

Transcript: bigQUEST Podcast | S1, Ep 07

James Orsini On Dialing Up Efficiency To Prepare for bigQUESTS

Andy Murray: All righty. Hey, James, great to see you today. How are you doing?

James Orsini: Very good, Andy. Thank you so much for having me.

Andy Murray: Oh, well, it's a pleasure to have you on the podcast. Many people may not know your story, and probably it's great to start there. So would you just give me a review a bit about your journey, perhaps up to what you're doing now at Sasha because it's a fascinating and very compelling journey.

James Orsini: Yeah, yeah. It's been a great career thus far. It's not over yet, thank God. But it really it started in public accounting. I was an auditor for KPMG and had a plethora of clients, one of which happened to be a branding subsidiary of Saatchi & Saatchi at the time. And I remember being on that client and saying to myself, "I could see myself in an environment like this someday." I liked the creativity of it. I loved the energy in the room. So I did what a lot-

Andy Murray: Did the right-brain side scare you at all?

James Orsini: No. Not really. There I was, a guy in a three-piece suit sitting in a cubicle with a tie on, and here they were, casually dressed and whipping through the hallways, very collaborative. And I just remember observing it, an icon in the industry. I sat outside of Alan Siegel's office from Siegel + Gale. And just remember the moxie at the time, they were actually developing the bull for Merrill Lynch as a logo, which remains today. And I did what a lot of guys did in the 80s. I knew I did not want to be a partner in a public accounting firm, and I left and went to Wall Street. I was an analyst at Goldman Sachs in the investment banking and JR and commodity trading division.

Andy Murray: Wow.

James Orsini: And I quickly realized that Wall Street was not for me. I did well there, they liked me, I was promoted, but I knew I wasn't going to find a career there. And I got a call from a guy who I used to work with at KPMG, who said, "Hey, James, the Saatchi brothers just bought a single public relations firm in



New York City and they're going to build a worldwide PR network, and if you leave Goldman Sachs someday, you'll be the CFO of that network. But you got to leave Goldman Sachs," which is not what guys were doing in the 80s. In fact, when I resigned, my then boss asked to speak to my new boss to make sure that I really wasn't making a mistake. So that was an interesting and awkward lunch the three of us had.

Andy Murray: Oh, wow.

James Orsini: But fast forward, we built the fifth largest public relations firm in the world, a company called Roland, and I was a global CFO overseeing 31 offices in 26 countries before I was 30. So it was pretty cool. And then the Saatchi brothers almost ran out of money. This is back-

Andy Murray: I remember that.

James Orsini: In their days when they were trying to buy a bank to fund some of the acquisitions that they were doing. And there we were, this PR firm competing with the Hill+Knowltons and Burson-Marstellers who had been around for 100 years and we had been around for four or five and ran out of money.

So I asked the then-management to let me help break it up while there was still some money, and we did so. And then, they were like, "Listen, you're always going to have a job as a result of doing the right thing." And I stood there for a bit and Saatchi got acquired by Publicis, and I said, "You know what, if I'm going to have a new boss, I should probably pick my new boss rather than be told this is who your new boss is going to be."

So I left to go to work for Interbrand, another great global branding company owned by Omnicom, and I was their global CFO for two years, and their North American Chief Operating... Or actually the global CFO for four years, North American Chief Operating Officer for two. And that's where I found my passion in operations more so than finance. I felt I was always a much better businessman than I ever was accountant. I'm glad I-

Andy Murray: How old were you when you stepped into that new role? If I may ask?

James Orsini: Yeah, yeah. Mid-30s, young 30s.

Andy Murray: Young 30s, yeah.

James Orsini: And took a shot at doing something on the operational side, which much to their credit they asked me not to leave, that they would create a new position for me. And they did, they said,



"Listen, we have this North American president. We think if you go over there and you become the North American Chief Operating Officer together, you'll be the Office of the CEO. We won't really have a CEO, he'll focus on the external stuff, you'll focus on the internal stuff." And we were hugely successful. Within 18 months, we grew the revenue by 20% profits, by 60%, picked up four margin points. We were doing well.

And the phone rang and I recognized the caller ID and it was Saatchi & Saatchi. And I'm like, "Gee, I wonder why they're calling?" I picked up the phone and they're like, "Hey, can you do over here what you're doing over there?" And I said, "Yeah. You know I worked there before, right?" And they said, "No. We did not know that. We are all new people here."

So the two people that weren't new were Kevin Roberts and Bill Cochrane. I said, "Listen, the global management knows me." So they were like, "Well, did you leave on good terms?" And I said, "Yeah. No, I always left with the "you'll always have a job here" kind of thing." She said, "Great. Well, then, we need a third leg of a stool here. We have a new CEO, we have a new chief creative," and they needed an operational partner.

So I left, I joined there in 2006, and we had a really good run at that time. That was right kind of when your company came into the fold at that time. We did really well and helped to bring a New York office back to some luster, moving beyond just a traditional CPG kind of Proctor, General Mills company, and got into retail with JCPenney at the time, and Wendy's and Miller. And so we diversified that out very nicely.

And then I got a visit from Kevin Roberts, and he said, "Hey, stick around, we got big plans for you in the financial arena." And I was like, "Oh, man, it's not really what I want to be. I just don't want to do that anymore." So I'm like, "I'm going to have to leave before they promote me into something..."

So, yeah. So the funny part was I was contacted by this company, it was a small, publicly-traded technology company, and they were looking for a CEO, and I tried saying no a few times. And finally, they just made me an offer I couldn't refuse and I became the CEO of a company called Single Touch, which later traded as SITO Mobile on the NASDAQ. And I remember leaving and Kevin Roberts saying, "Oh, you're going to work for a small, publicly-traded company." He said three things. He said, "One, lonely job." He said, "Two, hard job, because what gets to your desk nobody can figure out." He said, "And where is it trading?" I said, "Well, it's trading on the Bulletin Board. It's going to go up to the NASDAQ." He said, "Hmm, you'll be asked to compromise your morals and integrity on a daily basis."

Andy Murray: Oh, my gosh.



James Orsini: And it kind of sounded like a Hallmark card. I shook his hand, I left, and six months later, I remember going back to his office and saying, "Man, were those words deafening because that is kind of what we're living." So fast forward, had a three year contract, took three and a half years, and then wanted to get back into big advertising, and went back to Publicis and we're talking to them about a couple positions. North American Chief Operating Officer for Publicis the advertising company, not the holding company, and North American CEO for Prodigious, their back-office production to Digitas and Razorfish, and a lot of this stuff.

And then I met Gary, and life changed. I had known his brother AJ, I sat next to him at a Seton Hall University basketball game about a dozen years ago. That's how we met. And he's like, "Hey, James, you ever meet my brother Gary?" And I said, "No." He said, "Did you ever hear of my brother Gary?" I said, "Not really." He said, "Well, do a quick Google search, he's not going to be hard to find." And I did, and he wasn't, and we had a 15-minute meeting. And-

Andy Murray: That sounds like a long meeting.

James Orsini: For Gary, that is a long meeting, with a stranger. And then I got a call back from AJ, the younger brother and he said, "Listen, good news. He likes you and he wants to have dinner with you." So he said, "But he's pretty busy. So the dinner is going to be on that day, that time, you'll get the call," you know what I mean? Not really going to be pre-planning for this. And I did, and of course, it was a Tuesday night in the city at 9:00 PM, and I live in Jersey, so here we are making this work.

And he said, "Hey, James. I want to build a \$500 million integrated, international, independent, communications company. I want a Richard Edelman model. Can you help me do that?" And I said, "Yeah. I had breakfast with Richard Edelman yesterday." I said, "I know that model." And I said, "I think I can." He's like, "All right, well, don't do one of those other jobs. You already did that. Step out on a cloud and do this with me. "

Andy Murray: Love it.

James Orsini: And it'll be six years in January.

Andy Murray: Wow. And in all that time it's continued to blossom and grow. Hey, James, for people that might be listening, we have a lot of young people that are probably leaving college soon, graduating in May and are looking at the future, or might be just in their first or second assignment. What I've noticed about your story up until age 33 where you found the operational job, you had a habit of leaving perfectly good jobs that had a lot of promise and such, and one could be easily talked into staying, but



you had some sense of clarity around that wasn't right for you, but you didn't have a lot of clarity on what was right, you just were still searching till you found that operational thing.

Where did that clarity come from, is number one? And number two, what do you say to young professionals that might be feeling like they're in the wrong job, or it doesn't fit their long term career purpose? Because your route has not been something one would look back at this point and say, "Oh, look how that was perfectly planned."

James Orsini: This is true. I mean, 30 years ago, that was really even a more difficult route than it is today. Today, this story is a little more commonplace than it was back then. But you're right.

I worked for some great, great companies. I had wonderful experiences. People ask me all the time what was my favorite? And I'm like, "I can't pick one favorite. I did a lot of great things." I mean, come on, back in the day, I flew to Concorde eight times on somebody else's dime. I mean, seriously, how can you not enjoy that? I was on a pilot program at Goldman Sachs as a non-Ivy League, son of a plumber from Newark, who graduated from Seton Hall when they were hiring Wharton MBAs.

So I was always kind of punching above my weight a little bit, but confident that I knew what I was capable of. I was very coachable so people took the time to invest in me to teach me what it was that I didn't know, and I didn't know a lot. I still don't. But I found some good mentors along the way. I always say work for a person and not a company, so I worked for Gary Vaynerchuk. And I've worked for Gary Vaynerchuk in three or four different capacities so far. Whatever company he puts me in, that's a company I'm in that day, but I worked for him.

So, the guy I worked for at KPMG was the same guy who called me at Goldman Sachs and said, "Listen, we got something over here at Saatchi and maybe you should come." The gentleman that I worked for at Goldman Sachs, I later called to become a board member when I was at SITO Mobile. So, I'm in touch with every boss I've ever had which I think is quite the testimony.

I leave as a good employee in the same way I come in, do whatever I can to help the companies that are left in the wake. Try not to speak ill of people, but I was searching. I knew what I didn't want to be. Okay, so it goes, intern, first year, second year, senior supervisor, manager, partner. Okay, I don't really want to be a partner here, so I saw that track and knew that's not what I wanted to do.

I looked around on Wall Street, and I said, "Why is everybody bald in their 30s here?" And they said, "Well, because they've worked a lifetime by the time they were 30." I was like, "Yeah, this is not going to be for me." The money didn't mean that much, and I knew I had to get out before the money became a golden handcuff. So I only stayed a couple years.



Andy Murray: Well, it's so funny, sometimes clarity in what you shouldn't do is more important than clarity on what you know you want to do. And I think that's what a great story to illustrate that, that comes through loud and clear. And the other thing that I think is another mythbuster you just blocked through is that you can work in an environment of right-brain leaders and thinkers because most agencies are, and left brain-ish.

But you've exercised both sides of it and you aren't afraid to do that and you aren't afraid to live in that environment, which I think that says something about the way you appreciate creativity and value that. And a lot of times companies, that's one of the big things I'm seeing is very few companies appreciate and promote and develop right-brain thinking. And you've had the good fortune to do that.

James Orsini: I'm going to give you two examples where that came ringing loud and clear and were probably two of the best decisions I ever made in my life. So when I was coming back to Saatchi, and remember, I had worked under a public relations subsidiary, now I was going to go back to work for Saatchi Proper as it was called, the headquarters in New York. And they were like, "Hey, James, here's your big corner office on the 14th floor. Dining room table, throw some footballs in there." And I said, "Yeah, I'm not going to sit here." And they were like, "What do you mean?" And I said, "I'm going to take this small glass office next to the chief creative officer on the 18th floor." And they're like, "What? We don't have financier ops guys on the 18th floor."

Andy Murray: They're not allowed on the creative floor.

James Orsini: I said, "I know." I said, "But the problem is we are going to be made or broke by our creative product, and if I'm on the 14th floor, those decisions are going to be made and I'm going to be looking at a rear-view mirror. And if I'm on the 18th floor, I'm going to be looking at a dashboard and windshield." So the best decision I ever made.

Andy Murray: That's great. Ben's probably crawling over there because he's a producer, as our producer, he was a Y&R creative. And so would you have let James up on the floor?

Ben Ortlip: We would have had fun poking at him. But yeah, we would have let him.

James Orsini: Let me tell you, man, they absorbed it like a sponge, right? So-

Ben Ortlip: Absolutely.

James Orsini: What do I mean by that? I had creatives come to me, "Hey, James, we're being asked to do a brand book, is that in the scope of work, do you know?" And you know what I mean?



Andy Murray: Oh.

James Orsini: So they got educated really quick on the value of their time and our creativity, and not just giving it away. The second thing was when I actually asked to show up on a General Mills commercial shoot. And the producer who was running everything said, "James, I've been doing this for 25 years, man, I've never had a financier ops guys show up on a set." And I said, "Now, isn't that unusual? You know how much we're spending here, right?" The hundreds and thousands of dollars of money that have fallen through, and this guy's been doing it for 20 years, and not one, not one financier ops guy has ever, ever shown up on the set. And I made some great observations there.

It made our relationship with General Mills even stronger as a result of what I observed there. It made us more profitable based on what I observed there. So, it was all good.

Andy Murray: Well, this is a great point, because one of the core elements of a bigQUEST is in these [5 Big Questions](#).

One of them is: *Define the single most important measure*. And why would you do that? Well, you're going to have to present a business case sooner or later, and you need to know how you're going to measure that.

And I've always said — and this would be the first time I've had someone that has a proper finance background, in addition to strong operation and creative leadership — but I've said, "The best thing you can do is don't wait to get to finance last. Find your finance business partner right away and you'll be surprised if you invite them to co-create with you the business case, because what they're looking for is information and understanding."

Andy Murray: And so when I went to Asda, and we were trying to do some really different things with our media spend and budget, getting the finance guy in. And he learned everything about media, and he was a very fast study and learner and was passionate about it. And he then became my biggest advocate to the CFO of why this made sense when I couldn't use traditional ROI payouts within a six-week period, he had managed to show how that business case would work. And we wouldn't have got it funded if it wasn't for that partnership.

And so I encourage people, don't be afraid of finance. Build a partnership early and you might be surprised they're willing to co-create with you to help you make that business case work. And so can you validate that what I just said is right?

James Orsini: Absolutely, it's right. I mean, so few take the time to do it-



Andy Murray: They don't, do they?

James Orsini: But it always works. When I was at Interbrand, I wrote a white paper on mastering procurement. And it was at a time where procurement was getting a much louder voice in our industry, and most agencies were taking what I call the ostrich approach. "I'm going to bury my head in the sand and hope that this passes me by." And we were running at the procurement people at 100 miles an hour to bring them total transparency.

And I said, "Listen, your job is to prove to them that you are good stewards with their money, okay? I don't want to have another conversation with a Fortune 500" — and this is a true story - "where they called me and they said, 'James, you guys are fat, drunk and stupid with our money hanging out of your pockets and it needs to stop, okay?'" So imagine that's your meeting when you're summoned down there.

Andy Murray: Great.

James Orsini: And it was me and the CEO at the time. So, yeah, I mean, understanding the model. And the example I gave you before about the General Mills commercial set. So what was the key learning there and how do both sides win? That was a model of hours times rate, right?

So they pay you for the number of people and the hours and whatnot. Well, while on this particular set, and I'll never forget, it was for a Progresso Soup commercial. The creatives sketched out another idea right there sitting on the set of the one that we were doing. And the producer's like, "I know a SAG actor who can come over, we could shoot this thing right now. We're all set up, we're in a culinary kitchen in Jersey City, New Jersey." And I said, "Hold on one second, let me call General Mills." I said, "Listen, I know the way the contract works, okay? And based on the hours and whatnot, I'm going to make \$600, because these guys just came up with an idea on what you were already paying. So I don't really want to do that." "Well, James that's what the contract said." I said, "I know that's what the contract said."

I said, "I don't really want to have to rip down this whole set and tell my creatives to keep that idea in the drawer for two weeks and then come back and ramp up this whole machine again, and cost you another \$150K to \$200K." I said, "You understand what I'm saying, correct? Somewhere between \$600 and \$150,000 is what we should agree on right now and we'll take care of this for you."

Andy Murray: Yeah, brilliant.

James Orsini: And they were like, "That's fair and reasonable." And we did, we shot the two commercials on the same set, on the same day.



Andy Murray: So what do you call that what you just did? Because that's what I'm looking for in helping passionate leaders lead bigQUESTS. And maybe the word's audacity? I don't know what it is, but how do you describe that character trait you have? And how could you replicate that in someone else?

James Orsini: Common sense business ethics. It is common sense business ethics. Gary always says, "Doing the right thing is always the right thing," okay? That was the right thing. Okay, the right thing was to stop everything. Let me talk to them and reason with them. Okay, I don't need the \$150,000, but by the same token, they shouldn't steal this idea for \$600 because somebody had a great thought and sketched this out in two hours' worth of time.

So it was, I call it common sense business ethics where doing the right thing is always the right thing.

Andy Murray: Mm-hmm. Well, that's a great story. Hey, can I ask you? We run into a problem a lot, or the world runs into a problem a lot, as we, when you're looking at new big initiatives, blue ocean projects. How do you put together measures and how do you think about measurement? And I would think in your client base, especially with Sasha Group, where you've got aggressive mid-sized companies trying to grow, but yet the things they're doing are the first time they've done it, perhaps if it's new, new value propositions and such.

And so how do you help think through business case and helping your clients with the business case that they need to make in order to do it? Because you could do the ostrich thing and just say, "We're going to ignore the business case." But in today's world, it's so complex and uncertain. And I've said this before, and Ben's probably getting tired of this joke. The three-year financial planning was invented to make astrologists look credible. And yet, you have to have some sense of forward look in terms of "*What do we think this is going to actually do?*" But I'd love to hear how you harmonize those two ideas.

James Orsini: We're fortunate at the Sasha Group in that our three pillars are education, consulting, and digital marketing. And oftentimes, we provide a maitre d'-type service rather than a waitress. Most agencies go into waitress mode: "Oh, you need a 30-second commercial, I'm going to go cook that up, and I'll bring it back to you." The Sasha Group has the beauty to say, "You're asking for this, but I really think you need that." And oftentimes, it starts with the education. They don't know what they don't know.

So of course, you come in with the ask of what it is you know, and then I often say "Listen, let me educate you on what could be possible, okay? And then from there you will tell me what matters to you, what are your KPIs, what matters to you, and then we will craft a digital marketing plan that tailors that marketing effort, okay?"



If you have to drive foot traffic into a Subway store, you don't need me selling you a brand awareness campaign, right? And regardless of how successful it is. It wasn't about that, it was about driving foot traffic.

If it was about the ability to pivot as well, right? So not only do you want to drive foot traffic, but the price of cheese went up 10 cents this week, and therefore, you're not pushing cheeseburgers, you're pushing chicken. Okay, and can I pivot that fast to help you capture that marketing? We work very closely with them in that sort of consultative maitre d', if you will, type approach to their solutions.

Andy Murray: Well, that's smart, because you don't have to worry about not getting a certain type of work that your agency is optimized to deliver. And so I think when... I can't tell you how many briefs I got in the agency side, and probably sent out from a client's side, that if you were to really look at it and say, "Okay, I see what you put in there is your objective, but what's the problem you're trying to solve?" and it's not in there, then you really kind of get stuff that might be aimed at the objective.

But to your point of the question, of well, what is it you're trying to solve as a problem? And not worry yet what the answer might be, because your agency may not execute that answer. If you only do 30 second commercials, every problem is going to... you really don't want to know the problem, you just want to get to the objective because the problem may take you to where you actually don't need a 30 second commercial. Why would you want to bring that up?

James Orsini: Yeah, absolutely. And it works across so many different areas. My brother is a builder and was working on this particular home and he knew exactly who he was targeting that home for. So he had this little alcove, which was going to serve as an office spot, but gave it real thought, ran extra electrical outlets there realizing that you're going to have to power more stuff than normal. It's not just a lamp, you know what I mean?

Andy Murray: Yes.

James Orsini: And just gave it some real thought. And the home was meant for somebody who's now going to be in a permanent work-from-home environment. Okay, so that's who we're selling to. Could others use it? Yes. But to that particular niche audience, this home mattered. Do you know it wound up selling for \$20,000 more than what we put on the market for because he found that guy.

Andy Murray: He understood the problem.

James Orsini: Exactly. When that guy saw it, he's like, "That's me. My company has abandoned office, I'm going to be work-from-home forever." You know what I mean?



Andy Murray: Yeah.

James Orsini: "And I don't want to be in my dining room." I'm coming to you from my master bedroom because we have three people working from home now. And while I have two offices, I'm the guy that needs the least amount of equipment, and therefore I've been relegated to the small desk in the master bedroom.

But generally speaking, thinking out that problem and helping our clients understand what is possible, and that's why we take the time to educate too, makes them a better customer for me. You won't know how to properly value me if you don't know what these KPIs mean across the analytics of a Facebook or an Instagram or a Twitter or Pinterest or... You won't know enough to push back on me when I'm not performing up to it.

Andy Murray: That's right.

James Orsini: So let's take the time and spend a few bucks on education before spending the big money.

Andy Murray: Well, it's interesting. In the customer experience space, I just saw a piece of research that listed the big challenges and a lot of people are not getting return on the investment they made for customer journey, customer experience work still. But one of the top problems is creating the business case that will get priority from the executive committee to fund, because when you're trying to create a new customer experience, you might have many things in there that you have to unpick and if you try to do attribution on what's really driving value, it gets to be really tough to put the attribution in the right place. Or probably the same in digital marketing, multi-touch attribution and such as is not an easy thing if you haven't already gotten down the road on it. But so what do you do? Do you start looking at lifetime value? Do you have to reframe the way you look at measurement in order to help these companies get off the ground?

James Orsini: Okay, it was one of the most frustrating things that I experienced in the 10 to 12 years that I worked at Saatchi and Interbrand, and that was at Interbrand obviously, they would pay us enormous sums of money to create brands, right? And at Saatchi they would pay us an enormous sum of money to market and communicate those brands. At Interbrand, we had a product called the internal brand alignment.

So when you're doing Furniture Mart, the world's largest retailer, Warren Buffett's thing, the people on the floor have to sell differently in that kind of environment than they would in any other furniture retail. I mean, you had 6,000 square foot homes as models inside of this facility. Somebody should take the time to tell the people on the floor how to sell differently.

At Saatchi, we spun out Ameriprise from American Express, and nobody took the time to tell the licensed brokers what we were trying to do. We were going to tell the world why they should buy Ameriprise, but what about all these brokers that were selling that thing and still running local commercials with a guy running up a hill and putting this flag on a mountaintop?

And my biggest frustration was even when we talked about JCPenney coming to Saatchi at the time when I was there. Now they were spending \$500 million to create a middle marketplace, right? They felt the consumers were being either pushed downstream to a Walmart or upstream to a Bloomingdale's and didn't have their own place. So their purpose was going to be, "We are the place for middle-market America."

And I'll never forget this story told by the CMO who had seven children, his wife, I guess, one of her kids was making a communion, and she said, "This is a great father and son experience, you guys should go out and get him a communion suit." So he goes to a JCPenney, and obviously, they don't know him. And he and his son had this wonderful experience, and they buy the suit. And they walk it up to the cashier, and she rolls it into a ball and jams and into a paper bag and hands it to him.

Andy Murray: Hmm, nice.

James Orsini: And he's like, "Great, so I'm spending \$500 million to tell the world, 'You as middle-market america have a place and we care for you, and at the point of sale, it is coming to a crashing halt.'" Because nobody took the time to tell the... I don't want to call it the weakest link in the chain, but certainly a link in the chain, that you have to service differently now. We're going to spend a lot of money to tell the world that we're something different, you better bring in that same customer experience.

Andy Murray: Yeah. 100% in looking through that whole thing.

Leadership also is something that's really important to encourage people to take these big bold moves and be the kind of leader that you demonstrate. Who's inspired you? I don't want to say between Kevin and Gary, but I mean, what are some things you've learned about inspirational leadership that is important today in today's world of uncertainty and complexity?

James Orsini: I actually had a meeting with Gary, before this, I told him we were going to be on, and I asked him if it would be okay if I shared a story that he shared with me. He was a retailer by trade. He was working at his dad's Wine Library, a pretty large retail liquor store here in Summit, New Jersey. And at the time, he was the number one salesman on the floor, okay? As you would expect.



Andy Murray: As you'd expect.

James Orsini: But apparently what happened was the company gets a call from the son of a woman whose wine never showed up. Okay, it's five days before Christmas, it's a snowstorm. The case of wine didn't show up, the woman's in a panic, and Gary very publicly tells everybody, "Okay, listen, I'm going to put this case of wine in my trunk and I'm going to drive this thing to North Bergen to deliver this case of wine." And he said, "James, it was a cheap case of wine. It was like a Zinfandel or something." He actually said, "The whole case was probably \$45. We weren't making any money on it."

But the point was, he wanted to demonstrate as a leader that the customer comes first. It wasn't going to be about the money. It was about doing the right thing for the customer, not just, "Hey, this is our best customer, therefore drop everything," but rather, "You people, this is a customer and I'm willing to leave the floor five days before Christmas." You think there's some sales going on there?

Andy Murray: Oh, yeah.

James Orsini: To do with this... And he drove all the way there. Didn't get a tip, didn't get really thank you or anything. Didn't really do it for that, but did it-

Andy Murray: No.

James Orsini: Because doing the right thing was the right thing. So that's the-

Andy Murray: That's powerful.

James Orsini: Inspirational leadership kind of story. And he said that that story was told years after he left.

Andy Murray: Of course.

James Orsini: He was at a Wine Library now doing other things but they were still telling that story on the floor of the importance of customer service.

Andy Murray: Yeah. Well, the power of great stories too. We could go down a whole route of why you want to codify these in stories, because of the power of retelling and retelling and retelling.

My inspirational story with Kevin was interesting because you were at Saatchi at the time. But I waited till the check cleared the bank — Saatchi owned us from the sale — and I remember picking up the phone and calling Kevin and saying, "Hey, man, I haven't had a boss in 10 years and so I'm not really sure how this works today. But so what is it that you want me to do?"



And he said, I'll never forget it. He said, "Well, first of all, never call me boss again. I'm your big brother, you're my little brother and let's go change the world." And then he hung up, and it was like, that's all I needed to hear. And so that was a beautiful conversation to me, but it's one that's logged in my mind about how to be as a leader. No one else was listening, this was just a call, but it kept the burden on me to be a leader and not just say, "Okay, I'm now an employee."

James Orsini: Yeah. And I think, leaders typically breed good leaders if given the right time. Gary, on that same dinner interview, if you will, asked me to describe what I do in a single sentence.

Andy Murray: What? Oh, wow.

James Orsini: Yeah. And I said, "Yeah, I take dreams and visions, and I put them into action plans." And he's like, "Look, you're hired. I got a lot of dreams and visions."

Andy Murray: Oh, yeah. I bet a lot of people would like to know what's it like to work with Gary? I mean, I don't know how anybody could keep up the energy and the excitement. But yet, if you look at it, and I've talked to a couple of other leaders, they're an organization. They're all really high caliber people. And so there must be something they're going right?

James Orsini: Yeah. I mean, look, I think the beauty of working for Gary is that Gary doesn't expect you to be Gary. You know what I mean, he's not looking for mini-mes.

Andy Murray: Fair enough.

James Orsini: He's looking for, "Tell me what it is that you do well and how I can help you do that really well in my hallways? And how can I be an enabler for you?"

Andy Murray: Brilliant.

James Orsini: When people ask me, "Are you an entrepreneur?" And I say, "No, I'm an entrepreneur enabler." You know what I mean?

Andy Murray: Yeah.

James Orsini: I just kind of help entrepreneurs find their way. And he is an entrepreneur. He really looks to find the best that he can in people. And look, I've served a lot of different roles. I mean, I started out as the chief integration officer. Partly because his brother was chief operating officer at the time and he said he wanted to give me a title that was amorphous enough to have me play in whatever area he



needed. I thought it was brilliant to hire somebody like me at the time that he did six years ago was a big investment. There was only one like me, really, in the hallway.

I mean, he had general counseling, he had a finance director at the time, but he's now built a half dozen leaders around the table, a lot of chiefs now. So I became the chief operating officer when his brother very publicly stepped down due to an illness, he had Crohn's disease, so he kind of stepped out of the business. And after my being there for 15 months, I became his chief operating officer.

I like to think that I had a hand in helping with his global expansion. Did his first acquisition, built out his studio. Later was asked to run the studio for six months. That's another interesting thing, right? So, "Hey, James, I need you to run the studio." I said, "Gee, Gary, I never ran a studio." He goes, "No, no, no, that's all right. It's a business and you've run businesses before. It's broke, go fix it." So just a lot of faith and trust to get things done.

Andy Murray: I don't think people realize how big the whole operation is, it's more than... Because you would almost think in your mind, a guy that can put that much content out, can't be also running a company.

James Orsini: Very actively running the company. He's an operator, you know what I mean?

Andy Murray: Yes.

James Orsini: He's an operator, which most CEOs that I have worked for were not an operator, and therefore really had to rely on me, almost blindly. He does not have to do that. He is an operator, first and foremost. So mine was more scaling him in operations when I was doing that. And then we came back full circle, and he said, "Hey, you ready to start something new?" And I said, "Well, what do you have in mind?" He said, "Well, I'm on the cover of Entrepreneur Magazine, I got 10 million followers, and we built a company to service Fortune 500. I don't have a company to service these small and upcoming businesses." He said, "I think we should start a new company. I want to name it after my father for legacy purposes. So don't screw it up."

Andy Murray: No pressure.

James Orsini: "What do you need to run it?" So, we're now two years into it. I'm up to 65 people. We'll do probably a good -

Andy Murray: Good for you.

James Orsini: \$13 million this year, very profitably. Likely \$16 million next year. So off we went.



Andy Murray: That's the fun stuff. I mean, you're doing the stuff that I could call it a Quest, but it's something that you can bracket, you're taking an A to a B, and you get a lot of people there, and everybody that probably is on your team are going to remember these moments because you're doing something important, big, meaningful, and it's an all-in type of thing.

James Orsini: Yeah, I actually just shared a piece on Medium today, and it was a reflection of Sasha's 2020: A dream without a plan is nothing more than a wish.

Andy Murray: True.

James Orsini: And I take the audience through the plan that we had set out in late 2019. So you're talking November of 2019 when Gary and I met. And we use an Eisenhower Matrix within important and urgent boxes, and basically said, "These are the 25 things we're going to work on to have a successful 2020 as the Sasha Group." And I'm pleased to say, and the article goes on to say how we hit on all, every dot that was in that box has been addressed in 2020.

Andy Murray: Okay, well, this comes so naturally for you, because you're living in these environments that have always generated creativity and press always went into new spaces. I don't know if I've lost count of how many blue ocean projects you've just listed in the time we've had together.

But believe it or not, James, there's a lot of people that are in organizations that are just optimizing the current operation to eke out a little bit more cost savings or do something incremental. And why is that? I mean, because it might be blind to you because you've never... Maybe you have, but that's not your world every day. And if they could understand better that blue ocean work is very accessible to everybody that you just got to have a mindset and a method to go after it. But if they've not experienced, they can really get stuck in the routine.

James Orsini: So I like to say it's an and-and, and not an and/or, okay? I don't know if visually your audience will see this, but I often ask people, "Do you know what this is?" (*Rubbing together his thumb and pointer finger.*) And they say, "No." And I say, "That is the difference between static and beautiful classical music. Sometimes it's just a little dial turn. You don't have to smash the radio with a hammer, okay?" So there are a lot of things in the hallways that just need a little dial-up. And that'll bring the efficiency which then will allow you the liberty to do the blue ocean projects, because some of which, they come as investment, you know what I mean?

Andy Murray: Right.



James Orsini: And it is I can tell you this, it is 10 times easier to do those from a position of strength, okay?

Andy Murray: Yes.

James Orsini: From a profitability standpoint. When I go to Gary now with a healthy, profitable, growing company and I say, "Hey, this is the next thing we want to do." It's a little easier for him to say yes, you know what I mean?

Andy Murray: Of course.

James Orsini: Now, he's different than most because he doesn't need profitability to... He's going to do 10 things, and if two of them bring big profits then...

He once said to me, "James, you've made a great career out of hitting singles and doubles, and I swing for the fence every time. And I hit a Grand Slam one time, and then I get hit in the head with the pitch the next time, and it doesn't bother me." Okay, so, but that's the yin and yang, right? That's what I said when he said he doesn't expect everybody to be like him.

So I'm a big proponent of both, bringing efficiency modeling to what it is that's currently there, and then tackling the blue ocean. Let me tell you how the studio came about. We were talking about this studio. And what I'm going to describe to you now is a 40,000 square foot studio that exists in Long Island City but it was a simple rap, it was, "Hey, James. The fastest-growing segment of advertising is video on social media platforms. Shouldn't I be doing the videos? Why are they going to BBD and Owen Edelman? I understand how the consumers consume the content there." And I said, "Yeah, you should Gary." He's like, "Great. Build me some studios." Now, that was, what 90 seconds?

Andy Murray: Yeah.

James Orsini: Okay. When I was at Saatchi and wanted to bring animation studios to New York, and they were like, "Well, why are we going to do animation?" I said, because you do Cheerios, and when it comes to the Honey Nut bee they go outside for somebody else. We should be doing that," okay? We eventually did do it. But it did take me nine months, nine months to get that built inside of the hallways of Saatchi. We were very successful in the first year. It was 8 million in fee in the first year. But I'm talking 90 seconds with this guy versus nine months.

And then when I said, "Okay, Gary, great. Don't let me do it like I did at Saatchi." And he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well at Saatchi, we had producers and creators and then we would ship it off to a production company, RadicalMedia, nice shoes. I think I could build you the whole production



company." I said, "Then we should be able to move faster, more efficiently." And he's like, "Great, because someday I want to be a competitor to Hulu and Netflix, do my own over the top content. Go." And we did.

Andy Murray: Nice. You are in a rare space, rare oxygen, James. That is rare oxygen.

James Orsini: Absolutely.

Andy Murray: And so the best I can say is, the more you could help us and others replicate that and learn from it, that, that is definitely a high bar because...

It takes an ecosystem of thinking and doing. I'm sure the whole leadership team works really closely together and there's a yin and yang, I love that, so that not everybody is that way...

One question I had for you. You work now a lot with a different client base than the Fortune 500. And are there any common attributes you see about your client base at Sasha Group, which I assume has quite a few founders still in the game? How do they operate and run versus what you might find in the Fortune 500?

James Orsini: So this is why we talked about education being so much more important for this group. We do work with founders and entrepreneurs. This is not a brand manager with a budget. This is a guy who, when I ask him for \$50,000, that's the same \$50 grand he was going to send his kid to school with. And I got to convince him that, "Don't worry, at the end of this, you're going to have \$150K, the kid will go to school and you'll still be able to get the boat." So we work really hard to gain their trust, which is why we skew very senior. It's a company of 65 people and I have eight or 10 VP levels or above, which in relation to the number of people is quite high as you can imagine. But that's consulting by nature, right?

My client base is not a Colgate MBA kind of client base, but rather they want to see somebody with a little snow on top and realize that they've been there and done that, right?

So when I joined VaynerMedia and at its peak 1,000 plus millennials, I didn't really know anything about social media, per se. But I did know that I had wisdom and experience, and 800 of them didn't. So they were smarter than me in everything that they did, but there is no substitute for wisdom and experience and I had both.

Andy Murray: Well, God bless you for creating a space for the guys that have snow on top, because I've heard some in the advertising industry say under 35 is where it's at as you may know. I won't name names but-



James Orsini: Yeah, well, look, I can tell you this: I dispelled a lot of notions about millennials having worked with them. I found them not to be self-centered, I found them to be super bright, super collaborative, very inquisitive. You know what I mean? I'm proud of the work that they do. I'm glad I have as many as I do in my company here as the Sasha Group. And I'm mixing it up, right? That was part of the agreement with Gary, "Look, let me take the cream of what I saw at KPMG and Goldman Sachs and Interbrand and Saatchi and even Vayner, for that matter, and we could do something special here."

So we have an eclectic mix of type of people that we hire. Different backgrounds. I have people with MBAs in education, I have people with PhDs in psychology, not just everybody's a marketer, you know what I mean? I got a lot of analytics folks on the media team from the measurement standpoint. So I got some that are International Studies. It's not just typical marketers.

Andy Murray: Well, you bring up an interesting point, because the path to top-level advertising was either: you're going to go to Miami Ad School if you're in the agency business in this kind of path, or if you're in the client side, a brand manager, marketing or Kellogg or whatever, you're going to stair-step, ABM, BM.

Today's world... I'd love to hear your perspective on if you were advising, again, people early in their careers of the kinds of experiences they would probably want to go get that would make them high-quality caliber candidates to be at your level. What kind of paths or experiences would you encourage them to think about they may not have thought about?

James Orsini: Yeah, so I like to use something that I call an SSP matrix, which is strength, skills and passions, okay? So do an honest evaluation of yourself, evaluating your strengths, your skills and your passions. Pass it along to somebody who knows you to call bullshit if they have to on some of the things that you're talking about. And then determine where those three align with servicing something right. So I'll give you an example of one girl who I met with a while back, and she was an African American Studies major in San Diego. Her dad came to me and said, "James, she's lost, she's washing hair in a salon right now, you gotta help her."

So we went through this, and we talked about how when she worked at a caterer her favorite part was engaging with the people and that she had a passion for art and photography. She was really strong in sort of front facing services, she loves to travel. So we landed on hospitality as a place for her. And then she goes to, now she's looking into wine ads, and she finds that they're looking for a receptionist at the Ritz-Carlton in Central Park.

So she goes there and of course, she's got no experience and they say that to her. And they're like — it's like just telling them you wanted to play baseball and you're here at the Yankees — "Get some



experience first and then swing back.” And she did and she found a small boutique hotel out in the Hamptons, which she did for a summer, a 12-room hotel, and part of her pay was to give her a room.

She circles back in the fall and the guy says, "Well, I have good news and I have bad news. The bad news is the position here in Central Park is not open. The good news is there's a open position at the Marriott in Dublin, Ireland." And she took it and left, you know what I mean?

Andy Murray: Wow.

James Orsini: Now obviously, that wasn't what the father had intended, right?

Andy Murray: He's going to shoot you now for-

James Orsini: But did want the kid happy and anchored.

Andy Murray: Yeah. Yeah.

James Orsini: And this was years ago, and she's since gone on to do other things but-

Andy Murray: That's a great point, though.

James Orsini: But it's a way of aligning. She was lost. She was washing hair in a salon with an African American majors background study. What do you do with this? Okay, it was really the SSP matrix that helped guide and direct her.

Andy Murray: Yeah, I don't know what your experience has been, but mine has been that what I'm doing right now, I can look back through a variety of different experiences and say nothing was wasted, even though in the moment I wasn't quite sure. But even back to P&G or to EDS before that, has that been your experience? So did you ever wake up and say, "Well, I wasted five years in this job over here?"

James Orsini: No. I remember writing an article about how my internship changed my life and I weaved together all my experience and how each one led to where I was today. And you were able to see now nobody could predict it at that point in time, okay? But, so KPMG, all of a sudden, brings me the guy who then brings me to Saatchi, and KPMG then brings me my wife, who I'm now married to who I met there, my son who now works for KPMG multiple years later, because I called the guy who interned for me, who became a partner. And he said, "You always treated me right as an intern. What do you need?"

Those kind of stories where you can really see how it all comes together. But you have to purpose for it to be not "I failed here."



Look, I'm glad I did what I did as a CEO of a publicly traded company, I know what I don't want to be when I grow up. I don't want to be the CEO of a publicly traded company. I am a rare few who could say that I have done it. I mean, I can be in rooms of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and I say, "How many in here has been a CEO of a publicly traded company?" There's crickets. So it has helped me relate to Gary better, because I know how lonely the CEO role is, you've played it. So, there's times early on when I was just texting him saying, "Listen, well done. I know how hard that decision was."

Andy Murray: That's a rare thing. You don't get a lot of those.

James Orsini: No way. But those were all building blocks into making you who and what you are. Who knows, maybe I would have been a hugely successful number one if I had a number two like maybe behind me. I didn't. You know what I mean? I had a number two who was trying to shoot me.

Andy Murray: Yeah. Yes. Well, I think Richard Hytner wrote a whole book called *Being The Consiglieri*.

James Orsini: Absolutely. And it was reading that book, *Ruling from the Shadows...*

Andy Murray: That's right.

James Orsini: *Consiglieri: Ruling from the Shadows*. It was me reading that book that said, "This is who I am. I am a great number two, I don't need to be a number one, okay? I don't need to be onstage. I don't need a target on my back." And that led me to Gary's world again.

Andy Murray: Yeah. And that's what Richard was for Kevin. And I mean, I think it's such an important building the team and I love how you take care of your network, take care of the people in your network, take care of the people you meet.

You've been very generous today, James, with your time with me. I really appreciate it. Great stories. Anything else you want to say? Because I've been really enjoying this conversation, but I know we need to wrap it up.

James Orsini: This is all about customer centric and customer service. It's so very important. Whether you're reading *The Thank You Economy* that Gary wrote, or *Setting the Table*, from Danny Meyer, or *The Nordstrom Way* or even a book like *Starbucks Changed My Life*, if you haven't read that one. That's even good for Ben about a Y&R creative who found his fulfillment in being a barista, and putting a smile on somebody's face with every cup that he handed over. So, customer service is super important. And if I leave with anything, it's doing the right thing is always the right thing.

Andy Murray: Is always the right thing. Well said. Well, thank you very much, James. Good luck to you with the Sasha Group. I hope you guys have a great end-of-year pull out so that all your dreams continue to come true. It's been quite a treat. Thank you.

James Orsini: Thank you. Thanks for taking the time to have me on the show.

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