How Fashion Website 'Beginning Boutique' Grew To $4 Million A Year In Sales And Became Australia's Top Ranked Social Media Brand
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Hello! This is Yaro Starak and welcome to the Entrepreneur’s Journey podcast. Today’s guest is Sarah Timmerman.

YARO: Hi There! Today on the show is Sarah Timmerman who’s going to breakdown every little detail about her $4 million-a-year fashion retail website and also, how she’s grown to over a million followers in social media. That interview is coming up in a moment.

Just a quick reminder, if you have not joined my email list for the EJ Insider podcast, please do so. Go to www.interviewsclub.com, that will redirect to the blogpost where you can sign up for the free email updates to make sure you get all the latest podcasts as soon as I release them and also, a series of my very best podcasts from the archives.

For now, here is the brand new interview with Sarah Timmerman. Sarah, thank you for joining me.

SARAH: Oh, that’s no problem at all.

YARO: So, did I get the highlight the real interesting? Is there anything else I should throw in there in your list of achievements that I’ve forgotten about?

SARAH: One cool thing that I forgot to mention was that we’re named the number 1 social media brand this year for Australia that is, which is pretty cool.
YARO: That is cool. I really would want to know how you’ve grown your social media following but let’s get to that when we get to that in your story. Are you born and raised in Brisbane as well just like me?

SARAH: I am born and raised in Brisbane. Yeah, just out in the suburbs, nothing special.

YARO: OK. My path was highschool to the University of Queensland to do a Business Management degree. What was yours?

SARAH: My path isn’t very straightforward, actually. I was just in the suburbs of Brisbane, finishing high school. Before, I’d love to pursue physiotherapy or something like that. And go to U.K, of course because that’s where all the cool kids go. I actually met my husband in year 12. He’s backpacking. He’s a Dutch backpacker at the time, and my mom hired him to paint our house. Yes, it’s pretty funny. I remember I had met him and I was in my softball uniform which is not attractive at all. And mom would hire these backpackers and I was helping her give them lunch. And I was to go and help him paint the house. Anyway, what was him spending 2 weeks in Brisbane, turned into 3 months and then he had to leave to move back to Holland. And so, I actually, I worked 4 jobs and saved everything I could and went to Europe. And we bought a very old Volkswagen and drive around Europe. For a couple of months, I studied a bit of physio. And I never got my visa and I had to move back to Australia. I also went to take Psychology and Political Science and a few other random things, never finishing them. And I actually finished a diploma in Leadership.

And then I went on to start my own business. My first business was actually supposed to be a wellness retreat but it didn’t work out because the landlord actually ended taking over that idea. I mean, that’s cool. I hope it’s still going today but yeah, she took the idea. And then my mom would treat me to Paris or big 21st party because that’s what we do in Australia for 21st birthdays and I took the trip to Paris and I went to this store, Colette. Just incredible, amazing experience. Nothing like anything in Brisbane. That’s when I realized I want to bring that to Australia, specifically to Brisbane. But there were no
proper’s for lease. So, my friends suggested I went online. And yeah, that’s how Beginning Boutique started.

**YARO:** OK. One question first – How did the boyfriend become your husband if you left him in Europe and came back to your studies?

**SARAH:** That’s a very critical info (laughs). He came with me, actually. And now, we’ve been living here. It must be like 10 years since he moved in with me. It’s pretty incredible.

**YARO:** So you went from him painting for your mom to basically travelling to Europe with him and he came back to Australia again with you. I’m assuming, did you get married so he could stay in the country? Because you would have been like 20, 18, 19, 20 – not very old to get married in that stage. It would have been a big, you know...

**SARAH:** It’s pretty crazy. We moved back to Australia when I was about, must have been 19. So, I left Australia when I was 17. Yeah. I was over there for 3 years and we moved back here. And, we were dating. Probably, for 4 years before we got married but it wasn’t actually for the visa because Martin somehow got really lucky and got a visa straightaway. Like, he went to Berlin. They interviewed him for his visa and he got it within a day. It’s crazy. Everyone else’s story is so horrible but ours is really simple.

**YARO:** You’re meant to be, I guess. Universe was helping you on that one.

**SARAH:** Yeah, it’s very funny. It’s a very... I mean if you lack faith, it’s a very faith story.

**YARO:** All right. So, with the business then, you were 21 when you were in Paris, like you took that instead of your birthday. I’m thinking when you come back, obviously, that was the start of retail stores. Pretty big undertaking. And I can see online might have appealed more as well. Can you just timestamp this? What was the state of online retail in Australia when you were thinking of starting or when you did start this? Can you give us also the year so I’d get a bit of chronology?
SARAH: Oh, Gosh. It must have been 2007 when I started thinking about it, to 2008. There was nothing going on. There were two big stores. They were called Folk Shop and My Catwalk and they’re both no longer in business. I remember having to beg people to let me sell their clothes online. I would have called over a hundred designers to try and get them on board and it just took that much effort because nobody believed online. So, it was incredibly difficult starting a store. Nobody liked online, either, it was kind of a dirty word.

YARO: That’s amazing. 2007 and 2008. That’s late in a lot of ways. I guess it shows how behind Australia can be sometimes with online and some industries.

SARAH: Oh, definitely.

YARO: OK. How do you do this? You’re getting, obviously, not a lot of role models to follow in terms of Australian-based ones. Did you have anyone to learn from or copy or you know, mentor you in terms of starting an online retail shop? Or you just sort of figured out as you’re going along?

SARAH: I think it's definitely a lot of figuring out as you go along. But, I had the cool kids I seek out to watch and to kind of see what they were doing in terms of being not high fashion brand online because Australia was already doing high fashion online. So, watching them and seeing how they were doing things which is incredibly inspirational. Nylon magazine is another really cool influence that I definitely had in my life and especially with Beginning. In terms of business mentors, my mom and dad run their niche, a transport company in Australia so I could learn a lot from my mom who was the CFO. So, there was definitely people to talk to but at the same time, she couldn't really help with any retail at all. She was just good for setting up, like helping me set up budgets and things like that. But, apart from that, it's just learn as you go.

YARO: OK. So, what did you do first?

SARAH: The first thing I did was start calling designers. I got our logo designed. And then I used...
YARO: Was that from 99designs or something?

SARAH: No. Actually, it was a team of really cool designers called Rumpus Room, I think but then they changed the name as well. They were really cool. It's our current logo, still actually. And, they recommended the design of a development company and we built a custom website. It was just not a good idea at all. It went horribly wrong. Wasted a lot of money doing that while that was getting built and designs were getting done, I was just calling designers and trying to really coordinate the entire project. It's kind of like not one thing getting done at once. You have to pull everything together at first. You know, make your budgets and make some sort of business plan even though you don't know what you're doing. It was definitely a very interesting, I think, 6 months.

YARO: I'm a bit ignorant when it comes to retail online and obviously, fashion retail. I've only had a card game website. It was very, very small and I was very young. I'm wondering with what you had to do at the start there. Did you call up the designers and say, “I love your work. I'd like to buy some of your clothing at wholesale and sell it on my online store.” Is that basically how it works? And then you just have to put it in your garage and then if you make a sale, you send it off your customers. Is that how it starts?

SARAH: Yes, that's how it starts. It's not even like you're asking them for a favor. It was just like, “I just want to buy your stuff.” But nobody wanted it.

YARO: OK. So, did you have any problems getting stock or were they really eager?

SARAH: Oh, they were not eager at all. It would always be like, “Oh, like an eBay store.” And I would have to explain, how, “NO, we're not an eBay store. It's a steadily rolling store. It's like retail. You're going to be well-branded and everything's going to be shot beautifully.” But people were not interested, it's just something designers were not into.
YARO: I haven't mentioned your domain name yet so we should better mentioned that in this interview so they’ll have a look at your site while they're listening to this interview.

SARAH: Thank you.

YARO: Oh, my fault too. BeginningBoutique.com.au is the one to go too. So, Beginning Boutique, as we’re going, you can sort of see what Sarah is running now. OK. So, you’re getting not a lot of positive support to begin with but I’m assuming you must have eventually got a few yeses and you’re able to have some dresses in your store.

SARAH: It was just a lot of persistence at start. And yeah, we got the ball rolling and got about 20 designers on board and our website was 3 months late. So, we had about a stupid amount of stock sitting in the garage waiting to go up and late stock is very bad as most retailers would know. So, that was another fun thing when we first started out.

YARO: When you say, late stock – you mean, like out of season? I’m assuming it’s pretty important with fashion.

SARAH: Yeah, it’s not even out of season. It’s just old. Like you’ve seen it out of stores for 3 months and they’ve probably sold it and now we got it on sale but we just put it up 3 months later.

YARO: Right. That's not good.

SARAH: No.

YARO: How did you fix this problem?

SARAH: Well, we just.. our website finally was finished which was quite delayed. I just had to do my best and you know, shoot everything on a shoestring and really just try to figure out how we are going to run the business and get cashflow as well. You know, when you start your online business, it's really hard to get traffic. That's where the social kicked in. That's how we started getting traffic.
YARO: OK. Before we dive in the social, I’m just curious with the few more knots and bolts how the Beginning starts. Do you literally just get your own digital camera and you take photographs of the clothing that you just bought at wholesale and then you upload it to your ecommerce platform and that’s connected to either Paypal or eWay and then you’ve got a buy button on the website with a picture of the dress. And so you’re ready to go. Is that how it kind of how it works to start with back then?

SARAH: Yeah. I mean, I think that’s even how it works today. It’s like... it’s not me obviously. I don’t shoot the stock anymore. I know I’m not talented enough to do it, but Grace does but it’s definitely... I think a lot of stores suggest still shooting and uploading and selling straightaway with eWay or Stripe or Paypal or anything like that.

YARO: OK. As simple as that. So, do you remember how many different items you had on sale at the opening of the website?

SARAH: I made sure I had 20 designers so they would have a few, they probably had 3 or 4 styles. So, probably we started with, I don’t know, 80 pieces, 80 styles.

YARO: OK. 80 styles, no traffic. What did you do next?

SARAH: Yeah. Exactly. And I mean it takes awhile to figure that out. Because you kind of think, build it and people would come because there’s nothing else like it online. And socially, that’s not the case at all. So, it took me a little while to figure that out and get over that hurdle. And it took really hard making partnerships and working with bloggers which was still really unheard of in Australia so, give people that just to show my store and then to review our store on their blog. So, that’s how we started initially and working social as well because obviously, we didn’t have money to pay for advertising. So, it was getting involved in things that I knew would return as well like selling and things like that.

YARO: So, when you say you worked social, what do you, because it’s 2008, 2009. There was no Instagram yet. There was no, I mean Facebook was definitely the leading one at the time. Maybe MySpace was dying out at that
stage. What did you do? Did you just try and, you put up a lot of pictures of your clothing and then try to get the people to follow you? Because again, no advertising budget like you said so you got to basically hassle. So, how does it work?

**SARAH:** Yes. It’s a little trial and error. Like, we did a lot of branding, different pictures of Facebook and try to figure out what actually our customer enjoyed and that was really an interesting challenge because you know, you put a balanced product with inspirational posts as well. But when I first started, I was just literally talking about Brisbane, what I like in Brisbane and how cool Brisbane was.

**YARO:** I’m not sure that's going to sell much clothing... but...

**SARAH:** And then we moved the conversation to being about our photoshoots and new product and stuff like that. It was definitely an interesting situation when you’re trying to marry up two very different things to make sure that you’re entertaining and relevant. We just built it using competitions and again, partnership. Like what I was saying before, try to get bigger brands to talk about us. Try to get our designers to talk about us. Like what you’re saying, you just got to hustle and work really hard and you make sure that you’re presenting things beautifully as well. So, that was what we did, that’s what I did in Facebook. And, you’ll just continue that across all other medias as well.

**YARO:** You keep saying “We.” Was it a “we” yet at that stage or is it still you?

**SARAH:** You know these business books that tell you that you have to pretend that you are bigger than you actually are? I was very good at that but no, at that point, it was just me. I got my first intern around that time and Kate was her name and she turned into my first employee. And...

**YARO:** What was her job?

**SARAH:** She basically did everything from packing packages to us trying to shoot ourselves to make better content to contacting people, contacting bloggers. You know anything that needed to be done. You know, when you’ve
only got 2 people you both kind of do everything. So, that’s a very interesting
time for the both of us.

And then, Kate always dreamed of moving to London and when she finished
her study, she did. So, now, she works for a massive company over there so
that’s very cool.

**YARO:** So, you’ve got Facebook, you got a website and you got, reaching out
to the bloggers and any kind of exposure you can get. Do you remember
what worked? Like what actually led to sales from all of that?

**SARAH:** Yeah. Competitions were great like in terms of competitions from
product. Getting girls’ influences is what you would use in your product that
definitely works. I mean, you have to get the girls that are speaking for your
demographic and your product and showing how great it is. Sales, of course,
the things that you know, any promotional tools like discounts and things like
that always work.

**YARO:** Flash sales like you’ve got on going now?

**SARAH:** Yeah. We, have always thrived to make our website really dynamic
so we actually do two commercials a week. They’re not necessarily based
around sales but just always based around being interesting and being
relevant because we are not in a girl’s life and I can’t walk into her house and
sell her clothes. If she’s going to be on my site multiple ‘mes a week, I beQer
make it interes’ing for her because otherwise, why would she bother?

**YARO:** You mentioned before, I think you mentioned sales email. Have you
mentioned the word email yet? I haven’t heard that. Did you start building a
list from day 1?

**SARAH:** Yeah. Definitely. Even before we launched the site. There was an
email capture on there. I mean, I can’t stress the importance of email. I was
talking to a girl the other day and she was saying she doesn’t send any email
out. That was crazy, you have to be sending out emails and making sure it
was good content. But what I was talking about specifically was actually an
email called (or maybe I shouldn’t tell what it’s called), but it’s an email for a
list of sales and you can put yourself in there. I remember when I was in one of my bedrooms working for Beginning. We made 6 sales from this 1 email. And that was back when we sold big ticket items. It was such a great day. That was the best. Love it.

YARO: Now, yeah. 6 sales a day does lead to $4 million a year, does it? OK. So, I'm kind of curious how did you know how to do email? Was that just from your innate exposure online, seeing what other emails being sent to you or was there another trigger for that?

SARAH: I've always read. I know this is going to sound so nerdy and I've always, I've always pushed myself to learn more because I'm so young and I don't have any experience. If I'm not continuously learning then this business isn't going to grow. So I was reading a lot of whitepapers, watching Hubspot, and making sure that I was really across everything because that's my responsibility to grow the company and I guess everyone talks about email marketing and I picked up from that really easily.

YARO: OK. So, how did you go from 6 sales a day being a good day to whatever it is that you get today?

SARAH: Well, I guess it came about, I think 2 or 3 years ago. I mean, you're always growing your business and you're always looking to challenge yourself, I think as an entrepreneur. We used to ask girls what they want us to bring to the store; we still do but nowhere near as much as I used to. I would always send out those questions and hear out people's opinions to purchase stock and I remember when I had pretty much no money to buy stock and I needed all of that to sell so I'll have money to buy stock later in the week. And it was just carefully reinvesting what you previously purchased to grow sales. So, buying more of one particular style or you know, we have enough money to pay for a model because that's always how it's going to work. But it's just all about improving everything. I guess making sales is all about making business improvements. You know, everything that you're doing, “I could do this, but how am I going to do that, who's going to implement that?” and just working from there. But on a real simple level, that's just listening to customers, getting them to tell us what they want and going from there.
YARO: Maybe you can break it down by looking at who you’ve hired because obviously, you’ve quickly reached your personal capacity. And since you said you did everything better bit by bit, you’ve got finding more designers, taking more photographs of clothing, building relationships with more people. You have so many things to do. You obviously started on new channels, like Instagram eventually. How did you start to balance that especially that as you said before you got the challenge of retail there, you might want to sell a bunch of products but then you have to go and spend all that money just to buy more product and it kind of feels like, you never get to take anything away for yourself because as you said before, I was investing in the next and the next and the next. And it’s going to be getting more crazy busy around you as you hire more people. So I can only imagine that requires a special kind of leadership to have control of that. So maybe you could take us to the point where you had to get an intern to who did you hire next?

SARAH: Yeah. Well, I was very lucky with Kate that she came a few days a week while she was still in the university. Then we actually got a design intern, a graphic design intern. The first one didn’t work out at all. She basically came in for half a day and said she couldn’t come in the next day because she wanted to go out on a weekend or something stupid like that. So we put the job ad back up and got a really cool chick who came on board and then did her internship and then I hired her and that was just a few days a week and then it grew into a full-time position. I also had another really great intern that worked out and she is still with us and she runs our PR. Basically, everyone did everything at the start. Everyone would pack packages if that needed to be done. Everyone would pick stock. Actually, picking it up ready to pack. I mean, there was nothing, and is still is nothing sacred at the beginning. Everyone should be able to take out the rubbish. You know, that sort of thing and we grew from that to hiring someone to do customer care and that person quickly grew into a full-time role.

And, we moved from our, it must have been like 30 square meter office into 350 square meters. That was really a huge change, taking such a small office and having a door-level office with only one person downstairs when we first moved in there and then everyone else in the room upstairs because there was one room that was the same size as the old office and the second room
was a hundred square meters. So, it was very interesting to manage that as well.

And we quickly grew out our team. The customer care grew significantly, the marketing as well grew out. And we have a whole e-commerce team now where, you know, I was just taking all the photos, writing all the descriptions, editing all the photos to upload, to that now being handled by two different teams. They’re going from uploading 15 products to 55 products. Like, dramatic growth and change across the business and we were in that office for 2 years and we just moved to our new office which is 370 square meters and we now have 24 people and staff, including casuals. It’s a pretty cool place to be. It’s an old icecream factory.

**YARO:** I think I can hear them in the background if that’s where you are now.

**SARAH:** Yeah. I moved to the quiet part of the office because I have heard them in the background as well and put headphones as well.

**YARO:** That’s alright. It’s all part of the process. OK. What I’m really curious about, everything sounds brilliant there. Hiring new people, bigger office. Everything is go, go, go, positive, positive, positive. Where did all the customers come from? Because you must have rapidly increase your turnover if you keep hiring every intern as a full time employee. You got salaries to pay. That’s from having very minor expenses to suddenly having another 50 grand a year to pay, 100 grand a year to pay, then 200 grand a year to pay. So, you have to have the revenue to cover that. So, where were all the sales come from?

**SARAH:** I should go back a little bit. So, before I got Kate or maybe when I first got my first intern, we had a pop-up store at South Bank which is a little area close by to West End that has a lot of food. It’s like a precint. We were running that pop-up sale there for 3 months; what was supposed to be 2 weeks turned into 3 months. It’s from that that I really got of taste of cashflow because being online back then, there were just not really that many customers. It’s not like the luxury of starting it now where customers are
online now but we had that and I guess, using that money, we redeveloped the websites.

We have 4 platforms now. Basically, as soon as we changed from that first initial horror of a website to Interspire which no longer exists anymore but changing to that, we saw an immediate growth because 1. the website worked all the time; and 2. Google could finally go through it and crawl the site. And we were actually getting a list of the things and our SEO improved. It was such a dramatic change using different platforms. And I guess we grew the revenue by having better platforms, better systems, as well as growing our social media. Our customers really came from social media.

As we are growing our revenue, we also started spending money on social media. I would spend about 90% of our marketing budget on social media advertising, that's already including people's time that was truly the paid advertising spend. I guess that's how we grew our revenue and you know, having consistent customer experience. Beginning Boutique was really well-known for great customer service. We are a Google-trusted store. So, what that means is that you have to actually get a certain amount of 4 or 5 ratings to be able to get Google to back your store. If you purchase with me, Google will cover that purchase up to a thousand dollars. So, you know the fact that we are quite well-known with our customer service has helped as well, obviously with word of mouth and things like that. That's how we managed growing, keep growing for the company.

**YARO:** Is that because you're using Google for payments or how did they honor you for that?

**SARAH:** Basically, as you checkout, you will be asked to rate Beginning Boutique. With those ratings, they collected those ratings for about 6 weeks and then if you get a certain amount of good ratings, you become a Google trusted store. You have to apply for it. You know, your service has to be exceptional. Your shipping needs to be express. Your advertising rates, your policies and everything have to be up in a scratch with Google. But, they don't get anything out of it except for a badge on your site which, I mean, it's
probably quite useful to them but if you go to BB.com.au, which is our short URL, you can see it there. It’s just a pop-up on the side of the website.

**YARO:** OK. I’m looking at everything and I’m distracted by all the pretty dresses.

**SARAH:** It’s just under the templates. It’s a little Google trusted store icon there.

**YARO:** OK. I think I’m on the subpage. Let me...

**SARAH:** It should be on every page.

**YARO:** I’m only seeing the...

**SARAH:** Oh, you won’t get it because that’s only in Australia. It doesn’t show for the States. We were actually in the States for the Magento Live conference last week and we thought we have lost it, we were freaking out.

**YARO:** You’re certified for Australia which is fair enough. That’s where your customers come from.

**SARAH:** Yeah and it actually depends on the URL as well. I don’t think we can even get it for the States.

**YARO:** Got you. I can see it’s funny how when you talk about half an hour, it almost seems simple. Like building pieces of the puzzle more and more, I can only imagine coordinating everything must have been crazy. Like you said, you have to get a lot of moving parts working together and you must multiply that in scales. Crazy. When did Instagram come to this?

**SARAH:** When Instagram started, we jumped on it pretty quickly. I almost can’t remember when that was but yeah, we just jumped on it straightaway. We just used the same content and we tried to vary it and follow up people so people start to know that we were there and promoted it on Facebook. You know all of the classic social media growth sort of things. We just tried to smash that out as much as possible and grow that because obviously, we could tell that it was the next Facebook.
YARO: You’ve got half a million followers, almost, as I talk to you now. That would be a huge source of customers, I imagine. I do want to clarify because a lot of people despite Instagram being around for a number of years now are still pretty clueless with it and I’m noticing more and more in these interviews, I do people are referencing Instagram as a key source of new customers for them especially presently. So, I’m assuming, you’ve taken photographs of your product already and you’re posting that up and using hashtags related to fashion. You’re following the influencers, you’re following the girls who have a lot of followers, fashion girls. Are you doing that in the hope that they will pay attention to you so potentially you could send address and then they’ll wear it and they’ll Instagram it and they’ll link back to your Instagram profile. Is that kind of how it works??

SARAH: Definitely. Just getting people to notice you. The thing is, people don’t want to write about the site until it’s really taking off. When you’re trying to build that site, you just keep reaching out to people as much as you can. It’s really not an option to not be talking and to not be making connections. It’s all about not giving up when the first people are not going to publish about you. You just have to keep going. You don’t have a choice.

YARO: OK. So, today then, I think we are almost caught up. Have we missed any milestones along the way?

SARAH: I mean it was really great when we’ve broke even, that was an incredible experience. I should say I hope I don’t sound make it too easy because it has been a very, very difficult journey. You know, it has been a lot of heartache and pain along the way, like to change platforms 4 times in less than a year is pretty intense. When we build a new platform now, it takes a year to kind of get it going. It’s a year not to have your eye on the game. You have to just to be building a new platform. So, it’s pretty intense but it’s been a great journey but it’s definitely been difficult and you have to manage. Like, you’re saying all these moving parts that are very rapid and making sure you stay profitable and you stay being able to pay your bills at the same time is incredibly interesting as well.

YARO: Right. So, when was that breakeven celebration year?
SARAH: It was, 2012 2013. I just remember I wanted to have party that has a swear word in the name and I didn’t ask you if we can swear.

YARO: Well, I’ve had a guest who dropped a whole lot of F bombs on the show and it’s fine. It just means you get that little list of stamp when it comes on the iTunes. So, you know. You might lose a few of your listeners if you do.

SARAH: Well, it was just a “Finally Effing Making Money” Party. So, I guess that’s safe to say. I just remember, like, just a feeling of having enough money to pay the bills was just incredible. So, we were, you know, I was operating for 4 years before Beginning can stand on its own two feet and not being supported by Martin and I. That’s quite a long time so it was such a relief when that finally happened.

YARO: It’s amazing to think you can do millions of dollars in turnover and yet you’re actually not keeping much of it, or of any of it. It’s all going back to the company. Just to clarify, do you pay yourself a salary during that time? I’m guessing you have to pay yourself living expenses. Right? Is that how it worked?

SARAH: Back then, I only took a wage, I think I took a wage 3 or 4 years ago. So, I just put everything back into the business. Even currently, we have the option to either go and get capital or to put everything back to the business and so, everything go to the business right now. While we can, we are not taking capital. You know, if we want to grow significantly and take this business to the world, money just doesn't come out of cashflow for a million dollar advertising expenses and things like that. So yeah, whilst Beginning is growing, my husband actually just worked. And, I didn't pay myself at all.

YARO: Good combination. I’ve noticed there’s a lot of couples who have something like that. That really helps. So, one person can really focus and the other person works a job. So, what is the plan now? Is it to go global with this?

SARAH: Definitely. I think, I think, we can be an international store and I think we already are. We have about... I can’t tell you exactly. Because I’ve got to open... we have 20% of our traffic coming from the States currently so I’d
love to see Beginning become even bigger in the States and obviously in Asia which is our local region. I mean, there's no reason why Beginning can't be a global business because what we're doing is attractive to women all over the world. And, we provide great customer service so you can trust that if you order from us, it's definitely going to get to you. It's going to look like how it looked. You know, its reputation more than anything else.

**YARO:** How did you manage to set up good customer service?

**SARAH:** It's always been my passion ever since the beginning, I wanted to treat our customers like our best friends. It's one of our company values. It's so important to make sure that we're constantly exceeding expectations and if you can't exceed expectations, you better meet them. Like when we don't have the luxury to get all the packages out when it's a busy day, we have to get them sent, we have to get it shipped. If we screw up, for example, last year. One of these very difficult times was last year and we were platforming to Magento. About a month after platforming, we discovered that the company based from the Ukraine that brought our database across had actually given us a corrupted file and it was only after critical mass at the site that we started to go out 200 times over for 2 months and lost hundred thousands of dollars. Then they also went into war with Russia so we had to figure that out.

But, what we did for our customers was work with Movenpick and brought badges for ice cream all over Australia and customers can just go in and grab one for free just because we're sorry that we screwed up. It's really just taking customer service to the next level. Why should people shop with us if we don't care about them?

**YARO:** Ice cream really does solve all problems.

**SARAH:** It does.

**YARO:** In Russia and Ukraine, it might solve some problems there, too.

**SARAH:** I won't get into that one.

**YARO:** Let's not go political. Let's say everything goes great, you go global. Is there a point in time in the future that you see yourself exiting? Either, selling
the company or just letting someone else take over or boss of it? Or, what’s the plan for you personally or have you not decided on that yet?

**SARAH:** I definitely thought about that. And I think, everyone says that you have to start with the exit in mind. I know I what I’d like to walk away with but at the same time, I’m not planning on walking away anytime soon and the only time that I would is if I’ve felt that I’m holding the company back. If I can’t continue to grow the company and it needs someone more experienced, better than myself, then I have to provide that. As, you know, as a caretaker for this business, it would be irresponsible if I ignore the signs and thought I was the best person that should run it if I wasn’t.

**YARO:** Good answer. Just maybe in the last sort of 5, 10 minutes. Sarah, can we just talk about the current situation for a new person who might be interested in following your footsteps starting some kind of an online retail store. How would you do things differently and what would you recommend to them to get going?

**SARAH:** Definitely, use a platform that is off the shelf. Using something like Shopify that has hosting encoded in it. I mean it’s not going to work in our level because it just doesn’t have the customer service that we needed and so, but they’re great at their customer service but for example the platform doesn’t have store credits and things like that that are pretty much essential when you run a business that are small to medium size. Start a platform like Shopify. I would do everything it has possibly could because agencies... Some people might hate me for saying this but I feel like agencies don’t have your best interests at heart. They do when you’re signing up the contract but then they quickly become focused on their business interests and of course, they have to keep their business in business.

**YARO:** When you say an agency, do you mean for supplying of stock or for...

**SARAH:** I mean for design and stuff.

**YARO:** Oh, yeah for development.
SARAH: Yeah. That sort of thing. So, it's... I think it's really important to get your own graphic designers and to make things beautiful as fast as you can. So, obviously you have limited cash so spend it how you're going to spend it but I think it's really important to make things as beautiful as possible, as fast as possible.

I think if you get the product mix it right and know the supply demand curve. That's one thing I learned while running Beginning. That curve really does make a difference as to how you think that product and realizing that it's, this isn't an enchanted journey, that I'm on a magic unicorn. It's customers want certain things at certain prices. It's not a matter of what I do or say about it, if it's not a certain price at a certain quantity, it's useless. So, it's just understanding the economics, a little bit of economics. Not a massive amount, but at least a little bit. And have more money than you think you will need because it will take longer than you plan it though.

YARO: What about marketing? What would you suggest today?

SARAH: Just be all over social. Start your social media accounts before you even start your business. Test out if you're product that you're thinking of selling is even popular on social media. Learn how a user can build an audience before you have to have the money. Some people would say they'll build their social media after they've launched but I just think that if I have the option to start a business with the social media networks already built, that would be amazing. It's really... I mean it's not as hard as it used to be because there are already those channels built up with an audience and people are already used to seeing businesses on social media now. Just doing it smart and making good partnerships with people that are relevant to your customers as well.

YARO: OK. So, that pretty much answers the marketing questions. It's social. Have a lot of cash saved up to get going as the buffer. Get the right mix. Know your economics. Know how much things should cost that people would buy that and I'm assuming it takes a real knowledge of the product. Get yourself a platform like Shopify to start with because it's obviously a bit more in a box solution so it's easy to get going. Good answer. I think that pretty
much would solve most industries’ problems too. If you’re doing any kind of e-commerce and if you want to sell real products online, that’s a good starting point.

Alright, Sarah. I think that’s a pretty much good wrap up of everything you’ve done. You said you won the Social Media award in Australia. How did that happen?

SARAH: Oh, it’s really random. We just got this email from a company that ranks social media brands in different countries and they just emailed to say, “Hey guys, we rated you as the number 1 social media brand in Australia. This is why... this is who you beat... Do you want to be interviewed by us?” And it was just, that’s been really cool in terms of... you know, it’s great for publicity but it’s also really nice to be recognized for the serious amount of hard work that we put into social media.

YARO: Because you’re not celebrities here and you got a million followers combined across your platforms. How do you do that? How do you get to a million followers?

SARAH: It’s really just posting beautiful content and talking to your customer. Talking back like having conversations with them. That builds anything. If you just talk at them, that’s not going to work. You have to be able to look through their pictures and go, “Oh yeah, cool. Are they talking about this? I know a little bit about that so let’s chat about it.”

YARO: All right. I’m going to start talking to my people more often. I want to get to a million followers as well.

SARAH: You should. And doing competition or stuff like that. Give stuff that away.

YARO: I don’t have pretty dresses to sell though so it’s you know... not quite as photogenic my products as yours. OK. Sarah, thank you for breaking down all the details and going into history. That was really informative and thank you for being so specific with each of the steps in your journey there. I think that would be a great help for anyone who's an entrepreneur who wants to
do online business, in particular who wants to do a retail business. So, well. Thank you. Congrats on the success. Go, Brisbane! I have to say.

SARAH: Yeah.

YARO: Anything else we should mention before I wrap it up?

SARAH: Well, I’d love for everybody to come and have a look at our site. That would be awesome. I think you know, if you really do want to push your dream or if you’re midway pushing your dream just remember to never give up because as cliché as it sounds, it really just does take all of faith, determination to be successful. Like, you just can’t ever give up so stick in there.

YARO: Awesome! So, that's BeginningBou'que.com.au. The Instagram is also /BeginningBou'que. And your facebook is also /BeginningBou'que and those are the two biggest channels that Sarah has and both have half a million followers, almost, as we’re talking. So that’s a good way to check out everything that you’re doing. Definitely, check out your site, check out your social media. Because you can see exactly how Sarah and her team are doing everything she talked about during this interview. Awesome.

Sarah, thank you very much.

SARAH: Thank you.

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