

Joe Altieri 00:00:00 There was a point where my mind was like this almost out-of-body experience, where my mind was like, I can't believe I'm here right now. Like where it was like this, this surreal moment where my mind was just blown away that I was standing here in front of the sharks and that Shark Tank. When an episode airs, by the time it's, it's all done, it's like 30 million viewers hit that episode. Like, I can't believe 30 million people are gonna watch me do this.

Ryan Newman 0:00:31 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 the show today is Joe Ulti. Joe is the president, c e o and inventor of Flex Screen, the world's first and only flexible Windows screen as seen on season 11, episode 10 of ABC's Shark Tank. Joe started his career as an independent sales representative in the window industry, and quickly became frustrated with the flimsy aluminum frames found in traditional screens. Today, flex Screen is a leading screen manufacturer on track to hit \$30 million in revenue. This year, flex Green has gained international attention and earned multiple awards, drawing interests and eventual partnerships with powerhouse entities, including Global 500 Company, St. Gobain, and American television personality, inventor and entrepreneur. Lori Grier, shark Tank investor, and Queen of Q V C. Joe graduated from Penn State with a degree in business management and marketing. Joe, I would like to welcome you to the Dare to Disrupt podcast, and this is a first for us. You are our first A b, C Shark Tank contestant to, uh, be featured on Dare to Disrupt. So thank you so much for joining us.

Joe Altieri 00:01:55 Thanks for inviting me. We're gonna have a have a lot of fun today. I'm really excited. Great.

Ryan Newman 00:01:59 Well, you are a professional. You've been on tv, radio, podcasts, all sorts of things, so we're excited to have such a pro <laugh> in our studio today. But if we may, uh, let's start at the beginning if we can. Where did you grow up and what were some of the early formative experiences that you encountered in your life?

Joe Altieri 00:02:14 So I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, so right outside, uh, eastern suburbs. So interesting, uh, you know, area that I, that I grew up in. You know, my, my, my grandfather had a farm, uh, about, you know, five miles away from, from where I grew up. And then five miles I could be in downtown Pittsburgh. So Pittsburgh just an interesting, um, area, but I, I do talk about my grandfather a lot and, and, you know, spending summers and weekends on his farm. And I, I learned a lot there. I learned a lot from my grandfather as far as, you know, the, the ingenuity that, that was necessary to create something in my garage that, uh, hey, whatever you have in your hands is what you use to, to figure it out. Because I didn't have any, I didn't have an r and d lab. I didn't have a bunch of people that were helping me with.

Joe Altieri 00:02:55 This is just, you know, flex screen was born from stuff I could buy at Lowe's in Home Depot. You know, growing up in that way, uh, taught me a lot. I was a, I'm, I'm kind of a lifetime entrepreneur, uh, you know, everywhere from, man, this is going back. Some of your listeners, I have no idea what I'm talking about here, but I used to deliver papers when I was really, really young, which is actually, you know, back then you bought the papers and then you kind of went out, you know, around your neighborhood and, and got routes. So I was kind of responsible for the papers that I had purchased, you know, at eight years old or nine years old, whenever I was a paperboy. But then, uh, you know, all through junior high and high school, I did things, you know, outside of a job.

Joe Altieri 00:03:36 I hated having a job, although, you know, I was a good salesperson and I, and I, um, worked at some places where, where I could sell things, but I always hated having a job. So I would do things like, um, a buddy of mine, we bought, uh, screen printing equipment. So we did all of the t-shirts for our whole high school, all the band, the, the clubs and the sports and all that stuff. You know, we did things like that. I cut grass when I was in, in middle school to, to earn things. And, and even, you know, uh, as I was looking at the end of my high school career, I sold Mothe --

-- r's Day flowers and Easter flowers, and that's how I bought my wife's engagement ring. I got, got engaged, uh, to my high school sweetheart. And, um, we got engaged at her senior prom and we're still married today, which is, which is great. I mean, those are some of the, some of the things

Ryan Newman 00:04:21 You're, you're in this environment where you've got, you know, a farm, uh, a couple miles from you in one direction, a big city in the other direction. How did you ultimately decide Joe to come to Penn State?

Joe Altieri 00:04:31 So, a actually, Penn State has a branch campus, um, the new Ken Campus, not far from me. And so when I was applying to schools, I got accepted to Penn State, Maine, but it was just, um, it was cheaper. Plus I was in love, you know what I mean? I <laugh> I had this, this, uh, girl that I wanted to marry, and so it was just easier to, to go to a big school, but have a, a smaller, you know, smaller local where I could still stay at home. And so that was a big factor. I always loved Penn State too. Like it was, I, I grew up, you know, rooting for Penn State Football, and so that, that was big. I, I, and I did, I got accepted to Pitt, I got accepted to Duque, you know, I could have gone to, I, I could've used those as the local school. I could've just Dr. Driven downtown. And, um, instead of decided to go to Penn State, I, it just, like I said, there's just something about, something about the blue. I, I don't know. I don't know how to, how else to describe it.

Ryan Newman 00:05:21 So you get, you get onto Penn State's, new Kensington Campus, you're a student there. And, and how did you decide what to major in and what course of study you had?

Joe Altieri 00:05:28 So I was, uh, again, I, I was a salesperson, you know what I mean? So, um, and my, my family, I, I come through from a line of entrepreneurs. My, my grandfather had his own business. Um, my father had his own business, and then even my wife's side, her dad and her grandfather owned their own businesses. And so I knew that I was going to get, you know, kind of go in that same direction. And so going into a, a business degree made a lot of sense, you know, at least to try to get some background to what it takes to run a business. You know, I've seen a lot of them start up, but I didn't know how, how the, the ins and outs of, of running one. And it's, and it's paid off a million fold through, um, the experience with flex screen over the last couple years. Even though I, I wasn't thinking about going, you know, graduating from Penn State and getting a job, I still wanted a, a great education from Penn State <laugh>. And so, so that's really, you know, that's kind of how I, I went in that, that direction with that major.

Ryan Newman 00:06:22 So you graduated from Penn State and, um, you're, you're now a graduate. So what came next for you?

Joe Altieri 00:06:27 I started, once I got out of college, I started working for my dad's company. So we were doing like racking systems and conveyor systems and, and big warehouses and things like that. And, and that lasted a, a, a few years, a lot of travel. And, and I had gotten married, you know, by, by that time. And so we had a little guy on the way. And so, you know, it was time to, to kind of hang up the, the, the travel and, and do something else. And so I went into the industry that I'm in now, which is the window and door industry. I worked for a screen company of all things, um, in, in Youngstown, Ohio. And, uh, then, then I moved back six or seven years later.

Ryan Newman 00:07:03 And so you're, you're working for this screen company, you're in Youngstown, Ohio. And at this point, do you already have the notion that you want to be an entrepreneur? And are you just sort of looking for the great next idea, or are you just trying to feel your way as a professional work in the working world? And what were some of your early mindsets around this as you were working before you actually launched your business?

Joe Altieri 00:07:23 My industry works a lot with independent manufacturers reps, which are, they sell pieces and parts for a bunch of different companies, but they, they don't, you know, they're not hired by one specific company. They don't have a, you know, they don't get a, a paycheck from one company. They get commissions from several companies. And so the company that I worked for used those as well. And so as I was, again, I had that e --

-- ntrepreneurial mindset. This was, that was a good step into me working for myself. So I had started a business, a a sales organization, but it was just me. And that was, uh, that was kind of the first in, in my adult life, that was the first big jump into entrepreneurship.

Ryan Newman 00:08:01 And so you're, you know, you're running in terms of being a salesperson, you're out there pounding the pavement, you know, meeting with customers. And what were some of your early experiences as in that sales role? I mean, did you, many people would say that sales is the hardest job there is, yet on the one hand, yet on the other hand, it could give lots of opportunity for growth and advancement. Um, from a financial standpoint, what were your experiences like?

Joe Altieri 00:08:23 Um, you know, sales is, is a lot of times it's feast or famine. It, it just is. The first couple years it was peanut butter and jelly and packing my lunch, even though I was, you know, I was gonna be gone for, for two days. I'm, I'm packing a couple sandwiches and things like that, because there just wasn't a lot of money. Sales is, in my opinion, one of the most, it's probably the most lucrative career that you can get into if you're good at it and, and you're, you're successful. Even high paying jobs that people think about, you know, lawyers and doctors and things like that, there's a cap. There's only so much that you can make as a sales professional. It's unlimited, virtually unlimited. Again, you, you might, you might not be able to make \$10 million a year selling, um, window screens, but you can make \$10 million a year selling something out there. And if you learn the, you learn the, the traits of a good salesman, and you find the, the products out there and the companies that, that you can work with, there's a, there's a lot of potential. So again, the peaks and valleys were, were rough. You have to be able to stomach those and also budget for those as well. When everything's good. As a sales professional, you have to make sure that you are anticipating when it's gonna go bad because it, it does come, come up and down.

Ryan Newman 00:09:34 And so you have this early experience as a salesperson. What, what ultimately led you to, uh, start flex screen and, and go out on your own.

Joe Altieri 00:09:42 So in, in the window and door industry, most people don't make their own screen. So if you're a window manufacturer, you, you produce windows, you have to put a screen on that, on that window, and it has to be produced somewhere. Some companies do make it themselves, but most, the vast majority outsource that to another, another company, there's two really large ones in the US and I ha I was an independent rep for one of those. And the issue as a frontline sales guy, we, and window screen companies are just in time suppliers. So they're, they're, they're doing custom sizes and they're doing them in very, very short lead times. So, for example, a lot of my customers, you know, back then, they would place an order on Monday for 10,000 window screens. And there were all different sizes, and a lot of cases they would start getting delivered on Tuesday.

Joe Altieri 00:10:28 And some of my customers, they were getting shipments 24 hours a day. Every three or four hours, another shipment of, of window screens was coming. So you had that, you had this really short lead time where, where people had to get product out, but then you had a product that was not very easy to manufacture. Painted aluminum is what screens are made out of, and they're not, they get damaged really easy. You have to match colors. Um, you know, they, they scratch and dent. They're hard to get in and out, all that stuff. And so in our industry, that has resulted in about a three to 5% reject rate on, on window screens. And, and you're talking about millions and millions and millions of screens being produced every month. And three to 5% of them, you know, have to, have to be remade before a homeowner is happy.

Joe Altieri 00:11:09 It's a huge number and it's a huge pain point for, at that time, my, my customers. So I would go in and, and I, my customer would be like, why can't you guys come up with something better? You're a window screen company. You know? 'cause I was representing the window screen company. Why can't you do something better? And at some point I went, why haven't we done something better? A metal window screen with a rubber sp --

-- line was invented in 1907. So something that is over a hundred years old. And if you look at the patents, they look just like the screens that are on your windows today. It looks just like it. It's crazy that, that, that a technology hasn't changed in over a hundred years. So this was just, it was a hobby. I, I, you know, pulled my wife's Yukon out of the garage, you know, for, for a week or two, is what I told her I promised her.

Joe Altieri 00:11:50 And, um, this was just me trying to come up with something else that I could make a screen out of that wouldn't scratch and dent and get damaged as much as the screens that I was selling at at that time. And, uh, two years later, instead of two weeks, two years later, I finally had this ugly prototype of what I call my bubble gum and duct tape prototype. 'cause it literally, it's the, that's what it was made out of. It was anything that I could find. And I showed it off to some people in our industry and they were like, oh my goodness, this is amazing. You know, build it and we will come. And so that's how, that's how flex screen started. It was, it was just, uh, I identified a problem and it, this is entrepreneurship 1 0 1, right? I identified a problem. I came up with a solution and then, you know, figured out a way to get it out into the market. And so that's, that's really, that's really how it started.

Ryan Newman 00:12:39 And what was the actual key to your solution that the previous models did not have? Now obviously the result was that it wouldn't, it wouldn't easily dent or chip, but what were you actually doing with the material itself that allowed it to be so much more superior to what was in the market?

Joe Altieri 00:12:55 It's a completely rethinking of what a window screen is. I didn't go out, trust me. I did not intend for that to happen, <laugh>. Um, so instead of using painted aluminum, I started with spring steel. And Springs Steel has some properties that, you know, the, the tensile strength of springs steel is, is incredibly high. So you can run it over, you can hit it with a hammer, you can throw it off a building, and it just does not get damaged. You can't hurt it. And so that's a, what I was trying to accomplish. How can I find something that would not, you know, get, get damaged? But along with that, there were also problems with springs steel. Um, number one, if I made it as big as a regular window screen was, as far as the same size, it was incredibly stiff. I couldn't, you couldn't, can't even bend it.

Joe Altieri 00:13:39 It was like a garage door spring and how big the, the springs are in a garage door spring. And so, um, so I had to make it very, very, very small to get the flexibility that I needed to, to get it in and out of the window. It's also flexible, as I had mentioned. So now I had come up with a new way of installing and removing screens from, from the home. And again, these are, these are ancillary attributes to, to our product, but they were also, they came along and they ended up being positives to our product at, at, at the end. So that was a big thing. I mean, we, it was a completely different product, you know, instead of the little plastic corners that go into the corners, we actually have one piece that goes all the way around and, and we use, we metal form, we, we form the corners and bend them.

Joe Altieri 00:14:24 So, and then we had to, had to figure out how to weld that together and, you know, all of all of those fun things. How to get the mesh to stick to the frame, how to make spring steel, which is carbon steel resistant to, to the elements, you know. So there was a, there was a lot of developmental things that we had to do. Truthfully, I wish I was as smart as the product make makes it seem that I am. But it was just a lot of experimentation. It was a lot of, you know, trying stuff out, failing a million times till we came up with the product that it is today. And even the product it is today, the way that we manufacture it, we've changed it three or four times in our, in our, in our really short lifespan of Blackstream. So

Ryan Newman 00:15:03 Everyone knows that inventing the prototype is one thing, but then actually getting it to be produced, you know, any company that's producing a product knows how challenging that is. How did you actually then go about mass production or getting orders? I, I presume, 'cause it's a chicken and egg thing where maybe you're getting you --

-- r first order, but you don't have a production assembly line lined up. Or on the other hand, if you get a production line assembly lined up, but you don't have any customers, then it's hard to do one versus the other. So how did you tackle that problem?

Joe Altieri 00:15:30 Well, I, not very well <laugh>, let's just say that. So I, um, I was in the industry, which helps, like, I didn't invent something in the automotive industry, you know, I, and, and so where I didn't have any connections or anything like that, I, I knew the players in our industry. As I was looking at getting this from my garage into production, I started showing it off. I did the things to protect myself. You know, we, I, I filed for a patent. I had everybody that that saw it, you know, signed non-disclosure agreements and all that stuff. So, but I kind of did the world tour. I went out to, to a bunch of companies and said, if I can figure out a way to make this, do you want this? And they all said yes. Said, okay, my next thing that I need you to do, I need you to write me a letter saying that if I build this, that we'll come.

Joe Altieri 00:16:11 Because I couldn't figure out a way to make this to cost under a million dollars to get started as I came to the development side of, of flex screen wear. Okay, now I have the product kind of similar to what it looks like today. It cost me about six, \$7,000 to come up with one. I like just, just one. And it was only, you know, it was, I think it was like three foot by two foot. And so I had three of those made, and those were the only three flex screens in existence. And I was taking them around and I have to repair them. Like it was, it was like really, really, um, I had a case designed for 'em so that if I blew, they wouldn't get damaged. 'cause like, literally that was between the patent and the, the prototypes. Like my savings was, that was it.

Joe Altieri 00:16:54 So I had to come up with, I had to, to get some investors involved. And so the letters helped me to, to get the investors. So I had about 15 companies that said, if you build it, we will come. And so I got some investors together, we opened up the manufacturing plan. I found a way to, to manufacture it, at least the first way that we, that we did to manufacture it. And, um, opened the doors and thought that we were gonna have a million orders because I had all these letters, I had all the, like, all this support from our industry. And our first year we did \$400,000 in business, which didn't even keep the, like, it, that barely paid the rent. Like it was, it was miserable. So we have millions of dollars tied up in this. And so first year was like 400,000.

Joe Altieri 00:17:36 I think we did a million and a half the next year, but it was still like, not, we're not, we're bleeding, bleeding, bleeding, bleeding. So the chicken and the egg, I thought that I had gotten it right, but, but we just, we just didn't, you know, I didn't have enough pent up demand. And so we identified a, a new problem, um, which was exposure, you know, so when something, when something has been the same for over a hundred years, trying to convince the end user that this is something that they need is very difficult. Especially because I'm talking to the window manufacturers who are typically are two or three steps away from a homeowner. And so as I'm going out and I'm going, Hey, you know, Mr. Window manufacturer, why aren't you buying from me? And they're like, well, our dealers, you know, our distributors and the homeowners aren't asking for it.

Joe Altieri 00:18:25 As a matter of fact, when we try to push it, they go, what in the heck is a flex screen? How, what is a flexible window screen? We have no idea what that is. And so, so we had to get our, our word out to out to homeowners. We had skip the window manufacturer. We had to create, pull through demand from the homeowners to actually become a success as a product. So we solved all kind of problems for the window manufacturers. It didn't scratch and dent it tested better 'cause we're so low profile. So it actually tested better. And they're, they're testing with their wind and air and water infiltration, all that stuff. It was easier to take in and out. Like there's all these positives that are like, yeah, but we can't get that message out to the homeowners. We're, we're too far away from them. You need to do that. I looked at my budget and we had like \$13 and I'm like, well, I gu --

-- ess a Super Bowl ad is out. You know, how do we, how do we get the message out to the homeowners? And that was, that was a huge challenge for us. And that actually kind of led to Shark Tank.

Ryan Newman 00:19:20 And so this pull through demand, you're talking about your, your reason for highlighting that is because while the homeowner is the end customer, that's not ultimately who you're selling to. You're selling to the distributors and the dealers. So you needed to create the demand. What you're saying is among that end user to go to their distributors and go to their dealers to say, we want this product to then for them then to come to you and say, okay, we're now gonna supply the product. Is that, is that the issue you had?

Joe Altieri 00:19:46 Yeah, I'm actually one more step back. 'cause I'm selling to the window manufacturers who are then selling to the dealers or distributors who are then selling possibly to a builder or remodeler who's then selling to the homeowner. So, so yeah, I had to have homeowner demand, homeowners had to be asking for it, or at least willing to accept it. You know, there had to be some, some way of getting the, getting to them so that they understood our product so that the window manufacturers could push it through their sales chain to the homeowner.

Ryan Newman 00:20:16 So you're running outta money, you're having a hard time reaching your end, your end user. You need something big that's gonna be able to get people's attention in an Enter Shark Tank. Why don't you take us through how that all went about?

Joe Altieri 00:20:28 Well, actually before Shark Tank, and this is, this is really interesting. So we started, we went in all in on social media. So we had a, I had a, an intern, he was a college intern, and he was going for marketing and his, he was doing a, a, a whole semester on social media marketing. And he's like, Hey, I'm learning about this in school. Why don't we give this a, a try? And so we started doing a bunch of research, you know, about getting, you know, getting our message out on social media. And we just started doing it. Like we just, we set up a camera, started doing a a lot of videos with me, talking about flex screen, talking about our, our journey doing crazy stuff like running our screens over with cars and dragging them behind ATVs and throwing 'em off of buildings.

Joe Altieri 00:21:07 And a couple of them went viral. And so our, our demand started picking up, which was good. Like we, we started seeing big jumps. Now homeowners are asking for it, and it becomes easier. And then there's also things that people could point to, like, oh, you don't know what flex screen is? Well go to their YouTube page, go to their Facebook page, you know, go check this out. And it, it gave them some, it gave the homeowners some comfort in making that decision to use our product on, on their windows. But through our efforts to, to get to the homeowners Shark Tank, one of the Shark Tank producers saw our social media said, Hey, you're pretty good in front of a camera. Your product looks pretty fantastic. I think it's something that would resonate with our viewers. Will you come on the show? And in fairness, I I tell this story a lot.

Joe Altieri 00:21:50 I thought it was a joke because if the thing, when you invent something, especially something that people would want on their house, what you hear all the time is you should go on Shark Tank, but there's a hundred thousand people a year that, that, you know, go and, and fill out applications and go to the cattle calls, you know, do all the things to try to get on the show. And I'm like, that's it. The likelihood of me getting on that show is really, really small going through, through that way. But they reached out to us and I'm like, oh, this is one of my buddies, you know, playing a joke on me, right? So we get an email from, from the, the producer, literally, I, I went to our guys, I'm like, I think this is a joke, but how cool would it be if we got on Shark Tank?

Joe Altieri 00:22:28 And then the next day we got a phone call from producers that she left a message on our voicemail. And when I looked up the number, it was Sony Pictures, and I was like, somebody's really going far for this practical joke, which would not be unusual for my group of friends, or we're gonna be on tv. And so we call back and I still to go through a bunch of, jump through a bunch of hoops, but instead of th --

-- is being like a six month process, you know, going through the application and sometimes year, years and years, people, you know, try to get on the show from the first phone call until I was filming was, uh, like five weeks. It was crazy. And so they, they asked us, we're one of the few people that have been asked to come on the show, which is really cool.

Ryan Newman 00:23:11 Incredible. So how does that actually work? So you're, you go through the different hurdles of being asked to be on the show and then what, take us our audience members to what it's like to actually being on that stage when the doors open. What are you thinking? What are you feeling?

Joe Altieri 00:23:24 I'm thinking don't throw up, don't throw up, don't throw <laugh>. So, um, it truthfully, it is, it is the scariest. And I, and I'm, I've gotten closed with a lot of entrepreneurs that have been on the show. We do, we do, um, reunions every year. Um, I have a podcast where I actually talk to some of them and things like that. So, and this seems to be a universal thing. There is very few people that go, this was a, an experience that I wasn't all that nervous about. For me, it was the scariest thing I've ever done in my entire life, by far the scariest thing I've ever done in my entire life. You know, the people in front of me that I, I actually could hear their, their pitch got destroyed. And so then they're like, okay, it's time to go. And, and then you're there.

Joe Altieri 00:24:08 You're the hallway is the hallway. It looks just like that other than you can't see, there's a cameraman in front of the entrepreneur walking backwards the whole time. And literally they're like, if he falls, you walk right over top of him, you step on him and you just keep going. So, but the doors open and you walk out, and then you have what the producers claimed was the longest two minutes of your life. And I'm telling you, it is the longest two minutes of your life. So you walk out and there's a dot on the floor. So you walk out and they're like, you find the dot and you stand there, and until somebody says go, he goes, the director said, I will tell you when to start. You don't say anything, you just look at a shark. So you're standing there for two minutes, you're looking at the sharks.

Joe Altieri 00:24:47 The sharks are looking at you, you're looking at the sharks. The sharks are looking and they're doing stuff like they're finishing up, they're sending some text messages and putting away, but at this point, um, there's a ton of people in the sound state, you know, in the Shark Tank with you. And there's boom cranes with, with cameras that are flying around, and they're getting all of those shots. Like when, like when they have like the dun dun moment where they're like, I think you got you. And they zoom in on your face. It actually doesn't happen in that moment. They're, they're setting up those shots before you even talk so that, you know, you have a certain look on your face and they, like, that's the, that's the, you know, that's the look. So all this stuff's happened. Your hearts go, you know, you know, beating a Malam minute, then you have this pitch, you know, the Hi Sharks, I'm Joe UI teary from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Joe Altieri 00:25:31 You know, like you have that thing that you've been practicing for the past, you know, in my case, five weeks, like literally I listened to it, I'm flying out to LA and I have that in my headphones over and over and over again. Me doing it, and that's what I listen to all the way out, because you don't wanna forget it. So not, so then you're playing that in your mind like, okay, don't mess up, don't mess up, don't mess up. So there's all this, you know, crazy anxiety going on. Then there's that surreal moment where you're like, Mr. Wonderful sitting, you know, this is all pre covid. So I was, you know, I was, I was, was was close to them. I mean, he was sitting 10 feet from me. I mean, he was like, right there. And, and so you're like, I can't believe I'm here.

Joe Altieri 00:26:09 And, and so I had these like weird, I had these times where you're multitasking in your brain as you're pitching to the sharks, right? So, and they're not nice when you're in the Shark Tank, they're talking over each other. They're talking over you. Um, and I was in there for two hours and 37 minutes. That's how, that's how long my pitch took to, to film. So we had a, we had a little bit of a bigge --

-- r company and a little bit more complex. So we, it took us longer to get through the financial side, which doesn't make it, you know, all that ended up on the cutting room floor. But anyway, so as you are talking, they're shooting questions at you and you're trying to formulate the, the answer to the next question that you, that you wanna answer, right? So, so you have like these three things going on.

00:26:55 And then there was a point where about five minutes in to my discussion with the shark, so you have like, the pitch is like you on, you're on autopilot for that because you've practiced it so much. But then when you start talking to them, there was a point where my mind, it was like this almost out-of-body experience where my mind was like, I can't believe I'm here right now. Like, where it was like this, this surreal moment where my mind was just blown away that I was standing here in front of the Sharks and that potentially like Shark Tank, you know, when an episode airs, by the time it's, it's all done. It's like 30 million viewers hit that episode, you know, between primetime, the reruns, the YouTube spots, all that stuff. Like, I can't believe 30 million people are gonna watch me do this. So then you have that, that and added pressure there where you're like, don't mess up, don't mess up.

Joe Altieri 00:27:46 30 million people. So anyway, all that to be said, scariest thing ever. But I did a ton, a ton of prep work, um, with my, my partner. So for two weeks leading up, like once we knew that I was going to be going out there, my partners drilled me every single day. I had a standing, I had a standing appointment with one of my partners to drill me on our numbers, on what the valuation would be, how we justified our valuation, how, you know, what our, our long-term plans were. I mean, they were just, they throw some like, big curve balls that I wouldn't even think of just trying to, to trip me up. I went in prepared, as prepared as I could possibly be, which, which certainly helped.

Ryan Newman 00:28:26 Incredible. And just so we're clear, you were actually in there with the Sharks for over two hours pitching your company?

Joe Altieri 00:28:33 Yeah, so they, when you go in and they, they, they do like a big meeting with everybody that's pitching that week. Shark Tank's filmed in four weeks, so it's two weeks in the summer, two weeks in the fall. So that's a lot of companies that they, they get through in each of those weeks. But they brought us all together and they do a bunch of, um, meetings. And so the head producer, he got up and said, look, even though the segments are only, you know, 12 to 15 minutes, if you have a bad pitch, you'll be in there for about 20 or 25 minutes. If you have a good pitch, you'll be in there for 40 to 45 minutes. And so I, when I turned around and, and, and the, the one producer was like, you are in there for two hours and 37 minutes.

Joe Altieri 00:29:09 Like, that's the second longest in Shark Tank history. I was like, I was two and a half hours. And to give you an idea of how stressful it is, went back to the hotel. My wife was there, so she wasn't allowed on the, on the set, but I went back to the hotel, you know, we did a little bit of celebrating, you know, that, that kind of stuff. And I slept for over 18 hours straight. So we had, we had friends that were meeting us out there, and I slept through like, things that we were supposed to do, but I was just exhausted. My wife's like, I was like, why didn't you wake me up? She's like, I tried. She's like, you were like, you just rolled over. She's like, you were just absolutely wiped out. She's like, I thought it was the, the, the nice thing was just to let you sleep.

AD 00:29:51 The Pennsylvania Technical Assistance Program, also known as Pent Tap, supports small to mid-size enterprises across the state of Pennsylvania by providing facility energy and operational assessments, leveraging community resources, supporting grant applications, and driving workforce and business development. To learn more about how Pent Tap is supporting small business sustainability across the Commonwealth, visit penttap.psu.edu for more information.

Ryan Newman 00:30:25 Well, I'm sure everyone's gonna go and, and YouTube your video clip of, of when you are on Shark Tank. But for those who haven't seen it, what was the outcome of your pitch?

Joe Altieri 00:30:33 So we, we actu --

-- ally had three of the Sharks fighting over us, and it came down to Barbara and Lori. Barbara was interested right from the start. She had gotten this, this deal that we really liked, which was to set up a completely separate retail company. So my, uh, what we'll call my manufacturing and wholesale side would, she didn't want a part of that. So I was kind of leaning that way. Lori, um, matched it, and I decided to go with Lori. I went in like wanting to, to, to, to work with Lori. And so when she matched that deal, I went with her. Fun fact, Barbara dropped the F-bomb, which, and they couldn't edit it out because, because I went with Lori instead of, and it was just in a spot where they couldn't edit it out. So we were, um, on YouTube for that season. We were the highest watched segment because Barbara dropped the F-bomb and they had to bleep it out. So again, fun fact, you never know what's going to, you know, on online. You have, you have no idea why people are, you know, why people watch what they watch. But it was a big deal that she, that she cussed and they couldn't, uh, they couldn't get it cleaned up very well.

Ryan Newman 00:31:35 Why'd you want Lori, and what were the specifics of her deal?

Joe Altieri 00:31:38 So I, I wanted Lori, Lori has now, so we're, we're, we've become one of the top 10 companies to come outta Shark Tank. And so now she has eight of the top 10 companies. Uh, and so that meant a lot. Again, history to me is big. You know, she seems to either identify companies or help them get big. And so I wanted to be a part of that. And her deal was we would set up a separate, uh, separate entity sim just for the retail side, just a direct to homeowner. And she invested \$400,000. That deal has changed. And again, just a behind the scenes with Shark Tank, the deals that that, that you see on the show, it's kind of like two people sitting down at lunch and you do the pitch over lunch and they go, we should do business together. And, and they jot down on a napkin some basics of how, how this is going to work. And then you really have to work it out. So we actually changed our deal with Lori significantly. She's a, she's an equity partner in flex screen, and we licensed the retail side off to another, another company.

Ryan Newman 00:32:37 And how long did it take to negotiate the actual terms of your deal? Sort of post-production?

Joe Altieri 00:32:42 About six months. And, um, luckily it worked out for all of us.

Ryan Newman 00:32:45 Wow. That's great. And more importantly, how did being on Shark Tank either enhance or change or amplify the direction of the business overall?

Joe Altieri 00:32:53 The first thing is that the amount of the, the amount of exposure you get from Shark Tank is enormous. So we did a, um, we had a advertising consultant do some work for us because Sony sends a, a contract to you that is, you sign it or you don't, like, there's no, there's no, you know, now let me change this a little bit. They're like, if you wanna be on the show, you're signing this contract. And so our attorneys went through it and they're like, I wouldn't sign this, but you probably will <laugh>. Like, you know, like what? Like, it's, it's not bad enough that you wouldn't sign it, but it's not, you know, it's not overly favorable to the entrepreneurs. And a lot of it's about secrecy and, and things like that. You know, you're like, you, you're signing like a million dollar guaranteed judgment if you let out that you're gonna be on the show beforehand. And, you know, like, just, just things like that, that typically you wouldn't, you wouldn't sign. So we had a a, a consultant come in and say, and we asked them how much we have, would we have to spend to get the same bang for our buck as Shark Tank does? Like, can you like do an analysis? We really wanna understand this. And they came back and said it would be about \$15 million.

Ryan Newman 00:33:57 Wow. One five, 15 million,

Joe Altieri 00:33:58 One five, 15 million. I mean, you're talking about 15 minutes on Prime time. One of the, the most watched shows in the world, not just in America, but then on top of it, it's, it's also Shark Tank is the only syndicated show that that plays 24 hours a day, seven days a week. So Shark Tank is playing somewhere in the United States every single minute of every single day, and it's all reruns and, and all that stuff. So there's that. Then there's the, if you do partner --

-- with the shark, the exposure you get through their followings and things like that. And we, we ended up being on Shark Tank twice because we're growing so fast. They did an update episode with us the very next year. So that was, that was huge. We got another three minutes on primetime. The, the next year. Again, they tried to quantify it with a dollar figure.

Joe Altieri 00:34:46 I can't quantify it from, from my side as far as it's, it's huge. It's absolutely huge. You know, when you have the Shark Tank logo on stuff, and when you have the as seen in Shark Tank and you have Lori Grier as kind of your spokesperson, there's a, there's an amount of credibility that comes along with that that I, it would take me 10 years to, to get there. So it, I mean, it really, really propelled us, you know, Lori's still an equity partner, so I, I have a big meeting with a large window company and she's gonna jump on, on Teams and say hello and having something like that in a meeting with a very large company where you're like, Hey, this is my partner, Lori, you guys might have, you might recognize her. You know, it's, it, it means a lot. It, it really does.

Ryan Newman 00:35:29 So if we go back to the Joe that's in his, in his garage, tinkering in his grandfather's garage, and we would've pulled him aside and said, Hey, listen, when you, you get older, you're gonna build a company and you're gonna be on Shark Tank. Would you have believed it? Would it be a shock or would it kind of be sort of all part of the plan?

Joe Altieri 00:35:44 <laugh>? You know, it's funny. So we, we were just honored. My, my wife and I just went to a, um, a, a dinner where we were honored as the sixth fastest growing company in, in Pittsburgh. And, and then we also made the Ink 5,000, like the week before that. And so my wife and I are sitting there having a glass of wine at this dinner. I'm like, can you believe that this is happening? Like that? We're one of the fastest growing companies in, in our area, and one of the fastest growing companies in the entire country. And she's like, I always knew it. I'm like, I'm glad you did <laugh>, because I, I surely didn't, no, honestly, I thought what would happen was I'd come up with this cool idea and then somebody would buy it and, and somebody, you know, somebody in our industry would, would just, you know, go, oh, that's great.

Joe Altieri 00:36:26 And I would've been satisfied with that. But you know, this is, this is far beyond anything that I could imagined. I mean, coming to Penn State and speaking to the, the team the other day, like, I, I sat there again as, as I was, you know, five minutes before, you know, speak. I'm like, I can't believe I'm at Penn State. Like, I got invited to come to Penn State to speak about my experiences. That's, um, it, it's, it's huge, man. I'm terribly grateful for all the opportunities and, and there's a fantastic team that surrounds me that does, that has gotten us here. This is not Joe. This is, you know, a group of people that, that have, are as dedicated as I am. And we wouldn't be there without them. It's

Ryan Newman 00:37:05 Really incredible. And so as you think about the future, whether it's expanding product lines or continuing just to go into deeper concentration within the windows and door space that you're in, can you just talk about what the future holds or what your higher aspirations are for the business as you look out to the future?

Joe Altieri 00:37:20 Yeah, so we, we do have some new products that we're coming out with. So we have a, a patio door screen, you know, like a, you know, typically we think of it as like a sliding patio door screen. So we have a, we have a, a flex screen esque version of, of that that, that we're in the middle of developing. But the big change for us is we're, we're a manufacturer. So we, we own manufacturing locations, you know, throughout the, the country that are close to our customers. Again, just in time you have to get rid of logistics, you know, logistics, time and logistics cost. So you have to set up close to them. So we've just made the push over the, this past year where we've started licensing our technology to window manufacturers. So that is the next evolution of, of flex screen. So we had a, a, an automation company that has created a, an automated line that, that makes our product, that produces our product with very, very little labor and at a pace that is impossible with right --

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Joe Altieri 00:38:13 Regular screens. Like we're, there's a finished flex screen coming off the line every 12 seconds. It's, it's incredible with four people. So, you know, it used to take us to, to do the same amount of, of screens, you know, in a day, used to take us close to 40 people. We're doing it with four now. And so window manufacturers have started buying these automated lines and licensing the technology. So we're, we're becoming more of a tech company, a royalty based tech company and instead of a, a manufacturer. So that's a, it's a huge shift and it's paid off. Incredible.

Ryan Newman 00:38:46 Well, uh, thank you Joe for taking the time to share your entrepreneurial journey with me today. I'd now like to hand things over to a recent Penn State student, Kevin Harris. Kevin is the founder and c e o of Wave Breaker Technologies, a veteran owned and operated business making kayaking more accessible with its top mounted storage. Well, he recently participated in the event Penn State Summer Founders Program. Kevin, I'll now hand the interview over to you.

Joe Altieri 00:39:13 What's going on, Kevin? We, we had, we had a great chance to talk at the, at, at the, uh, dinner the other day.

Kevin Harris 00:39:19 Oh, yeah, it was, it was fantastic. I personally appreciate you coming out to, uh, Penn State area, coming back to state Go state, Ryan, thank you for wonderful interview before me and the introduction. I appreciate that very much. So Joe, I just have a couple questions for you today. Um, first off, physical products. Oh, man, I am, I feel like everything that you're describing, I'm either going through it or going to go through it in the very near future. Um, it, it's a little scary when you tell your story two years to make a prototype. Goodness gracious. Um, and so <laugh>, I'm currently kind of at the end of the prototyping stage and moving into manufacturing. And so the first question I have is very specific towards manufacturing and physical products. So in the beginning, and you've mentioned with some background that you were in the industry, um, I have not worked in the kayak industry, have not worked in the outdoor industry. I'm just a, a veteran kayaker who solved a problem and needed, needed to solve it for myself. And so how did you go about evaluating and choosing both the manufacturing processes, location, um, and then your decision making process through do we have someone else make this or do we buy the equipment ourselves?

Joe Altieri 00:40:29 Wow, that's a big question. So the first thing is with just about any product, um, that I've seen, typically there's multiple ways of, of producing it. And, and that was the same with with flex screen. The way that we produce it today is not the way that we, we started, the way that we produce it today was actually an idea that, you know, I had kicked around, but it was way too intense and I didn't have any historical sales for companies to get excited about. And when I'm, I'm talking about companies that, that would supply the raw materials. So I I, we completely changed our raw materials over the past two years, but starting off, I had to, I had to go with the easiest way of getting into manufacturing as I possibly could. Our brain material is, is Springs steel, that's a commodity. That's, that's easy.

Joe Altieri 00:41:17 But on the outside of it, we actually have a P V C coating around it today we're having that, that P V C coating extruded around the spring steel before I get it, that was next to impossible to find somebody interested in doing that for me when I had zero sales. They're like, how much are you gonna buy? I have no idea. They're like, well, how are we gonna put, you know, three, \$400,000 into the r and d of, of making this happen when you're not going to guarantee sales? Like, do you have three or \$400,000 to give us to do that? Like, no, absolutely not. So we had to find the easiest way of, of getting into the market as we possibly could. So we bought electrostatic powder coat equipment because that's, that's how the prototype was made. I took it to a, a powder coat company and, and, and had them, you know, spray it with a P V C.

Joe Altieri 00:42:05 So I knew that that worked and we could find that equipment used. That was the reason that we started, you know, manufacturing in, in that way. But we knew that that wasn't where we, we were going to end, but I had to get, I had to get some, --

-- some adoption rate out in the, out in the market so that I could get some excitement from the vendors and, and equipment companies and all that to, to get it to the point where we wanted it to, to go. You know, I, I think that there's a lot of times where young entrepreneurs, and I'm not talking about young as far as age, but I'm just talking about new into bringing a product in. They want it to be perfect when they get it out. And sometimes you have to, you have to go out and just do what you can to start this, get the sales out there and start getting some product out there and getting some feedback. And you need to try to do that evaluation. Like what is more important, getting the perfect product out there, you know, one that has no, you know, little hidden warts or anything like that. The, the early flex screens had a lot of little hidden warts, you know what I mean? They, they, it wasn't the best that that flex screen could be, but I was selling, you know, I was able to get product out there. And so that to us was more important than, than finalizing all of the, the little details of the product.

Kevin Harris 00:43:18 Awesome. Thanks. Does that help that? It's very helpful and I, I agree that I don't think there is a right way to do it. There's just a million different ways to do it. Yeah. Um, and so my next question, I want to kind of move back into a comment that you made early, is that you're trying to get this message out and you have \$13 in the bank. And so you've also hit kind of hinted towards, okay, we're a small company, we have \$13, how do we raise awareness? And then you went to Shark Tank. And so I would like to know this journey, getting the product to market with limited funds. And then, you know, by the time you got to Shark Tank, you were a bigger company than some other ones. And so how, how did your marketing kind of shift as you moved along?

Joe Altieri 00:43:58 So again, the, the, the product acceptance happened before Shark Tank. So social media for us was, was a huge deal that got the, the brand awareness out to, to the marketplace in a way that, that we couldn't do through traditional marketing. It cost us next to nothing. We have a, a video right now that's, that's we're, I, I wanna say we're close to 40 million views on now. It's a, it started off as a TikTok video. One of the guys just took a screen and popped it into the window, put, you know, whatever was trending, whatever background noise was trending at at TikTok at the time. And it absolutely blew up. And so now we had a bunch of stuff that's, that hasn't gone anywhere that gets 10 views or a hundred views. And so, you know, what we've learned through all of this is consistency of message, consistency of posting, you know, hosting, getting stuff out is, is a hundred is, is key.

Joe Altieri 00:44:53 You have no idea what video is going to do well, what video is going to go viral, what is going to go is, is going to be close to going viral that you can then make some tweaks to and then get it back out. We own a, a digital marketing company now too. What they talk to, to clients about a lot is this isn't, you know, social media is not a, it's not a magic pill. It's, it's a tool that you have to use consistently. Like a lot of people go, Hey, I put out six videos and our sales didn't go anywhere. Why isn't this working? Like, no, you have to put out like 60 or 600 videos and, and be consistent and get them out there all the time. And same thing with your, you know, your product. You just have no idea. Like in my mind, I'm, I'm, I'm like playing some different videos that you guys could do and some, some fun stuff that you guys could do.

Joe Altieri 00:45:42 You have no idea which one of those is, is gonna go viral. And then all of a sudden your, your online store blows up and you can't make enough or gets the attention of, you know, one of the big manufacturers that wants to buy the idea off of you or, you know, those types of things. Because they're watching, believe it or not, you know, these big companies, they are watching social media because they wanna see what's out there in their, their product category and they wanna grab it before it gets big. And so that's, that's a really good way of getting, you know, getting your products recognized in an industry that you're not familiar with.

Kevin Harris 00:46:17 Awesome. I appreciate that. So the last question I have for you here before we run out of time --

-- , and this is kind of for I guess all of our listeners, um, is how do you work through problems and make decisions when you know that, Hey, I'm missing 30% of the information. So, so how do you make decisions with, okay, I have enough information. It's not all of it, but this is what we have to work through. So how, how do you work through that process of the unknowns and then having to make a decision and move forward and, and dive in and accept the consequences?

Joe Altieri 00:46:54 You know, uh, there's a lot of decisions that I wish I had 30% of the information <laugh>. Not that I'm missing 30%, I just wish I had 30%. So, I mean, the first thing is having good people around you is vital. It, it really is. I talk about this all the time. There is not a decision that gets made at flex screen that is a Joe decision. You know, when people come in, they're like, Hey, I need a decision on this. My first, my first question back to them, and, and you can ask anyone on my staff, I hope you come in and visit us someday. But first, first question I ask is, what do you think? What do you think that we should do? Then I make them defend their, their argument. Okay, so you think you should do that? Okay, why should we do that?

Joe Altieri 00:47:33 And, you know, and now I don't even have to ask the question anymore. They, they come in, people come in and be like, Hey, we have this problem. This is what I think we should do and this is why we should like, it. It, it's, it's become part of our, our culture. You know, me putting it back on our team. I mean, there's a lot of that when it comes down to Joe decisions though, like, Joe has to make this decision. Like this is a, a top a top decision, you know, we're talking about, again, just to give you an idea, the, the automated equipment that, that we've developed, at some point I had to write a purchase order that was ridiculous, right? A seven figure purchase order that no one else in my organization has the ability to, to do that, or I wouldn't put that on them anyway, even if they did have the ability to, to do it.

Joe Altieri 00:48:13 And so, you know, it was, Hey, this is as much information as, as I have, um, our team is, is supporting this, and at some point we have to roll the dice. And, and sometimes it's just gut and, and, and gut is, I'm not talking about like throw stuff up against the wall, ki kind of gut, you know, see what sticks I'm talking about. Like, you know, you think about it and you chew on it and you're thinking about it in the shower, and man, you just feel that this is the right way to go. The other thing that you need is you have to have this, this internal dialogue that says, even if I get this wrong, there's gonna be something good that that comes out of it. I made a decision, um, about two years ago. We were, we were coming up with a new product and, um, this was my baby.

Joe Altieri 00:48:58 We, you know, between the inventory that we bought, the time, you know, all these things, it was about a hundred thousand dollars investment. And, uh, we blew it. We just absolutely blew it. It, it didn't take off the product. We didn't sell one, um, not one. It was about six months later where we had all this inventory and I had to make the decision to scrap it all because it was just taking up space and we knew that we aren't, weren't gonna do anything with it. And so, man, that was painful. But you know what we learned, we learned a lot of lessons through that. My team learned a lot of lessons through the mistake that, that I made. So, you know, one of the things within our organization, you know, part of our d n A is that I love making mistakes. I love when my team makes mistakes.

Joe Altieri 00:49:43 I love the, the education that they're getting through, the mistakes that they make going into to decisions with the mindset that even if this doesn't have the outcome that I desire, there's going to be something that I learned from. It is really important. It actually helps you to make some of those big decisions and sleep at sleep at night. Again, not, not saying that when, when I was going, you know, when I made a hundred thousand dollars mistake, trust me, there were a couple sleepless nights where I'm like, oh my God, what did I do? Right? But, but there were a lot of, like I said, there were a lot of lessons, you know, there. And, and truthfully, if we didn't have that mistake, we would not have gone into this licensing side

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-- of our business that is going to end up being, you know, has, has proven to be our future and the most lucrative part of our, of our company. Our company. That's one of the important things is make the decision with as much information as you have, as much guidances as you can get. And then, you know, go, go into it with the thought that I'm gonna learn something through this, through this process. No matter what happens, I'm going to learn something and, and my company, my company or me, we're gonna be better for having made that decision one way or another.

Kevin Harris 00:50:50 Excellent. Hey, again, I appreciate your time. I appreciate your advice. Uh, it's very helpful. Uh, thank you so very much.

Joe Altieri 00:50:57 No, my pleasure. If there's anything else I can do for you, certainly let me know.

Kevin Harris 00:51:00 Appreciate it.

Ryan Newman 00:51:04 That was Joe Altieri, president, c e o, and inventor of Flex Screen. This episode was produced and edited by Katie DeFiore. If you haven't already, be sure to subscribe to Dare or to Disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode.

Thanks for listening.

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