



LEAD WITH WE
SEASON 2: EPISODE 011
Natasha Case, Coolhaus

Simon Mainwaring:

From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead With We. I'm Simon Mainwaring and each week I talk with top business leaders and founders about the revolutionary mindsets and methods they use to build their bottom line and a better future for all of us by leading with we. And today, I'm so excited to speak with Natasha Case, the co-founder and CEO of Coolhaus, a premium all-natural ice cream brand. Natasha started the company with her wife, Freya Estrella in 2009, and she's a passionate advocate for diversity in entrepreneurship. So Natasha, welcome to Lead With We.

Natasha Case:

Thanks so much for having me.

Simon Mainwaring:

Tell us, you started Coolhaus in 2009. What led to that decision in the first place?

Natasha Case:

So, it's kind of an interesting journey getting here. My background's in architecture and design, but I always wanted to use the skill set and apply it to something else like I always kind of thought of it really broadly. And I also was interested in... And this is a, for me, like a kind of lifelong thing, how to make things that are intimidating for people feel more fun and accessible? And so I was searching for a way to accomplish those two things. And I kind of stumbled on food by accident as a way to really achieve that. And the accident was one of my professors in studio, he criticized this model I had made, he said it looked like a layered cake. I was like, "Why is that a bad thing? Layered cakes are delicious."

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Natasha Case:

So I baked the next model as a cake. Yeah. And I had so much more fun creating that project than anything I had worked on. And I had noticed my colleagues were really like lit up by it and were really excited. And I thought, "This is what I want to do. If I bring food into the architecture conversation, it's memorable. It's fun, it's welcoming. It brings people together." And so I started doing all these food and design projects all through the rest of college and all through graduate school. And then into my first job at Disney Imagineering and the recession hit right when I had pretty much started. So, a lot of people were getting laid off. And as part of this food meets design concept, I started making ice cream sandwiches from scratch and naming them after architects like Mies Vanilla Rohe, Frank Berry, Mintmalism after minimalist design, Julia S' more-gan and it was really a sort of a lighthearted way to just bring awareness to architecture, make people feel better with ice cream.

And then I met my co-founder, Freya Estrella, who's now as you mentioned her, and she's actually now also we're married. So we've been partners in all ways. And she saw the business potential in this. And I think for us, we just saw the larger potential at that moment because so much of life is timing, as a good moment to kind of elevate the ice cream category because I think there had been a lot of the same stale brands sitting there for decades and they didn't really have stories. They weren't relatable. They were all made by the same people, which is generally older white men, there wasn't like women-created brands.

Simon Mainwaring:

Sure.

Natasha Case:

There wasn't a millennial-created brands, queer-created brands, Freya, a woman of color. So just this whole opportunity to be authentic creators, but we didn't have any money. And everything was unsure in the economy. So, we did find an ice cream truck with no engine for \$2,500.

Simon Mainwaring:

You just went for it. Let me ask you about that because would you... Do you look back now as kind of one of those lessons in entrepreneurship and say here was a happy accident. You were coming and thumbing your nose at your architecture professor and you did this sort of just creative expression. And then you said timing is so key with entrepreneurship and you just went with it and ran with it and so on. Would you say that that's a hidden gift and that we should all listen to those sort of happy accidents?

Natasha Case:

Yeah. I think it's all about having recognition in life. Like, do you perceive a moment that comes to you as an opportunity as a moment to explore or do you kind of have the blinders on a bit about, "Okay, I'm just getting from point A to point B and I'm not going to taking anything else besides that," which I think there's moments for that too. Sometimes you really do just need to get from point A to point B, but I think always keep an open mind for something. I think an entrepreneur knows that something that could first appear as a criticism or an obstacle is actually a hidden opportunity, it's all a question of how you perceive it. And I think a lot of the things, a lot of life is trusting your instinct and trusting your gut and believing in how you may be uniquely positioned to do something cool and recognizing a good time to act and ultimately there is no way to really know if something's going to happen, unless you give it a try.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah. Having no money, having no experience isn't really a real obstacle. It's just if you're passionate about it-

Natasha Case:

And do research. Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

... And do your research. Sure. You mentioned something really important a moment ago that here was an industry opportunity, not because there was a white space or because there was a new innovation on lock, but you looked at the industry and went, "Well, there's a lot of old white men running this industry.

And there was a place for millennials, for diversity in there." That's a really interesting lens on opportunity. What made you feel like that's something that you should lean into? Was it just as a way to represent yourself more authentically through business or was it like, "No, this is something that needs to be elevated in the marketplace more broadly?"

Natasha Case:

I think a little bit of both, I think like from a product perspective, for sure it was like, "Wow, this could be better." We know I was making ice cream from scratch with friends and it tasted so much better than what you could buy. So clearly things can be done better. And I think products can be more transparent. Methods can be cleaner. Sourcing can be more thoughtful, all the things that we more expect from the top quality brands these days that were really new... Not brand new concepts, but concepts that were ready to be reintroduced back then. But I think on another level, and that's really the bigger point in some ways is wanting that connection from the people who create the brand to the people who buy them and feeling that there's something authentic about being able to make something that you know you would want and something special about that and seeing that the story is something that resonates with you is also something that's much more in line with how we consume and shop now.

We want to know who's behind it and why, and what's their mission? How are they using their platform or their brand for something good and interesting and what led them to this and do I connect with that story? So I think that that was important for us.

Simon Mainwaring:

And let me ask you like, to what degree does that personal story play into your brand? Because you've got some fantastic stories on the packaging obviously. You've got certain storylines on the website and so on. Is it something that you use as a trigger for the business, as a catalyst for the business, or is it something more that people discover when they dig a little bit deeper? How do you see its role?

Natasha Case:

We really do put it front and center because we feel that it is such a special story, that it's so unique to us and it has to do with who we are. And it has to do with the timing when this brand was created and why it's here today and why it's thrived to get where it is today. And I think the whole kind of cut from architecture to the truck and the truck had no engine. We towed it to Coachella with a AAA platinum membership-

Simon Mainwaring:

That's awesome.

Natasha Case:

[crosstalk 00:07:32] that it broke down even though it never drove. And we launched there and it's such a special origin story. So I think if you lead with that and people know that, it's like it's such a connection to the brand they want to buy and also it's a north star for a lot of how we think about how we grow the brand, the partnerships we do, the flavors we create, the events we want to be at. So, I think leading with that story is very important and then that story informs how we use the platform for the mission, which is really, how can we empower the next generation of diverse creators, women, minorities, the LGBTQ community to be able to live out their dreams in a way that they want to? And that we are

moving the dial for that generation, how do we use our ice cream novelties to make that happen? So, it makes sense because that's how it started.

Simon Mainwaring:

It totally makes sense and also there's so much creativity within those communities. It's got to be doubly frustrating that they're not better represented in the entrepreneurial world.

Natasha Case:

Absolutely.

Simon Mainwaring:

I want to ask about that for a second. What obstacles have you come up against? For example, there's the digital divide where some communities don't have access to the web the same way others, there is the funding and VC and private equity money is in certain markets around the country. All of these things have different limits on the entrepreneurial ambitions of people out there, but peculiar to the sort of LGBT communities and so on, what have you found gets in the way or what resistance have you found? Is it the lack of access to capital? Is it just a lack of representation? What are those things you had to overcome?

Natasha Case:

Well, I think that capital and representation is connected because I think ultimately when you're going to raise money for your... Trying to get this opportunity for investors to be involved in what you're building. And I really do mean it's an opportunity for the investors and that's how I see it and I think that's how you have to see it. You're not asking for a favor. You've literally created something and investor can say, "Oh, here's a check, I get to be part of it." That's a pretty big opportunity for them. But I think when you're going and you're pitching that partnership when there's so few people who come from your community on the other side of the table-

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Natasha Case:

... there is going to be a disconnect. So part of it is who are the people at these firms writing the checks and we obviously need to have more women and minorities and queer in any way that's underrepresented, that's one important thing. So, I think when you have that on the other side, it certainly makes it easier. And it could be something as simple as if you're a woman raising money and you were creating a product for women.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Natasha Case:

And you're pitching to all men, of course, they may not see the value because they wouldn't even know maybe how to use that product [crosstalk 00:10:07].

Simon Mainwaring:

They need to know what they are missing out on. Yeah. Absolutely.

Natasha Case:

Yeah. Right. Totally. Yes. But beyond that, it's like, it doesn't matter. It's just so important to have that connection. And I think also everyone's journey is different. I think for me, as a gay woman, I think in some ways, it's funny, Freya and I talk about this a lot. We have a lot of lesbian friends who are running companies, and I think ultimately adversity can serve you in business because you have had to question things, you have had to maybe have really tough conversations. Maybe you've had a different relationship with risk and how you may think about risk, for example, even in your dating life. It is different for a gay woman or a straight woman. So, I think all these things can actually be advantages. It's just a question of feeling empowered and hopefully having a community that can really share those stories with you and you feel like you're in it together. I think that really does make a big difference in business.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah. That community aspect, because it's so tough outright, everyone has days where you want to give up and you're just kind of pulling your hair out. Do you see it's changing, Natasha? Do you see that either on the strength of just greater awareness around social inequities of all types, whether it be the Black Lives Matter movement or just broader cultural awareness as a function of younger demographics out there and so on? Do you feel like it's changing or is it really you're driving that change with other queer and lesbian and gay entrepreneurs who really are forming their community and you're just surging ahead together?

Natasha Case:

That's a good question. They're so connected. I think that consumers demand something and businesses respond, but I also think the most interesting and innovative businesses really do set the tone because I think consumers can demand something, but it's hard for them to ask for what they can't envision. If you think even about like, if you went into like a research group five years before the iPhone and you were like, "So, are you going to pay \$1,100 for a phone?"

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Natasha Case:

And everyone would be like-

Simon Mainwaring:

Never.

Natasha Case:

... "That's insane." And then suddenly you show them something that you could manage your whole life and give away all your privacy on fantasy [crosstalk 00:12:19].

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. You give out all your data. All at once. Right. Right.

Natasha Case:

... yeah. Yeah. Check, check. Sign the contract. So, I think the consumer can only go so far. I think it is the role of the innovator to really move the dial, but having consumers believe in it and understand it and know about it and ask for it also is part of that kind of evergreen loop of progress.

Simon Mainwaring:

Entrepreneurship is a curious journey, not one that everyone sort of select slightly and it really demands so much all of you. How did you get the idea off the ground? Did you bootstrap your way through to an expanded product line? Did you do friends and family financing?

Natasha Case:

The bootstrapping was like my personal credit card. Don't ask me why mine are not Freya's. She just [crosstalk 00:13:10].

Simon Mainwaring:

[crosstalk 00:13:10] that's that strategic moment where you go, "I don't know. Is it here?"-

Natasha Case:

Yeah. She was my insurance policy-

Simon Mainwaring:

"... can I bring her with me?"

Natasha Case:

... Oh yeah. [crosstalk 00:13:18].

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Natasha Case:

Yeah. Right. Yeah. Uh-huh (affirmative). So anyway, that was the very, very start. And then we did friends and very friends and family, really family like my mom, Freya's aunt, one other friend. And then we started getting into actually work with Opportunity Fund. They're amazing. They're the biggest microlender in the country. They lend to a lot of women and minorities. I was on the board for five years in Southern California and we worked with them and then we did bigger angel investment and now we're in the private equity and actually... And we have a really great kind of social mission-based private equity partner as well. And some other angel investors that have come in, some really highly influential folks. So I'm excited about that too.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's so powerful because as you say, you've got a premium opportunity with your product itself, the cones themselves, you're doubling down on that. When you typically get to the rounds where you're getting private equity involved, there's certainly more cooks in the kitchen. There's more chefs at the table. How do you protect your purpose or mission, even though you're working with a mission-aligned partner like that, how do you make sure that the integrity of your intent doesn't get diluted? Is it a daily battle where you've got to kind of keep yourself on track or do you find, you know what, pick the right partner in the first place and it takes care of itself?

Natasha Case:

Yeah. Yeah. If they weren't here for the mission and frankly seeing the business value in that proposition, then I don't think they're the right fit.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Natasha Case:

If you're going to be battling in affirmation and... First of all, it's totally counterintuitive because as we talked about earlier, that is why people are shopping and that is why people investing in brands. But I also believe that as far as strategic acquisition, that is going to be one of the number one things in this generation of brands that gets bought.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah. Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. And to that point, every day in the press, we get this daily diet of news about climate or biodiversity, and then we've had the pandemic and the BLM movement and so on. Everyone knows that we're living in a challenged world. How does climate sustainability factor into your supply chain and what are you doing to sort of really deliver on that promise or that expectation of the younger generations?

Natasha Case:

That's absolutely a player in all of it. I think our investing in our plant-based was a really big part of wanting to move in that direction and we expect that to be half of our product line within a couple of years. And that's definitely moving away from... It's a lower footprint for sure. And I think there's huge amounts of innovation that can be done there. And it's all sorts very sustainably. We're moving in the direction of everything being non-GM certified. We're thinking about who we're buying from. Can we buy from more women and minorities as far as vendors? And then just as far as business practices, anything that's like food waste and all of that, why would you want that even from a P and L standpoint, that just hurts everybody. So it's always just important to be conscious of and better for your business.

Simon Mainwaring:

And how do you go about selecting those partners, or does it come at a premium if you're going to go plant-based? Are there cost efficiencies there that it's competitive now when you're trying to get a business going and you've got to choose between a more expensive supplier or a less expensive, but less responsible one? What did you find the situation wants?

Natasha Case:

I think now we're at a point I feel like, as you grow, it is easier. It's true. When we were smaller, it was like, the more sustainable packaging was more expensive and that was a hard thing to justify although we always try to find ways around that. For example, from our trucks, the sandwiches come in edible paper, so it just kind of soaks up the yummy kind of-

Simon Mainwaring:

I have eaten some of your paper.

Natasha Case:

... Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

I have to admit. And also the whiskey-based ice creams.

Natasha Case:

Yes.

Simon Mainwaring:

You're standing there as a dad, like we're in LA, in New York, called the city store and I've gone in there at night and I'm like, ice cream rarely at 11 o'clock at night, we really whiskey ice cream?

Natasha Case:

It helps go to bed.

Simon Mainwaring:

I will take two scoops.

Natasha Case:

Yeah, exactly.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, two scoops. Thank you.

Natasha Case:

And that was the charms, of course, kids always want to order it because there's lucky charms in it. And you're like, "Well, it's your call." [crosstalk 00:17:16].

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. No. Absolutely.

Natasha Case:

That was very little alcoholic. It would be fine. No judgment on that [crosstalk 00:17:21].

Simon Mainwaring:

I know, I know. I'm like, "Can I drive home after this?"

Natasha Case:

Yeah. Yes. Yes.

Simon Mainwaring:

And what would your advice be to LGBT, gay, lesbian, queer entrepreneurs? Would you say to them now in hindsight, "The last decade there's been a lot of progress and now is your time, step forward with greater confidence."

Natasha Case:

Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

Or do you say, "Listen, lean into your peers and let's do this together?"

Natasha Case:

Yeah, absolutely. I think both and all, I think as an individual, you have something to stand for and you're helping to be the change that ultimately will inspire the next generation and also to connect with others in the space is really nice and share experiences and the good and the bad. I think there's many good ones to share and like I said, it's helpful. I think you realize that. Business is a great way to overcome adversity or to use the adversity and it becomes a positive thing for sure. And I also think business is the great equalizer. Like one of our factories is in rural Utah. They know everything about my family and you know what, we're all here to make a great product. And so, it puts you in a room with people that could be easy to not connect with and you do, and you realize we just didn't know each other and we're actually all here to do something good and we're all connected. And I think the number one reason we fear each other is we just don't connect.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think this moment, this is a watershed moment coming out of COVID where it's not just a chance to get outside again, but to reconnect and understand how important connection is at a deeper level. And there's no better place than to do it around a pint of ice cream. I was actually talking with my team earlier today and we were arguing whether somebody eats ice cream in a bowl or straight out of the pint? What would you recommend? Is it sort of just the pint or nothing approach?

Natasha Case:

I'm an equal opportunity ice cream eater. No judgment anyway, [inaudible 00:19:26] going to do with the cones? Are you a top or a bottom? Do you like to just go straight from the bottom of the cone or work your way?

Simon Mainwaring:

I've got issues with people that bite off the bottom of a cone before they're finished, but-

Natasha Case:

[crosstalk 00:19:37].

Simon Mainwaring:

... We'll take that offline.

Natasha Case:

You can comment on that social media account.

Simon Mainwaring:

I should. We'll get a debate going. I also noticed that you mentioned how you share your story as something that's sort of a differentiating aspect of the business, but also you use your packaging very effectively and I think a lot of entrepreneurs struggle. When did they talk about their purpose? When did they talk about their product or when did they lead with their product and then point back to their purpose? How do you approach packaging in the stories you tell?

Natasha Case:

I think if you have... I don't think every brand has an amazing story or even purpose behind it. So they're going to lead with product and you really can see that. And I feel like more often than not, that may happen with like a kind of specialty diet, or maybe even like a bit of... I would take it further into like the fad diet. They're leading with that because that's the core purchase driver is someone on keto or... And so that makes sense. That's first and foremost need people to know they can eat this, they're on keto or whatever.

On the other side is I just see it as more of a long game if you're going to lead with that kind of story in that mission because that's really to me, building the culture and building something bigger than even a product can be and allows you to do more than one product also, because ultimately I think you have to be smart and streamlined about it, but once you have that brand, you can kind of do anything with it.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah.

Natasha Case:

And it can be a lot of different places. So that's my philosophy. I truly do not believe there is one right way to do this. Like whenever I do public speaking, I say like, "This is my story, and this is what I've learned. If you can apply them, great or you can take something away, that's helpful for your story, but I'm not going to sit here and tell you how to do it because there's not a one-size-fits-all.

Simon Mainwaring:

And you mentioned culture there, which is so important especially when you've got a bricks and mortar business. How you relate to a guest, the customer really determines whether they come back or not. In terms of your platform of inclusion and diversity and so on, do you hire for that message? Do you try and sort of demonstrate that through your staff? Or do you educate your staff to that end? How do you build a culture around it?

Natasha Case:

Yeah. I think all of those things. I think you want to obviously walk the walk as much as you can. And if you have a space where it's not happening, you have to ask yourself why and have the tough questions and conversations as a leader and with your team and create plans and practices and take actions that really demonstrate that good and hopefully if you have the right team that are totally behind it as well, and you have the consumer who wants that, it's all connected. And so, I think continuing to have awareness... Like something, for example, I thought that was interesting in a seminar that I attended, it was about interns and how unpaid interns. It's a luxury to be an unpaid intern because it's basically someone who can go and work for free, which obviously also, there's-

Simon Mainwaring:

Issues around that.

Natasha Case:

[crosstalk 00:22:38] in California anyway, about what kind of work they can do. But if you can manage to change that to a paid internship post, you're going to attract a much bigger diversity of candidates, mostly you're going to get wealthier and white candidates with an unpaid internship. So, even just realizing and being aware of things like that, how important that is-

Simon Mainwaring:

That's interesting.

Natasha Case:

... even for something like that. So, I think a lot of meaningful learnings and conversations have come out of last year for everyone, no matter how woke you thought you were or not and that's ultimately a good thing. I did want to show you guys too-

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, please.

Natasha Case:

... just as an example of a product. This is a currency cake. I know it's in reverse to me. I don't know if [crosstalk 00:23:19].

Simon Mainwaring:

Currency cake. There we go, yeah. I can see that.

Natasha Case:

... But it's a pint for Black Girl Ventures, which is basically a platform. They do pitch competitions with live fundraising and they have mentorship and incubators and webinars. I've led a few. And this flavor, the proceeds or profits will go to one of their grants for one of their founders. So it is literally ice cream that's funding startup capital for black and brown female founders. And it's so good to use... Like literally the ice cream is something that is delicious and brings joy and can help make change. That's just how I see the future for us.

Simon Mainwaring:

More and more I'm hearing today that successful companies and entrepreneurs and leaders are saying, "Here's the legacy I want to build." And it's about shaping culture or moving conversations forward. The company and the products are tools to that end-

Natasha Case:

Yeah, 100%.

Simon Mainwaring:

... but in that order. So, what's your larger ambition? What's your ambition?

Natasha Case:

Yeah. I do see that. I just think like so much of running business, like, what's your purpose and what can you do and how cool that, like... I don't know that every... I think each company is different. A company like Coolhaus that is so cool and unique and interesting and started with out of the box thinking and unique leadership and diverse leadership, we have a unique opportunity to actually use an ice cream brand for cultural change. Like what an exciting thing to be able to do, what a special power?

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Natasha Case:

Why would you not try to make that power be full of fact and it's something you can look back on and really be proud of. And I can honestly say, I feel like what I do makes me a better person.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. Right.

Natasha Case:

We can't all say that and that's a huge gift especially given like... Yeah, we started making ice cream sandwiches. So that's something I'm really going to do because that's like for me and my life on a personal level. But I also think, demanding that every single person views it that way is not okay either.

Simon Mainwaring:

Sure.

Natasha Case:

Not every single brand and person is here to do that on the same level. And I think we can take that too far and we don't want to have that kind of judgment on every single entrepreneur. Let's all do our best and be here to live our best purpose. And if we can make really positive change, then that's awesome.

Simon Mainwaring:

I really agree with you that it is a good rod for our own back that we create when we have companies that are purposeful because you've got to hold yourself to that highest standard all the time. And you've got to walk your talk. Have there been any stories over the years where someone is coming in perhaps and said, "Hey, just the fact that you're here, and that you're speaking about this story and that you're being a success, your success has not only changed my life because it's given me permission to be who I am, but it's inspired me to start a business." Anything like that, that sort of touched you in terms of the effect you've had?

Natasha Case:

Yeah. I think I have in a good amount. Now I've been doing this 12 years and I just did my first Clubhouse panel last week and a couple of the speakers like, "Oh, I heard you speak before and you gave me this idea." Or, "This was really helpful feedback where we were on a panel together," or something else. And so it's really nice to hear it come back. Like if I can do that for someone else, it's amazing. It's very fulfilling. And ultimately it fulfills me to want to do what I do more. I think when you mentor someone or you are an advisor for their company, part of it is you seeing like, "Oh, what's the next generation up to?" It's a two-way street. You're definitely helping them. I think it's a helpful role, but they're helping you too.

I think anyone who's any kind of teacher on some fundamental level, kind of knows that. So, it's the inspiration. It's like a cyclical thing. It's like a universe kind of paying back. So, it's really cool when that happens. And ultimately, it serves you too, to do that.

Simon Mainwaring:

It does because you sit there and you've got good days and bad days and you just worry about payroll one day and sometimes you'll flush and it's good. But I think as a purposeful entrepreneur, it's that stuff that sits with you and you kind of go, "That story is what stayed with me." Or, "That's what really meant something to me." The success that you've had in whole foods and really the premium end of the market, how did you even learn these skills? How did you learn to make ice cream? How did you learn to be a successful entrepreneur? Did you have mentors on the way? How did you build your skills?

Natasha Case:

I think, yeah. I think I had always supportive people who encouraged me in my life, my parents who always... They saw I had a creative interest, they were like, "That's great. Let's [crosstalk 00:28:02]."

Simon Mainwaring:

There's no stopping it. There's no stopping it.

Natasha Case:

Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

Don't stop Natasha. She's doing it. Yeah.

Natasha Case:

Yeah. They're both creative. My dad's an architect. My mom's an animator. So, they understood like, "Oh, you can be creative and you can have a career." And just a lot of supportive folks over the years, whether it was like coaches on sports teams and there's all those kinds of people along your way, whether it's like more directly or not with business. But I think like ultimately if you want to be an entrepreneur, you have to be like a self-starter, you have to have the confidence and the conviction and the fearlessness to learn and be autodidactic and figure things out and ask questions, but also just get it done. And I think kind of done is better than perfect sometimes. It's really hard to be a perfectionist entrepreneur, I think.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah.

Natasha Case:

But then my first angel investor was the guy, Bobby Margolis, and he is like a titan of the fashion industry. And he definitely gave me a lot of lessons. One of which was you walk through a wall when you don't know what's there. And that is to say like, there's some naivety when you start, that's actually a good thing.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah,.

Natasha Case:

And if you know too much, you go into analysis paralysis. So that was a very empowering thought.

Simon Mainwaring:

What does the future look like? What did COVID, what effect did that have on the business? How did you retool? And are you taking any of that moving forward? Was there actually some benefits-

Natasha Case:

Oh, yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

... in terms of how you had to innovate?

Natasha Case:

Huge silver lining. I would say a number of ways. One, looking at the shop, which obviously we couldn't have customers in the shop for a long time, but we switched to like the full last-mile delivery model and yeah, that's actually been super interesting. We're definitely [inaudible 00:29:34] the top line, but we're running almost doubly efficiently on the bottom and it kind of makes you wonder, do we want to reopen to full hours even though we can, because we can have this great delivery business that's expanded and

we've fine-tuned the online offering for that and it works. And then meanwhile, we've gone to all these other like cloud kitchens, dark kitchens that are like virtual Coolhaus shops on the delivery apps. We could have those all around the country. We could never open another scoop shop and have virtual scoop shops really anywhere that we wanted.

And I think those really thrived and grew in COVID. As far as our events business, that was the hardest hit. Weddings were number one type of event. There's no weddings.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Natasha Case:

It's coming back, but I think we've learned to use our kind of activations through other channels. So like if we have a brand who approach us to make a custom flavor, normally we would just hand it out from the truck and do a whole truck event. And now we're doing it through our delivery apps or through our e-com. And so now the truck is coming back. We can offer the truck and we can offer these other channels as well. And so it's expanded, and we started doing trucks, like treats to employees. Like going to 300 employees' houses to do like ice cream little gift to cheer them up while they're working from home.

Simon Mainwaring:

Amazing idea. There is an idea. Wow.

Natasha Case:

Yeah. We never thought of that or did that before because everyone was just at their office, the truck shows up and that's it. So, I think that's another offering that we can continue to do because people aren't going to come back full-time if ever. So you learn a lot, and then also what do people want to eat? What's the affordable luxury that's most ideal when they're at home versus when they're out? And I think building e-com, e-com is kind of a frontier in ice cream still. And I think there's opportunity to figure that business out and make it more possible but I think it's going to take a while to fully get there the way that the rest of the e-com industry is, but I think that has been accelerated by COVID and all the online ordering.

Simon Mainwaring:

And you mentioned the plant-based cones going to whole foods and so on, and the premium end of the market that you're really claiming ownership of. What else are you doing to grow the business coming out of COVID? I know you did the partnerships with Allegro Coffee around the Three Queens brand.

Natasha Case:

Yes.

Simon Mainwaring:

Is partnerships a big part of it?

Natasha Case:

Yeah. Partnerships, that's a way that we've always built the brand. So I want to continue to lean in. We did a great one with Ritz Crackers last year, it was like a Ritz Crackers swirl and peanut butter ice cream. It went totally viral. Kristen Bell had it in her freezer. We were giving it out through all the non-truck channels like I said. Now we're doing a sandwich with them for National Ice Cream Sandwich Day this year. And I want to continue like always, we've done so many of those, whether it's the entertainment industry, like we did one with Hulu, also with Kristen Bell, Veronica Mars, we did Veronica Marshmallow, like a small sandwich. We've done it with French's mustard in the past. We've done the fashion industry. We've done video game companies, so many collaborations, and they're really like marketing that pays for itself because we access their platform and sometimes in the case of the really big companies, there're budgets for PR and marketing-

Simon Mainwaring:

Sure.

Natasha Case:

... And we bring them speed-to-market, an innovative item, a better quality item and a unique way to get it out there. So, that's one of my favorite bread and butter Coolhaus things and I think there's way, way more cool ones to come from that front in dairy and plant-based.

Simon Mainwaring:

I love what you're saying. You're talking about purpose, you're talking about products and you're talking about partnerships as just three things you can really leverage to accelerate your growth.

Natasha Case:

Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

And if you're in a crowded category like ice cream and you can bring all of this innovation and really unlock this new white space, everything's fair game. Everything's fair game. Is there any message, Natasha that you would share to fellow aspiring entrepreneurs, there may be gay, queer, they may be lesbian, LGBT, what would you say to them as they still have some hesitancy based on your experience over the last decade? Are there any words that you'd share with them?

Natasha Case:

I think the walks through the wall when you don't know it's there. I think definitely learn enough and know enough of and be empowered by your willingness to just take that leap if you really believe in it and have the strong instincts and have kind of that passion and that initial feedback. I would say, as an entrepreneur, you really have to look for the sparkle in someone's eye when you tell your idea. It tells you a lot.

When someone's really like, "Whoa, that's something." You're like, "I've got something here. I've got to make it happen." Which is why I don't believe in not sharing an idea even early on because people don't steal ideas. It's all about execution. It's like just share the idea and see what people think and get

feedback. And then secondly, I would say, really think about your vision in a big way, two, five, 10-year plan. Write it down, hold yourself accountable. It's amazing how when you write it, it happens. And I think there's something about that accountability for yourself that you can share with others, that you can share with your team, with your customer, with your buyers, with your investors. That's really, really meaningful when you get it out of your head.

And I think write it down, not only for your business, but for you personally. Like, is this going to fulfill you? What do you want from this role? Do you want to lead? Do you want to exit? Do you want to play only a certain part in the company? Are you going to be able to make enough money to support yourself from the hours you're going to spend, especially for women, we don't think of ourselves enough in the equation. So, I think it's an incredible exercise. The sooner you can get to that when you're growing the business, the better.

Simon Mainwaring:

Fantastic. Well, Natasha, congratulations on the success to you, both you and Freya. And I just want to say enormous respect for bringing greater diversity to entrepreneurship. It's long overdue and it's incredibly powerful. So thank you.

Natasha Case:

Thank you for having me and for hearing my story.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for joining us for another episode of Lead With We, where I spoke with Natasha Case, the co-founder and CEO of Coolhaus, who shared with us how to leverage entrepreneurship, to promote greater diversity and inclusion and how to leverage a unique and defining quality of your brand to accelerate growth and scale impact. Our show is produced by Goal 17 Media, and you can find more information about Natasha in the show notes for this episode. Make sure you subscribe to Lead With We on Apple, Google, or Spotify, and do share it with your friends and colleagues. You can also watch our episodes on YouTube, at WeFirstTV. And I'm really excited to share that my new book, Lead With We is now up on Amazon for pre-order. So make sure you check it out. I'll see you on the next episode. And until then, let's all lead with we.