

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 187: SHAE AND SYD MCGEE

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. A podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of Learning™ in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. And today we have two special guests, Syd and Shae McGee.

Shea graduated from college with a degree in public relations. She quickly realized that what she really wanted to do was interior design. After just a few semesters of design school, she had so many clients she wasn't sure how to keep up with the workload. Syd started his career building a startup for digital marketing, but once he'd gotten to the top of this S curve and jumped in the process of figuring out what S curve was next, the light bulb went off. Today, they run and are the sole owners, no outside capital, of one of the most successful and fastest growing interior design businesses in the country. With more than 1.4 million followers on Instagram, a popular YouTube channel, a newly launched brand with Target, a new book titled Make Life Beautiful, and a Netflix show Dream Home Makeover. Shae and Syd, welcome and thanks for joining us.

Shae McGee: Well, thanks so much for having me. You know, Studio McGee officially began six years ago when we formed our LLC, but in my mind, it, the process to that point began a few years before that. I was working at an advertising firm and really not excited about the work that I was doing. And when we moved into that first apartment, I started reading design blogs, books, magazines. And it was a great creative outlet to me. I also felt terrified to pursue that as a career because I didn't have a degree. I had just graduated in something else completely.

Whitney Johnson: We talk about disruption. And I think it's really interesting how you started out and you're like, "I'm not a designer. I like design. I'm not a designer. I didn't go to design school." And yet you loved it. You had a passion for it. You studied it.

Shae McGee: I felt like that was a reflection of a poor decision on my part to study something else and just didn't, didn't even think, think about that as an option, even though Syd really continuously encouraged me.

And so this apartment makeover process happened a couple of times and we bought our first home. In Orange County, 2010 or so, and we were able to buy a foreclosure and it was the only thing that we could afford. I saw

this as my portfolio opportunity. So we moved in and within about a week I was trying to get quotes on remodeling our kitchen.

And all the while, Instagram was starting to gain momentum. So I had a personal Instagram account and started posting pictures of our home to just, you know, neighbors, friends, family. "Oh, look at these wood floors we put in. Oh, I think I'm going to pick this hardware."

And noticed that that ended up getting quite a bit of response from friends and family. And then I got a text message from a friend of my sister-in-law who said, "Hey, could I hire you to style some bookshelves?" That was a turning point where I thought, "OK, I think I can do this." And so I said yes to that project, styled the bookshelves, posted one picture.

I took the picture myself. And I got a lot of good feedback and then people started hiring me to do these little projects. So from there I started building my business. At a certain point Syd started helping me with the business side. And it was a secret. He didn't want people to know that he was working with me because I think he felt like he was working for me instead of with me. And once I saw that we could work together, even in this stressful, tense situation in our lives, I knew I was going to convince him to do this with me. It just took some time.

We had uttered many prayers through this.

And he woke up one morning and said, "I think we should move to Utah." And I said, "OK." We sold our home within about a month from that time that he made that decision and I was on board. I was ready to move somewhere less expensive, take the money from the sale of our home and we lived off of that for a year to build our business, Studio McGee. And then at that point, that's when it became not about Shae McGee, it was Syd and I together.

Whitney Johnson: Syd, you were working at the digital marketing firm. You quit that because you were like basically, in my terminology, at the top of your S curve, done, jumped to another S curve. You think you're going to do another digital marketing agency or something similar and realized this isn't really for me. So then you have Shae saying, "Syd, let's work this together."

Syd McGee: I think at that time I was trying to find my like ideal life, meaning work crossover combo, and I was like, "What is that going to be?" Like, I always loved creative aspects and I love to surf and I love this and I love that.

And I was like, I got to find that right thing where I just love doing it every day.

And I was like kind of failing on that journey. And then I had this epiphany of, "I actually really don't like the work that I'm doing. I don't want to continue this. I'm not finding fulfillment." I just loved working with people.

And I think that I was successful monetarily in building this marketing company, but then realizing ultimately, like, it was selling things for multiple different brands and never really having your own identity.

So I think once Shae helped me see the light of, like, "Look, you have this operational experience, which is not the creative side, but you can come and apply that here, um, and we can work together and it can be our thing." Then I was like, "OK, I'm in, you know, like if it's going to be our thing and we're going to do it together, it has to change from Shae McGee Design to something that's a little bit more representative of both of us." And that's when Studio McGee was born. And I think that's that's where we really then, um, started the partnership and started the assignment of, "What are you going to do and what am I going to do?" And then that was the start of our journey.

Whitney Johnson: What had to happen in your brain, what had to shift that you could go from this place of I'm working for to with? Did something in particular happened that allowed you to make that mental shift?

Syd McGee: I love the you know, the idea of like sometimes we get in our own way. And I think I was getting in my own way, kept stubbornly perceiving it as, "This is Shea's deal. This is today's thing. I want to support her. I want to tell her to be brave. I want her to go after this. But, I..."

Whitney Johnson: "But I'm not going to be brave."

Syd McGee: And what's funny is it was like something small. I think that once I just started actually getting in and doing the work, um, that I started to just be like, "OK, I know this. I'm comfortable with this. She doesn't like to do these portions, organizing invoices, following up with the vendors, creating their relationships, seeing if we can email stuff over instead of fax it." I'm like, "Give it to me. I want to optimize this thing like all day." And she was like, "Great, I hate that stuff. So you take it." And I thought, at that point it was like, "OK, I like this side and she kills it on this side. This could work really well." And because of her inbound attraction of like new clients and her love for what she was doing, that really kind of sparked me into being like, "OK, she can bring it in, I can help manage it, and we can then scale it and grow it." Because I think at that time I had consumed a lot of podcasts and books and things around, like growing a business, because I was like, "I don't know what my passion is, but when I find it, I'm going to apply all this like information that I've gathered and then Shae and I got together and I..."

Whitney Johnson: It was sitting right in front of your face.

Syd McGee: Yeah.

And that's when I was like, "Hey, babe, you got to check out the Instagram like you should... I think maybe you should share what you're doing on there. Um, and this is like classic for Shae and I like, I'll be like, "Yeah, maybe check out Instagram." And then it's like, OK, seven years later, eight years later, she hasn't missed a single day of posting at least once a day, if not twice a day, you know, so I can give a little bit of an idea..."

Whitney Johnson: Wait, Wait, Wait. You haven't missed, you haven't missed a single day in seven years?

Shae McGee: I can probably count on two hands how many days I've missed.

Whitney Johnson: So did you post on the days you had your babies?

Shae McGee: Probably. [laughs]

Syd McGee: I'd say 98 percent sure that I'm, that's a yes.

Whitney Johnson: As one workaholic to another, yeah, I completely endorse that decision. How did it feel, Shea, when that moment when you had a third, you know, the sister-in-law of your, no, the sister of your sister-in-law, what was it?

Shae McGee: So it's, um, a friend of my sister in law.

Whitney Johnson: Ok, friend of your sister-in-law, what did you do in that moment when you got that call or that text that she wanted you to design?

Shae McGee: Honestly, I thought I could accomplish anything from that point. Like as soon as I saw that text, I knew that this was the jumping off point for me to move forward and do what I wanted to do.

But then I froze because I didn't know how much to charge or how to, you know, how to do anything. So then I turned to Syd and said, "What do I say?" You know? Um, but as soon as I saw the text that was for me the moment when I knew I could do something with that.

Whitney Johnson: One of our Instagram followers who said, your feed is one of their favorites. I said, you know, you work together, you play together, you family together. How do you manage all the "together?"

Syd McGee: So we've gotten to the place where I think that what we found was really important, and we speak about this in the book... we went on a trip and then we couldn't get left alone from our team. And we were like, "We are going to have to figure out how to build a team that can live without us for a couple of days.

And we are going to also have to learn how to just be comfortable telling each other, 'Let's just enjoy dinner.

Let's just stop and not be offended or bothered by that. But we'll just talk about it later. It's OK."

And I think that dynamic, along with, like, some intentional planning throughout the year of, like, around holidays, we'll look and we'll say, "OK, what do we want to do this year as a family?" And we'll plan like two or three bigger trips, which is highly concentrated family time, um, and know that, like, we are carving out personal time, because if not, what happens is the entire year will go by and we just did photo shoots and projects and awesome work stuff, but we never did stuff just with the family. Um, and I think that we do with that on a smaller level, um, by planning like monthly like dates like just Shae and I like "Hey, we're going to go out. It's going to be a no business date and we're just going, like, to talk about, like, life."

And we try to find those moments. And I think we've gotten, now we've gotten a lot better at it and we just, we balance it.

I think we really enjoy each other, um, but we also make sure to give each other time to have to themselves. So we will say, "I'm going to go for a three hour bike ride. You're gonna go get your nails done and when I get back and then go to your workout. And then and then we'll all hang out the rest of the day together as a family."

Shae McGee: When we were really in the messy phase of our business, we weren't taking that time for ourselves and we were grumpy with each other and just about everything. And so we really have found that carving out some time to work out makes a big difference.

Whitney Johnson: So on your dates, no Instagram?

No, I try really hard not to, to do the Instagram or... even like when we're on our family trips. Occasionally I'll take some photos. But it's funny... isn't, isn't it ironic that life is the most fun when we're not on Instagram?

I'll take some pretty photos, but really trying to put that phone away.

Whitney Johnson: What's your favorite part of working together?

Shae McGee: My favorite part is that I have a partner that knows exactly what I'm going through.

At all times, even together, being a founder of a company can feel really lonely, and I think that, I think about how many challenges we face and we've been able to face them together. And when we are home and we are feeling so overwhelmed by a new obstacle, we still are facing that obstacle together. And I think that, that combined with a very implicit trust in your partner, I have never second guessed, Syd has my best interest and that I have his best interests. And so that's my favorite part.

Whitney Johnson: Syd, what about you?

Syd McGee: Yeah, I mean, I agree. One hundred percent.

It's a really lonely position to be as a business owner or as a CEO or... So at some point you can feel like, "Oh my gosh, like I know the financials and know all the problems. Having that someone that has the understanding of the business as you do, um, has the vision and can go forward, that's great." Working together has provided us the opportunity to work a lot more, but also be with our family more. So I'm really grateful for that.

And I honestly like walking into completed projects that Shae does is like amazing to me. I always am still in awe of her talent and just how good she is at what she does.

And that's fun to watch it actually come to life.

Whitney Johnson: What are your rules of engagement or when you disagree on a business decision or strategic decision?

Shae McGee: I am so shocked that I say this, but our disagreements are not about the direction of the business.

Our disagreements usually come from the stress of juggling our relationship and the business or family and the business, but we have always seen eye to eye, and if we don't see exactly eye to eye, we just talk it out until we find a compromise.

We will go back and forth. Play devil's advocate, um, kind of rile the other one up until we finally find a point that we both agree on.

I think that the hardest thing for me is, is juggling the relationship and the business. And then that's when we're feeling stresses at work. We take it out on each other outside of work and then all of a sudden, like him throwing his dirty clothes on the ground becomes a fight.

And it's like, really, because we're stressed about, you know, something happening at the office. And so for us, that, that's where the tension comes. And then that the rule of engagement there is like turn off the phone because it's like you'll get the email with the bad news and the other person doesn't realize that, like you're snapping at them just because you got the bad email.

And so the rule for us to turn off the phone, hide it, get it away so that we can just settle down for a second.

Whitney Johnson: Turn off the phone... Solves a whole host of problems.

Syd McGee: Yeah, I agree with her. I think most of the time we do agree a lot. And then if there is something that is irregular, then we will just talk about.

Whitney Johnson: Tell us about McGee and Co..

You took a swing at this a few years back. Can you just talk us through the evolution of, of your e-commerce business Syd.

Syd McGee: It's been a lot bumpier of a road than anticipated. When we first started, we were like, "OK, we're going to sell our home, we're going to go all on in on this business together. Let's do it."

And then it was like, "OK, what are we doing?" And it was like, "Well, maybe the interior design, you're really busy with that. We can continue to grow that."

And it's like, "Yes, but I always see successful interior designers have product lines. So whether that's textiles or they're doing furniture, I think that's really when you start to make money is if you sell product to and you're good at what you do." So I was like, "Cool, let's do that." I, e-commerce like, "Let's just get a Shopify page going and we can do this."

And so we started to, like, dig more into it and find out what that was. So we went to these wholesalers, we spoke to them about selling their product and they're like, "Who, who are you guys? Who are you guys again?" So we talked that night and I remember being in the hotel room with her talking about this it's like, "OK, you know what, like the Instagram is going well, that's building fast. Let's just build that reputation as much as possible. And then we'll come back next year and say, 'you have to work with us now because like we are big time.'"

And so we did we, we really focused on that and grew Instagram quite well and came back the next year. That allowed us to open the door to start getting products sold.

And there was a lot that went into that. I mean, we had a failed website. We spent \$80,000 on it. We had someone building it that we'd never met.

And then we realized after launching our site, you know, it was selling well, but that for five weeks and we're like, this site is terrible. It keeps going down. I don't know if we're having sales. And then I haven't seen a sale for two hours. Well, I text the guy. Servers were down. Oh, my gosh. We rebuilt the whole site in like Shopify over like a two-week period and then relaunched it just before holiday.

We just lean into it. And we had, we had been selling pillows before kind of in the background. Shae had just said, like, "Look, we could design these textiles. Could you go find someone to print them, make them into pillows, and then we'll sell them."

And that's, that was Shae's, like, first product creation. And then they were up for sale, just kind of in the background on Studio McGee that they were selling, but we were selling maybe like \$20,000-\$25,000 a month in pillows and textiles and me and one other person, we're just trying to personally fulfill those.

And so we had to move to a warehouse where they store product and fulfill it. That had problems and that had setbacks.

But I just kind of was like, "You're going to have problems forever. So I know we're having problems there, but we'll fix those and we'll figure it out. Let's just keep going."

Whitney Johnson: So what did you do early on when you had the sites going down? You had the difficulties with the warehouse.

Shae McGee: We had one that was breaking a lot of our stuff and we had another one that was taking our stuff and, um, not invoicing us properly. Those weren't signals or signs to us that we shouldn't be doing it. It was just a sign that we needed to pivot or to make adjustments. And I think that that's in, that time period really made that evident.

Whitney Johnson: Wow, those are big setbacks for a really young business. That must have been tough. What are some of the lessons that you learned?

Shae McGee: I think that one lesson that we have learned throughout this whole process, but specifically that time period really highlighted that, that you are never going to be problem free and I am a problem solver. And so in my mind, there was going to be a point where you had solved every problem and you, like, reached the top. Right?

And like, the business was running perfectly and smoothly. But what I've learned is that, it's just perpetual issues that are arising. But your strength as a company is your ability to move quickly and solve the problems. I will not lie, I think that we really got some key members early on that set the tone for a positive workplace and a strong work ethic. And we also made some mistakes. And those team members really permeated the culture. And we started to see things going in a negative direction. And as soon as we saw that, we knew we had to make some changes. But that is a really hard place to be in, because if you have one team member that really affects the culture in a negative way and you're a small company, it's not something that can be overlooked. It starts to affect everybody.

Syd McGee: I had heard that said somewhere like, "If you want a culture of people that smile and are happier, like, you just need to naturally hire smilers." And we did that. And it made such a huge difference.

Shae McGee: Now I look at our team and I'm like, "Yes, like, these these team members are working together and lifting people up." But it wasn't always that and we realized that we had to be very conscious about that. It wasn't just skill set.

Whitney Johnson: You have a show coming up with Netflix. Very excited to see the premiere. So for the people who are listening to this podcast are now going to go watch it because of this conversation. Is there any inside baseball, some little fun detail that we should look for, some back story that we should be aware of going into it that will make it fun? Like, "Oh, that's a fun little detail I would have missed."

Shae McGee: So throughout the show, you'll see in real time, but then in reality TV format, we cut to interviews and that interview set was in our basement for the last year.

They built like a 20-foot wall and put a sofa and a backdrop.

And we had all the lights and cameras down there. And it looks like a studio set that we went to L.A. or something, but that was actually in our basement.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, that's so fun. All right. I love that. You've just written a book. It is delightful everyone. Tell any quick thoughts on discoveries that you made as you were writing the book.

Syd McGee: It was fun to go back and recount the journey and the stories. We lived in a rental for four or five years as we built people their dream homes. I kind of had to like, "I hope one day we get to build our dream home." But we had, like, blocked that out. It was like, "We're focused. We sold everything we had and we're going in to build this business together." That was fun to see that played out. And that's truly how we continually go now. Even, even writing the book, it was like we don't want to write this because we don't feel like we're done. But it was fun to share the journey because we hope that it encourages other people to kind of take that same leap and be like, "It's messy, but it's a blast. Like if you feel like you should do it, let's do it."

Whitney Johnson: Shae, any quick thoughts?

Shae McGee: Writing the book was very emotional to relive some of these experiences that we weren't sure our business would make it through. Of course, we'd survive, but would the business survive this? Would we be starting over again and being able to look back and feel that source of, "I did it! I can do what's coming because I know that we're not at the end of our journey." So I love being able to recount that. And I think that that's good advice for anyone that's in the middle of this messy middle being able to look back and kind of note a few experiences that they've made it through to give them the courage and energy to keep going.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, it's interesting, it felt to me a little bit like your, you know, your book is a celebration. So you've gotten you're not at the top. You know, there's a Zen saying this is, "When you get to the top of the mountain, keep going." And you are going to keep going, but it did feel to me like, "This is a celebration of where you are right now." And I'm just wondering, when you finish a project, is there anything that you do, both of you, just to celebrate and mark the occasion of having completed that project?

Shae McGee: We are trip people and of course, COVID over the last several months has been a challenge that way, but, uh, we are experience driven and I think also because we deal in product and stuff that for us the biggest treat is a trip. And so whether that's a road trip somewhere or a big trip overseas, it doesn't matter. Just a getaway to soak it in is our way to celebrate.

Whitney Johnson: What's a trip that you have taken recently? That was especially fun way to celebrate as a family, maybe not recently, but in the not too distant past.

Shae McGee: Our last anniversary, we went to the south of France and we rented this tiny little stick shift Fiat and drove all around the coast and we would just hop off and into the ocean. And then I, of course, love looking at the antiques. But I was just so inspired by the landscape and the style and the laid-back nature of the culture. It was it was phenomenal. I'm still inspired by that trip, you know, over a year later.

Whitney Johnson: There are lots of different places that people can find you. Is there somewhere in particular?

Shae McGee: Studio McGee is the place to find all of the info. So Studio McGee on Instagram and our blog. From there, we link out to our book, to the show, to our YouTube channel, to all of our products.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So everybody who's listening, just so you know, we are going to have 10 copies of their book available. I'm hoping that you all will sign the copies. You go on Instagram, tell us what you liked about this episode, what resonated with you, and then you will be eligible for a copy of the book.

Wrapping up. Every dream has a cost. What has this cost you?

Syd McGee: I think the things that cost were a lot of short-term sacrifices in the early years of our business to obtain. The long term benefits.

And I think there was those years of three to four years where we didn't travel at all.

If it was a travel, it was a hop in our car and drive to California real quick to see my parents, stay with them, and come back home.

But even then, we usually didn't because we had too many obligations. It was just like, "OK, those are things that we gave up: trips for ourselves, taking time for ourselves. It was like one day.

One day we will. But right now, let's just do this."

Whitney Johnson: And that's where I think the book is so lovely is it allows you to celebrate the cost that you incurred to celebrate that it was worth making that expenditure.

Syd McGee: I'm really glad it did work out because I would have been a lot of hard work and sacrifice over a half decade for nothing. So thank heavens that Shae and I figured out, uh, how to work together, how we could grow a business together. So I think if I were to leave anything, it would be like, consider the opportunity that you want, pursue it and work very hard at it.

But maybe there's some opportunities like don't be stubborn. There could be some good opportunities for you that you're ignoring.

Think of who you really want to share that time building that company or going on that journey with, because that will make all the difference in the world.

So how much you enjoy actually what you're doing every day.

Whitney Johnson: Shae?

Shae McGee: I think that Syd and I have found that things will work out, but it might not be exactly as you planned them to be, and I think that that's one of the biggest lessons that we've learned over the last few years, is that... It's not going to be perfect and you can plan, and planning is good, but it's never going to go exactly like that. But the key is to just keep going and really problem solve and get comfortable with the problem solving, because in the end, it will work out and you'll look back and say, I'm actually glad it worked out that way.

Whitney Johnson: Well, thank you, both of you, for your time. It has been a delight to be able to read your book and now to have this conversation and the best of luck with your show on, Dream Home Makeover and Make Life Beautiful. Thank you to both of you.

Shae McGee: Thanks so much!

Syd McGee: Thanks so much, Whitney!

As I reflect on my conversation with the McGee's, what stands out is that the only thing Shae needed to do to figure out what career she wanted was to look at what she was already spending her time doing. She now just needed to get that first customer, which she did.

It reminds me of something my mentor, Clayton Christensen, would say. "Be patient for growth, impatient for profits." Get that first customer, that first profitable customer. There's a world of information about your business, about your business model in that first transaction. And Syd, he also knew what he wanted to be doing, but as often happens with our strengths, our best strengths, our biggest opportunities there, so obvious, so reflexive, we can't see them until we can. And when they could together, they jumped to a new S curve of Learning™ and now are building a hugely successful business and brand.

It makes me wonder about you. What do you think about when there's nothing you have to think about? What do you do when there's nothing you have to do? Where do you wander to? What would it look like if more people believed, if you believed that you could actually pursue what you love to do?

What would it take to make your life more beautiful?

If you've enjoyed this podcast and would like to be eligible for a copy of their book, *Make Life Beautiful*, go on to Instagram. Tag me @johnsonwhitney, tag @studiomcgee. Tell us what you enjoyed. Tell us what you learned about this episode or from this episode, and you'll be eligible for one of 10 signed copies.

Thank you again to Shae and Syd McGee for our conversation. Thank you to our team, Jennifer Brotherson, Sarah Duran, Whitney Jobe, Steve Ludwig, Melissa Rutty and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson and this is *Disrupt Yourself*.