

Jess Weiner 00:00:04 So I come in with a yes and mindset. I try to understand what their core business has yielded them. Why is it successful? Why is it profitable? But I am there to agitate. I am there to authenticate. I am there to contextualize cultural trends and push them out of their comfort zone.

Ryan Newman 00:00:28 This is dare to disrupt a podcast about Penn state alumni, who are innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host Ryan Newman and on today's show is Jess Wiener. Jess is a cultural expert and creative who has spent 26 years researching and educating on cultural trends in order to help people feel seen, heard and understood. She's a best-selling author podcast, host and speaker who has connected with audiences from the white house to wall street. She has been a strategic partner in culture, changing moments, such as Dove's campaign for real beauty and the evolution of Barbie through her consultancy. Talk to Jess, Jess and her team helped fortune 500 companies to become more inclusive and culturally fluent. She graduated from Penn state in 1995 with degrees in theater, women's studies and classics. Jess, I want to welcome you to dare to disrupt podcast. This is a first for us first in a couple of ways. Not only are you our first guest from LA, you're also our first creative and you're our first professional podcaster. So I feel like this is the student coming to the teacher for lessons. So don't hesitate to, uh, guide me along the way.

Jess Weiner 00:01:51 Uh, I'm sure it's going to be brilliant. Thank you.

Ryan Newman 00:01:55 Yeah. Well, you're welcome. Thank you for being with us and thank you for making time for Penn state. So I thought we would start as we normally like to, which is really at the beginning, would you mind just sharing for our listeners where you grew up and what really were some of the early inspirations for you in your early life and what ultimately led for you to go to Penn state?

Jess Weiner 00:02:15 Yeah, I grew up in Miami, Florida, so probably, I mean the exact opposite of where I ended up in happy valley for college. And there's a reason behind that actually. So I grew up in Miami. I went to all performing arts school, so I've always been a communicator or a creative, a performer. Um, I went to performing arts, middle school, performing arts high school, and I knew that I wanted to study theater, but I had so much appetite and passion for media and communications and social issues. And, um, so liberal arts education just made a lot of sense for me. And I remember actually being on a cruise ship, uh, my senior, like we're junior year, way before I started to apply for colleges. And I had thought that I would go to a school in California. I thought it might be UCLA. I thought it might be Berkeley.

Jess Weiner 00:02:58 And I remember meeting a Penn state alum on this cruise ship with my parents and I, you know, she was another young woman and we kind of met in the buffet line and she started telling me all about happy valley and how much she loved Penn state. And she had multiple majors and minors and she had so many opportunities to study abroad. And I just something about her passion and her infectious, like enthusiasm for her school experience, like really intrigued me. And so I started looking into Penn state and, um, ended up really finding a perfect blend of everything that I was interested in in coming to Penn state because I was able to major in theater and I loved the college of arts and architecture and like the MIT and my major

Jess Weiner 00:03:41 And I got to go abroad for in Greece, you know, for a year. And so it kind of actually really helped shape so much of how I wanted to take my art and my creativity out into the world. I discovered my love of social justice at Penn state. I was able to flex my activist muscle at Penn state. So anyway, just from that fortuitous, like cruise ship buffet conversation.

Uh, and I, I wish I remember her name because I would thank her, but anyway, yeah, that, that Penn state alumni energy is what brought me here,

Ryan Newman 00:04:14 Jess credit to the buffet line. And that sounds like, you know, we're all great things happen. So you come to Penn state, you have this amazing experience. You start to sort of expand your comfort zone. And what were your thou --

-- ghts about just you talk about social justice? How about the idea of marrying culture and what I love about reading about you as being a, a, a culture shaper shaping of a culture. Can you talk about that in relation to entrepreneurial-ism and sort of how those early seeds were planted for you at Penn state?

Jess Weiner 00:04:47 Yeah, I actually think I, I didn't have the word entrepreneur when I was studying at Penn state nor was brand something that we talked about personal brand, or that just wasn't in our vernacular yet as a, as a culture, but all the seeds of entrepreneurship were planted for me. So I think one is because I had a liberal arts education because Penn state was so helpful in letting me explore and designing basically within my major and opportunity for me to cultivate my passion and my curiosity. I mean, I think that's a key seed in entrepreneurship, right? You're you're following your passion. You're I think entrepreneurs are on the hunt to make something better, improve something, to change or disrupt a system. And so for me, I think I was very fascinated at Penn state with putting together all the worlds that I loved. I loved what I was learning in women's studies, because it was a kind of history I wasn't taught in my mainstream education growing up.

Jess Weiner 00:05:40 I didn't hear enough about women in history specifically, or people of color in ways that really inspired me and, and delighted me to, um, to want to learn more. And then I think the classics piece for me was about studying how historically we could change and challenge a culture's story. And so I think I pulled all those pieces together and found a lot of interest. What I didn't know how to do Ryan was how the heck was I going to make money doing any of the things that I cared about doing? And what I will say is my sophomore, I think sophomore year, junior year, I was part of a group that helped to form, uh, the university park ensemble, which was a theater company within the department of theater that worked with a couple of different groups on campus. And we did a lot of orientation programs where we did plays, and we would do these interactive theater productions.

Jess Weiner 00:06:31 And by starting that theater company and by learning how to run that company and learning how to market. And I think a lot of my entrepreneurial, like passion and, and desire was born from that experience so much so that when I graduated and again, like had no idea how I was going to pull all these things together. What I really leaned on was the experience of starting a business while I was in college and starting this program. And so I replicated that model as my first business model after college. So I'll paint the picture for us. I graduated with three degrees that guaranteed me to make no money in the world and like all good entrepreneurs. And I don't come from a trust fund and I didn't have exceptionally wealthy parents nor did I have a big network of folks to go tap into outside of our, obviously like our alumni network.

Jess Weiner 00:07:21 I was in Indianapolis because I moved out there with my boyfriend at the time. And you know, so here's now a new city. I don't know anybody. I decide to go take a community college course on grant writing because I was trying to figure out how I was going to get funding for an idea to make a kid's theater company or a social issue theater company. And I got a \$5,000 grant. My final project was to write the grant proposal and I got awarded the grant from Eli Lilly and Eli Lilly is a pharmaceutical company headquartered in Indianapolis. And I wanted to write a play about eating disorders. Eli Lilly produces Prozac that a lot of people use to treat behaviors around eating disorders. And so early, early, early days, Ryan, I found a way

Jess Weiner 00:08:07 I started my theater company. I focused on body image issues and writing plays about eating disorders. And my only agreement with them as a company was I had to leave. This'll definitely date me. I had to leave pamphlets in the back of the room when I was done with the play. I didn't have to promote a drug. I didn't have to. I just had to merge a corporate interest with an audience interest. And what I found there was I was really good at being the, the interceptor. I was really good at culturally contextualizing for an audience and for my, my spons --

-- or. And so I found a way to work as an entrepreneur where I could do some of the early development for me, a branded content. And again, didn't have that language yet. Didn't even know what I was doing was entrepreneurial in a way, but it was survival for me. You know, I was taking all this great education. I was figuring out how to get resource to capitalize my idea, and then it really ended up starting this beautiful yet circuitous journey in a small business ownership.

Ryan Newman 00:09:10 Amazing. And did you find yourself in a situation when you first graduated that had a job offer been made available or had your three majors? It just spoke to someone in an interview that you would have taken that job. So was this a sort of decision by default or is this something that you were sort of proactively reaching?

Jess Weiner 00:09:29 I think to be honest, I remember sitting in, again, I remember everybody listening. I graduated in 1995. Okay. I had to go to the computer labs. We had computer labs. I don't know if you still do, but like I had to go and use a computer. I only had a word processor. I wrote before I graduated, I probably wrote 300 applications to theater companies that did social issue theater. I just didn't know. I think because I wasn't connected, like, you know, folks are today connected through the web. Like I just didn't have access to resources largely about what this world could look like. So I went the traditional path. I wrote to theater companies. I tried to find places, um, that would be interested in what I had to offer. And I just got rejected over and over and over again, like it just wasn't a thing yet.

Jess Weiner 00:10:17 Like doing social issue. Theater was such a niche fringe thing in 94 95. I will say this. When I graduated from Penn state, I had done something in the media that had gotten me some attention. Right. So I had done a piece for MTV news while I was a senior at Penn state on what was then called for me, the Mifflin mob or Mifflin streak. A lot of folks are still familiar with it. I don't actually know if it still happens on campus or not, but it was this, you know, historical institutionalize event of folks running a mock on campus, mostly guys screaming, sexual phrases at women in the dorms. And a lot of, a lot of, uh, stuff happened, you know, when I was in school of like protests and, um, you know, we were really trying to stop what I, what we felt was institutionalized, sexual harassment.

Jess Weiner 00:10:59 And so I did this piece for MTV and I got a lot of attention. And then I did a piece for CNN. And so even while I was a student, I was just at the beginning of understanding the power of media and the power of publicity and my message was getting out there. So even though I was applying to all these theater companies, trying to find a way to write social issue plays or to work in some sort of social issue theater that didn't really exist. So the industry wasn't there yet, but media gave me a great calling card and the interesting story too. So when I graduated, I didn't know what I was going to do. I was trying to work in children's theater because I thought maybe that would be the closest place that I could apply my skills. And of course, like all good struggling artists.

Jess Weiner 00:11:37 I went to go do my day job, which at the time was working in a learner's at the mall, which is like basically like a limited a clothing store. Right. And I worked there for all of four days and on, I think my third day, the day before I quit, these two young women came in, remember, this is a mall in Indianapolis. I know nobody, but these two young women came in, they were in college, they had just seen the MTV piece. And we started having this incredible conversation and they were kind of like, what are you doing in a clothing store? Like you were, you know, you were just causing all this great change on your campus. And I thought, ah, that's it, that's just a reminder that like, this is not my path. I got to go get back out there these day jobs, or they're helpful to pay the bills, but this is not going to be my career path.

Jess Weiner 00:12:16 And so that's what brought me to writing that grant or going to that community college course to learn how to write a grant. So I think truthfully at the end of the day, I'm realizing I do have the DNA of an entrepreneur. I, you know, even though I didn't come from a family that supported that nec --

-- essentially or knew even what that was, I think they supported me in, uh, unconventionally, you know, trying out things after I graduated from college. And I'm so grateful for that. I'm so grateful for like the failed retail experience in my life. Cause it brought me back to what I w what I felt like I was here to do.

Ryan Newman 00:12:49 Amazing. And so when you think about how you went from getting this first grant doing theater to then launch, launching, talk, talk to Jess, can you talk about what that launch was like and how you came up with the name?

Jess Weiner 00:13:01 Yeah, so I had a really wild journey before I even got there. So I got that grant. I started a theater company and I ran that company for six years in Indianapolis. And then I had been at Columbine after the first big school massacre in 1999. And I had written a play I'd been commissioned to come to Littleton, Colorado. I was working as a producer and a writer and a director doing this social issue work finally. And then the world was changing, right? It's 1999. It's the beginning of reality TV. I want to now start to go back to the MTVs and the, you know, the programs that we're really starting to talk about youth issues at the time. And so I moved to California, I pursued, I sold my business in Indianapolis. So I was my first exit. I sold the interest of my theater company to a local theater company, and that company still exists today, Ryan.

Jess Weiner 00:13:50 So, you know, well, over 20 years later, that company still exists locally in Indianapolis. And I moved to LA with my sight set on how do I create a platform in the media? And I knew nothing. And again, I knew nobody, but when I got out here, I ended up very fortuitously getting, uh, scouted by a network, um, that somebody new, somebody new, you know, all these sort of stories, like they heard wind of what I did with young people and the plays that I wrote. And I got a television deal when I came out to California to be a talk show host. So, you know, I, I, it wasn't exactly what I had thought I wanted to be doing, but I was looking for that platform. And again, you know, the, the industry was pretty nascent in opportunities for a self-made, you know, woman, young woman who wanted to talk about social issues and things that were kind of touchy and intense to talk about, and they weren't journalism, but it was, you know, art.

Jess Weiner 00:14:43 And so anyway, I ended up getting a TV deal. And during that time I was preparing to do a talk show and I was writing a book and my book got on Oprah. And then Oprah opened, obviously Oprah opens doors. And so, you know, that world started to take off for me. And here's the thing that I took away from. It was as an entrepreneur, I was completely and always re like iterating my life. As I, as I went along with it, I was following industry trends. I was trying to stay ahead of some things. I was also by pure survival, again, trying to find the way that I fit. And so after I was on television for a while, doing a lot of like guest shows, and I was like, you know, experts on a lot of people's shows. I did Tyra's show. I did CNN.

Jess Weiner 00:15:27 I did the today show for awhile talking about youth issues and activism. When did that happening, where brands were coming my way. And, uh, Dove was the first brand to reach out to me, to ask me to partner with them on the launch of the campaign for real beauty. In 2004, they wanted a self-esteem and teen expert to help them shape curriculum and marketing and advertising content. And I had never thought about working with a brand before, by the way, was not cool to work with a brand back then, you know, very skeptical of what was in it for everybody. So I ended up starting to work with brands, and after a while, I built this kind of, again, accidental part of my business, advising, strategizing creatively, developing with brands. And the way talk to Jess came about was after the success of the campaign for real beauty, um, I was writing for 17 magazine.

Jess Weiner 00:16:21 I, you know, was an advice column is in a lot of places. And I started getting phone calls from other brands who would say, oh, well, we have a problem with our advertising. We want to be more inclusive. And somebody said, I should talk to Jess or somebody. We say, oh, we got a problem representing women. Somebody said, I should talk to Jasmine. So it kinda became a running joke about, you know, gett --

-- ing all this like incoming phone calls with folks, wanting to ask for advice that I named the company that, but ultimately what my company does now is, you know, we're cultural advisors and strategists for brands, helping them to better represent people in media, marketing and advertising and making sure people feel seen, heard and understood, which has always been a through line of my work, even with my social activism work. It's just that I kind of came back to my roots and found a creative way to work with brands who have bigger budgets, big platforms, and they need the help.

Jess Weiner 00:17:12 And so again, kind of iterated my career as I went along, but a very circuitous path to get there. And I take the time to explain that. Cause I think sometimes when you hear about somebody's journey, you only get those highlight moments. There were lots of low lights along the way. There was a lot of trying to convince people, this was real. This would work full care about social issues. If you can even imagine a day in time when adults that I would be pitching ideas to would say, ah, you know, young people don't really care about climate change. I don't really care about, you know, domestic violence. I really care about hate crimes. I'm like, yeah, we do. We want to be a part of the solution. And so it was a big part of, uh, of my journey was figuring out, you know, how to keep going when doors are slamming left and right,

AD 00:17:57 The invent Penn state venture and IP conference is one of the largest tech startup conferences in the mid Atlantic. The conference highlights innovations from high growth and emerging markets, including it, energy advanced manufacturing, biotechnology, healthcare, B2B, and B2C among others. The 2022 conference slated for April 28th and 29th is expected to be an even bigger draw than past years. If you're interested in joining us to celebrate the spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship, that's embraced at Penn state, learn more at Penn state, vip.com.

Ryan Newman 00:18:39 It's amazing to think that you were able to take all these skills that many people would look at and say we're in. So in some ways disconnected so many different areas of your life and your interests and weave it all together, not only to be successful as a business person, but also as a cultural strategist to these companies, when you started working with dove and the real beauty campaign, is that something that they brought to you sort of fully, fully packaged and you were just sort of inserting yourself or is it more of you are working with them to sort of cultivate and come up with the messaging and idea? And can you talk about what that campaign did? Because my understanding is it wasn't just the campaign itself, but it was all the work that you did after the launch of,

Jess Weiner 00:19:21 Right. So when I got approached by, by the folks that dove, it was to come on board as an advisor to shape the messaging and the trajectory of the campaign. And the reason why it was because the dove campaign for OBD started with a piece of research that was done globally by the brand. And the research said that 2% of women worldwide just to would consider themselves beautiful. So 2% of the women that dove polled would describe themselves as beautiful. And one of the things that we went back and question them on was how could we help you change your mind about that? Like, what is the reason behind all of this? And before the audience would answer that question, what we got from most of the audience for dove was, you know what, don't worry about changing my mind, help me change the mind of my daughter helped me change the mind of my niece, help me change the next generation.

Jess Weiner 00:20:09 And so what I did there, which was, I think a really big unlock with the brand was they had had one path in mind and we listened to the audience and we shifted direction. We had gotten permission to talk to their children in a way that many brands don't get permission and look dove, didn't have a product to sell to kids. It wasn't about, you know, it wasn't like we're going to do this because we've got like this new line of facewash coming out. You know, this was a true social initiative to try to understand the mindset of the audience around this beauty brand. And what the audience said to us was, I'm worried about the next generation. There's too much Photoshopping, airbrushing, retouching. The image --

-- s of beauty feel unrealistic. And I grew up on them as an adult, but help my kid not have to handle that.

Jess Weiner 00:20:52 And so that actually shaped the narrative of what I could bring to dove, which was I can help write the curriculum, write the programming, because I just spent all these years on the road with young people, helping them to unpack these big social messages. And so we really developed, I think the trajectory of the education materials for dove beyond this. So it was a campaign, it was a campaign to talk about real beauty and real beauty, not being an airbrushed image, but obviously being who you are, um, flaws at all freckles and all wrinkles and all. But there was a deeper message in there which was about media literacy. You know, we were, you're talking about 2004 when the everyday person didn't have the opportunity to airbrush and retouch on their phone. We didn't have a software like that. We didn't have apps like that.

Jess Weiner 00:21:35 So you really had a gatekeeper creating all the marketing and media that told women what was beautiful. And what we did was spend time with dove, researching the impact of that negative beauty message. And then we took that information, fed it back with consumer and said, help us change beauty together. What do we do? And so dove really became a partner with their audience in a way that I, I think many brands now try to do, but Doug was a real pioneer in that, and it didn't come without risk. You know, a lot of brands were not doing it. It was, you know, what's a soap company doing, talking about self-esteem. So once again, I took all, I leveraged all of my experience being on the road and educating young people and talking about heavy duty topics and making them palatable. And I brought all that experience to my relationship with this brand. And it taught me so much about how to have a relationship in brand strategy and creative development. And you're right. Like I have a lot of skills. A lot of it comes back to how I was taught, what I studied, what I got to do in my life creatively that still shows up in my work every day, uh, as an entrepreneur.

Ryan Newman 00:22:40 Amazing. It only seems natural. It makes total sense that only a couple of years after your work with the dove campaign, you went to start working with Barbie and Mattel. And, you know, I know there's been reports about if you take the actual dimensions of the original Barbie doll and try and put them onto a human form, it's, it's almost anatomically not possible. Can you just talk about how the work you've done with Mattel and, and almost in a similar vein to what you did with dove, but obviously in a different genre there in terms of adults versus

Jess Weiner 00:23:08 Yeah, totally a bit. The work with Mattel was so fascinating because, um, you know, when I joined forces with that company and that brand in particular, everybody has an opinion about Barbie. There are million studies like that, that love to kind of poke at Barbie, became a lightning rod for conversation. Barbie became a cultural artifact of the times, right? She was too vapid. She was too thin. She was too white. You know, it was all the, the standards that people were really railing against. But what I don't think people understand is she's a twelve-inch fashion doll 11 and a half inch fashion doll with kids who play such interesting stories out of her. So what was really interesting about working with Mattel was trying to get back to the roots of what's great about the doll through a kid's eyes and not through how adults were looking at the doll.

Jess Weiner 00:23:57 Right. And so what I mean by that is I understood all of the problematic narrative around Barbie, but when you meet the people who work on a brand and you get to know them as human beings, and you start to look what a thing, I think I'm really good at as an entrepreneur is seeing multiple sides of a story. I try to be that translator and that contextualized her. And so for me, I have to really understand, okay, what is the brand one and why are consumers so upset about that? Like, why are there, you know, where's the disconnect. And really at the end of the day, it became about kids. Like what do kids want? And what was really interesting about Barbie's evolution was changing her body, uh, evolving her body really so that she became more reflective of kids today, not just in body shape and size, but in skin tone, hair, textu --

-- re, eye shape, and eye color.

Jess Weiner 00:24:44 You know, that was really an important marker for Mattel as a 60 year old brand and as a legacy brand to evolve with their audience. And you know, that's not as easy as you might imagine, right? There's lots of people who are skeptical about that. And then again, I come back to, I say, when we put more diverse dolls in the hands of kids, what ends up happening is they see themselves more in the stories that they're playing out. And so we kind of went back to the roots of the magic and the imagination of Barbie. And so for me, my strategy with that company has been, how do you scale global diversity when your main character of your brand has looked like only a very small percentage of the world and, you know, Barbie as a brand, which is so interesting, has I think at like a 99% awareness rating, like kind of similar to Coca-Cola, right? Like it is a brand you can go to any corner of the world, people know Barbie. And so to evolve Barbie to shift Barbie, uh, takes a lot of stakeholders. So I'm just one player in a lot of people helping to evolve that brand. And it was, it is still, they're still a partner of mine. I'm 11 years into a partnership with them. And it's one of my proudest moments because I see kids play with dolls that look like them now. And I know that they're seeing so many more possibilities than they had before.

Ryan Newman 00:26:04 Well, as the father of a daughter, uh, I just want to thank you because you're making the world a safer place for young women who are growing up now to be able to see reflections of themselves out in intercultural society, which make totally make sense. Can you talk for a minute about, you mentioned having an 11 year relationship with Mattel, can you talk about this notion of having a relationship with a client to whom you're often going to disagree and be a source of resistance yet you, you still want to make sure you can find a way to stay in business. How do you navigate that?

Jess Weiner 00:26:35 I have so much compassion and empathy for my fellow consultants and entrepreneurs out there. Because look as an entrepreneur, everybody knows this, you eat what you kill. So you're hunting all the time, right? Especially when you're iterating and generating, you know, capital and you are trying to, you know, keep your business afloat. The deal with consultancy is it's really easy for brands to not have a budget for you next year. You know? So you're constantly needing to make yourself both relevant and relatable and useful inside of a business. And so for me, what I think has been both a blessing and a great opportunity has been, I get paid and I get looked towards, I mean, I think my relationship stems from me being an authenticity auditor for my clients. They want me and they need me. And they asked me to be the rub internally to challenge them.

Jess Weiner 00:27:22 But here's the thing. And this is where my theater roots come in. Nobody's going to get inspired by you walking into a meeting and saying like your design socks, and this marketing is harmful and you're terrible with people over here. Like they're human beings doing this job. They're copywriters and creatives and ad agency partners. Like there's a lot of stakeholders. And I think what I do really well is improv with them. I go back to my principles at Penn state around. Yes. And right. So the principal would improv is if I walk into a room with you, Ryan, and I say, Hey, Ryan, the sky is purple. And you say, no, it's not just, boom. Scene's done. It's over. Like, there's nowhere for that conversation to go. Right. If I come in and I say, Hey, Ryan, the sky is purple. And you say, yes, and it's raining.

Jess Weiner 00:27:59 Boom. The scene opens up and there's more to iterate on. I do that when I get called into work with partners. So, you know, I got to walk into Disney and I can't, you know, get all, you know, I can't get frustrated about like the state of Disney princess. I have to say, Hey, great. You know what, yes, girls love pink and sparkly. And they like kicking a soccer ball and science, like let's do the yes and approach. Right. And it sounds so simple, but it has been the big unlock with my clients. So I come in with a yes and mindset. I try to understand what their core business has yielded them. Why is it successful? Why is it profitable? But I am there to agitate. I am there to authenticate. I am there to contextualize c --

-- ultural trends and push them out of their comfort zone.

Jess Weiner 00:28:42 And it's not as easy as just being provocative for the sake of being provocative. I have to come with cultural stats and insights. I have an incredible team that helps me to do that. I have to come in as a storyteller and tell them the story of the audience they haven't reached yet. You know, I have to speak to them in both business language and creative language and sometimes even spiritual language because everybody's trying to do a good job. I'm working with dads and moms and parents who also want to make the world better for the folks around them. There's a lot of tools in my bag of tricks. So for me, relationships are the currency of business and I build long lasting loyal relationships. Um, because I think we get aligned on the same values and the people who hire me in longterm are hiring me in to do serious systemic change work. I'm not a day player. I don't take short-term contracts anymore. I don't do kind of like, you know, these sort of surface, I call it SFS and Ryan, it sounds fabulous. It signifies nothing. I'm not interested in dressing up. Somebody's problematic business. I'm interested in coming into big fortune one and 500 companies who have massive global reach and helping them connect better. So people are seen, heard and understood.

Ryan Newman 00:29:49 It's amazing, you know, sometimes to multiply, we have to simplify. And in your case, that meant really getting in with the right customers. How has that philosophy from a customer standpoint led to changes in your business over time in terms of team and size and scale. Because last time I checked, you're not able to multiply yourself and be in 15 different places at once. And you do, you do offer a very unique flavor. So how have you been able to scale what you're doing in a way that's effective and works for you?

Jess Weiner 00:30:19 It's a great question. And it's probably the bane of my existence as a small business owner in an IP related business. Meaning like the IP for me is my, my, my brain and my, and my relationships and my connection. I will say that I had an experience. So I've always been, you know, relatively small shop because it's been a personal brand business. You know, I started as a playwright and educator, a speaker, a creative, and then have built this consultancy around it. But I didn't set out to be an agency and I don't want to be an agency. So what I have toggled with is when I scale and you're right, like I have a high touch relationship with my clients. I am to the left and right of them with their agency partners, with their marketing partners, with their internal teams and stakeholders. And I have a high element of trust with my clients.

Jess Weiner 00:31:05 And so I had to learn, and I'm still learning over time, how to wean them off at times to just me and to trust my team and to trust other people in that space. But there was a time where I had more clients than I'd ever had before more staff than I desired to have sure I was making more money than I'd ever made before, but I was pretty miserable because it, it started to become evident that my clients didn't want to be farmed out. They didn't want to be serviced by an agency. What makes my business so unique is that it's small, it's niche, it's fast, it's flexible, it's fluid. You know, we, we really have the agility that our brand partners are looking for and, you know, scaling to size is not going to keep us agile. And so I had to make a decision.

Jess Weiner 00:31:51 I love that you said, in order to multiply, you have to simplify, I'm going to, I'm gonna use that. I think that's a brilliant mindset that I came to in a tough way. I burned out trying to like scale a business that I don't think is designed to scale, at least in my desire for this business, right? Like I want to be a complimentary creative partner to my clients. I don't want to run an agency where I give them cookie cutter solutions to things that, you know, are down the road. We are very high touch together. As a small team, I have eight full-time folks. We are, you know, very engaged. And so I think that has started to serve me well. So what do I do from a business perspective is I look at depth over breadth now. So a lot of our partners, you know, I come into a brand like Mattel and company like Mattel and a brand like Barbie. I'm working across all of the girls brands, including American --

-- girl. So I start with Barbie and I've been able to expand my relationship to these companies. So I'm really looking at deepening the kinds of dynamics I have with these partners versus kind of just having a long book or list of clients.

Ryan Newman 00:32:55 And you talked about earlier tools in your toolkit, another tool in your toolkit has been the podcasts, and you've had, you've launched a couple of podcasts over the years. Can you talk about some of your journeys with podcasting and what you're up to now in terms of your latest projects?

Jess Weiner 00:33:09 Yeah, so I started my first podcast in 2017 called talk to Jess name of my business, and the idea was to talk to other business owners and Changemakers and, um, and just be in conversation with people who are trying to move culture along and I loved doing it and then didn't do it. Like it just, it was a great project and didn't quite find a way to like incorporate it into the scale and scope of my business. And then in 2019 I was scaling and building this, you know, the company, you know, as I was talking to you about and I really burned out and I decided that what was part of my burnout was I wasn't back at my roots and my values and all this like emphasis on creativity that I really needed as an entrepreneur. I, when I decided to scale back my business and go back to the roots a bit, the pandemic hit, right?

Jess Weiner 00:33:55 And so I had had a couple of experiences in my life of losing people have. Now we're in a global pandemic. I lost some people during the global pandemic, and I wanted to talk about death and dying and urgently living. And so I launched a podcast in 2020 called we're all gonna die anyway, which in hindsight is a pretty risky title to launch during a global pandemic. But it worked, I think because the conversations weren't only about death and dying, they were about living and living urgently. And I think all of us have been reckoning with what matters most and what's the future of work and what's the future of our balance of our lives. And so I fell in love again, coming back to the podcast world and having conversations with people. And then that led me this year to partnering with Shonda Rhimes and Shonda land audio, and I heart radio to produce and create a show called dominant stories, which for me is about helping to challenge and change the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves, about our beauty, our body image, our creativity, our identity, um, and dominant stories has been a topic that I've been talking about in my workshops for a while.

Jess Weiner 00:34:58 I talk about it with my corporate clients all the time and dominant stories are those like that negative narrative that we could have in our head, especially as entrepreneurs, right? I mean, we feel like a fraud or an imposter. People are going to find out, I don't know what I, you know, say that I, I know, you know, I can't do this. I'm not worthy. I don't deserve this. I'm too old to start this business. Like all of that negative narrative I wanted to challenge. And that's what I call dominant stories. And so this show that just launched about a week ago is talking to artists, celebrities, storytellers, experts about their stories that they're rewriting and challenging and changing. And so I'm talking to Oscar winners and, you know, massive creative folks in the world and business leaders. But I'm also talking to folks who are using their lived experiences to change the world around them, which will always be a theme in my work and how we together can rewrite those dominant stories that look, if we don't examine them, they could end up guiding your life. You know, I know a lot of people who don't take risks as entrepreneurs because those stories are pretty loud. And I think when we can examine them and challenge them, it'll open up a life. That's more led by your vision and your values than by your fear.

Ryan Newman 00:36:05 Uh, you've said before that you teach what you most need to learn. And I think that's pretty evident in terms of looking at the early books that you wrote and how that informed your thinking in terms of working with global brands. And then here again in the podcast world, can you talk for a minute about the business of podcasting? You know, you mentioned having your first podcast, which you viewed more as a project and then your second podcast, as a way to kind of reignite and tap into your creative juices her --

-- e, you're talking about having major platform partners and, you know, with that comes lots of money in terms of advertising dollars, et cetera. Can you just talk about what you've learned in your understanding or, or observations about the business of podcasts?

Jess Weiner 00:36:48 Yeah. And I'm still learning it to be, to be fair and certainly partnering with the likes of Sean Deland and iHeart have brought me into a new understanding and respect for, uh, the business of podcasting and you're right. I think my understanding so far is there's actually, I think it's a lot like the wild, wild west as far as an industry goes, right. Everybody has a podcast to some degree. And, um, I think what I'm learning about the business of it is that much like the content thrust that we're in with all of the streamers, um, you know, niche focused, authentic content always seems to rise to the top. What I love about the podcast world is that there is a little something for everybody. I think we're still trying to figure out how people get paid. You know, a lot of this is a numbers game.

Jess Weiner 00:37:32 I see a lot of podcasts companies who produce multiple podcasts under their domain. There are a lot of podcasts companies, but you know, you need a distribution partner. You need to make sure that people are hearing much like it was early days in television, you know, as cable started to explode. And now with streaming, you know, the name of the game is customer acquisition and an audience. So a lot of folks are getting platforms who have tremendous followings, right? Cause the idea is that they're going to bring their followings to the table and advertisers are going to leverage against that. I think the industry is sort of right-sizing itself right now. I think people are still trying to figure out, you know, how to make sure that there's appropriate reach. How are we translating that into conversion for advertisers? And so I think there's a lot of, of learning that's happening in this space.

Jess Weiner 00:38:15 One thing I will tell you that I'm learning from this work is actually more in the creative space, which is I think that the greatest podcast that I've been listening to and really absorbed, especially more of an interview style than a fictional or storytelling dimension is podcasts for me are as much about listening as they are about talking. And as a host, what's been really exciting for me is refining my listening skills and recognizing that what people really relate to is the language in between the lines of what people are saying. You know, there's so much that you can pick up in a great conversation. And so it's trusting the simplicity of this format that I think is really important as well. It's intimate and that makes it different from anything else that's out there. But I think from a business standpoint, there's still a lot for us to be, um, exploring we're watching brands get into podcasting. I'm going to be doing that with my clients next year. We're going to bring some of them into the podcasting space. You look at trader Joe's has a great podcast who would have thought, I think there's a lot of opportunity, uh, there in this space.

Ryan Newman 00:39:19 It's so exciting. And it's been exciting to have the chance to learn about your career until now it's exciting to see what you're doing currently. And it just makes for a lot of inspiration and inspiring to others to think what you may do next and what, what possibilities are unlocked for them. You know, you talk about unlocking brands, but really you have the ability to unlock future entrepreneurs specifically in this world of social entrepreneurialism, which is something that's not as often discussed. People are so focused on building and scaling a software business and having that be sort of the only vertical that people define as entrepreneurialism, you've clearly been a trailblazer in the way you've defined what your entrepreneurial path has been. And it really just leads a lot of excitement to see what may come next for you.

Jess Weiner 00:40:04 Thank you. I feel, I feel excited about that too. And I feel so grateful to have this conversation with you and in a community of listeners that have an interest in, I hope in, in somewhat disrupting systems through their entrepreneurial efforts. You know, I think that there's, I think before, when I first started over 25 years ago, those that was a learning curve that I had to --

-- help the industry with a bit. Right. It was sort of like, you're right. You either like it wasn't, I wasn't selling widgets or gadgets. People didn't understand what, how you could commodify social change. And I think now businesses understand, especially with this next generation of consumers, it is a, it is a need to have not a nice to have. You have to be able to be a fully integrated social impact business regardless of what your goods and services are.

Jess Weiner 00:40:49 You know, people want to know if I'm going to invest my time, money and effort into you as a brand, I need to know who's your C-suite who's you know, who are your meetings? You know, what are you standing for? What's your carbon footprint? Like I do think, and I think that's a great host of accountability. And so I get excited when I meet new entrepreneurs who are looking to solve the world's problems out there. Like I think that triple bottom line is sort of more, it's more status quo these days. And I think that's great. It's only good for all of us.

Ryan Newman 00:41:16 I'm now going to turn it over to our student entrepreneur. And so that's Carly furlough. Carly's a sophomore at Penn state studying business administration. Her startupsharps and flats makes assistive devices for people who have disabilities injuries or limiting circumstances that who play instruments and Carly I'll now hand it over to you.

Carley Furlow 00:41:36 Hi, Jess. I am so honored that I got to be on a podcast with you, and I've learned so much from listening for the past half hour, but I have a few questions for you. My first one is you've worked with some iconic brands. What advice do you have for a small business?

Just starting out like mine?

Jess Weiner 00:41:56 Oh yeah. Well, I'll tell you, you have a better advantage than some of the big blue chip companies that I've worked with in that you don't have the baggage a hundred year old business has, or a 60 year old business has as far as expectation. And so what I would say is play into that, right? So come out of the gates with a point of view, small businesses, I find especially entrepreneurial businesses need to have a point of view about their business, about their consumer. I mean, your business has an incredible point of view. You're there as a service, you're there, as I would also say for me, it's about representation and showing folks in their full capacity and helping them to live their full life in that way. That point of view is really important for, uh, crafting and carving out your space and market.

Jess Weiner 00:42:39 And I think small businesses need to have a strong point of view. The other advantage that I think small businesses have versus some of my blue-chip clients is flexibility and fluidity. It's a lot harder to turn a publicly traded company around because there's a lot of stakeholders in that conversation than a small business like pivot and pivot often is what I will say. You will find that you'll start to go down a path and you know, I'm not talking about just obstacles, but if you hit a dead end, if you hit something, you start to change your mind. You learn something about your market that requires you to go in a different direction. The greatest asset you have is your flexibility as you're building. And that is a lot harder for me to try to get a large company to do than a small company. So I would say recognize the strengths you have as a small business, and don't be afraid to have a point of view and pivot often.

Carley Furlow 00:43:28 So my second question is what lesson did you find most valuable as a Penn state student that helped you get to where you are today?

Jess Weiner 00:43:35 Well, you know, I remember going to a lot of networking events at Penn state and I hated networking events because it puts so much pressure on you, right? To feel like, you know, you've got to leave with a, with a bunch of business cards and people don't use business cards anymore, but you know, like it to leave with a bunch of contacts. And what I would say though, that flipped for me was my senior year. I remember going to another networking event and somebody said to me, stop thinking about what your going to get out of it and start thinking about what you could give into it. And what that meant was when I started to meet people at these networking events, I stopped actually talking about what I was doing, and I spent more time cultivating curiosity about wh --

-- at they were doing. And when you are at a networking event and you start to ask somebody, you know, Hey, Carly, you know, tell me about, you know, your passion or, Hey Ryan, tell me about what's the biggest obstacle facing your business right now? Boom. It opens up such relationship commodity. And again, relationships are the currency of business. So I try, I learned how not to be transactional in those relationships. And I learned how to be relational. And that has made all the difference in how I connect to people. And it has opened doors for my business time and time again,

Carley Furlow 00:44:43 That was some very good advice. I go to a lot of networking events and I'm always here like, okay, I'm definitely the youngest person in this room. What am I going to?

Jess Weiner 00:44:51 And you know what, I'm, here's what I'll tell you. Carly, I have a pet peeve though. I will also say about like folks who come to me and they say, I want to pick your brain. No, you cannot pick my brain. My brain is picked over. My brain is full to capacity. What I want to do is have, like, if you want me to answer a question for you, if you want me to help, I love people who come to the table with research. So if you know, you're going to a networking event and you've got your eye on somebody who might be in a business that you want to get into, or you want to make that connection come prepared because it is a, you put the labor on the person you're talking to, to do all the work. It's a big turnoff. It's much better if you are kind of like, you know, if you were to come to me and say, Hey, Jess, I learned a lot about what you do. I've got one question for you. Do you have five minutes for me? And then you've got a great pointed question. You know, you get that relationship piece going rather than saying like, oh, tell me how you got started or what can I do to build my business? Like that just puts a ton of labor my way. So I would say for folks, just to remember, do your research and be, and be relational and, and try not to put the onus on that person to help you like figure out how you can help them.

Carley Furlow 00:45:58 And my last question is how are you able to build a team around your vision for talk to Jess? And how long did that take

Jess Weiner 00:46:05 It is still ongoing. So I will tell you, and this is the real talk. Maybe we'll save this for a part two Ryan, but here's the real deal building a team can really suck. And it is so important that you get it right. But I also want to dispel the notion that it's like easy to do, because I think as you're building a business, you're constantly creating and recreating like what you need. And so sometimes I didn't know what I needed. I hired really badly for a long period of time. I spent a lot of money not getting value for some of the things that he, I spent a lot of money on consultants and you know, it's a lot of trial and error. And so I want to paint a realistic picture that what turned the corner for me was being clear on my vision and values and trying to find more so like-minded people with those vision and values and then the skills can be taught or gained or acquired as we go along on the journey.

Jess Weiner 00:46:58 So I read a great book called from good to great, and it talks a lot about getting the wrong people off the bus and the right people on the bus. And what matters more is where the bus is heading. Um, not necessarily like who's driving and how you're going to get there. It's more like sharing that vision together. And so it's been a lot of trial and error for me. I've been a terrible boss at times. I have hired terribly. I have learned a lot. It's been really humbling. And I think at the end of the day, I'm starting to find, I have an amazing team around me. Now I've learned from some of those lessons, but it is a constant dance of trial and error, especially when you're making a business, that's rooted in something your passionate about. It's hard to get people on board and get them aligned. And so I just have a lot of compassion. I want other people listening to know it's okay. If you got to hire and fire a bunch of folks and what I will say that I never listened to you that I wish I did was hire slow and fire fast. Thank you so much. Just thank you. Good luck with your, with your work. And I think the business that you're building is needed in the world, and I wish you the best of luck

Ryan Newman 00:48:06 That was Jess --

-- Wiener. Founder of talk to Jess. If you haven't already be shorter, subscribe to dare to disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for the next episode in the new year. Thanks for listening.

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