What helped was identifying the two things that resonate with our readers. The first is science. We bring you the latest research around recharging, and the connection between recharging and productivity. The second is telling stories around the data. For example, we got Jeff Bezos to write about why his getting enough sleep is good for Amazon shareholders. We also got Selena Gomez to write about how doing a "digital detox" helped her in her life. We saw that giving readers a role model makes a difference to them.

These early decisions about what to prioritize, like all decisions you make as a leader, required a combination of data and gut. It's very important for leaders to realize that it's not all data-driven. I first met Jennifer Morgan—the president of SAP—a year ago, when I was still at HuffPost. We had this amazing connection. Now that Thrive and SAP are partnering, the fact that Jennifer and I have a personal friendship is helpful. When you're dealing with a big corporation, there are a lot of institutional layers that have to be brought into the process. But when something gets stuck, I can simply pick up the phone and talk to Jennifer.

At the moment, the corporate side accounts for more than half our sales. That's partly a function of what we staffed first. In the startup phase, where you hire first makes a big difference in where the revenue comes from. But the media platform is growing too. In less than six months, we're reaching more than 20 million viewers.

It was very hard stepping down from HuffPost, because, after all, it's like my third child. But once I made the decision, it was completely clear to me that it was the right one. ■

Lots of people become entrepreneurs because of an unexpected career shock, such as a corporate acquisition or layoff. Dawn Halfaker's military career was ended by an explosion and a catastrophic injury, in Iraq, in 2004. Yet Halfaker would eventually recover and form Halfaker and Associates, an Arlington, Virginia-based contractor in data analytics, cybersecurity, software engineering, and IT infrastructure for the federal government, including the Navy, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Defense. *–As told to Kimberly Weisul*

Dawn Halfaker | Halfaker and Associates → IT services contracting

How I Lost an Arm—Then Regained My Purpose

FROM AN EARLY AGE, I wanted to get a scholarship to play basketball. I was contacted by West Point about playing basketball there and becoming a cadet. At first I dismissed it. I didn't have a good understanding of what West Point was.

"Your job as an officer is to continue to lead in not-ideal circumstances, and you're probably underresourced. Being an entrepreneur and getting something started, you never have everything you need, and things never go according to plan."

The minute I stepped on the West Point campus, I knew it was the place for me. I was drawn to the intensity and sense of purpose. There was nothing that set any of the other schools I was considering apart—they were all about where you were going to party and hang out.

Part of the great thing about West Point was that I didn't fully understand what I was getting into. I didn't know what the plebe year was all about. It was probably better that way. The basketball coaches paint a rosy picture. Being there was a huge surprise and a culture shock. It was four years of just trying to survive.

After West Point, my first duty station was in Korea. Then I went to Fort Stewart, in Georgia, and deployed from there to Iraq in February 2004.

Our focus was on rebuilding the Iraqi police force. We were working hand in hand with Iraqis, training them, equipping them, going on missions with them. We were responsible for the security of the police station, and for protecting our area of operations from insurgents.

That's where things got a little messy. We were going on missions to flush out insurgents who were planting IEDs, shooting rockets at the embassy, or blowing up the police stations. On one of our patrols, near Baqubah, our Humvee drove into an ambush and was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. I remember being loaded into a medevac helicopter. When I woke up from the coma, my parents and doctors had to explain what had happened—and that I'd lost an arm.

I spent my 25th birthday in the hospital thinking that my life was over. It wasn't just that I'd lost an arm. It was that I no longer had a career. I had been physically fit, mentally fit, at the top of my game, and I went from that to a state of feeling basically useless. I was terrified about being just cast aside while everybody else moved on. That's what fueled me to go into business and to want so desperately to stay connected to the military and the mission.

I was constantly in pain, and I always had to think of a different way to do things. I worried about having to get in line at Starbucks and buy a coffee and get change and carry it back and open the door. Those were the things that plagued my mind, more than the bigger picture of what was going on with my life.

When you think of a wounded warrior, you think of a young male in a wheelchair. I had

a hard time identifying as a veteran and fitting in as a female who was wounded in combat. People weren't laughing to my face—it was mostly probably in my head. But I look different. Whenever you're different, you're kind of vulnerable. I did an internship on Capitol Hill. It was really discouraging. There were very important issues that Congress had to deal with. Do the soldiers have the right helmets? Do we have the right equipment? Are vets getting the right care? I was amazed at how many times the debate became partisan, and people were willing to ignore the common-sense solution.

"Hiring other veterans affects my company in a positive way. There's a similar value system, a similar understanding of the mission."

Then I thought I'd maybe work as a contractor focused on supporting the military. That's when I realized there was a big disconnect between what was going on in Washington and what was happening downrange. There were so many people who didn't have combat experience trying to make decisions and influence policy. I thought, you know what? I can do this better. I could start a company. I could hire people who have the right expertise, and provide the support myself.

When I was at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, there was a colonel who wanted me to help him better understand how technology innovations could be used in the field. I was able to leverage that experience and other relationships to learn the industry and start positioning myself for a career, and to begin building the infrastructure of my company in the background.

There's no question that my military training helped me become a better entrepreneur. You go through so much training in the military, but from that first year as a plebe, what the military is teaching you is how to be resilient. You plan your mission, and you execute, but nothing ever goes according to plan. Your job as an officer is to continue to lead in not-ideal circumstances, and you're probably underresourced. Being an entrepreneur and getting something started, you never have everything you need, and things never go according to plan.

You also learn that the people who can make things happen are the ones who are challenging the status quo. There are people who figure out how to make the whole system work for them, as opposed to being a follower. From the start of my company, I recognized there were other people in my situation. As my company grew, I knew I could bring in other wounded warriors.

Hiring other veterans affects my company in a positive way. There's a similar value system, a similar understanding of the mission. Then there's the skill set to do data analytics and IT infrastructure. For the type of work we're doing, we need people who understand the military, so that's critical. But as the company grows, we value diversity. We need to make sure that employees who are not veterans can still do well here. It's something I'm aware of. I don't want to create this in-group.

Certifications help tremendously, especially in my industry, where there are hardly any medium-size companies. You're not going to compete with Lockheed Martin. But you can leverage the set-asides to have an opportunity to show what your company can do. Once you're able to do that, then eventually you can compete with Lockheed Martin. I'm not in any rush to do it. We're still finding our sweet spot and trying to refine that before we say we're the best at what we do and we can beat anybody. That's the goal. ■

Steph Korey and Jen Rubio | Away → Luggage manufacturer

How We Launched a Company Before We Launched a Product

Steph Korey and Jen Rubio had a problem. Their planned launch of Away, a new luggage brand, was fast approaching– and none of their suitcases would be ready to sell in time. Luckily, the two had a social media trick packed in their bags. They turned a proven retailing tactic, the preorder, and an idea for a book into a campaign that went viral on Instagram and beyond. *–As told to Burt Helm*

KOREY: As December approached, we knew our first production run was not going to be ready in time for Christmas. Even so, we thought there are a lot of people who have terrible luggage. They might be happy to preorder something.

RUBIO: We wanted to get everyone on board in the beginning.

KOREY: The whole genesis of Away was that Jen broke her suitcase. She has all these well-traveled friends who can recommend anything. She jokes that she could text, "Hey, I need a coffee shop in Bangkok," and they would send her recommendations in an instant. She texted them, "Hey, I need a new suitcase," and they were like, "I've got nothing."

RUBIO: We both had worked at Warby Parker, the direct-to-consumer eyeglasses brand, and thought we could take a similar approach with luggage. We used the same materials that are found in bags that cost over $700: sturdy YKK zippers, double-spinner wheels that are really rugged and glide over airport carpets, German polycarbonate shells that are both light and strong.

KOREY: We thought, if people who travel heard about us from an in-the-know friend, we could make their travel more enjoyable. How do we put our story out in the universe in a way that people will repeat it? Jen had this idea of launching with a book.

RUBIO: It wasn't simply, let's make a book because we don't have any luggage ready. It was a way to assemble a bunch of people to talk about our luggage when it was available.

KOREY: We interviewed 40 really interesting people from the creative community—writers, artists, photographers.

RUBIO: They represented a bunch of different categories, like food and fashion. These people aren't necessarily household names, but within their circles, they're very well-known and respected.

KOREY: It was a beautiful hardcover book. We called it The Places We Return To. We didn't pay contributors, but we gave them a gift card for a suitcase. In November 2015, we sold the book with a gift card that was redeemable for a suitcase in February. It was essentially a preorder with a complimentary book. People wrote about this interesting book—and then mentioned our luggage. They were excited about it. They all had pretty big networks on social media. We made 1,200 books and sold out early.

RUBIO: We were also in close to 100 gift guides. In our first year, we exceeded $12 million in sales. We've now sold more than 100,000 suitcases.

KOREY: Storytelling is a central part of our marketing. We think about what stories we can feed to the press and to social media—things that make people take notice, things people want to share and talk about. Instead of offering traditional monogramming, Jen came up with this awesome idea to partner with a few hand-lettering artists. Each came up with a custom alphabet for Away. We took these custom alphabets, put them on our website, and gave customers the option to pick their style, and have artists hand-paint their initials on the suitcase. You don't push your product. You create things that are fun to talk about, to write about, to share. ■

Of all the bizarre turns in the 2016 presidential race, few top Pizzagate. The conspiracy theory, spread across alt-right media, centered on the idea that Hillary Clinton and John Podesta, one of her top aides, were running a secret child trafficking ring out of a pizza place, Comet Ping Pong, in Washington, D.C. The story was ludicrous, but for Comet's owner, James Alefantis, the nightmare was real and terrifying–from the first virulent posts online to the day a gunman stormed the pizzeria. *–As told to Burt Helm*

James Alefantis | Comet Ping Pong → Pizzeria

How Customers Saved Me From Conspiracy Nuts Who Tried to Destroy My Business

IT WAS ABOUT 9:30 OR 10 on the night of November 5 when I saw I had a voice mail from Will Sommer, a reporter at the Washington City Paper: "Do you know about this online conspiracy theory that you're running a child-slavery ring out of Comet with Hillary Clinton?"

"The community really rallied around us. Online, a movement started–'We'll all go to Comet at 6 p.m. Sunday to show our support!'"

It was right before the election. A lot of crazy things were happening. A lot of talk about conspiracies was being thrown around, and John Podesta's emails had been hacked and were being leaked. Over the years, I had had email exchanges with Podesta about cooking for fund raisers. At first, I was like, "Oh, this is so funny. I'm in WikiLeaks." We started getting weird comments on Comet's Facebook and Instagram posts and on my personal accounts. I just deleted them and set my account to private.

When Donald Trump won, I thought, now, finally, at least this crazy conspiracy theory will go away. But the opposite happened. It grew and grew and became more and more focused on Comet. I got a call from a friend who works at MIT's Media Lab. He told me, this thing is out of control.

Messages and comments poured in. At one point, I was getting about 75 personal messages on social media a day. My response was to shut everything down—delete the comments, try not to respond. I thought, obviously this has to end eventually.

But it only kept escalating. Many of the messages were violent—"I have a gun. I want you to die"—and gory—"I pray that someone comes in with an assault rifle and kills everyone inside Comet. I want to cut open your guts and watch them spill out on the floor." I'd just shut my laptop and go on with my day.

It got scary when users started performing what I'll call "citizen's investigations." Users sifted through my social media profiles and started messaging everyone who'd ever liked or commented on a post of mine. I started getting calls from friends, family, and customers who said they were getting harassed online as well.

The phone started ringing all day long. You can't ignore phone calls when it's part of your business. People call the pizza place to ask, "How busy is it? Can we get a table? We want to order food." Now my staff was hearing "We know what's going on! You should turn James in! You're going to go to jail too if you don't." Or screaming "You're sick!" Some people I knew were like, "This is stupid." Others were terrified. I had to learn how to get these posts taken down, the steps you can take to reclaim your privacy. Mostly, there's nothing you can do.

The stress does weird things to your body. I was exhausted every day but never tired. I was

on full alert, full of adrenaline. It was very intense. Then I'd go to the restaurant, and everything was normal. I'd feel fear, but there'd be all these families and kids happily eating. It was like a parallel universe.

Later, Cecilia Kang, a reporter for *The New York Times*, asked to write a piece about what was happening. At the time, I'd been denying media requests. Once the *Times* piece came out, it wasn't a dirty secret—everyone knew about Pizzagate. Employees and I talked every day about how to field questions from customers.

The community really rallied around us. Online, a movement started—"We'll all go to Comet at 6 p.m. Sunday to show our support!" It was like, thanks, people, but can't you just come in several waves— 400 people showed up at once. The managers were saying, "We are going to be hugged to death!" From that point on, every day was like our busiest day of the year.

The gunman arrived on the afternoon of December 4. I wasn't in. I was at a church fair when I got the call from one of my managers. She was crying and said, "A guy came in with an assault rifle."

The man with the gun, Edgar Welch, had decided to "selfinvestigate" Comet. He rushed in through the front door and walked toward the back, and shot open the only locked door in the restaurant, a closet, damaging computer systems inside. My manager told me everyone was safe and evacuated to a firehouse across the street. When I got there, the police had locked down the block. That night, we went back. It was so weird. The tables were empty, but you could see full beers and half-eaten pizza on the table—the moment when time stopped.

At that point, I was ready to close temporarily. The next day, the phone never stopped ringing— "When are you open? Are you open tonight?" Basically, the community said, "We're coming. Open your doors." From Sunday until Tuesday evening, I did everything I could to get security in order. And we opened. The way people came out to support us, it was incredible, an overwhelming sensation.

From that point on, though, I was fearful. I was still receiving death threats. I started wearing a hat and sunglasses to leave the house. And the security people were like, "Yeah. You're in danger."

In the days just before the gunman drove to Comet, he was texting with a friend and told him he'd been inspired by videos made by Alex Jones, the online con spiracy theorist who runs Infowars. It's one thing if rumors swirl on 4chan or Reddit. But Jones has an audience of millions. He has influenced other gunmen. We're still figuring out our legal strategy, but we're keeping our options open. I was heartened to see Jones retract his stories about us and apologize.

We continue to see protesters, people who still believe Pizzagate is real. On the day of the Women's March, the day after Trump's inauguration, these guys came with giant signs. They had megaphones and were screaming, "Your neighborhood is Sodom and Gomorrah, with your rainbow flags. And you're pedophiles." They were yelling at people going into the restaurant.

What happened next was beautiful. People got up from their seats and poured out onto the street and rushed them, drowning out their protests. We had a PA and put on dance music, and everyone started dancing around them. We had a big dance party in front of the restaurant until they got weary and left. It was like, "Bring it on." ■

John Boiler | 72andSunny → Advertising agency

How I Stopped Being a Jerk and Became More Creative

In a past life, John Boiler was a revered creative director at Wieden +Kennedy, the West Coast advertising agency that helped put Nike on the map with iconic campaigns such as "Just Do It." He was also a cynical egotist. So he hit the reset button. Years later, he's the co-founder and creative cochair, with Glenn Cole, of 72andSunny, an ad agency "built on optimism" that works for the likes of Google and Adidas. *–As told to Burt Helm*

MY WIFE TOLD ME SHE DIDN'T like what I was becoming. God, to have somebody you love tell you that—it turns you inside out. But she was right. It was 16 years ago, I was 35, and I'd been running the Amsterdam office of Wieden + Kennedy, the ad agency. That night we were drinking wine—probably a lot—and discussing my next career move.

"Once you start treating employees as more than a job description, suddenly they go, 'Oh, wow! Maybe I should bring my whole self to work today!'"

I had adopted this fixed mindset that I was really awesome and I didn't need to learn—like, I'm not interested in your input, Mr. Client, I'm here to protect my idea because you're going to screw it up. I was doing better and better, but that cynicism had begun to creep into every part of my life.

It took me a while to examine what needed to change. I decided everything did. We moved to Los Angeles, where I'd try to become a commercial director with Glenn Cole, my creative partner from the ad agency. We had a friend who ran a production company and he started putting us forward for small jobs—little art projects, surf videos, and some commercial work.

I was a shitty director. Our producer friend said to me one time, "You know, people who do well in this business have return customers. The way you get return customers is by not telling them their ideas are lame." It's funny, when you own your own company, it's like you're running around naked every day. You can't maintain the front of being a creative genius when your survival is in the balance. All of a sudden, clients' ideas seem much smarter because you depend on them. Most important, it changes your outlook from one of having employees to one of having partners. If anyone was good enough to work with us for the little pay we could offer, I felt committed to making them happy. Because there were so few of us, we had to embrace everyone's creativity.

That was the first big lesson for me. Once you start treating employees as more than a job description, suddenly they go, "Oh, wow! Maybe I should bring my whole self to work today!" Our secretary would be making comments on all the work. That secretary, Evin Shutt, is now partner and chief operating officer. Everyone got much more engaged. And it got way more fun. If you don't welcome input from all your people, you narrow your creative product. Eyes dim. When you get people with diverse backgrounds and experiences together, you get surprises. That's when really good things happen. ■

Jack Ma | Alibaba → China's largest e-tail conglomerate

How I Created E-commerce in China

Jack Ma built one of the world's biggest internet companies without learning how to code. The lead founder and executive chairman of Alibaba taught himself English by offering tours to foreign visitors of his hometown, Hangzhou, in eastern China. That's where, in 1999, Ma launched Alibaba, which took in nearly $23 billion last year. Now Ma is hoping to expand his U.S. business, especially by encouraging more American companies to sell their goods on Alibaba's platforms. *–As told to Maria Aspan*

I STARTED MY FIRST INTERNET company in 1995, after I visited Seattle. China was not connected to the internet, and nobody believed there was this network. So it was difficult to even hire people. The first three people were me, my wife, and a guy who was a university lecturer with me, who had a computer background. China was starting to think about exporting, but small businesses couldn't go to international trade shows. So our business model was to make homepages for Chinese companies, so they could promote their products and be found by international customers.

Nobody wanted to try it. But I had a friend, Maggie Zhou, who later became my secretary and now is our ambassador to Australia. She worked for a hotel called the Wanghu [Lakeview], the first four-star hotel in Hangzhou. I told her manager that I could make the hotel a free homepage, "and if there are any people who come to your hotel through that homepage, you can pay me." He agreed. And nothing happened for three months.

Then the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing. Suddenly the hotel got a fax from several American ladies. They were coming to the conference and using the internet to search for hotels—and the only one listed in China was the Wanghu Hotel. We had to tell them that the hotel was more than 1,000 kilometers from Beijing. But they asked, "Can we stay in that hotel and have meetings?" After the conference, they flew to Hangzhou to stay for three days. That shocked the general manager of the hotel—and then he paid us.

Even today, I still don't know how to code. I really don't understand how to compute. But as an entrepreneur, if you don't know something, you don't have to worry—you just have to find people who know about it. I didn't know anything about financing until I found Joseph Tsai, Alibaba's executive vice chairman. I don't talk to the investors a lot, because Joe's supposed to do that.

Don't try to hire the best people at first. If you try to hire the best when you're still a small company, it's like putting a Boeing 747 engine into a poor tractor. It won't work. But you can hire the right people, the people who know better than you, who are passionate about what they do, and who are open-minded about learning. And then when your company gets bigger, you have to rotate your people through different jobs. Make sure the engineers know about more than engineering. Work with the entire staff to make sure they are the best in their field. I have a great team, because they get everything done better than I could. So I can spend a lot of time thinking about the future.

The perception is that online, counterfeiting is big. But I would say, today, it's so much better than offline. With internet commerce, everything you buy, sell, deliver, manufacture—we can trace all the data. We're using our technology to fight against phony merchandise. In China, we deliver up to 57 million packages per day, and we had $547 billion in sales on our platforms last year. If people buy something counterfeit, that makes them unhappy and it makes the brand owner unhappy and unwilling to partner with us. But we're getting more and more brands to partner with us. This year, we're launching a huge campaign and working with law enforcement to fight against manufacturers that produce counterfeit products, to stop that at the root.

We are the company dealing with 10 million small businesses in China alone. We can at least figure out who's buying, who's selling, who's manufacturing. It is why we are chasing the bad actors. It's impossible to kill them.

Business is all about five, 10 years later. That's why I have to travel, I have to listen, and I have to think a lot of things that might seem crazy. All small businesses should think out of their town, out of their city, out of their country. If you're a real entrepreneur, there is always curiosity. If you don't have curiosity, you're a retired entrepreneur.

Alibaba's existed for 18 years, and we are so influential in China, but nobody in America knows us. We've always tried to come to America. We're not very successful, but we have patience. Now we say, "We do not want to make another Amazon, another eBay here—but we can make the small businesses go to China." I'm not really that keen on making every American know about Alibaba, but I'm very keen on getting entrepreneurs to try Alibaba. We're not an e-commerce company—we make other people do e-commerce. We think every company should be e-commerce.

If Amazon can help you, go on using Amazon. If eBay can help you, go on using eBay. What I'm telling everybody is, we should not globalize the Alibaba business. We should globalize e-commerce. ■

Ben Weiss | Bai Brands → Beverages

How Low Sugar Took Me to a Sweet $1.7 Billion Sale

Bai Brands founder Ben Weiss created a low-calorie, low-sugar, antioxidant-rich beverage based on coffeefruit–the bitter pulp that surrounds coffee beans and is usually discarded. After launching from his Princeton, New Jersey, basement, Weiss spent years giving out samples, and landed on the Inc. 500 in 2015. This year, Dr Pepper Snapple Group bought Bai for $1.7 billion. *–As told to Will Yakowicz*

IF YOU GET SHELF SPACE and think you've made it, you're mistaken. On the shelf, you're just inventory. The game is to get off the shelf and into the hands of the consumer.

In 2010, we noticed that customers were turning bottles to see how much sugar was inside of them. You'd win or lose on that basis, and I saw it coming—a growing unwillingness in customers to drink sugar. This is the issue that has fueled our growth. We spent five years handing out samples, telling customers about coffeefruit and how Bai has only five calories and one gram of sugar. It wasn't glamorous, yet it worked—no other beverage could make the same claims.

The longer you're in the beverage industry, the more you realize you're really in the distribution industry. In 2014, we signed a national distribution deal with Dr Pepper Snapple Group. Sixteen months later, DPSG made a $15 million investment.

I wanted to maximize the brand's potential—we couldn't be just another product on a company 's truck; we needed to be a top priority. It was a tough decision, but I initiated the process and told J.P.Morgan, which had given us $50 million of financing years earlier, that I wanted to change the industry with a company embracing our vision. Eventually, DPSG said that it wanted to go where we were going, and to be part of the solution: to help the industry end its dependency on sugar and artificial sweeteners. That's the bedrock of our relationship with DPSG.

Bai was early, but we were on to a fundamental change. This is the first year bottled water has surpassed soda in sales. Ten years from now, the beverage landscape is going to be very different, and Bai will be a big part of that change. ■

Katia Beauchamp | Birchbox → Beauty products sampling service

How I Made the Tough Decisions to Get Into the Black

Katia Beauchamp launched Birchbox, along with Harvard B-school classmate Hayley Barna, in New York City in 2010. They vaulted the beauty product sampling service to more than a million subscribers, and a reported $485 million valuation, in just under four years. (Barna left in 2015, but remains a board member.) In 2016, under pressure to generate profits, Beauchamp had to cut staff by 25 percent, to about 230, and scale back plans to open additional retail stores. Beauchamp got Birchbox into the black, and investors responded, allowing the company to raise another $15 million. *–As told to Zoë Henry*

IN 2016, WE SAW A SHIFT in the market. There was less venture capital deal activity, so it was crucial that we control our destiny by getting to profit and reaccelerating growth. Besides making layoffs, we reduced the cost of putting together a box of makeup. We developed machinery from an old French design we found in one of our factories. Traditionally, commerce is a pick-and-pack operation, but you can automate that. We reduced human touches by more than half. We cut millions from our monthly expenses.

> "The most important thing for an entrepreneur to know is how much halo effect any marketing effort has."

We also stopped spending on marketing. We were still working on social media and PR, but we turned off television for almost six months. That was painful, but it was the only way we were going to learn what was really driving value, so we could control our investments. The most important thing for an entrepreneur to know is how much halo effect any marketing effort has.

At first, I tried to shelter the team from the things that were really hard, because I didn't want them to be distracted. I underestimated how valuable it is to have all staff members feel how important their decisions are, and to let them share in the bad things. This maps onto what I believe as a mother. Are you going to be there every day to comfort your kids, or are you going to teach them how to comfort themselves? The reality of pursuing something exceptional is that it is always hard. There is no other side of hard. It's about reframing your perspective and loving the hard. Last year, we did more than $200 million in revenue, and in January we turned a profit.

Emotionally, it was horrible. The only thing that keeps you going is that you love the business more than you love yourself. ■

Hayden Slater | Pressed Juicery → Fresh juice retailer

How an FDA Threat Made Me a Great Operator

Hayden Slater opened Pressed Juicery in 2010 with two friends who shared his devotion to fresh juice. Each put in $30,000. They set up in the back of a Beverly Hills cupcake shop. Just as the company began to expand, things got sticky with a visit from the FDA. *–As told to Lindsey Blakely*

WE GOT OVERLY AMBITIOUS and decided to start both local delivery and national shipping. I didn't do a whole lot of research; we just started taking orders through our website. I reached out to the FDA and said I wanted to make sure we were doing everything by the book.

At the time, our production was inconsistent. We learned quickly you can't just take a recipe and scale it using the same proportions. We'd have these crazy variations in flavor profiles. We didn't realize how crucial the cold chain was—from where you store the fruit to where you press it to how you deliver the juice. You need a consistent temperature.

"We didn't realize how crucial the cold chain was—from where you store the fruit to where you press it to how you deliver the juice. You need a consistent temperature."

When the FDA inspector arrived, I assumed that I'd just tell her about making juice, who I was, the history of the company, etc. I walked her through the production line. At every station, she took notes furiously but didn't speak. At the end she said, "What you're currently doing requires me to shut you down."

It was like a bomb had dropped. My plea was "I called with truly good intent—I want to make sure that I'm doing everything the right way." I asked if she'd be willing to work with me instead of just forcing us to close. She agreed to give us 30 days as long as I kept her in the loop every step of the way.

We addressed the cold chain first. It was a massive investment, but it allowed us to stay open. With our savings and $50,000 from friends and family, we rented a refrigerated truck until the one we purchased arrived. We also turned the entire back of our facility into one huge refrigerator so we could control the temperature during the pressing process. After several months of back-and-forth— it felt like years—we got word that everything we had done was acceptable. I finally felt like we were playing with the big boys. More important, though, it changed the way we did business. Every step in the process became about quality. ■