

Episode 176: Max partnered with Mark Cuban

Not too long ago, I went on Hulu, and I found the TV show Shark Tank, and I went all the way back and watched every episode starting at Season 1.

I've always had that entrepreneurial spirit, wanting to start businesses and make money by working for myself. And that's what I've pretty much done – I've been self-employed for more than 20 years. And now, I'm self-employed as a podcaster.

But one thing I've never done – I've never been on Shark Tank. But Max has – and he did it as a teenager.

Max told me the whole story of the product he developed, and how he pitched it on TV and ended up getting a deal with Mark Cuban.

This is a Flashback episode. Max originally told this story here on the podcast, back on episode 18. So after he tells about his adventures on Shark Tank, you'll hear a new conversation I had with Max recently, about what he's up to today. Surprise – he's started a new company.

Scott

How long have you been watching Shark Tank?

Max

I've been watching Shark Tank since I was probably 8 years old, so for the past 10-11 years. Well, they're in the 10th season now. I've been watching since the first handful of seasons, so I've been watching for a very long time.

Scott

Yeah, your episode was in season 10, right?

Max

Yes. We are in the 10th season, which is a great season. They're doing a lot this season featuring stories of young entrepreneurs because, I think, they're starting to realize that entrepreneurs are now growing up watching Shark Tank. So, it seems like they're starting to do a lot more on that end, which is very nice.

Scott

That's good! That's great! I like that! When did you first have the idea for this product?

Max

When I was 15 years old, I just fell in love with coffee. I got so inspired by it and I just started loving it. I'm not sure why, but I started making it myself and know using all different types of brewing methods - pour-overs, Aeropress, everything you could think about to make coffee. Eventually, I stumbled across cold-brewed coffee. This was something that I haven't tried before. It wasn't sold at Starbucks and it wasn't sold in any large retailers. I said, "This is something that I really want to try because everything on the internet said it was smoother, sweeter, and tasted better. It was a totally different kind of coffee than I ever had before. So, I went online and typed in, "How to make cold brew coffee" on YouTube. I learned that people use mason jars to make it themselves at home all the time. So, that's exactly what I tried to do - I took a mason jar, I had ground coffee, added cold water to it, and let that sit in your refrigerator

for 24 hours. Then, what happens is you have the sludgy coffee mixture in a jar that you can't drink because you have to filter it. Everyone online said, "Just take a cheesecloth or a paper towel and filter it." So, I tried filtering it and made a mess, of course, because it's not really a good way to filter something. My parents were so mad because I was just a kid making a mess in the kitchen - they were not happy. They said, like, "You're never allowed to do this again! You need to stop making cold-brew!" I said, "Well, okay. There has to be a better way to do this because if this is going to be the next kind of coffee that everyone's gonna love, why is everyone using this horrible way to filter it? Like, there must be a better solution." So, I had this idea for a double-sided mason jar lid with a filter in the center. I thought that this must exist. So, my first instinct was, "Oh, let me go buy this! I'll find this on Amazon!" So, I typed in double-sided mason jar lid on Google and Amazon, but it does not exist - I couldn't find it anywhere. So, I said, "I'm going to make it because it's not in the market." So, I went into my garage, grabbed a screen door, some mason jar lids, blew together this first prototype, and it worked! After some trial and error, it started working. So, that's really how BRUW was born. I said, "This is an amazing idea! It's helping me make better coffee! Why can't this help everyone make better coffee?" So, it's something that I've been continuing to work on for the past 4.5 - 5 years.

Scott

When you first made that first prototype and got excited about it - obviously, I can tell just by listening to you - were you excited because, "Wow, I can now make cold brew coffee" or were you excited because, "Wow, I've got a product here that could potentially make a lot of money because nobody else is doing it"?

Max

I think it was a piece of both. I don't think that I was only excited, like, "Oh my god, I just struck gold! I'm gonna make a billion dollars!" because we definitely made that much. It's a good product - people are buying it - but we definitely haven't made millions and millions and millions of dollars yet. Hopefully, that's down the road. But my first instinct was, like, "I want to help more people make better coffee." Going to a very macro level, I think that's what makes really strong entrepreneurs. When you're driven by passion and want to help other people make better coffee, and other people understand your passion, I think it can just lead to a lot more success than saying, "Oh, I'm gonna make a million dollars! I'm gonna start a company!" because if that was the case, there's a lot of different ways we could have grown it. I don't think that we would have built a community of people that enjoy using the BRUW and enjoy making cold-brew at home.

Scott

Right. And you wouldn't probably be quite as passionate about it if it was just for money. Now, you said the name of it is "BRUW". What does that mean?

Max

Truthfully, it's because brew.com and brew.net were taken and I couldn't think of another domain name. We're working on a cool backstory for the name. As of right now, I was just sitting around the kitchen table with my mom - I think my grandma was there - and my siblings. We were, like, "We need a name for this. What should we call it?" Originally, it was "COFFME" - that was the first name. Everyone was like, "No way, that's horrible!" Then, it was "BRUWD", which you can't really say without like--

Scott

You got to spell it for everybody.

Max

Right. Then, there were all these other names. Finally, someone at the table - I don't remember who it was - said, "What about 'BRUW'?" I was like, "Oh, that's a good name - it must be taken." So I went online and was, like, "Oh, it's available! So, we bought that domain name.

Scott

It's pretty incredible that a 4-letter domain name was still even available.

Max

It's a '.net' - we don't have bruw.com. We had bruw.net and we also had bruwcoffee.com. So, yeah, I was really lucky.

Scott

Have you talked to the '.com' owner at all about getting that?

Max

They are not willing to sell it. Trust me. I've talked to them.

Scott

Wow, okay. Well, not yet. I mean, anything's for sale for the right amount of money.

Max

Exactly.

Scott

Okay. Personally, I have only been familiar with hot coffee. My wife drinks iced coffee. I wasn't really familiar with cold-brew as compared to iced coffee. I've done a little research, so I know now, but can you describe for the listeners what the differences are?

Max

Totally. Let me go back to iced coffee. Iced coffee is you make coffee, cool it down, and pour in ice, right? It's pretty self-explanatory. Everyone can pretty much figure out how to make it - not too challenging - you just get a cold-tasting cup of coffee, so it's not that special. Cold-brew, on the other hand, you actually brew it with cold water. So, the coffee grounds never touch the heat, never get hot, and you do it over a longer period of time. Because you're using cold water and because you're stretching out the process, the chemical reaction between the coffee in the wall and the water is actually different. So, you're not extracting the same amount of acidity out of the coffee bean and you're not extracting all the same elements that you would when you have a hot cup of coffee, so it ends up being more caffeinated and tastes smoother and sweeter - it doesn't taste as bitter and harsh. If you brewed it hot, that same coffee would actually taste completely different, and that's a big plus to a lot of people that like coffees. They said, "Well, I hate the bitterness of that milk or that cream." When they drink cold-brew, it's smoother. And they don't need to use the most expensive coffee in the world to get something out of it that's drinkable. It's something that tastes good, still, if it's made cold - I think that's what people like a lot. Then, because of the lower acidity, certain doctors recommended it for patients who have digestion issues because it's easier on their diet. There's a whole array of benefits to it, but it is different. The main one is that it tastes different and it tastes better.

Scott

Yeah, I look forward to trying it. I haven't had cold-brewed coffee yet. I ordered your filter - it just hasn't arrived yet. I know that you have a little backorder, right?

Max

A little bit. It's on the way. So, everything shipping out. By the time this is airing, it should probably be shipped out already.

Scott

Yeah, I'm sure.

Max

Yeah, it was crazy. We got all these orders on the night we aired on Shark Tank. I mean, we were expecting an influx of orders but we didn't really know how much, but then we just got slammed and we said, "This is great!" Then, we also had, like, "Okay, we need to meet this demand. We need to figure it out." It was definitely challenging to do it, but we're slowly getting there.

Scott

Let's go into the show. You decided to be on Shark Tank. To get on the show, you can apply either online or on an open call. How did you do it?

Max

Yeah, you can apply either online or in an open casting call - both of them are pretty similar. In one, you just go and speak in-person in front of the judges, and in the other one, you send a video of yourself. Either way, I believe you get in front of the same casting team, they review you, and they pick. I mean, they pick the best entrepreneurs that they see. I think, this season, they got 44,000 applicants. So, it's competitive to get on the show. Because of how successful the show is, everyone's trying to get on it, but there's definitely a process to apply and get approved. I think the statistics are astounding for this season 10 - what they published is 44,000 people applied to be on the show. 158 of those people made it to LA to actually film the segment, but 88 of those people made it to TV. So, like, 158 films and 88 people made it to TV. So, you can go to LA, go to the stage, pitch to sharks, film your episode, and then just get cut off and not actually ever have it come to fruition, which would be pretty disappointing. Personally, that's what I was worried about. We filmed in the summer and I said, like, "Oh my god, am I gonna be on TV?" We had no idea what was gonna happen. So, that's what I was concerned about. When we got the news that we were going to be out in January, it was very relieving.

Scott

That's one thing I wanted to ask you about - from the time you got accepted to come out to the time when you actually filmed the show, how much time went by?

Max

Right. So, it was a long process. I mean, they're taking applications now for next season, right? So like, it's January and they're already doing casting calls and taking applications for season 11, but they haven't even finished airing season 10 yet. So, you can imagine that it's a long road to get there.

Scott

Yeah. So, your show is actually on Episode 9 of Season 10 - that went on the air on January 6, 2019, which was just a few weeks ago. When did you actually record that episode?

Max

That was over the summer. The entire season of Shark Tank was filmed in two segments - a week in June and a week in September. I believe that's what was been published. So, I mean, it's crazy.

Scott

So you filmed in June and it went on the air in January, so it's like six months, roughly. How many times did you practice that pitch?

Max

Oh my gosh, I can't even tell you. I thought of it a lot - right a lot. I had the pitch written. I decided that this is what I'm going to say to the sharks. I would literally be in front of the mirror, going, "Hi, sharks. My name is Max Feber. I'm 18 years old." So I just went through it and did it hundreds of times. I mean, there's a folder on my computer of me doing it. Instead of doing it in front of the mirror, I did it in front of my webcam on my Mac so that I could play it back and say, "I'm going to tweak this. I'm going to say it slower. I could actually evolve that." So, by the time I got to TV, it was pretty polished.

Scott

Right. Because you want it to be second nature. You don't have to try to remember your lines, right? How nervous were you when you were walking down that hallway? I mean, what were you thinking?

Max

Oh, my gosh, it was the craziest experience. When the doors opened - the music was playing in my head although they don't actually play it when you're recording - I walked down, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is finally happening." Then all of a sudden, I saw 5 sharks sitting in front of me. I was, like, "Wow." It hit me a little bit that I had finally made it into the room that I had always been watching. I filmed for a lot of TV shows, but not Shark Tank specifically. When you're there, you're like, "Oh, I can't believe this is how it looks on TV." It feels like you're on a set and it doesn't look real, but when you're on the Shark Tank set, especially when I was there, I just completely felt natural in that room. I was standing on the carpet in front of the shark and I was like, "Oh, I haven't imagined what this feels like forever. It didn't feel like I was in a foreign environment. It felt like I was walking into the TV that I've been watching forever."

Scott

Because the set doesn't really change except the product being shown - it's pretty much the same.

Max

Also, it didn't feel like it was fake - it felt like I was truly walking into what I had been watching forever. It was, like, very nostalgic. It was a great experience.

Scott

Did you want a particular shark to give you a deal as you were going in?

Max

I really liked all of them and I really respect all the sharks. I didn't have anyone, specifically. I mean, I love Mark Cuban, I did want Mark Cuban going in, but if he didn't give me a deal and

Robert had given me a deal, it wouldn't have been the end of the world because I do respect them all so highly. I like all of them, but I wanted Mark - I had my eyes on Mark. I also had my eye on Lori but she didn't end up giving me the offer.

Scott

The sharks you presented to were pretty much the standard list. It was Mar, Daymond, Kevin, Lori, and Robert. As you were going in, your proposal was you wanted \$50,000 for 25% of your company?

Max

Yes.

Scott

You did the product demo and it looked super smooth. I mean, I could tell that - when I watched it - you had obviously practiced that a lot and, obviously, that paid off. Now, Kevin joked more than once, "Wow, Max is really, kind of, amped up on the product. He's taken a lot of coffee. Was that actually the case?"

Max

No. That was actually one of the few mornings that I didn't drink any coffee. I mean, I was just very nervous and excited, and the combination led me to be very just energetic. I mean, I'm normally a very energetic person. So, it made me very articulate and very energetic, and I think they liked it.

Scott

Yeah. I think that came across as very, very positive. I mean, I can tell that just by talking to you - obviously, you talk fast, you think fast, and that's just the way you are. Was there any question that you were afraid that they were gonna ask?

Max

No. I mean, I was pretty much prepared for anything that they could have thrown at me. I had been reviewing-- I mean, I didn't necessarily review my numbers just because I know the numbers. Like, I had been working in the business so regularly every day that you, kind of, learn and know everything about it, so I didn't have to prepare too much. So, I just had to recalculate the cost of it and make sure that we had actual numbers of what our product cost and stuff like that, but I wasn't really nervous about anything. I think, in general, when running a company, I try to maintain a very healthy company that's morally strong and very financially healthy, so we didn't have any debt. We didn't really have anything too crazy that they saw. It's not like they could have gotten my secrets out of me because we didn't really have anything to hide. I pretty much left it all on the table with them.

Scott

And you've already got your patent just before that?

Max

Yeah, that is true. We really had gotten the patent, like, 3-4 days before filming with them.

Scott

It was great because that's one of the things that they always ask. Of course, they would always ask, "What does it cost you to make one of these?" And you had all those answers ready to go.

Max

I mean, like, I'm not gonna say, "I don't know the answer to how much it was gonna cost." And I think those people who go into the tank and say, "Oh, I don't know how much it costs to make it." should not be on Shark Tank - like, they shouldn't even ask for an investment.

Scott

How did they get past the first screener, right?

Max

I don't know the process of how they get past them or how they apply, but why should they take an investment when they don't even know? They might not be able to manage that money properly if they don't know what their product cost - I wouldn't trust them with my money - and I can't imagine how those billionaires in the room would feel about it.

Scott

Right, because it's not like they would just give their money out to anybody.

Max

They're billionaires but, at the same time, they're not, like, throwing their money away. When they give you \$50,000 in Shark Tank, they're investing it in you because they think they'll make money back. People forget that a lot. They think, "Oh, they're just giving this kid." Like, they don't realize that Mark giving me \$50,000 is Mark assuming that I'll be able to take that \$50,000 and turn it into \$5 million which, hopefully, we're gonna be able to do.

Scott

Right off the bat, Kevin offered you \$50,000 for a 50% stake. You didn't seem too excited about that.

Max

I couldn't believe it. That was just a stupid deal - I didn't like it. I mean, I respect Kevin O'Leary a lot - I think he's a nice guy, a good investor, and a good person for the most part, but I felt that was a stupid offer.

Scott

But that seems like it's, kind of, his shtick where he just comes out sarcastically and doesn't pull any punches. I don't remember what he said about your product but, obviously, if he was offering a deal, he must have thought it had potential, right?

Max

I didn't like the deal because that was too much equity for me. In all honesty, like, he is probably one of the most shrewd investors there and he's probably one of the fastest to say, "Your idea sucks. Get out of here. You're the worst company ever." But he didn't say that to me. He respected me enough to understand that we were running a healthy company. He believed in the product and I do really appreciate that because, I think, that's very rare coming out of Mr. Wonderful.

Scott

In another one of the presentations on that same episode, I think the line he used was, "You need to take this product out back behind the barn and shoot it." I think a lot of that is for ratings because people want to see what Kevin's gonna say next, right?

Max

I don't know why he does it. I don't know if they do it for ratings or not. I just know that getting an offer from Kevin O'Leary - he's probably one of the hardest sharks to get an offer from - is really rare. So, when he gave me the offer, it made me feel like this product is legitimate and they're gonna like it. If he likes it, then nobody else would. If he doesn't have an issue with the financials, then nobody else is gonna have an issue with the financials. If he notices a little bit of a deviation from what's normal in the industry, he'll slam you over it.

Scott

So you got that. Then, Lori dropped out. Daymond offered \$50,000 for 30%, which is a little bit more equity than what you initially wanted. Robert dropped out. Then, Mark Cuban said, "Okay, I'll give you \$50,000 for 30% and I want an immediate answer." Did you feel pressured? I mean, obviously, they want to put pressure on you of "We're gonna give you this, but you need to answer us now."

Max

I don't know. Daymond gave me the offer and the offer he gave me was, like, "Look, I'd want to license it." He didn't seem to believe in me that much. Meanwhile, Mark was like, "You remind me of me when I was a kid. You're a mini-me. Like, I love you, I love this." He gave me the same offer. So, again, I really respect Daymond John and I think he's a great entrepreneur. He was the Entrepreneur In Residence at my college, Babson, for a little while but Mark just seemed to have a little bit more belief in me than Daymond did. I think he was investing in the business thinking can make some money back, but Mark was investing in me along with the business. So, I really appreciated that. I said that I respected him and I wanted to do a deal with him. In retrospect, I probably could have asked the 2 of them to go in together, but I don't know if that would have ever materialized.

Scott

Yeah. That makes sense. I mean, since they were both offering the same deal, for you to go with Mark, I guess it makes sense why you did that. Looking back on it now, since the show has now gone live, would you have done anything differently?

Max

That's a good question. I don't think so. I think we hit it spot on. I think the way the show made me look was good - I think they made me look really good - and I really appreciated that. I think they really portrayed the company very well. There's not much I would have done differently. Maybe, I could have asked Mark and Daymond to go in together.

Scott

But that wouldn't have necessarily been a positive, though.

Max

Right, exactly. I think I would have asked the question - I don't even know if I would have. I went back and forth thinking about it, Mark wanted me to commit immediately and I did. I think that shows how committed I was to him, to his company, and to his investments. On the other hand, I don't know what Daymond could add to the company because I haven't really interacted with

him. So I went back and forth there, but I don't think I would change anything. I think it went really well.

Scott

They definitely reward decisiveness.

Max

Yes, I agree.

Scott

After the show, did the deal actually happen - you got the \$50,000?

Max

We did - we're working with Mark, which is really great.

Scott

How often do you talk with Mark?

Max

Mark is great. He's a really good and strong advisor - I really appreciate it. I'll probably email him, like, once a week to ask him questions or give them updates, and he is always responsive, works with me, and gives great advice, which is awesome. He's really good to work with. He is a really good adviser and a really good mentor.

Scott

Not many many people have direct access to Mark Cuban.

Max

Yeah, seriously. That made me a celebrity in school and everywhere. They're like, "Oh, can you ask Mark a question for me? Let me talk to Mark! Let me get Mark's phone number!" I'm like, "I can't."

Scott

Oh, yeah. You're not gonna abuse that privilege.

Max

It's great. It gets me to all the parties. Anytime I want to go to a party on campus, I'll be like, "If you don't let me in, I'm gonna call Mark" and they'd be, like, "Okay, come on." That's just a joke - it's not that I actually will. But it's been really cool to see people supporting me in, like, the company - it's been really great.

Scott

You mentioned that your appearance on the show had a pretty positive effect on sales. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Max

Yeah. We did really well. We were on the show. Then, all of a sudden, we had thousands of new customers flooding in. I realized that we were going to sell out - we did better than I expected - and I was, like, "We're gonna sell out. We're not gonna be able to fulfill all of our orders immediately." I said, "Well, if we can't be operationally excellent going into the industry -

like, we can't get all the orders out immediately and have perfect supply chain - then we have to be on the very top of our customers, we have to be talking to them, interacting with them, and building a community with them." We said, like, "We have to do something. We can't just leave these people to fend for themselves." So, I sent out an email to all of my customers with my personal cell phone number and said, "Look, you're my customers, you're supporting me, you're paying me, why shouldn't you have access to me? That just didn't make sense." Then I said, "Call me or text me. That's my real number. It's the same one that my mom has. Ask me your questions. Don't slam us online. Don't leave horrible reviews. Just call me and I'm happy to talk to you about it." That's what we were doing and it had been working very well for us.

Scott

People love transparency.

Max

It's really good - they like it a lot, they respect it a lot, it helps build a stronger brand for us, it helps build a community of all the people that are on board and respect us. So, I really like and appreciate that.

Scott

When you get the \$50,000, what did you use it for?

Max

We invested a lot in marketing like what Mark had asked for and what he wanted us to do, which we did. We've done a lot of everything. We're just spending a lot of money to grow ourselves as a company.

Scott

So what you're doing is, kind of, like, bootstrapping, where the money that you get from pre-ordering or from ordering is really paying to have the product created, right?

Max

Right, exactly.

Scott

When Lori dropped out, she said or thought that this is just gonna be one of the many products that you'll develop. Do you have plans for other products now or are you focusing on just this one?

Max

I don't have anything definitive in the pipeline, but I do agree with her a lot. I've always viewed that this is not something that I'll necessarily retire on - it's just the first of many ventures for me. Now that I have a relationship with this community of a few thousand people around me - I gave them my phone number, built a strong belief not only in the product but also in myself - I can say, like, "Hi, thank you so much for believing in BRUW. I'm starting this new thing. Would you support this? Look what I'm doing. You believed in me from when I was a kid." I think that people would be open to it, I think people would believe in it, and I do really appreciate that.

Scott

Yeah. I mean, the network that you're building now, if you think about calculating the value of that over your lifetime, that would be a lot more than \$50,000, honestly.

Max

Right, exactly. When Mark Cuban gave me the deal, having access to Mark and having a relationship with Mark was so much more valuable to me than anything else. I just said, like, I really appreciate him and I really value him. I know Mark Cuban's worth a lot more than \$50,000. So, I was very flexible in the amount of equity I was willing to give up - don't tell him that.

Scott

Alright. Well, if he's listening to this then, of course, he knows.

Max

Now he knows.

Scott

So you've got your website. You're on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I'm gonna have links to all of these on the show notes for this episode so that people can contact you. What's the easiest way for someone to actually get the BRUW cold-brew coffee filter?

Max

The best way to buy it is through our website - bruw.net. The best way you know that's the best way to do it. The coupon code is SAVE10 for 10% off - don't tell your friends, it's a secret. That's the best way that they can get a hold of one. Also, they can follow or contact me on Instagram at @maxbfeber - you can DM and reach out to me personally there - that's the best way to get in touch with me. I love speaking and I love doing everything. So, please reach out to me, I'm happy to talk.

Scott

Yep. Like I said, I'll have links to all that on the website for this episode. And Max, I appreciate you coming on. It's an exciting story and I look forward to seeing where it's gonna go.

Max

Thank you so much. I really appreciate the time and I really enjoyed the conversation.

Scott

Max, welcome back to the podcast!

Max

Thank you so much. It's great to be back.

Scott

The listeners have just heard your story from five years ago when you got that deal and you were working with Mark Cuban. I remember, at the time, you were seeing a big influx of customers having gotten all that national publicity of just being on Shark Tank. I assume you were eventually able to catch up on all those orders, right?

Max

Thankfully we were, yes. I mean, it was crazy. It has been five years, which is wild to think about - it's been so long. It was an unbelievable experience and it was such a— I mean, it was probably one of the most challenging scenarios of my career to date where I have this massive

spike in orders, which no amount of inventory management, no amount of order preparation could prepare me for, and it was really challenging. And I think, reflecting on it five years later, while you're in it, while you're in the thick of it, you're really just doing the work, right? You're working, you're running, you're executing, you're doing what you think you could do, and you don't necessarily respect the amount of effort you put towards something until you're looking back at it years later.

I'm very lucky to have been thinking about the scenario regularly and it's been great. It was really an amazing experience. But yeah, so I'll give you the update. We filled all those orders, thankfully. I don't remember exactly where the story left off. I filled all his orders and then I worked with Mark's team and I continued to run the company for a year and a half. Then, in May of 2020, I was lucky to exit the company through an acquisition to a company called Snarky Tea, who's also in the Shark Tank Network. They've continued to run the brand, they've continued to sell the product, and I've been able to step back into new roles and take on new opportunities.

Scott

And the exit— was that the plan from the start? I know it is for a lot of startup companies.

Max

Look, I think that an exit is the plan for a lot of companies and they don't exit, and it's not the plan for a lot of companies and they do exit. It really doesn't matter. Whatever your plan is in the beginning, it's irrelevant. Anyone who runs a company or program or anything understands that it's really not relevant - your exit strategy day one. I think I didn't necessarily know what the company was going to become, whether it was going to stay a project, whether it was going to grow, whether it was going to be sold. It was hard for me to understand exactly what was going to happen and I was fortunate to realize that I was at this opportunity where I could really sell the company, make a good amount of money, and walk away with this storybook ending to a great story of running a company through high school and college and selling it.

That's more of what I was focused on - what's the natural conclusion to running BRUW? Like, how can I continue to progress in my own career? And it ended up working out very well.

Scott

And you said you took other positions in the company after you left it, after you sold your equity in it. But did you have any other deals or ideas in the works at that point?

Max

So I didn't take other roles. To be clear, I didn't take other roles within Snarky Tea. I detached. I was no longer invested in the operation of BRUW, but I took other roles at other venture-backed startups, and other startups and other companies really to spend the time learning about other types of industries and other types of brands and learning about how the venture world works. I knew how to build a company. I knew how to build a product. I knew how to manage a team. I knew how to sell it. Where my weak point was understanding the financial structure of raising money for a company and kind of building a conventional venture backable startup. So that's where I devoted a lot of my time to learning, took opportunities, and took roles, which really just encouraged me to learn, be exposed to new industries and new work opportunities, and actually was able to leave about a year and a half ago for those opportunities and started a new company, which I cofounded and building now.

Scott

Yeah, that is pretty amazing. You call a storybook ending. I mean, you're still so young. It's like the storybook's beginning, still.

Max

Yeah, right. It's like the prologue is over,

Scott

But I understand that, after being on the podcast five years ago, you have been in contact with one of the listeners of the podcast. What was that about?

Max

That's correct. Okay, so I'm going to shout her out. She's going to appreciate it. Professor Quinn at Clark University, Worcester, Mass, is an avid listener of this podcast. She really likes it. She actually sent me an email saying, "Hey, Max, I'm a professor at Clark University. We have an entrepreneurship program. My students would love it if you would come and speak to us and come and talk about your story of being a student founder, how you balance classes, school, social life, your company, and all of these different things. They're all running companies. They're all trying to break into the world of startups and they want some advice."

Of course, I read this email. I was like, "This is ridiculous. No one's going to listen to me. What am I? What am I qualified to speak about? What is my story actually? How inspiring could my story be that people actually want to talk about it?" Which, fortunately, is not true. But I think it's the mindset that a lot of founders have. So I was like, "Yeah, absolutely. Of course, I'll go. I would love to speak to your kids." So, I went. I lectured for a day last year. Then, last week, actually, I don't know when it's going to air but, as of the day we're recording it, I was at Clark in Worcester last week spending a couple days lecturing these classes, talking about my story, and also serving as a guest judge on Clark Tank, which is their version of a shark tank, which was really fun to see what some of their students are working on.

Scott

That's cool.

Max

Yeah, it was great. But I have to tell you— thinking back to what I did, I said this again, hindsight of 2020, reflecting on the company is really clear. Lecturing about it a year later really forces you to deduce all of your thoughts into a very clear structure, a clear outline to know exactly what your takeaway and your analysis is, and talk about it to people, and I was really lucky to be able to do that. I think what I realized is that almost all of my job at running BRUW and at running my current company is that you're playing this mental game. You are playing this mental game of entrepreneurship where you are balancing your own emotions, your stress, your pressures, and you're putting out fires every day.

A predictor of success for a founder is not necessarily your ability to sit down and do all your emails and execute. Your predictor as a founder is your ability to just take a deep breath and know that it's going to be okay and manage all these different pressures and all these different stresses and move the ball forward. That's what I was able to speak to a lot of their students about, which was a really exciting opportunity.

Scott

And it must be an exciting opportunity for them as well. So shout out to Professor Quinn. Good job.

Max

Yeah, she's great. Yeah, she's great. She's going to love hearing this. I mean, I was so beyond impressed with their entrepreneurship program. I went to Babson, so I shouldn't be plugging other entrepreneurship programs, but I was really blown away with it. I thought they did a great job.

Scott

And now you have cofounded a new company called Bellwether. What is that?

Max

That's correct. So we're building a company called Bellwether, which is designed to help brands leverage their existing social values as marketing engines. So what we figured out is that because of my background in direct consumer marketing, running BRUW for five years, I understood very clearly what it took to market a product. I also understood that, right now, as of 2024 - that's what year it is— it's hard to keep track. We're in what people are calling this cookie pocket. Digital retargeting has become so incredibly challenging. There are a lot of data privacy regulations, social media networks are restricting, and there's a lot more content out there that's harder to break through. So brands are trying to look towards new opportunities to market their products.

Tangentially, at the exact same time, we're living in this era where people are incredibly driven by their social values to the point where 80 percent of Gen Z and Millennial consumers are actually willing to switch from brand A to brand B if brand B more closely aligns with their personally held values, and that's just an astounding statistic. It's not surprising to anyone listening, but it's astounding. Regardless of your politics, it's something that the market is responding to.

So what we built - I'll give you the really high-level version of our product - is when you go to a website and you get a pop-up that says, "Enter your email and we'll give you 10 percent off." Almost everyone clicks out of it, right? Nobody really goes through that. A couple of people go through it, but that acquisition rate is very low. What we built is a pop-up that says, "Hey, enter your email or enter your phone number, and we'll help you register to vote. We'll help you send a letter to your elected representative. We'll help you sign a petition. We'll help you take on some sort of social cause." Again, doesn't have to be political, right? It can be very generic in the brand.

But what we found - and this is consistent with some other research - is that actually acquires almost 80% more cold leads - like, 70-something percent more leads. The leads that are acquired spend 40% more money over the course of their lifetime with the brand. It's this win where we have found a way to financially incentivize direct-to-consumer brands to really take their social impact seriously. So, they can cause some form of positive social change while simultaneously increasing the amount of customers they have and the amount of money their customers spend, which is an unbelievable opportunity that we're building in.

Scott

Yeah. It sounds like the perfect storm. How did you come up with that? Who figured out that it would work?

Max

Oh, I mean, there are a lot of smart people that are much smarter than I am that are researching in this space right now. Thankfully, there are a lot of people who don't read the same research that I do, who aren't taking it seriously. That stat 77% or something and the 40%-- I think it was Harvard Business Review that put that study out. Don't cite me on that, but it was either Harvard or McKinsey. Somebody put that research out, which said 70% to 80% more likely to go through a flow if you're engaging on an existing value. Our product is testing that hypothesis and confirming those numbers.

We're living in this time where people are really spending a lot of money and a lot of energy researching social responsibility because I don't have to tell you the world is a little crazy, right? The amount of social engagement and political engagement that's going on is unlike anything we've seen in a really long time, certainly nothing we've seen in my memorable lifetime.

We think that where the world is for social responsibility right now is where the world was for sustainability and climate engagement 10 years ago. Nobody was investing in climate tech 10 years ago. No one was building climate companies 10 years ago. The few that broke through and the few that were are now crushing it and they're killing it. Now, everyone's writing checks and building these funds around climate tech and sustainability. But we really expect that, in a couple of years, we're going to be the first to market and are at a really big opportunity, which I shouldn't be saying on a podcast, Scott, because now everyone's going to start competing with me. I'd like to have that.

Scott

Yeah, you know the entire world's going to hear this episode. You've kept out of the bag now.

Max

Yeah. Professor Quinn, if you're listening, don't steal my idea.

Scott

And how can people hearing this find out more about you and what you have going on?

Max

Look, I'm available. They can find me online. I'm on LinkedIn. I'm on Instagram. I'm all over the internet. I would encourage them to send me an email, shoot me a text, DM me on Instagram or LinkedIn or one of those two. My Instagram is @MaxBFeber name and my LinkedIn is just Max Feber. Just find me and reach out to me. I say this and I mean it.

I really do take almost every call where somebody says, "Hey, I just really want to learn more about what you're doing." I was talking to these students the other day and I told them this, "Look, you're not going to take me up on this. But I want you to reach out to me. I want to be on calls with you. I want to help you. I want to talk to you." So all it takes is them to reach out and I'm really happy to." So I would encourage anyone listening to reach out. And if you're in New York, let's grab coffee. Otherwise, let's hop on a call and I'd love to chat about that.

Scott

And that's an offer that - if anyone has any entrepreneurial leanings - people should absolutely take you up on. When I'm in New York, maybe we can get together because I'll be up there sometime this summer.

Max

Sounds good.

Scott

And for all of your contact info, we'll have that in the episode notes - your Instagram, LinkedIn, email, and all that. That'll be in the episode notes so people can find that. And, Max, I appreciate you coming back on. You've already done so much and it looks like there's a whole lot more in your future.

Max

Thank you so much, Scott. I really appreciate it and I look forward to connecting in another five.

Scott

Max is so genuine and down-to-earth – and when he says he wants you to contact him, he means it. He really enjoys helping other people, especially around the topic of starting or building a business. All of his contact info is in the episode notes at WhatWasThatLike.com/176.

Female 1

Hi, Scott. I love your podcast. Each story is better than the next, and you are such a wonderful host - so kind, empathetic, and wise. So, thank you for that. "Episode 170: Justin found his mother on Facebook" hit me hard as we adopted our son at birth. He is 16 years old now. I just wanted to mention that the adoption agency we worked with changed our way of thinking about what it actually means when a birth mother chooses adoption for her child. Rather than give up her child, she makes an adoption plan for her child. I know it's just a simple change in a phrase, but I really think it more accurately describes the choice a birth mother is making. No woman wants to give up someone they carry in their body for nine months. Rather, the birth mother realizes there may be someone out there who could give that child a better life, and that is what she chooses. It's an excruciating decision for her, and one that will forever change the course of the lives of so many individuals. It is also, in my opinion, one of the most selfless acts of love there is, which I know you understand.

There are many people who continue to use the phrase giving up a child, and my stomach turns a bit each time I hear it. So, I try to do my part in letting people know there is a more fitting phrase and, perhaps, someday the standard language will become that a birth mother made an adoption plan for her child. Now doesn't that sound so much nicer?

Scott

Been getting lots of good feedback about the Tuesday Question episodes with Meredith. This past Tuesday, the question we talked about was "what's something you wish you could forget?" and I told a personal story that I haven't shared here on the podcast previously. And of course we always share the answers that come from you, the listeners. I have to tell you, Meredith and I are having a blast putting these together.

I wanted to clear something up about the podcast audio.

I've gotten some feedback from a few listeners about a high-pitched screeching noise that can be heard right at the end of the ad break. The ones who heard it have called it jarring, scary, annoying – just not something you want to hear. So I wanted to let you know – that's not a

sound that I include when I'm putting the episode together. It's something done by mistake by my hosting company. And fortunately, it only showed up in the audio for a very small percentage of listeners. I always listen to my own episodes on the day they go live, and I never heard it myself.

But the good news is, by the time you hear this, hopefully it's resolved. I want to give a big shout out and thanks to my friend Alex, way down in Cape Town, South Africa. She was kind enough to help me out by actually recording that awful noise and sending it to me so we could investigate it. So thanks very much Alex!

So it should be gone by now – but if you hear it, I'd really appreciate it if you could somehow record it and send it to me.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And here we are once again, at the Listener Story segment of the show. Why haven't you sent in your story yet? Just talk about something interesting that happened to you, just a 5-10 minute story, and email it to me. You could hear your own story right here on the podcast!

This week's story is from a listener who had a bad feeling about someone – and she was right.

Stay safe – and I'll see you in a week, with a brand new episode.

(Listener Story)

Gina

Hi, Scott. My name is Gina. I was wanting to tell you kind of a freaky, scary thing that happened to me. It was in February, 2013. The police in Southern California were on a manhunt for a man by the name of Christopher Dorner. You may have heard of him. About a half hour prior to it first being on the news, I had gone to get gas at an Arco gas station in Lake Elsinore, California. As I was standing in line at the register to pay for my gas, a man walked in and I got the most terrible feeling inside of me. He was a tall, good-looking man but, when he looked at me, I knew he wasn't a good person. I immediately left. I knew in my heart that this guy was bad news. I didn't get gas. I got in my car and went home. That's how scared I was.

I told my adult daughter about the feeling I had gotten when I saw that guy. About an hour after I told my daughter the story, we were watching the news and they flashed a picture of that exact man. I had gotten that terrible feeling from at the gas station. I jumped up and said, "Oh my gosh, that's him. That's the man that I saw at the gas station!"

Christopher Dorner was a former LAPD police officer, and he was seeking revenge for losing his job. It all started on February 3rd, 2013, and ended on February 12th, 2013, when he killed himself during a standoff with the police in the San Bernardino community of Big Bear. He killed four people and himself. The victims were law enforcement officers and a daughter of one of the LAPD captains. There were four counties involved - Los Angeles County, Orange County, Riverside County, and San Bernardino County. At that time, it was the largest manhunt in Southern California history.

I have an uncanny ability to know if someone is an evil or bad person. I've been that way since I was a young girl. It has happened to me several times but never with a person as horrible as Christopher Dorner. Some of my friends say, "Oh my God, doesn't that bug you that you get those feelings?" And I said, "No, because sometimes that could probably save my life."

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed my story.