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Madeline Veenstra - Text Transcript

Madeline Veenstra Explains How She Achieved Early Startup Success Combining Fashion With A Wiki

with **Yaro**

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YARO: Hello, this is Yaro Starak and welcome to another interview with an entrepreneur. Today, I've got Madeline Veenstra on the line with me. If you've never heard of Madeline, she's actually the founder of [WikiFashion](#) which we're going to learn a bit about in this interview and Madeline is actually, well, I should check, Madeline, are you born and raised in Brisbane like me?

MADELINE: Yes, I am.

YARO: Awesome. You sound more like a person from Brisbane than I do so, you're more authentic. Where did you begin this process? Did you go to University of Queensland like I did?

MADELINE: I did. I went to UQ and I started there in about 2004 and I didn't do anything to do with fashion. Obviously, UQ doesn't have any fashion courses but, I did Japanese and Economics.

And so, I became an economist when I graduated and I kind of just started WikiFashion on this side. It was more of a hobby to sort of, funnel my creativity into something and it just sort of started to take off.

It was a lot rewarding than being an economist because at that time, I was being trying to become an econometrician, so very hard core data, sit on Excel all day long kind of stuff. Not very thrilling.

YARO: Yes, I remember doing just the basics. I did a business management degree at UQ. The Economics subjects just... Yes, I could not imagine doing that for a full time living. I think I'd go crazy.

MADELINE: Oh yes. I told them that in my interview. I said I don't like Maths and they thought I was joking and then, they gave me the Statistics job.

YARO: Oh! [Laughs]

MADELINE: Yes.

YARO: Maybe you should practice your serious version and the joke version. So, is there any history of entrepreneurship in your background? Did you have the lemonade stand as a ten-year-old or anything like that?

MADELINE: Actually, I think I did. I had a car wash / lemonade stand when I was about 13. I put all these signs on our front driveway saying "Free Car Wash and Lemonade Stands."

My dad got very angry and took down all the signs. But yes, other than that, I haven't really done too much. I think WikiFashion kind of just came about, not an accident but, it was, like I said, more of a hobby. It wasn't something I thought I could make any money from. It was just something that I think a lot of people noticed was missing as well and they came on board. And so, it kind of grew from that.

YARO: You must be reasonably exposed to, I guess, two things – fashion and technology. Have always been interested in those areas?

MADELINE: Yes. Well, with fashion, I worked at Country Road and I was also in retail all throughout University to pay my rent and things like that. And so, I was always interested in fashion and my boyfriend, who is also my co-founder, he is a programmer. So yes, I think he helps me with the Wiki and is doing the technical side of it and got it started from there and then, I learned Wiki syntax and sort of took over.

YARO: Interesting. I didn't realize your business partner was also your boyfriend.

MADELINE: Yes, he's actually my fiancé now.

YARO: Okay there you go. Congratulations!

MADELINE: Yes, thank you!

YARO: That sounds like one of those “never work with family” sort of moment. How is it going working with a partner?

MADELINE: It's really good. He has a lot of projects, a lot of things that he's working on as well. So, it's not really a full-time thing to him. It's full time to me and he just helps out when there are technical issues and things like that.

So, at the moment, we're building out the community aspect more, a forum, and ways that our members can talk to each other and things like that. I don't think anything that we do mix too much. He doesn't really talk to the designers and I don't know, we get over fashion blogs, and talk to the bloggers and things like that. So yes.

YARO: I presume fashion probably pours into tears especially wounds about fashion.

MADELINE: Yes, it does.

YARO: Happy with the code. Okay, well maybe you can take me back in time a little bit, Madeline. So, maybe in how you two met is probably a great place to start since the partnership and you have the good combination of a creative person and a technical person there working together.

MADELINE: Yes.

YARO: So, did you meet in the University?

MADELINE: We did. We met in first year and we first studied, I think it was Introduction to Macroeconomics. I had to do it and he did it for fun. So, that says a lot about him. That's how we met. At the time, he was, I think he'd always work for himself and was doing a project with a training company in Brisbane. That's how we met in the University.

YARO: Okay. Now, you met as most people normally do, just as friends. I can imagine that when the talk about having a business came into it. Is that

something that just casually was in discussion or was he into business before this?

MADELINe: Yes. He's ran his own business since he was about 16. So, for him, it was a lot more, I guess, natural but, we didn't really start WikiFashion off to do business. He, I don't know, it was, like I said, it was more of a side hobby and he helped me with the code. And then, later on, we turned it into a business and he is my co-founder. So, it wasn't something that we started off thinking, "Okay, we can make heaps of money out of this and start a business together."

YARO: So, was it just like you're into fashion and maybe, why not do a blog or why not just read forums and contribute. Why do Wiki? Where did that...?

MADELINe: Well, I think, I guess, I'm a bit of a geek too, and obviously, studying economics and being an economist, I did like the theoretical side of economics or anything like that. I really saw with Wikipedia, I don't know if you've ever looked for fashion on that but, it's really lacking and so, I think, and a lot of blogs and big fashion media sites are very top down. There wasn't anywhere for people to contribute and make their own space.

There's some sort of Fashion style communities like [LookBook](#) and [Chictopia](#) and things like that but, nothing that's, I wouldn't say media but, like an actual central fashion resource. So, that's why we decided to make that.

YARO: Okay so, before I'd like to hear about how you two set it up together, but maybe for the people who are listening to this who don't actually understand what WikiFashion is, I probably should have asked you this in the beginning, what is it?

MADELINe: WikiFashion is a central resource for fashion. And, it works in a similar way to Wikipedia. So, anyone can sign up and contribute in the Wiki Syntax. That's basically what it is. It's a Wiki for fashion. It's an editable site for fashion, yes.

YARO: And, you can eat it, too.

MADELINE: Yes, edible. Please don't eat... [laughs]

YARO: [Laughs] Okay so, I'm well-versed with starting forum communities and obviously blogs. I've never done a Wiki but, I can imagine, there's the same challenges with getting traction of getting people to actually contribute.

So, can you take us back? I'm assuming you said it was more like a hobby and your boyfriend must have set up the Wiki software and then, you started adding clothes into it. Was that pretty much how it began?

MADELINE: Yes, well I'm a member of a forum called the [Vogue Forums](#) in Australia. They had about, I think they have about 200,000 members now. But, back then, they used to have this thing where they would add or create Flickr albums for the clothing that they had purchased. It was just a really big mess.

And so, that was one of the things I did. Our very first user actually that we sent it to, she used it for Alannah Hill or all of the items that people purchase from Alannah Hill, she'd organized into WiKi Fashion albums and she's used it, I think, every single day since then. So, it's almost three years. And, it kind of just grew from there.

I guess, people sort of had a need for it. Yes, I found a lot of people off forums and then, also a lot of fashion bloggers, we have about, our last count was about 600 of them that have "I Love Wiki Fashion" badges so, they'll come on and they will add information about their blogs and then, stick around and add information about their favorite designers and fashion history and things like that.

YARO: Why are they willing to do this? Just because they love fashion?

MADELINE: I don't know [laughs]. They are very obsessive about it. Some of our users are I think... well, like I said, the bloggers, they can add information about themselves and I think... I don't know... The same reason why people on Wikipedia like to add information about things. It gives them some value. They don't earn money from it but, I don't know, they are contributing in a way and I think that's what they enjoy and they're part of a community and

they're our first members I think, they really like how it's grown and they sort of help spread the word.

YARO: I can imagine if you do feel like you're an authority on a certain label or a certain style or just in fashion in general, you almost feel obligated to have the right information in a Wiki. If it's the main one, you just want to be the... and the same with Wikipedia, I presume you wouldn't go and read like being the history of Albert Einstein and you see something wrong, you're probably like, "Oh, I got to change that." And, having the ability to do that must be empowering which is probably why Wikis have worked so well.

But, I have to admit, usually, there's a bit of a tipping point with where you get enough users that isn't, you know, when someone first comes to Wiki Fashion, there has to be something there in the first place for them to see.

MADELINe: Well, a lot of our users come because they find our pages through search, through Google so then, they'll come and they'll see spelling mistakes or a collection missing, things like that and also through blogger badges as well.

YARO: Oh, that blogger badges that is a great idea because it brings people back to your site.

MADELINe: Yes.

YARO: So, is it safe to say that most of your growth has been organic in word of mouth and search engines?

MADELINe: Yes, definitely, word of mouth. And also, obviously, there's a lot of I guess, seeding of the Wiki by name. At the start, I did a lot of pages and that really helped the organic growth like through search and things like that but, I think it was mostly bloggers telling other bloggers about it and also people from fashion forums.

YARO: Okay, when you say "seeding," you're just creating pages in the Wiki.

MADELINe: Yes.

YARO: And, this is all because you know about fashion so, it's just some text, some pictures, and away you go.

MADELINE: Yes, exactly. So, use I'll information from all over the place. Library book, a video I've seen, or something from the Internet and sort of just compile it all together.

YARO: Okay. So, how many years now has this been going forth?

MADELINE: We started it back in 2008 and that was before it was officially launched and we launched it in about July 2009.

YARO: When did the... You talk about like a hobby, when did you decide that it could be a business?

MADELINE: When did I quit my job? I'm trying to remember... Probably about 2010. So, it's about 6 months before I realized that it was getting quite popular.

YARO: Right, so can you give us, like when you say, "quite popular," I mean, for you to quit your job, you obviously had to see the potential for you to at least make a living from it, right?

MADELINE: Yes, of course.

YARO: So, what gave you the confidence that you can have a shot at doing that?

MADELINE: I think just the fact that we got so many people at the start using it and quite frequently. And, like I said, our very first contributor, she's still using it to this day. It's not huge numbers compared to big fashion sites. We have like 30 staff members. I think I could see a lot of potential in it, and I didn't really... It was at a stage where I had to let it go or do it full time so, I decided to do that full time because I really didn't want to be an economist anymore.

YARO: [Laughs] Yes, I was going to say it's an easy choice.

MADELINE: Yes.

YARO: But, despite that, it still got to be a little bit scary jumping ship. I've done a lot of interviews of a lot of entrepreneurs and that moment where you go, "You know what? I love this business. I'm not sure if I can make enough money though. I don't know if I can risk not having a salary anymore."

Were you afraid of that sort of situation, in a situation in your personal life where you're living with your parents or something like that? Or, it hasn't been too much of a stressful point?

MADELINE: No. I haven't lived with my parents since I was about seventeen. So, I always had to support myself. I guess, it was pretty scary but, not as scary as being completely bored for the rest of my life so, I figured it was a pretty easy choice.

And, I was pretty young so, if everything went bad, I could go get another job. So, it's not too bad.

YARO: So, how does a site like Wiki Fashion actually make money?

MADELINE: At the moment, we make money through advertising revenue and then, also sponsored content. So, like on our blog, and also with events and things like that.

YARO: I came across you, I can't remember exactly when or what specifically but, I do remember you getting quite a bit of press coverage in particular like Brisbane Times, like I've seen you in a column or something there and you have events as well, or events brought to you by Wiki Fashion?

So, you seem quite involved in the community here. This gives me the feel of like a startup company that you're trying to hopefully grow big at some point so, you're not really bootstrapping are you? You kind of want to get fun being... hire a lot of people, increase the size of the website, that sort of thing?

MADELINE: Yes. I mean, probably not hire a lot of people but, we are looking to raise funds in terms of being able to take Wiki Fashion to the next level.

So, at the moment, we only have the one developer which is Colin and we definitely need some more in terms of fixing up the usability of it because it's a little bit difficult for some of our contributors who are not as tech savvy to navigate. So, those are some things that we are looking to do when we raise some funds.

Yes, but I wouldn't say that we want to hire heaps of people and be a huge company but, yes, we do want to hire some more people to make it a lot more usable, user-friendly.

YARO: So, you don't want to but, are you able to, as you two in the partnership, can you live off Wiki Fashion at the moment or do you still need to grow it a bit more?

MADELINE: We do need to grow it a little bit more. At the moment, it can sustain myself but, not my co-founder.

YARO: That's still... As a worst case scenario, you can sit there on Wiki and make a living which is...

MADELINE: Yes, exactly and that's what we started out. At the beginning we didn't ever think, "Oh, let's start a Wiki and make heaps of money." It wasn't... The best case scenario was to be able to sustain my living. I think that's good.

And, also in the near future, we are looking to relocate to New York because a lot of designers that we work with are in New York and a lot of our users are there, and we had quite a few people that are quite confused that we are based in Brisbane because they just assumed we were based in New York so, a few things have not fallen through but, I guess, it's a little bit harder to network with people and build partnerships with people when they're all in New York so...

YARO: Yes. Brisbane is probably not the biggest hub of fashion in terms of...

MADELINE: No, it's not. Or, tech really.

YARO: No. I think you can get away with tech without being in a certain country necessarily where fashion, you probably need to be attending fashion

events and connecting with people. It's a fairly close-knit community, I presume, the fashion world.

MADELINe: Yes.

YARO: What is Fashion Week in New York, Fashion Week in Milan, and that's what happens, right? Just travels around the world and so on which can be amazing. It's a shame you'll lose these Brisbane people going overseas but, that's the way it is.

MADELINe: Yes, I know.

YARO: I am curious in terms of like, you're planning on growing the business and moving to New York, do you think... because I know you talked briefly about getting funding, for people who are in Australia because I'm going to this myself right now, that it's something you should consider is moving over to America maybe, San Francisco if you're doing this startup. Is that your experience because you probably should get into a lot of startup companies?

MADELINe: Yes. We went earlier to San Francisco back in September to talk to some people about this and our section was, "Why aren't you in New York?" because we're not really a tech company. We're, at the heart of it, we're more fashion and media. So, that's why we've decided that we'd like to move to New York.

But, I think definitely for people wanting to do startups that are more tech, San Francisco is definitely the place to be. There's such a huge network of even Aussies over there which is amazing.

YARO: Yes.

MADELINe: So many Brisbane people, as well.

YARO: That's pretty amazing to hear. It's not a big place.

MADELINe: Yes.

YARO: Okay, now in terms of the entrepreneur lifestyle Madeleine, can you maybe give us an input on how you live your life at the moment? What's it like to be an entrepreneur running a Wiki, about fashion in particular. It might be a little bit different to one about blogging, for example, what I write about. I'm not attending fashion events [laughs].

MADELINE: Well, I think it's probably not as glamorous as it sounds. I spend most of my day from my home office working, talking to designers in New York, and also I like to look for emerging designers as well so, in Australia and overseas.

So, yes, a lot of my day is talking to our contributors and helping them out, and then, also finding designers and then, talking to journalists for press and things like that.

And then, I guess, because there's not too many events in Brisbane, I don't really go to fashion shows and things like that. So, that's why, we started the Brisbane Fashion Meetup Group so, I have that once a month. So, other than that, I'm basically chained to my computer.

YARO: Okay so, it...

MADELINE: Probably not too different to a site about blogging.

YARO: No. I like to go to cafes just to mix it up. I'm sure you do as well.

MADELINE: Yes. I could never find free Wi-fi.

YARO: That's a challenge in Brisbane. It is.

MADELINE: Yes.

YARO: I could point you to...

MADELINE: Even Starbucks charges.

YARO: I can point you to a few in the West end where I live if you're ever curious but, you mentioned press there. Were you referring to press for Wiki Fashion or just the labels that you're covering?

MADELINe: Labels, I talk to their press, their PR girls. They'll contact me and want to do, say for like sponsorships and advertising, and things like that. We work with them in making sure that their collection pages are correct and things like that, if they wanted to edit anything because I usually sort of help them get started on it.

YARO: What have you found has been the most difficult thing with this whole process of being an entrepreneur online in the Fashion industry?

MADELINe: I think probably the most difficult aspect is, just --

YARO: You two love it all?

MADELINe: [Laughs] No. It's difficult to get ahead because there are so many fashion websites. I don't think that we're even close to the top in terms of fashion sites. There are so many awesome ones but, I think it's really hard to keep fighting away on something when you feel like no one's really noticing it so, that's something that has been difficult in the past. But, I think it's getting a lot easier now because we are starting to be recognized in the fashion industry.

YARO: I can imagine the potential to cover everything given a Wiki. Wikipedia has attempted to cover everything which is pretty amazing and they've done a good job at it. You can almost type anything there and get some form of information about it. So, you obviously feel the same pressure to have every single fashion label ever in existence covered.

MADELINe: Yes. They can get very overwhelming especially when I decide to make a random page. I don't know what to pick because there are so many things to choose from.

YARO: Right. So, the hope is that you're going to continue to attract more and more contributors.

MADELINE: Exactly. So, that's sort of where I spend my time. I can't do the whole thing myself so, yes.

YARO: Okay, well, it would be exciting to see where it goes. On that note, where would you, I hate to put a time stamp on things but, in the near future, where would you like to see Wiki Fashion go?

MADELINE: In the near future, I'd love to be able to relocate our team to New York, we'd like to hire someone that's very familiar with Media Wiki so, we can make it a lot more user-friendly.

Yes, so make it more user-friendly, build up the community. So, the forum, make sure our users are able to communicate with each other easily and also just, well, also, we're also going to be creating, or changing the Wiki so that, people can edit it like Wiki have so, with forums, it would be a lot easier for brands to be able to launch their collections. That's something we want to do.

We want to be a resource for brands to launch their collections each season. That's something in the very near future that we're going to be launching.

YARO: Okay, awesome clearly, in these things to do. Wrap it up with one last question, Madeline. I really like to get input for the people listening to this and not just to stereotype it all but, certainly the girls, women who are listening to this who are interested in entrepreneurship because I don't feature a lot of women entrepreneurs on my podcast simply because there aren't as many so, when there's an opportunity for another woman to be on a call and talk about her experiences, I'd love to hear your feedback if you can imagine, they're sitting here, listening to you talk right now and they're sort of... especially, "Should I quit my job to go start a business?" Maybe the most important tip you would give them, especially because I'm expecting tech is a challenge.

I know you can say, "Go and get a tech or any techy boyfriend." [Laughs]

MADELINE: [Laughs] That's not a good answer. No. I definitely say to get out in the community. There are so many people, even though, I don't put Brisbane down but, I love Brisbane, there are so many intelligent people here

and I think go out and talk to as many people as you can and tell them your idea and most people are really willing to help and give you feedback and tell you what you might do or point you in the direction of a technical person or other business partners, or things like that. I think it's really important to go and talk to people.

So, if you're looking for a tech person go to the Brisbane Development Meetup and things like that. There's a whole heap. You can find them on meet up but, yes. That's probably my number one tip.

YARO: And of course, for our listeners who is not from Brisbane which is actually--

MADELINE: Yes, not from Brisbane. Sorry.

YARO: Some of my audience are not from Brisbane so, certainly [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) is a great site for meet ups. It is amazing.

I've been to quite a few meet up events full of tech people, I've always wondered though whether, I'm assuming you can't just go up and say, "Hey, would you like to be my partner...?"

MADELINE: Oh, I wouldn't do that.

YARO: How would you figure out who is a good person to work with because a partners is a big deal?

MADELINE: Yes. I think spend a lot of time in the community before you do something like that maybe even try to teach yourself how to program. I know that sounds difficult but, I'm starting to do that myself. I think, if the more you understand it, the more you'll know what you're looking for.

But, definitely don't go straight up to a programmer and say, "Hey, I've got a great idea. Do you want to program it?" Because they probably won't like that.

YARO: Okay, awesome. Madeline, we haven't actually mentioned the domain name. Where can we find out everything that you're doing?

MADELINE: Yes, so just go to Wikifashion.com.

YARO: That's a good domain name, easy to remember that.

MADELINE: Yes, very easy.

YARO: All right, thank you. Any last things you want to add before we wrap it up?

MADELINE: No, that's it.

YARO: Okay, well thank you very much for joining me on the call and I wish you and Wiki Fashion strong growth and even if you are leaving us to go to New York, you're from Brisbane so, it's forgivable. I'll be keeping an eye on you because I certainly been seeing quite a bit of press coverage here and there about what you're doing and it's all startups in Brisbane. I love to hear about that. So, thank you for sharing your short story.

MADELINE: Yes, thank you for interviewing me.

I hope you enjoyed that interview with Madeline Veenstra. Please do check out her Wiki Fashion website to see what she's getting up to.

If you're interested in hearing more interviews like this with successful entrepreneurs, Internet Marketers, bloggers, and information marketers, please visit my blog, which is entrepreneurs-journey.com or you can Google my name which is Yaro and you will find over five years' worth of interviews and past success stories from other very successful people.

Thank you for listening to this and I'll speak to you very soon. Bye!

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