

[00:00:00] B.J. Werzyn: You started to formulate this concept of this home remodeling experience is not a great one. Contractors end up being not reliable. They don't return phone calls. There's not a whole lot of transparency into the pricing. They start a project, and maybe they show up one day, and maybe they don't show up the next, and it always ends up going over time. It always ends up going over budget. I thought, well, what if I could develop a home remodeling company that could provide this fast, easy, convenient experience for homeowners where it's minimal disruption to their life?

[00:00:34] Ryan Newman: This is dare to disrupt, a podcast about Penn State alumni who are innovators, entrepreneur and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host, Ryan Newman, and on the show today is BJ Worsen. BJ is the founder and CEO of West Shore Home, one of the largest direct-to-consumer home remodelers in the nation. Through a combination of acquisition and new office openings, West Shore Home has over 38 locations in 18 states and revenue in excess of \$750,000,000. BJ is revolutionizing a traditionally fragmented and tech adverse industry through aggressive implementation and integration of technology.

He was recently named an Entrepreneur of the year 2023. Greater Philadelphia award winner BJ graduated from Penn State 1999.

BJ, thank you so much for making time for us on dare to disrupt. This is a first for dare to disrupt. BJ, you're the first home remodeling company we've had on the podcast. Thank you so much for joining us.

[00:01:39] B.J. Werzyn: Thanks, Ryan. Glad to be here.

[00:01:40] Ryan Newman: So, BJ, we're going to start as we always do, which is at the beginning. Can you give us some insights into where you grew up and what some of those early years of your childhood were like?

[00:01:49] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah, so I grew up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and growing up, our family business was a window and door manufacturing company, wholesale distribution of building products. And quite frankly, that was pretty much the last thing I ever thought I was going to get into or ever really wanted to get into the family business. I was definitely going to go out and do something on my, you know, I chose Penn State and started there in aerospace engineering and thought that I was going to be an engineer.

[00:02:19] Ryan Newman: Amazing. So you're growing up, and can you give us some of those earliest memories of just watching your parents working in this business, which I'm sure was going on around you as you were a.

[00:02:29] B.J. Werzyn: Child, it wasn't that large of an operation. They probably had less than 50 employees. But growing up in the summers, whenever I was in high school, and even sometimes summers when I was in college, I would go back to earn a few bucks and worked on the front lines, whatever that might have meant on the manufacturing lines. Sometimes I went out and worked with the installers.

[00:02:50] Ryan Newman: So you're at Penn State, you're an aerospace engineering major. And clearly, at some point, there was some type of a diversion or a change in path for your course. Can you talk about that?

[00:03:01] B.J. Werzyn: I think it was probably my junior year, and I'm in the advanced calculus classes, and all of a sudden the math has more letters than numbers in it. And I kind of had a revelation then at that point of maybe I don't want to be a rocket scientist, maybe aerospace engineering is not the path that I'm going to go. And during the time when I was in college, the family business had expanded. They had opened up an operation in Florida. They had taken on a partner from Europe, and they started building European style windows and doors. So upon graduation, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I thought I was probably going to go

back to grad school. And then they approached me and asked if I'd be interested in moving down to the Tampa Clearwater St. Pete area and help them get this new venture started.

[00:03:48] Ryan Newman: And would you say at this point, BJ, would you say that you had an entrepreneur instinct, or was it more about supporting your family or exploring this new venue?

[00:03:58] B.J. Werzyn: I think I did have the entrepreneurial instinct I saw. My parents were always entrepreneur, and they had their own businesses that they operated. This was my first opportunity, obviously, to kind of venture into that world. It was, hey, I get to move to Florida. I don't have to go back to school for another two years. I can just kind of see what it's like to run your own business and then make a decision from there. So ultimately, it was actually a great choice of mine and a great opportunity because when I went down, I got to see the whole spectrum of building products, construction, home improvement. Obviously, I got a lot of experience on the wholesale and manufacturing distribution side as we were making the windows and doors. I worked a lot with builders and architects on new construction, and I also got a little bit of exposure and experience to the end market, the end user, which was the remodeling space, that's when you get to work directly with the consumer. And that was what I was most interested in. I had noticed that there was a pretty big problem when it came to home remodeling, that it was a really poor customer experience.

And I thought if I would focus anywhere in this industry, in this space. I would rather kind of be in a consumer facing business, more so than a wholesale distribution, building products.

[00:05:13] Ryan Newman: How long did you stay in Florida for?

[00:05:15] B.J. Werzyn: So I ended up there probably about six years. I graduated from Penn State in 99. And when I eventually moved back to Pennsylvania, it was kind of late 2005, early 2006. The family business was only around for about two years. We were developing some new products that hadn't been brought to market yet, getting some certifications from Miami Dade county, which is the most strict building codes in the country because of all the hurricanes. We got all of our products certified Miami Dade. And then we had an investor come in and offer to buy the company. So we decided to sell it. But I really liked the area, so I stayed in Florida, and now I knew windows and doors, so I ended up going to work for a company that sold windows and doors, both to the end markets for new construction, but also direct to consumer on the remodeling side. So that's where I really kind of got that exposure to both new construction and what they call R and R.

We would have builders come in, and this was early 2000s, so you got to remember, huge housing boom in the run up to the big financial crisis, Florida was absolutely on fire. They were building 510 \$15 million mansions like crazy, especially all along the coast. So we would get builders come in every day, and they drop off sets of prints. And a lot of the other guys there that were in the sales department didn't really know how to do a takeoff from an architectural blueprint. And I had a little bit of experience, but I just kind of dug in and figured it out and end up doing a lot of sales to builders between those 2000 to 2005 years.

[00:06:49] Ryan Newman: And you mentioned RNR, that stands for.

[00:06:51] B.J. Werzyn: Repair and remodeling.

[00:06:53] Ryan Newman: And so that's really the situation where individuals, homeowners, are looking to improve their own existing home. Or is it homes that are being improved by a builder that then somebody new is moving into? Most notably, no.

[00:07:04] B.J. Werzyn: So that would be homeowners looking to improve their home. So they would reach out, inquire, schedule an appointment to go out. We'd send one of our design consultants out, measure all their windows, take a look at their doors, whatever the project they were interested in, and then we would do the actual installation for them. So again, it would be providing both the product and the service, and doing the remodel and the bundling of the product

and the service.

[00:07:27] Ryan Newman: Is that something that, from an economic standpoint, does that lead to more efficiencies and higher margin, or was just better customer service? What's really the catalyst for doing both? Providing the product and doing the labor on the installation?

[00:07:39] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah. So when you're doing wholesale, if you got a builder or contractor that's ordering a lot from you over the years and they're buying on volume, the margins are obviously a lot smaller, whereas if you're dealing directly to the consumer, you're going to have a bigger margin profile. But obviously, customer acquisition costs are a lot higher because you need to find a new customer every single day, unlike a builder or contractor that's going to come back and buy from you over and over and over again, as long as you're obviously giving them good service. So not only did I see the problem in the industry of a very poor remodeling experience and being able to affect that customer experience more so by dealing directly with the consumer, I also found it interesting, the marketing and sales aspect of it, again, because there's no recurring revenue and you're trying to find a new customer every single day, you have to be very scientific and analytical about how you're going to spend your marketing and through what channels, and then going out to find those customers and turn that into a sale.

[00:08:37] Ryan Newman: And so at this time, when you were living in Florida, it was all under either the family business from your parents or a company that you're working for. In other words, West Shore home hadn't yet started.

[00:08:47] B.J. Werzyn: West Shore home had not yet started, right? Yeah. The original company was the family business that we had for a couple of years and then sold off. And then I went to work for somebody prior moving back to Pennsylvania.

[00:08:56] Ryan Newman: And BJ, when you're working for someone else, the good news is you're learning the business. The challenge is, know, in theory, you've only got so much latitude to really sort of run things the way you would run them. How did you view that experience? Was that something where you felt like you could go on working for somebody else forever? Or were you starting to have those entrepreneurial seeds being sown of wanting to kind of do your own thing?

[00:09:18] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah, that's a great question. So there were two owners of the business that I worked for. One guy was more so on the operations side, and he was in the office every day. He was there to help us with any of the technical aspects of the business. He ran the installation crews, and then the other partner was on the sales side. So technically, he was the one that was managing the team that I worked in. And, yeah, over time, it wasn't necessarily that I thought that I knew how to do it better, but I had a lot of ideas of my own and I didn't really see the value in the wholesale, the builder sales, the contractor sales. And I really kind of gravitated more towards the remodeling aspect of it. So as I started to think about, hey, what would this look like if I owned my own company? I wanted to move back to Pennsylvania to be closer to family, and I settled in here to central Pennsylvania, and that's when the idea of West Shore home came about.

[00:10:10] Ryan Newman: So you come back, you've got all this great knowledge and insight that you've acquired from Florida. And what were those initial days like of starting West Shore home?

[00:10:18] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah, so, remember, I went to school to be an engineer, so I had absolutely no business schooling. I was starting this venture completely on my own. So this wasn't a family venture. No money, no capital, no partners, no investors. I capitalized it with a couple thousand dollars. I went to Staples, I bought a phone, a desk, a computer, and basically just bootstrapped the thing from day one.

[00:10:39] Ryan Newman: I mean, this sounds really daunting. What feelings of excitement or anxiety or how much would you say that at that point you felt like you knew you were going to be successful versus there was a chance this wasn't going to work?

[00:10:50] B.J. Werzyn: Well, he always knew from day one there's a chance this wasn't going to work. Obviously, with all the dynamics that I had just laid out before, no business schooling, no capital, et cetera. But it wasn't really anxiety. It was just trying to figure it all out. Right, who are my suppliers going to be? Where am I going to buy my windows and doors from? How am I going to go to market? What's the name of the company going to be? What are our best lead sources going to be? What channels are we going to go to? What is my installation force going to look like? Am I going to use a subcontractor? Am I going to hire our employees and make them w two s? So every day was a new learning experience for me.

[00:11:23] Ryan Newman: And initially, what was your initial go to market strategy as it relates to a lot of those issues? And how did you initially start going to market?

[00:11:30] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah, so you got to remember now, this is going back 15 plus years. So from a marketing standpoint, there really was no such thing as quote unquote, digital marketing. People had websites. And yeah, Google was just getting started, but most advertising and most marketing then was just your traditional media. So the options were television, radio, billboards, newspaper, direct mail, marriage, mail, things like that. Again, without any capitalization, without any bank funding, I couldn't really afford to go on tv and advertise. So I would place an ad in the newspaper, or I would place an ad in, like, a home improvement magazine and basically sit there and wait for the phone to ring. And when the phone would ring, I'd go out and I'd meet with the customer. I would measure all their windows, I would demonstrate the quality of the windows. I would sell the job, I would order the product, I would receive the product. I'd go out on the day of the install with the installers, collect the check from the homeowner, and then basically reinvest that right back into a new advertisement because I needed to find my next customer.

[00:12:31] Ryan Newman: So your cost of acquisition was pretty high initially, I assume?

[00:12:34] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah, but I made it work because I didn't have to do it at huge scale. Right. It was just myself and at the time I was using. Today we have all of our own w two employee installers. But that's not how I started out. I started out with subcontractors, so I didn't have a huge amount of overhead or a huge need to generate large quantities of leads. So I was very efficient at it.

[00:12:56] Ryan Newman: And so you get off the ground initially. You have that initial experience in terms of the advertising, the customer acquisition. And how did you start to think about how to scale and grow this business? Because the way you first described it, where you're personally involved in doing the measurements, going out for the, oversee the installation, collecting the check, putting that money back in the business for advertising doesn't sound very scalable yet. The business today is an enormous business, and so take us through the scaling process.

[00:13:24] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah. So obviously the first five years, I would call it, were more focused on building the systems, especially on the customer acquisition side. So it was building the right marketing system, the blend of marketing that we're using. Right. How much it costs to create an inquiry, how much it costs to schedule an in home sales appointment, what the closing rates are, your average sale, something we call NSLI. So net sale per lead issued, hiring a sales manager, recruiting, hiring, staffing, and training sales reps that can go out and give that same level of high touch customer experience that I was giving myself. Right. Go out and meet with a customer, do a good needs analysis, find out exactly what type of problem they're looking to solve, give them a solution to that problem, offer them consumer financing if they want, was obviously something that I had to figure out in the first few years, because a lot of these consumer financing platforms and lenders aren't necessarily looking to set up startups. They're looking for businesses that are a little more stable. So finding a source of funding for my customers that either couldn't pay cash or they might have wanted some sort of like promotional financing. Twelve months, same as cash. So it was really trying to figure all of that front end out of marketing and sales.

[00:14:38] Ryan Newman: BJ, you've spent so much time with the consumer, the end consumer in a direct to consumer business that you run, what is the mindset of that consumer that's looking to improve their home? What are their objectives? What are they setting out to do? And how is West Shore home essentially helping them achieve their ultimate objectives?

[00:14:55] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah, so I started out in windows and doors, but we eventually got into bathroom modeling. And that's kind of an interesting story, because at this time I always grew the business from day one. I think the first year we did like a million dollars in revenue. The second year was like 3 million, then 6 million. So by the time I got to my fourth or fifth year, we were doing maybe ten or \$15 million in annual revenue, which was a nice size window dealer at that time, and I was networking with other larger dealers. And one of the first questions he asked me was, do you guys do bathroom remodels?

And at the time I thought it was just the most bizarre question. I was like, no, we're a window and door company. Why would we do a bathroom model? I said, do you do bathroom models? He said, yeah, man, it's a great product. It's easy to generate leads for, it's a big need for customers. Sometimes they remodel the bathroom because they just want to upgrade and they want it to look more modern, but sometimes they actually need to do it. The tub might be leaking or they might be older, and they don't want to have to step over a tub, so they want something that's more accessible. He said, it's easy to sell, it's easy to install. We do most of these installs in a day or two.

The profit margins are very similar to windows and doors, and it's just a great category and another vertical to get just. Again, at first I thought it was a crazy question, a bizarre concept, but I said, you know what? He kind of makes a good point. And he was operating out of Louisville, Kentucky, and I asked him if I could come down and visit him. So I went down to visit him and I talked to the marketing staff, and they told me, absolutely easier to generate leads for bathroom models than it is necessarily for window replacement. The salespeople loved it, the installers loved it, and actually got to talk to a few of his customers. And what they said they liked the most was how fast and easy and convenient it was that they didn't want their bathroom torn up for weeks or months on end, that they were able to get in and get out right away. And that's where I started to kind of formulate this concept of, well, this home remodeling experience is not a great one.

Contractors end up being not reliable. They don't return phone calls. There's not a whole lot of transparency into the pricing. They start a project, and maybe they show up one day, and maybe they don't show up the next, and it always ends up going over time. It always ends up going over budget. I thought, well, what if I could develop a home monitoring company that could provide this fast, easy, convenient experience for homeowners where it's minimal disruption to their life? Because I think a lot of people really love the outcome of the home remodeling project, but they hate the process of it.

It's a headache at best, a nightmare at worst. And most of the time, it's because these projects just drag out forever, and they just want it to be done. So that's when I really said, you know what? We are going to focus on building systems and building processes to get in, make a happy customer, and get out and let them get on with their life.

[00:17:45] Ryan Newman: It's incredible to think that something that is a pain point for customers is really the key to what you're alleviating. That leads to just tremendous growth. It sounds so simple, BJ, but I'm sure it is and was really hard. How do you actually solve as a business, for this pain point of delays and things taking time? And what is it that you're able to do that allows it to be done so efficiently?

[00:18:10] B.J. Werzyn: So the first part, I think, which was a critical decision, and as I mentioned before, when I first started, we were using subcontractors, and that's the norm in the industry, right? Most home remodeling companies are specialized contractors. Whether you're doing windows and doors, bath remodels, you might be doing kitchens, roofs, siding. Most of the time that last mile is subcontracted out to someone else. And I decided early on I didn't want to give up that control.

I wanted to have the installers work for the company feel like they're part of the team, drive company trucks, wear company uniforms, and follow a standard operating procedure designed by the company so that we could control that quality and that we can control that customer experience. So owning that last mile is a huge piece to this. And then when it comes to scalability, to your question, as I've got friends in this industry that are all over the country, we were in bigger networking groups, companies from Boston and California and New Orleans and Kansas City, and we would always get together a few times a year and we would be sharing best practices.

And when I started getting really interested in scale, I would start talking about operational excellence or how you make the process more seamless and more stress free for the consumer. And I couldn't really get anyone's attention when I started those types of conversations. They would always lead back to what I was talking about earlier. Marketing, advertising, lead generation. Right? They wanted to know, hey, who's using this new thing called Facebook to generate leads? And how do you optimize your search engine marketing or search engine optimization on Google?

And I kind of realized at that point, this is a 500 billion dollar industry. Every year, homeowners spend a half a trillion dollars remodeling their homes. It's a terrible customer experience, and there's no nationally scaled remodeler. So when you think about it, it's kind of crazy. They're spending \$500 billion despite the terrible customer experience. And when you're thinking about the size of the industry and the size of the tam, the total addressable market, it's the same size as the restaurant industry, it's the same size as footwear and apparel. And we could spend the rest of the day, you and I, naming national brands when it comes to restaurants, naming national brands when it comes to footwear and apparel. Yet there's not one national remodeling company.

It started to really make sense to me that, hey, nobody's really trying to figure out how to scale this thing. Nobody's really trying to figure out how to be able to replicate this system in multiple markets or in multiple product lines. So I really spent like the next five years trying to crack that code. So the first thing I did was I hired a lean consultant. Which might sound kind of odd that we're hiring a lean consultant for a services business. Typically, when you think about lean, you think about manufacturing, you think about a shop floor, you think about how to flow widgets through a manufacturing shop floor. But I wanted to see what that would look like if we mapped out a value stream for our process.

So I hired a lean consultant. We did a value stream map, and we realized there are 67 processes to get a home remodeling project done from the time the phone rings and you get that initial inquiry all the way through the end of the project. So we took those 67 processes and we collected data, we call them data tags for each individual process. Right. How many things flow through that process on a given time period? What all the disruptions are, what the first pass yield is, and we look for every opportunity to eliminate waste. Are there certain things that we're doing here that don't even need to be done? Are there certain things in this process that's causing pain or frustration for the customer? And we eliminated anywhere there was waste. And then we automated everything that we could to try to make this the fastest, easiest, most convenient home remodeling experience we possibly could.

[00:22:09] Ryan Newman: Incredible. I mean, this is amazing just to hear you talk about this, because in many ways, you took your engineering background and applied an engineering rigorous approach to an industry that previously had never been mapped in that way before.

[00:22:22] B.J. Werzyn: Absolutely. And I get that question. A lot of you founded this company on your own. You had no business schooling. You really had no capital to get it going. And how have you been able to grow something that's approaching a billion dollars in annual sales? And I said, well, it was really systems thinking, a system for everything. Whether, like I mentioned earlier, on your marketing and your sales side or your operational side, everything needs to be systematized. And that really kind of started with that engineering mindset, and then it flowed into that lean transformation that we did and then eventually into our technology systems. So everywhere along that value stream, where we created automation, we started to build a tech platform so that we could technology enable every single step of the process.

[00:23:05] Ryan Newman: Well, and the difficulty is, it's not like you can go and buy some off the shelf technology solution because it's fit to an industry that previously had not been served in this way by technology. So I imagine that must have taken a really big investment and really locking arms with the folks that you were able to partner with, to actually develop the technology, to even be able to apply and measure the different items in your business that you're focused on.

[00:23:27] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah, that's spot on. Any sort of software that was industry specific that was out there was more of a CRM or like a customer relations type of system that was able to calendarize your sales appointments, that could track all your metrics for marketing and track all your metrics for sales. But it didn't really go beyond that, there wasn't a whole lot that was available for operations. So to your point, we had to basically build it from scratch and we chose salesforce.com to be our platform and we started building out a custom instance of that and that's been now a ten year process, but everything through the company flows through that system and that's where the single source of truth is, where all of our data lies. So it's not the only software that we use, but it's connected to everything else.

[00:24:15] Ryan Newman: But to your point before that off the shelf CRM system that would not really work for you is back to the whole sales and marketing and front end of the business as opposed to the operational process orientation, which is really what's driving the efficiency of your business today.

[00:24:30] B.J. Werzyn: That's absolutely correct.

[00:24:31] Ryan Newman: Incredible. So you've built this business, you mentioned you're approaching a billion dollars in sales, so over \$750,000,000 of revenue, which is extraordinary, 3000 employees. You're in over 18 states, 38 offices. It's incredible what you've built. What does the future look like for West Shore home?

[00:24:50] B.J. Werzyn: Well, our mission is to be America's most admired home remodeling brand and we define that with a vivid description of what that would possibly look like. So first of all, we need to have a national footprint. And when I first developed this vision framework was going back to around 2015, 2016, and we called this our big, hairy, audacious goal, our bhag. A lot of that vision framework was developed from books that I read by an author named Jim Collins.

Good to great, built to last, great by choice. So we put out the core purpose, the core values, and we defined our bhag as the most admired home remodeling brand because again, I noticed this 500 billion dollar industry with no national brands. So we wanted a national footprint. At that time we defined that as 30 locations. I thought if we could get into 30 major msas, we would have a national footprint. So here we are. Today we're at 38. I would say we're still not probably at a national footprint. We're still not in New York, we're still not in California, but we're really starting to get there. We stretch from our home base here in Pennsylvania all the way down to Florida and out west as far as Denver and Salt Lake City and Phoenix. I think we're getting close to that national footprint.

The second was to have the highest mps or net promoter score in the industry. And we tracked that very carefully. We look at our customer experience every single day, and we have over 30,005 star reviews with an average star rating of 4.8 out of five stars. Which is pretty crazy when you actually think about what we do. We go into someone's home and we tear it apart and we put it all back together in a day or two. So there's a lot of things that can go wrong, but we're really proud of that 4.8 out of five star rating. So having the national footprint, given that great customer experience, to have the highest net promoter score in the industry and being a destination employer, I knew to scale this as it is a home services business, and because we don't outsource the last mile and we employ all of our installers, that we had to be really focused on our culture. We had to be really focused on our development of our people and really be viewed as a destination employer in an industry that's maybe not quite that sexy. Right. A lot of people aren't growing up thinking, boy, I really want to get into construction or I really want to get into home remodeling.

So building a people system and building all the systems around the people was just another one of those engineering mindsets that we had to apply to. Recruiting, onboarding, training, coaching, leadership development. Becoming a destination employer was definitely one of those things that we thought we had to do to become that national brand.

[00:27:22] Ryan Newman: Well, for somebody without a formal business experience, you sure talk like a very seasoned business executive, which obviously you've grown to become. You mentioned the role that books play in that. How have you built out your team? Or how have you thought about the role that you play in the organization versus the role that others play? Because just hearing you, I mean, it's literally not enough hours in the day to do all the things that you do. So how do you view your role today, BJ, in running the business?

[00:27:47] B.J. Werzyn: Yeah. So as the chief executive officer, I put a really high importance and a high emphasis on hiring good people, people that fit the culture. Right? It's not a culture for everyone. We went from 40 or \$50 million in revenue to \$800 million of revenue in a relatively short amount of time. And that high growth nature of the company is aggressive. Right. We have to come in every day and we have to get after it. There's no excuses. I had to first make sure that everybody that was brought into this organization kind of fit that mindset, that default, aggressive, extreme ownership mindset. And as I was building out the executive leadership team, we got a really good mix of senior level executives that brought a good resume and business knowledge with them to West Shore home, as well as some homegrown folks here that really make up a pretty dynamic team.

[00:28:35] Ryan Newman: It's really incredible to think the growth that you've had and what you've achieved. What's also notable is you talked earlier about your love for Penn State, and you've done some pretty remarkable, innovative things at Penn State as well. If we could just pivot for a minute to talk about the role that West Shorehome has played in the space with respect to nil name, image and likeness, which is a big change in sports. Can you just talk about your support of Penn State athletics and the role that that's played as well and how the evolving industry has taken shape and you've tried to be a leader there also.

[00:29:04] B.J. Werzyn: It's been an interesting journey here over the last couple of years, trying to even figure out what this whole name, image and likeness thing is. A friend of mine who our daughters are best friends, they go to the same school. He played professional football for seven years and played college ball at Princeton, and his roommate is actually on the Penn State football staff. And the two of them were talking and they said, hey, look, we're all trying to figure this out together and figure out what direction the landscape of college football is going to go because it's the law of the land now, right? It passed the Supreme Court by a 90 vote and it's just the new way of doing business in college football. But everybody was trying to figure it out and he said, well, you guys should talk to my friend BJ. He found it and he runs a large organization that does a lot of cool things with marketing and social media, and he might have some ideas.

So we set up a meeting and I went and met with coach Franklin and he basically said, this is the new era of college football and we're all trying to figure it out together. And we know there's going to be a big education piece around it. A lot of the administration, a lot of the alumni, a lot of the boosters of the football program just don't understand that it's okay to pay players, right? That was always taboo for many, many years, just getting people to understand that this is legal and there's a right way and a wrong way to do it. So my friend Ross, who had connected me is from the reading via missing area, and he knew of Nick Singleton, and Nick was the Gatorade player of the year. He was a five star recruit. He was an early enrollee at Penn State and Ross said, look, this is a good kid, comes from a good family. If you wanted to support an individual athlete, I think this would be a great place to start. So that's kind of how we first got started in it. We did the deal with Nick, and he's helped us with some different social media things, and it's just a different way for us to get our brand out there instead of just advertising over and over and over again. Here's a way that I can support my university that I have great love for and the football program that I want to see do well to be able to take care of kids that are playing for that football program.

And then as we started thinking about, well, how can we really make this a win win? There's a football collective for nil called Lions Legacy Club, and we were working together with them to become the corporate sponsor so that we could help more than just one kid. We designed the program a lot around giving back to the community because that's big for us here at West Shore home and getting involved with charitable initiatives that maybe we were already doing. So we do toys for tots every year, and we do a big toy drive around the holidays for the kids. We do stuff at the beginning of the school year with United Way for stuff, the bus, so we can get school supplies to school districts that need that. We do a lot with cancer awareness and breast cancer and the four diamonds.

So we did the presenting sponsor for Lions Legacy Club, and we helped the guys lift their own brand and be able to give back to the community. So West Shore home wins, the student athletes win, and we're able to give back to the community together.

[00:32:10] Ryan Newman: Thank you, BJ, for all you do to support Penn State and Penn State athletics and for taking the time today to share your entrepreneurial journey with me. Now I'd like to hand things over to our current Penn State student, Jennifer Natalie. Jennifer is a senior at Penn State majoring in finance with a minor in corporate innovation and entrepreneurship. She is the president of the Corporate Innovation and Entrepreneurship Society at Penn State. Jennifer, I'll now hand the interview over to you.

[00:32:39] B.J. Werzyn: Great.

[00:32:39] Jennifer Natale: Thank you so much, Ryan. I truly appreciate it, and it's so great to meet you. BJ.

[00:32:44] B.J. Werzyn: Great to meet you.

[00:32:45] Jennifer Natale: As a current student involved in entrepreneurship, I'm currently the president of the Corporate Innovation Entrepreneur Society. And the goal of our society is encouraging entrepreneurship with our members. And so my first question to you is, what goals should a student entrepreneur have within their first business, as our members are trying to create their first.

[00:33:07] B.J. Werzyn: Business I think that's great. I know a lot of young adults that are growing up may not necessarily know exactly what they want to do for the rest of their lives when they turn 18 and they commit to a school to go to. And typically the general advice would be, well, go get a business degree. If you get a business degree, you have a lot of different options and avenues to go. But entrepreneur is a little bit different than business, right? It's being an entrepreneur, it's solving problems that can help the greater society. So I think what you guys are doing is great. And I think one of the keys to being an entrepreneur is you can really kind of customize that to what you're really passionate about. So if you're going to get in business for yourself, if you're going to own and operate a company, if you're going to put your blood, sweat and tears into something, it might as well be something that you really are passionate about.

And that when you wake up every day, you're super excited to build that business because you absolutely love what you're doing. Great.

[00:34:01] Jennifer Natale: No, I really appreciate that. I think for us, our main drive is making sure that they have that passion for their business because we really want to focus on having them do something they really want to do. But sometimes it doesn't always work out. And with that, what obstacles did you face when you first launched your startup? And what advice do you give in regards to overcoming those early stage obstacles within a business?

[00:34:25] B.J. Werzyn: Being an entrepreneur may sound glamorous and owning your own business may sound really great, but what people have to understand under the surface is a lot of hard work, right? You're going to be living this and breathing this business every single day. You're going to be up at night thinking about it. So it is rolling up your sleeves, it's getting your hands dirty, it's being willing to do whatever you possibly have to do to make it work. And as you're pushing that rock and it's very hard to push at first, and once you finally start getting it to move and you start to get some momentum and you keep working hard, eventually that flywheel starts to spin and things start to get easier. But what you really have to do to be a successful entrepreneur is focus on the customer. Focus on the problem that you're solving for that customer and make everything about that customer and give them the absolute best customer experience you possibly can. And that should be the key to making a successful business.

[00:35:20] Jennifer Natale: Right. And then also, too, you had the path in which you didn't start your business right after graduating. So do you recommend people who are interested in entrepreneurship start that business right after graduation, or you think they should wait till they have more experience to start that business?

[00:35:38] B.J. Werzyn: Look, everybody's situation is probably going to be a little bit different based off of where they live or what their background is socioeconomically, or even what they learned in school. Did they focus on marketing? Were they more maybe focused on finance and accounting? But I think going out and getting a couple of years experience in the real world is probably never a bad idea. You can go out and maybe make some mistakes or learn, and it's not necessarily going to cost you because it's not your own company yet. But if you graduate and go out and work for two or three or four years and really start to understand everything that's involved with running a business, from the outside, it looks easy, but it's kind of like that iceberg. You only see a tip of it above the water, and below that is everything else. It's the people systems that I talked about. It's recruiting, it's HR, it's onboarding, it's training, it's leadership development from finance and accounting. You have to be able to have good financial statements, a strong balance sheet and a PNL. So you can actually see what's going on in your business. You need to be able to capture data and use data in every aspect of your business so you can see what's working and what's not working. And I can go on and on for hours about all the other things that it takes to run a business besides the thing that you actually do. So if you can go out and get a few years of experience post graduation, I would never say that's a bad idea.

[00:37:01] Jennifer Natale: Yeah, I agree. My plan, for example, in life is to do that. It's like to go into the workforce in the finance industry. And then I figured once I have more of that experience that I could go and start my own business one day. But with that comes the financial aspects. How do you navigate those early startup financials? Because you said you didn't get any kind of funding. How do you navigate the financial side of it?

[00:37:26] B.J. Werzyn: Yes, we got different options there. I mean, mine might not be the typical story where you go out and you start a company with a few thousand dollars and you build into seven or 800 million dollar business. If you have a great idea and you can build a good business plan, there's other ways to go out and get funding for a business. You can go to a bank you can go to private equity, you can go to venture capital. But if you can show that, hey, I've got this idea, it's a problem that society is dealing with. It's a great solution for society, and you have a good plan around that. You can get some funding. Now, you may have to give up some equity to do that, or you may have to take on a business loan, which obviously would need to be paid back. But there's different ways to get the funding or the capital required to start up a business.

[00:38:10] Jennifer Natale: Thank you so much for that answer. I truly appreciate it, and I believe that's all the questions I have to ask. So thank you very much.

[00:38:17] B.J. Werzyn: No problem. Thank you, Jennifer.

[00:38:22] Ryan Newman: That was BJ Werzyn, founder and CEO of West Shore Home. This episode was produced and edited by Katie DeFiore. If you haven't already, be sure to subscribe to dare to disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.

