

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 139: HEATHER HAWKINS

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption, providing you with tools to move up the S Curve of Learning in your career and life.

The Disrupt Yourself podcast has continued to grow as you've generously shared your favorite episodes and takeaways on social media and been willing to leave 5-Star Ratings and Reviews. So, I want to take a moment and read our review of the week from Chad M. Smith.

"Disruption is just change. Everyone is going through change. The great ones though are creating it. So what Whitney talks about is relevant to everyone. I listen to every episode. I've listened to episodes 80, 100 and 120 multiple times. Her supplemental resources are amazing that she GIVES AWAY on her website. Thank you for all the hard work you put into your podcast, Whitney."

Thank you, Chad for such a warm and kind review! And for a programming note, the next episode in our series of deep dives into the 7 accelerants of disruption that Chad mentioned listening to multiple times, the next one airs next week with episode 140. If you'd like to be our review of the week, please go to [Apple Podcasts](#) and leave a 5-star rating and a review so other like-minded listeners can find our podcast.

Today's guest is great at helping her clients create and craft a narrative around the things they are changing and creating.

Heather Hawkins is CEO and Founder of [Elevation Strategy](#), a visibility consultancy with a mission to educate and empower entrepreneurs and executives on building media relationships.

WHITNEY Heather, welcome to the podcast. We're delighted to have you.

HEATHER Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

WHITNEY My first question for you today, um, is where did you grow up, and what did you think you wanted to be when you grew up?

HEATHER (laughs) I love this question. So I grew up in Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley. And-

WHITNEY Oh, so you're a valley girl, basically.

HEATHER I- I'm a valley girl, and that's going to become incredibly apparent as we continue this conversation, I'm sure, because try as I might, I just can't get it out of my voice sometimes. But- so I don't know if it was Los Angeles or what it was, but when I graduated from college I had no goal at all except for that I wanted to be famous. And I also happened to have absolutely no skills at all that would portend fame in any way, shape, or form. (laughs) Um, so I ended up going into radio, and I started my career in radio. I actually was a commercial radio personality in Santa Rosa, just north of San Francisco where I went to school, for a while. And I ended up falling into PR, brand strategy, media relations, kind of sideways, not even really knowing what it was when I first showed up for that first job. It was a paid internship, and I was making so little in radio that when I showed up for this paid internship I was like, "My goodness, this is like career level salary stuff." I did end up actually getting to do all those things I wanted to do as far as fame, but I ended up doing it in a totally different way.

WHITNEY You know what's interesting about that is does it surprise you at all that you didn't have any idea what you wanted to be when you grew up? Like you- you went to college and you still didn't know what you wanted to do. Does that surprise you at all?

HEATHER Not really I guess, knowing myself. Because I'm 45 now, and I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up. I still feel like it's a journey, and I'm discovering it. And people contact me all the time and they say, "I'm in college, and, you know, I want to go into PR. And should I major in PR?" "No." You know, you shouldn't ... I don't believe that you should tie yourself down that specifically. I believe that learning how to learn and learning how to explore and discover and all of those things have the value. I think it's kind of weird to know, honestly, exactly what you want to be. I mean, I said I wanted to be a radio personality, and I did it, and I got there, and I was like ... You know, it wasn't what I thought it was going to be.

WHITNEY (laughs) Okay. So you did have a brief stint, as I, uh, read- read up on you, as a standup comic.

HEATHER Yeah.

WHITNEY So where di- where did that play into all this? Was this during college? Was this when you were a radio personality? Like when was the standup comic piece?

HEATHER Yeah. So part of what had me leave radio was that I couldn't be at all creative. I mean, really when you're a radio personality you just have to read the papers and stick to it. And I- you would always get phone calls from my producer. You know, I was on like in the middle of the night on Saturdays and Sundays, but I would still get that hotline ringing that's like, "Heather, you know, stick to the script." (laughs) "Stop cracking jokes. Like you need to like just stick to the script."

And so once I started my career in PR I felt like I had that itch in me to express myself doing that. Um, I had a boyfriend at the time who was doing standup comedy, and I said, "You know what? Next week I'm going to do an open mic." And I got up there and started doing it. I ended up

getting to perform with Robin Williams. Like Robin Williams told my mother I was very talented, which is ... I should just, you know, put that on my LinkedIn profile or something. (laughs)

It was a whole lot of fun. It was a whole lot of fun. It was an opportunity to express myself. I'm an introvert. It was an opportunity to get out of my comfort zone. It was an opportunity to see how even people who are great at something, like Robin Williams, you know, he was showing up at open mics and workshopping his work. That's how I crossed paths with him. Um, you know, even the best of the best practice. And it's- it's more process than you might think.

WHITNEY All right. So what's- what's an aspect of the process?

HEATHER What is part of the process? So I think two things. Um, there is an awesome book, and I'm not thinking it off the top of my head. But it basically talks about the math of comedy and the reasons why people laugh is- is more mathematical. Like you could almost write out an equation. Any comedian can take a joke that works really well, and they can almost write it out in like symbolic logic almost and recreate that joke, um, and figure out what the magic was there. So it's- it's more mathematical and scientific than you might think.

And then the other piece of it that might surprise people is that it is so rehearsed. And part of the rehearsal is figuring out how to make it look off the cuff. Um, you know, you- I did standup comedy when I was in San Francisco. I haven't done standup comedy since probably 2001. There are people still doing the San Francisco comedy circuit that I will go see that are telling the same jokes that they were telling in 2001. And they're still killing it with those jokes. And those jokes still feel fresh and still feel new. But there's a lot more repetition than you might actually think going on in comedy.

WHITNEY That's fascinating. So you did radio. You did standup comedy. And now you- you landed in PR. One of the things I thought would be interesting for people who are listening and saying, "Okay, I do need PR. How do I do this? What does this look like," I thought it'd be interesting to start with what was one of your biggest wins in PR, public relations? For those of you who (laughs) don't know yet, I'm using this acronym. Biggest wins, let's start there. Because I think, you know, everybody has something that becomes a calling card for them like, "I did this, and therefore now you probably want to listen to what I have to say 'cause I know a thing or two." So what's that- what's that big one for you? What did it look like? what did you do?

HEATHER Yeah. So the huge win for me, and it's such great timing that you're asking about this right now, 'cause we're coming up on the 20-year anniversary of it, is I was manager of public relations for the launch of Sega Dreamcast, which is, you know, still remains the final console- video gaming console that Sega ever released. After Dreamcast they became solely a software company. And that experience, that job experience, that team, the way that we worked together, um, you know, I still get chills whenever I think about it. We're actually putting together a reunion of those people to get together, because that team, the way that we worked was amazing, and the fact that we were able to mobilize our fan base.

And our- and when we went into it, just so you know, if you're not a video game history person, um, Sega had made some poor choices, and they had really let their consumer base down. So they had this passionate consumer base who was out there feeling like two times burned, three times burned, by the time we got ready to launch Dreamcast. But we knew that those people still had- they- their blood still ran blue, as we liked to say. And if we could just get to them in the right way, if we could turn that passion into a movement and mobilize it for the business we knew that we could really get some place.

If you look at where we started to where we ended up, um, that delta was so great. We accomplished such huge things. And it was the moment in my career where I realized that if

you're positioning your company right and you're doing the right things for the right reasons, it's not just about selling a thing; it's about creating a movement. It's about recruiting crusaders for your cause, and that if you do that right your customers become your greatest allies.

So from that moment on in my career I always have said it's not just about selling things; it's about creating movements. It's about that lifestyle thing where, um, you're not just at person who purchased a thing, that you are a Sega person, or, you know, you are a Clif Bar person, another company that I ended up working with more recently. So I think that that really ... Sega Dreamcast definitely stands out as one of the defining moments in my career. Working on the launch team for Maroon 5 is another one that definitely people go back to.

WHITNEY Okay. So let's- let's do Sega for a minute, and then let's analyze or dissect them for a second. So where were you- where did you start with Sega? And- and- well, you kind of outlined where you started. But what are two or three things that you can say PR helped make that outcome happen? And obviously there are lots of different variables. But what are two or three things that you did that helped get the outcome that you wanted, and what was the outcome?

HEATHER Yeah. Yeah. Really quickly, interesting thing about how I ended up at Sega. I went into PR, which is a world of, you know, at the time bleached blondes with Kate Spade bags and Steve Madden shoes, and I showed up with blue hair and a nose ring, which made me (laughs) kind of stand out in the world of PR. And from that moment on I feel like my work really spoke for me. But I ended up leaving Sega's PR agency, going to another video game company, and having the higher ups at Sega go back and say, "Where is that blue-haired girl?" You know, "We need her here. We need her here because she's going to be able to speak to our people, and she's going to be able to speak to our people authentically."

So in a world of disrupt yourself, I feel like that- that piece of authenticity for me was something that really helped me grow my career in the early years-

WHITNEY That's fascinating. So they reached out and said, "We want that person. Go find her."

HEATHER Yeah. Yeah. They went back to my PR agency that I had worked at and said, "Where is she at now? She needs to come here?" So they recruited me to come in, because they knew that they had this pool of people who needed to be spoken to authentically.

WHITNEY Are you a gamer?

HEATHER Here's my dirty little secret. I'm not a huge, huge gamer. But I- I played one. I played one really well during the time I was there because I knew that I needed to. Um, there are certain types of games that I- that I do enjoy playing. Um, but I'm, you know, I have dated some gamers, girl. I am not a gamer. (laughs)

WHITNEY So that's an interes-

HEATHER I know what that looks like when you're actually a gamer. Um-

WHITNEY So that's an interesting question though, Heather. So they felt like you could talk to your customer-

HEATHER Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY And it's an important question. Because what you're telling me is you were able to talk to them, but you didn't necessarily need to actually walk in their shoes, but you were still able to talk to them. So let's dissect that, 'cause that's interesting.

HEATHER Going back to that word of auth- authenticity, I don't feel like it ever really felt inauthentic because I understood how to- how to talk to them, so I had like this dual-sided my mind. Half of my mind was very strategic, and I understood how PR worked and the messaging and the processing, you know, all that- that kind of hard science knowledge stuff. But at the same time, I could- I felt like I could be casual. I understood that I needed to be casual. I was able to switch back and forth between sitting in a room with the President of Sega Japan and like shooting the crap at an event with a gamer person who needed to be spoken to in that way.

And, you know, you asked what did we do, what did we do to make that- that success happen. And when I came into Sega, we created an entire department that was dedicated; we called it Enthusiast Relations. But really at the time it was kind of word of mouth influencer relations, even before that was a thing. That didn't even become a thing for another five or six years. But we understood that we needed to be in the trenches, talking to the people, listening to their needs.

We launched a bunch of programs where we didn't specifically say, "Go buy a Dreamcast." You know, we had, um ... What might the word be? Signs and symbols. You know, we had this swirl that we would send teams out to chalk on sidewalks. Didn't say anything about Sega; didn't say anything about Dreamcast. But the people who knew what it was would know what it was and would feel like they were part of something bigger. They would feel like they had this insider knowledge or they were being spoken to really at their level and in a way where they could feel like part of it, versus, you know, "I am the audience to which you are speaking." It was more like, "I'm part of it. Like we're- we're in this together."

WHITNEY It was like a- it was like a coder ring. Like a- like-

HEATHER Yes.

WHITNEY That- that co- you know, the- like the ring, the secret code ring. And then you were helping ... They were like, "We can decode it because we're part of the club." Right?

HEATHER Exactly. Exactly. In fact, we literally did. I mean, if you go back, I could ... uh, we were creating press materials. One of the press materials we had for launch had braille on it. Um, some people still don't know to this day that that braille actually says something. And it was all messages. I mean, it was all these little messages, these little breadcrumbs. You know, we understood, we're talking to gamers; they want to make a game of it. This is how they want to be spoken to. And it was really kind of understanding that and- and being on their level. And my- you know, my goodness, this- this huge gaming company is talking to me in this way.

WHITNEY So, um- so basically what you're saying is you marketed to them like it was a game so that- because that's what they ... I- I gotcha. So you did a number of things that spoke the language of the gamers.

HEATHER Yeah.

WHITNEY Um, what's one more thing that you did, and then what's the outcome that you could kind of look at and say, "Here's what we accomplished."

HEATHER Yeah. Um, the other thing that we did within the company is we flattened the hierarchy. So Peter Moore who was our leader at that time, you know, I could go to him and I could say, "Peter, I

have this journalist. I- you know, I have this guy who runs this website." You know, I don't even know if journalist would be the word for some of these people that we were talking to. I said, "Peter, he has this question. He really wants to talk to you about this question. Can I get you to talk to him?" Peter would say, "Absolutely." He would find time on his schedule to talk to people. He held his own media relationships. He understood the importance of people from, you know, the lowliest gamer all the way up, you know, to a Walt Mossberg and the people at the- at the Wall Street Journal or New York Times. He understood that in order for this thing to happen it was really going to be a bottom-up; it was going to be a ground swell.

And there were no- there were no silos, as far as, "This is your job. You take care of your job. This is my job. I take care of my job. My time is more important than this person's time." It was an all-in-it-together philosophy. Um, and I feel like, you know, Peter, for me, has been the shining example of understanding the importance of I- I call it earned awareness. And that can be anything from word of mouth to media relations traditionally.

WHITNEY Peter was the CEO at the time? Was he the CEO at the time?

HEATHER Yes. Yeah.

WHITNEY Okay. Got it.

HEATHER Yeah, he was the CEO. Um, and then, you know, Sega is a Japanese company, so there were things that we- that we came up against, you know, coming down from Japan that, you know, ended up being a challenge, but we really were able to kind of run our own ship in the United States, and I think that that's why we had such huge success in the United States. If we had only been the United States unto itself, it would have succeeded. It was the worldwide climate at the time that kind of ended up being the ultimate downfall.

But when it comes down to what were we able to accomplish, we accomplished the biggest 24 hours in entertainment retail history, the 24 hours surrounding 09/09/99, the most money changing hands for an entertainment launch ever. Um, and we beat out, uh, Star Wars Phantom Menace was the previous bigger one at the time that we launched Dreamcast. So we went from kind of the Pariah and a little bit of a laughingstock in the generation of hardware previous, to the biggest 24 hours.

And- and, you know, I can't think of what the numbers were, but I'm sure if I were to say them everyone would laugh, 'cause we need to remember that this was 20 years ago. Right? Um, but beating out Star Wars Phantom Menace was something that I think we can all hang our hats on. And to me, what's the biggest victory? I still get contacted to this day from people ... I think I've done three podcasts in the past two weeks of people saying, "I'm going to go find Heather Hawkins because she was part of Dreamcast, and Dreamcast mattered to me in my life. It- it was a defining moment in my youth. It was something that, you know, I would put up there with the top three." I mean, I've had people say, "Top three moments of my life: birth of my child, getting married, first time I played Sega Dreamcast." I mean, that's- that's huge.

WHITNEY Wow.

HEATHER And that's the kind of movement and emotional attachment that I've been striving ever since to- to help my clients achieve. Um, certainly I've been striving ever since to find another job, another role, another environment where people are working together in the way that we did during that time.

WHITNEY That's fascinating. And so I love what you said is that people have sought you out because they- because that experience that they had with the Sega Dreamcast was so impactful for them. And- and that has now become somewhat of a North Star for you in all the work that you do- have done since.

HEATHER Mm-hmm (affirmative)..

WHITNEY Okay. So Maroon 5 and radical authenticity, okay, what's the story? Tell us.

HEATHER Yes. (laughs) So let's see. Um, Maroon 5 ... so after Sega I moved to New York City to work in the music industry, which had been another, um, of my goals, another- another thing that I had always wanted to do. And Maroon 5 crossed my desk in, let's see, mid to late 2001. I was handed a CD and a head shot of five of the most glamorously, um, made up "boys." Um, in fact, I think one of 'em was actually wearing a Seinfeld-esque pirate shirt in the head shot that I was given. Um, and this was when boy bands were going away. You know, Backstreet Boys had broken up. The kids were into "real music" like highly produced punk and things like that.

But as we listened to the music, and as we got to know the guys, we were like, "Why is this even a path that you went on?" And they had recently switched labels and all this kind of stuff. So I- you know, I don't at all want to make it sound like I'm saying somebody was marketing them wrong before. It was just what, you know, going from smaller label to major la ... it's just kind of the way that things worked. It's like, "How are we going to package this up?"

And we realized that in order for them to survive in the ecosystem we needed to absolutely double down on the music and who they really were as people. And we understood that that was going to mean making some really tough decisions. And this is a story that I tell people a lot when they want to come at me with, "There's no such thing as bad publicity," and "It's a numbers game," and- and other things like that that people have come to believe about earned visibility. We decided with Maroon 5, and we all agreed top to bottom, for a year we would not do anything at all that sniffed at all of, you know, boy- "boy band," "pop culture."

So we were shipping to them like Jeep Jamboree camp out things. We were shipping them to the Sam Adams beer festival. We were basically saying if they were a jam band, if they were, um, one of these bands that's really respected for musical proficiency, where would they be? And we understood that that meant that we were going to have to say no to some things. And we joked at the very beginning, you know, that means if Bop Magazine calls and says we want to put them on the cover, we're going to have to- we're going to say no to that. We're saying no for the greater good.

And sure enough it happened. I got the phone call from Young Miss Magazine, YM Magazine, which I don't even know if- if they're even still in publication, saying, "We want to do Maroon 5 Takes You to the Prom. We want to put it on the cover of our magazine." So here we are saying no to millions of impressions, you know, millions of what you would think would be super high-value impressions. But we knew for the longevity of the brand, and, you know, the band really is the brand, that we were going to have to say no to some stuff. And the cool thing was, you know, we were all aligned, and through that process I firmly believe that they got that stronghold of actually being musically relevant, versus just being a flash in the pan. That timeframe would've so easy for them to end up being a flash in the pan otherwise.

WHITNEY That's interesting. And so radical authenticity then, what, you know, in that context, what does that mean? What's the lesson to extract for anyone who's listening?

HEATHER It means that understanding who you are not is just as important as understanding who you are. Um, when I work with companies in crystallizing their brand DNA through the brand messaging

process, you know, it's understanding there are places you don't have to be; it's understanding that you can have that GPS and that guiding North Star. You can say, "This is where we're headed, and I don't really care what comes up, because if it's distracting us from going here, we can say no, and we can say no without guilt, and we can say no without second-guessing ourselves, because we understand 100% where we're headed. And this whole organization from top to bottom understands where we're headed."

And that was the really cool thing with Maroon 5 is, you know, we didn't have the second guessers and, "Oh, maybe ... " You know, "Let's have a three-hour meeting about whether maybe we should say yes to this thing."

WHITNEY So they were- they were fully on board like, "Yep, nope, we're not gonna do it. We're good."

HEATHER Absolutely. You know, and- and the band themselves, I mean, I think that there was a level of- of, "Oh, thank goodness." You know? (laughs) Like, "Thank goodness, you know, we- we get to ... you know, we're being respected for being true to ourselves." And, you know, when I work with- with entrepreneurs, um, people hear that word 'radical authenticity' and they think that means that they need to have blue hair and a nose ring, or they need to be the Business Bikini Coach, or they need to be the, you know ... they imagine what "do they think." No, authenticity, radical authenticity means, you know, if you want to run your business from the mountains with your dog and your daughters like I do, that's- that's what you do; that's what you stand for. If it means that you want to not go live on Facebook Live three times a day because you want to communicate in a different way or you're growing your business in a different way or you don't want to do the traditional things people are telling you to do, that's okay. And- and really the value that you bring is in being authentically you, no matter what that is.

WHITNEY All right. So you, um, were- worked for large agencies for about 20 years, and then you disrupted yourself. And, or were disrupted. Actually, did- did you- did you lose your job, or did you make this conscious decision? Or was it a little bit of both? Which I think is-

HEATHER I was kin- I was mutually dis- mutually distru- disrupted.

WHITNEY Oh, you quit/fired? You quit/fired?

HEATHER Um, kinda quit/lay-offed.

WHITNEY Yeah. Okay.

HEATHER When I came back- when I came back from maternity leave with my second daughter, um, there had been two clients, two massive clients that were, you know, my life for the past eight years. I was a VP at the agency. And that billing simply wasn't there. And so in order to grow ... you know, in order to have that job be supportable, there was a lot of business development that needed to happen. And my personal interests were in more transformative tech, human performance, spaces like that, upstart clients that didn't have a big city agency minimum retainer that they could put down. And so it was kind of a- a personal decision.

And the thing I love about it is within a week of making that decision, um, that we were going to mutually go on our separate ways, um, I made the decision to move to the mountains. So I moved from San Francisco. I had only ever lived in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City, and I made the decision to move to the mountains, um, Truckee, California, outside of Lake Tahoe. So now I live at like 6,500 feet elevation in the woods. A bear climbed the tree on my porch the other day. And I'm a city girl out there like, "What do you do? I guess you post it on Instagram." (laughs) Like I don't know what you do when a bear climbs your tree. So it was- it was just an

awesome confluence of events that happened at exactly the right time for exactly the right outcome.

WHITNEY So you're three years in, is that right? To this ... You disrupted yourself; you were disrupted, kind of a little bit of both.

HEATHER Yeah.

WHITNEY What has been unexpected for you on this, um, journey as an entrepreneur?

HEATHER What has been unexpected? So, you know, a couple of- a couple of things have happened. Um, when I first started out I started out saying, you know, I'm going to start an agency, right, but I'm going to start an agency that can cater to these smaller upstarts. I call 'em startups and upstarts, um, that work in the space that I totally love. Um, so I was always trying to find a way to both pull the work and own the work and make it cost-effective for these people. Um, I feel like my mind was so set on a cost play. Um, and it's- it's lovely 'cause my former boss who's one of my lifelong mentors, career-long mentors, um, who's actually been a guest on your show before, um-

WHITNEY Oh, Lee Caraher?

HEATHER Lee Caraher.

WHITNEY Yeah. Okay.

HEATHER She-

WHITNEY Everybody listen. She did a great podcast on how to manage mi- millennials. So-

HEATHER Yeah.

WHITNEY ... shout out to Lee. Okay, keep going.

HEATHER She's an expert on that. Um, and, you know, my whole time when I was at the agency I was like, "Why can't we just, you know, have this lower retainer? And maybe if we put five clients in a bucket so they add up to one client we can end up making a half ... " And she would- she would just shake her head. And God bless her soul that I have not gotten a told you so email from her. But I realized- I realized about a year into the journey that trying to do full-fledged agency level support both didn't- didn't really work for startups at a certain level but also robbed them, I believe, from the snowball effect that can happen when a CEO understands the media landscape, when they hold their own media relationships, when people within the company are empowered to- to know how to make outreach and to know how to work with media or influencers.

So I had a client about a year and a half into my journey, um, who came to me and said, this level of agency support is killing us." And I was like, "It's killing me too," because trying to provide that level of support at- at the lower retainers path. And it's- and we mutually came to this moment of like, "Why don't I just share some information?" And as a PR person I had always been taught, you know, don't ever teach a client to do what you do because then you dilute yourself. You dilute your worth. You know, that's your intellectual property. That's what they're paying you for. You know, don't buy the cow if you get the milk for free, and all this kind of stuff.

And I had this radical shift around to an education first, empowerment first philosophy that is more in line with teach a man to fish. Right? I believe that it's not scary to make outreach to media. It's really just a mindset shift that people need to make. And I believe that it holds so

much power for businesses, especially when they're starting up, for executives that are on a growth path within their own career to walk into a job opportunity and say, "Hey, I'm friends with so-and-so at Forbes," you know, "I know so-and-so from- from the New York Times. Like I- I have that relationship." I feel like media is there to be such a resource to people, and people oftentimes want to segment it and say, you know, "I'm going to hire somebody to do that," or "I'm not going to reach out to those people until I can afford to have an agency." So I've kind of arrived at this kind of synergy between really high-level brand strategy and empowerment and education in teaching people how to do pieces of it themselves.

WHITNEY So here's- here's what's interesting for me as I've examined your work is it sounds to me ... so, you know, your- your initial thought was we're going to disrupt traditional PR. And then you're like, "Well, it's not quite working." And then you've- you've also got this, um, piece where you're going to- you've got a course and you teach people, you know, here's- here's how you do it completely on your own, DIY. But I look at it from my perspective and I wonder are you in some ways advocating for more of a coach model. Right? So that you're basically saying, "Yes, you know, Whitney or whoever I'm talking to, you've got to go out and develop these relationships with these particular reporters. Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to help you identify who those reporters are. Once we identify who those reporters are I'm going to have you work on crafting something that you want to send to them. I'll coach you through that, but then I want you to send it."

And so what you're doing is you're sharing the knowledge. They're still developing these skills, and basically you're saying, "You need this muscle. You need this muscle in order to do your business well. But you can't do all of it, so I'm going to let you outsource most of it to me or someone else. But you've got to know how to do it." Um, and so that's kind of what I hear you saying that you're doing. Is that- is that- am I just making this up, or is that actually what's happening?

HEATHER No, (laughs) you- you actually probably said it better- better than I can, because, you know, I- I hit an interesting pivot where I created a bunch of courses, um, and I was offering those to entrepreneurs like coaches and- and people like that. And I found that coaches really like the idea of doing PR. But they don't really ... you know, they get hit with so many shiny objects and so many like, "What do I dedicate my time to? Should I build a funnel or create an email ... or do a, you know ... " PR's just one more thing that's more distracting, whereas emerging business, startups, you know, they need to do this work. And the earlier that they start in the process the earlier they can get the snowball rolling.

And what a lot of people don't understand is if you're hiring an agency to do that work for you, you don't get to keep those relationships. So at the end of a one-year agency engagement you get a list of everybody that they contacted on behalf of you- of, you know, your- you, the client. But you don't get their email addresses; you don't get their phone number. If you were to send an email to that person, they're gonna be like, "I'm not entirely sure who you are because I've been dealing with Susan at the PR agency."

So for me, for- for startups at that level where they're really scrapping, I absolutely believe that it's an empowerment thing. It has so many benefits for them to hold those relationships in house. And it also ... almost every single, um, startup that I have worked with has had that digitally native, knows the brand inside and out, person that's probably doing their digital marketing right now, doing their social media marketing right now, who just doesn't understand that media actually wants to talk to them. As a PR person, I make outreach to media. And all the time it's like, "I wish I could just talk to somebody inside the company. Heather, you don't need to be on this phone call. Just let me talk to the person inside the company." And as PR people we've kind of been trained to be in the in between.

WHITNEY Right.

HEATHER And I feel like that's coming to a place where it's not so necessary anymore.

WHITNEY Yeah. That's interesting. So I see you more, you're moving to this model of coaching people through. And so I thought ... I'm completely throwing this at you. But I think it would be really helpful. So one of our podcast listeners wrote in, and she asked this question. She didn't know that we were going to have this conversation, but I just had this thought this morning, and I thought it'd be really fun and helpful to her as she has a legal background. She's done IP, privacy, international deals, and now she's a coach. And she's trying to figure out a way to put all these pieces together.

So I thought I'd give you a persona. So you've got this legal background. You've got this coaching background. She likes to do both. And so the question I would ask you on behalf of her, and she's going to be really surprised when she listens to the podcast 'cause she's realizing, "Oh, Heather's about to give her advice." What is one piece of advice that you would give to her? And if you could be specific that would be even better. That she should go talk to, um, or someone she should reach out to specifically? Any thoughts on that?

HEATHER Yeah.

WHITNEY And I realize I'm completely throwing this at you, but I thought it would be really fun and interesting.

HEATHER Yeah. So the first thing that I encourage her to do, and I encourage all business owners, any size of your business, to do, is to sit down and really crystallize what problem do you solve and for whom do you solve it. So- and you need to word it in a way that's future proof. So she does IP, she does law, she does coaching. So she wouldn't want to say, "I provide coaching for blah, blah, blah," or "I provide IP." "I help this person solve this problem." You know, and right now maybe she's doing it through coaching, but maybe a year from now she's doing it by providing, um, you know, IP law, um, classes or something along those lines. So she really gets to- needs to get clear for herself. Who is she solving problems for? How is she solving those problems? And from there she can understand where does that person go to look for solutions to those problems. That is going to help her understand what media she needs to start forming relationships with.

Now, we have this problem, all of us, that we assume our customer, our people, are doing the highest most biggest, you know, high-brow things. So if you're talking to entrepreneurs, people are like, "I need to get into the New York Times. I need to get into Forbes. I need to get into Fast Company." You know, that's not where they're going looking for solutions. They're coming to podcasts like this looking for solutions or they're coming to a more granular blog or newsletter or something like that. So it's more accessible to actually drive the needle than most people think that it is.

So for her, since it sounds like she's not entirely clear on what she's going to stand for and what she's going to be, she really needs to crystallize, within herself as much as anything, what she's going to be and what she's going to stand for. What I would hate to have happen is, you know, if I say, "Go be on podcasts," and she goes on the podcast and becomes known as the IP expert and then decides she really wants to be a coach or vice versa. She'll leave this really confusing trail behind her, um, that won't help her grow her personal brand. So number one thing is she needs to get clear on what problem she's solving.

WHITNEY That's great advice. Right? So are- are you coming at it as I'm- I'm a lawyer who has coach as a kicker, or am I coach who has lawyer as a kicker, potentially asking those questions. Those are great. Okay, good. Um, I- I hope that that's helpful.

Um, so I guess my ... as we start to wrap up, Heather, some questions for you are, um-

HEATHER Yeah.

WHITNEY ... so what problem do you solve, and how do you solve it, and who do you serve, and what do you stand for?

HEATHER When I- when I really sit down and think about what I do, I help emerging businesses to crystallize their mission on really a DNA-deep level. And then I use earned media awareness as a way to amplify that. And I come at it very much from an intentional creation, philosophical background. I feel like a lot of times when people say, "I need to get PR," or "I need to do my brand strategy," they're like, "It's because I need words to put on my website," or "It's because I need to know what media to reach out to." But I feel like the processes that we go through in order to make those things happen are probably the most powerful piece of it, because it helps you get super clear about where you're headed.

I had mentioned a little while ago it helps you forget about the stuff that you don't need to pay attention to. It helps you keep that laser focus. And if you don't sit down and literally write it down, um, you know, you'll constantly be changing your mind. So I encourage pen to paper or it didn't happen. It needs to be written or it didn't happen. And it needs to be agreed upon by everyone in your company and trickle down and shared for everyone in your company. Otherwise, it doesn't have the power, um, that it really can have. And I feel like it's a hugely powerful- hugely powerfu- powerful process. Um-

WHITNEY And it's okay if it changes, by the way. I think that's part of- part of the challenge is that people think, "Well, I don't want to write it down until I'm sure." And I think what I've found with the brand for my business is that it- it- it changes; it evolves.

HEATHER Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY So write it down. Be really clear on what you think it is. Socialize it with people inside of your company. And then once you've done that, knowing that probably in three months it's going to change, but that's okay 'cause now you've got something to work with.

And can I actually just give another little tip that I- I've started to use? Is once you think you know what you stand for, whenever someone says, "What do you do," 'cause that's always the big challenge. "What do you do? What does your company do?" Um, is once you say it to the person, ask them ... just see how they respond. And if they respond, and they pick up on it, and they go, "Oh, that reminds me of blah, blah, blah, blah," then you know it's probably working. At least it's directionally correct.

HEATHER Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY If they kind of go, "Oh, that's nice," and then they move on, then you probably gotta go at it again. So I realize that I'm just now giving the expert advice, but I'm not giving you advice; I'm giving other people advice. But, um, everyone who's listening, you're listening; you get this advice. But I think that's something else I would just add onto that 'cause I've used that and it's been really helpful.

HEATHER Yeah. Yeah. That's great advice.

WHITNEY Um, okay. So any other thoughts that you have about what you stand for?

HEATHER For me it is helping people crystallize what they stand for so they can get a clear vision of what they're creating, and then they can intentionally create that. But understanding, again, going back

to that core of radical authenticity, that you shouldn't, you don't need to, you oughtn't, it doesn't work if you, decide that you're creating something that's not aligned to you. So when we're going through this brand process, when I'm going through this brand process with people I always say, "We should walk out of this process with you on fire and knowing that that's what you stand for. And I always know as a consultant that I've won when a client of mine ... you know, three founders sit in a room and they're each talking about the business differently, and then they come together and they're like, "Holy crap, like I can see the vision- we can see the vision. We're aligned around the vision." That's what this work should do.

And then really when you're out there getting that earned visibility for it, it's- it's the power of hearing it repeated back to you the way that you wish to have it stated that both powers up your business and ideally powers up your customer.

WHITNEY What do you mean when you say earned visibility? You've said earned media and earned visibility? What does that mean exactly for you?

HEATHER Yeah. So I use the word earned visibility, um, to include the whole bucket of any time you're getting visibility where there's a gatekeeper. So it might be pitching that reporter who writes about you in their story. It might be pitching that podcaster who chooses to have you on their podcast. It might be pitching the conference organizer who chooses to have you on the stage. And the reason why that gatekeeper and that earn matter so much is because there's this halo of endorsement that happens when a trusted person, when a trusted entity decides to put you on the podcast. Like you chose to have me on the podcast because I- you know, I- you have kind of done the sniff test. You have ... you're like, "There's validity here. There's a person that you should listen to here." Um, when you get up on stage at that conference where somebody really trusts the people that are putting that conference together there's this halo of endorsement that happens.

So a lot of times people will say, "We should do PR because we don't have money for ads." That is totally missing out on the power of earned visibility. It's more of- it's more of an influence player really than anything. So I even put earned, um, influencer relations and word of mouth even is something that I consider to be earned visibility.

WHITNEY Got it. Okay. So, um, I'm going to tell you what my action item is going to be coming out of this podcast. And then I want to ask you ... I'm going to give you a little bit of time to think. Is a book that you're reading that you like and/or, um, how does endurance, um, being an endurance athlete help or fit into your PR brand? (laughs) And/or, um, who's a client that you would like to work with? You can answer all three if you want, but you can answer just one too.

Okay. So here's my action item. The action item that I'm going to come out of is I'm going to pick three people, um, reporters that cover what I do and just start following them and be aware of who they are, what they do, and find ways to, um, be helpful to them so that I can build a relationship with them. 'Cause that is not something that I have done.

HEATHER Mm-hmm (affirmative).

WHITNEY I did it when I was an equity analyst working at Merrill Lynch; I had reporters that I talked to, um, frequently. But at this point I don't really. And so I think that that would be a very useful, um, action item coming out of my conversation with you. So that's the thing I'm going to do. Um, now, so let's wrap up, and I have those three questions for you.

HEATHER Yeah. So, um, it's funny that you say that about the reporters 'cause that was one of the action items. You asked me to list what are some action items; that was one of the ones, um, that I would encourage people to do. Um, the other thing coming out of it that I would encourage everyone to do is just that if you don't have your brand locked down, if you- if you haven't written it on paper,

if you haven't typed it out, um, and if it doesn't give you some degree of chills or hair standing on end or saying, "Yeah, that's it. That's right." Um, if it doesn't make you excited to wake up in the morning, um, then you probably haven't gotten it right quite yet. And I encourage you to keep on working with it until you do.

And then if you are leading an organization and you haven't trickled that mission down through the entire organization, I highly encourage you to make sure that everyone in your organization is aligned with the same mission, because we're living in a day and age where every single person in your company is representing your company, is talking about your company, and you want to make sure that they're all doing it in the same way.

Um, I'm trying to think. What books am I reading right now? So I'm a- I'm a mom, so I'm like ... (laughs) I have this list of books, but none of 'em are- are all that, um, much relevant to people. I would say the last- the last book that I read that really saved my rear end I have to say as a business owner, and it is so tactical practical and not like necessarily inspirational, um, is a book called *Profit First* by Mike Michalowicz. I don't know if you're aware of him or his work. But it gives such a brass tacks way of managing finances as a contractor. I know when I switched to being a consultant, every time a client would pay me I was like, "This is a really big paycheck," but it's actually not because there are things that you have to be aware of. Um, and if you ever want to pivot your business as I did, um, in this past year, you have to have the resources to do that. Um, and so his book just makes it really approachable to figure out how to do that.

WHITNEY Great advice. Uh-huh.

HEATHER So I love his ... you know, I love his work. Um, a client that I would love to- to work with, you know, the- the clients that I'm looking at now, I have a passion for transtech, transformative technology, which is the application of technology to the pursuit of wellbeing and mental health. Um, and there are so many people doing so many interesting things. There's a company I read about the other day that is creating a headband basically, like a halo-like headband that you wear over your head when you sleep, and it records your dreams and plays your dreams back to you. Um-

WHITNEY Really?

HEATHER Yes.

WHITNEY That is so cool.

HEATHER Yes. It is both cool and absolutely terrifying at the same time. I have a whole spreadsheet of these people. You know, there's another one that does light therapy for treatment of depression, but it sends it up your nose so you don't have to sit in front of a light all day. There are so many people doing so many interesting things, um, that are really trying to create different kinds of companies for the betterment of the world really, for the betterment of humanity. And that's really where my passions lie. So there are some super geeky ones in there. They're the ones people have heard of like, um ... Is it Mindshare, the- the meditation app?

WHITNEY Oh, Headspace. Headspace.

HEATHER Yeah.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

HEATHER Headspace, yeah. I am all about- am all about transformative technology and all the geeky stuff going on in there. I love it. I'm a geek inside; I have to admit.

WHITNEY There you go. That's ... So that's exactly what you stand for and who you want to serve.

HEATHER Yes.

WHITNEY Heather, any last words?

HEATHER As far as parting words, I would just say, you know, until you define what you are you can't really rally people around your cause. So if you haven't spent time sitting down and really defining what you stand for and what mission you want to take people on, you really aren't going to get super far in growing your influence.

WHITNEY And I would add to that, I think to- to what you just said, 'cause you said this earlier, is if you don't know how to start with what you are, then start with what you're not. You said that earlier, and I thought that was really great advice. What do you want-

HEATHER Yes.

WHITNEY Heather, thank you so much for being on the podcast with us. It's been really interesting. We've covered a lot of territory, and I appreciate your taking the time.

HEATHER Thank you so much. It's been an honor.

If you're looking to grow your influence - whether in your career or personal life - there are some great takeaways here.

First, communicate with people in a way they expect or in a way that will appeal to them. As Heather was talking about her success with helping Sega launch the Dreamcast, my big takeaway was that though she wasn't a hard-core gamer herself, she'd developed the ability to "speak gamer", helping the launch team craft a strategy that would appeal to their mindset by embedding a game into the launch material.

How can you use this in your communication? Are there people who continually misunderstand you? How can you talk about what you do in a way they might better understand.

Second, authenticity matters a great deal. We can tell when people are trying to be something they aren't. Heather was able to make this case to Maroon 5 and positioned them as their real selves instead of forcing a boy band narrative on their album launch. This decision ultimately led to their success and their staying power. And I loved what Heather said - understanding who you are not is just as important as understanding who you are.

So, an action item for all of us then - as we approach the end of the year and look to the beginning of 2020, a good thing to do would be to write down your vision or mission statement. Spend some time figuring out who you are, and what you want to stand for in the world. And if you don't know where to start, circle back to what Heather said and start listing out the things you are not.

Thank you again to Heather Hawkins for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Rutty, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.